



Exploring Factors Leading Females into Commercial Sex Work in Nepal: A Phenomenological Study

Sarmila Kumari Saud^{1*} , Krishna Bahadur Thapa² 

Submission:

Apr 23, 2026

Acceptance:

May 8, 2026

Published:

Jun 30, 2026

¹ Dhungeshwori Secondary School, Jiri, Dolakha, Nepal

² Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID), Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

*Corresponding Author: krishna.thapa@sac.tu.edu.np

<https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.116>

Abstract

Female commercial sex work is associated with many socio-cultural, economic, and familial constraints, and may be linked to vulnerabilities, inequalities, discrimination, and familial profession as well as peer-led motivations. However, a potential area remains to be explored in the countries where sex work is a legally restricted work such as in Nepal. Thus, this study aimed to explore factors leading Females into commercial sex work in the socio-cultural context of Nepal. This study used a phenomenological design capturing the lived experiences of six commercial sex workers working in Kathmandu, Butwal, Pokhara, and Dharan, identified through the snowball sampling technique. The age of the participants ranged between 25 and 34 years. Data collected using unstructured interviews were analyzed following a thematic approach. Results revealed that female commercial sex workers were engaged in sex work either on the street or through escort services, social media platforms, online or virtual contact, messaging, and communication. Importantly, the study highlighted that economic factors were the most prominent, followed by family factors, gender-based violence, psychological factors, low levels of education and awareness, coercion-trafficking-and-exploitation, infatuation with luxurious lifestyles, and increased access to ICT, which led Females to enter and stay in commercial sex work. This study concluded that there is a clear association between socio-economic vulnerability as the key factor leading females to sex work. Findings signify a need for support through comprehensive interventions to prevent entry into sex work. It suggests empowerment, education, assistance, and support to address Females immediate needs and safety concerns.

Keywords: commercial sex work, females, leading factors, Nepal

To cite this article:

Saud, S. K., & Thapa, K. B. (2026). Exploring the factors leading women into commercial sex work in nepal: A phenomenological study. *Education and Development*, 35(2). 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.66412/ed.v35i2.116>

Introduction

Engagement of females in commercial sex work (FCSW), also known as prostitution, is a complex socio-economic and public health issue across the world. It is also interchangeably referred to as female sex work across the literature. Worldwide, it is estimated that 42 million people are involved in sex work, indicating significantly higher female participation (Scambler & Paoli, 2008; Bancroft-Hinchey, 2014; Minichiello & Scott, 2017). A statement highlighted by Slim and colleagues (2020) also supports, "Sex work as serving men's sexual needs and meeting females' economic needs." Though this study focuses on female sex work, evidence shows that both men and women

are involved in sex work, although participation rates differ across contexts worldwide (Biswas et al., 2022).

It is argued that the sex work, which traces back to ancient times, is one of the oldest occupations in human history and still remains as a social and national concern that should neither be expanded nor restricted (Ringdal, 2007; Beattie et al., 2020). The countries that allow sex work acknowledge it from different lenses and legal provisions. Globally, only 22 countries allow sex work legally, whereas 75 countries have strictly prohibited it, and 61 countries allow it with limited legal provisions (World Population Review, 2024). Such prevalent practice may be linked to deep socio-economic dimensions, raising a key question of



why females enter sex work. Several studies across different socio-cultural contexts have focused on exploring the reasons to answer this question prevailing different facts and factors.

In this regard, females' entry into sex work has been reported to be influenced by various reasons and factors that may describe familial and economic problems, social inequalities, and structural reasons (Suresh et al., 2009). Studies suggest that sex work is a product of social determinants such as discrimination, marginalization, poverty, gender inequalities, violence, harassment, etc., which drive females to engage in coping strategies (Slim et al., 2020; Zeben et al., 2025). Contrarily, such involvement may increase psychological and mental health vulnerabilities (Suresh et al., 2009; Deering et al., 2014). Females who have been engaged in sex work in middle- and low- income countries face more challenges and issues related to socio-cultural and mental health (Beattie et al., 2020).

Nepal, as a developing country, provides relatively limited economic and social opportunities for women and continues to face challenges in various developmental sectors (Ghimire, 2025). On the other hand, the socio-cultural and ethnic diversities of the country reveal a special identity and beliefs with the democratic political system. Importantly, it is informed that the socio-cultural, economic, and political atmosphere does not allow sex work, and by its legal framework. However, studies consistently report that female sex work is prevalent, disregarding legal restrictions (Karki, 2017; Sawicki et al., 2019; World Population Review, 2024). It is revealed that those who are engaged in sex work in Nepal are mostly female sex workers (FSWs), indicating their quite high participation, and prevailing its link to many reasons, and one of the notable is the political-economic upheaval after 2000 in particular (Ghimire et al., 2011). In addition, it also includes urban unemployment and poverty as the influencing factor to female sex work (Niroula, 2017), which seems related to economic factors. However, limited studies have examined this issue in depth and explored the recent dynamics of sex work in Nepal, particularly the reasons why females enter and remain engaged in sex work. Thus, there is still a significant need to explore the factors leading Females into sex work. The findings could help develop a comprehensive support system and adopt preventive measures. In this regard, this study aimed to explore the factors leading Females into commercial sex work in the socio-cultural context of Nepal.

Factors Leading Women into Sex Work

Disregarding legality, religious and socio-cultural sensitivity, sex work is categorized into street-based sex work, escort services, brothel-based sex work, online or virtual sex work, and participation in adult entertainment platforms (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005), which is widespread globally (Bancroft-Hinchey, 2014; Minichiello & Scott, 2017). However, limited studies report why females enter and adopt sex work as their profession. Numerous factors lead them to engage in sex work. Studies have explored and uncovered various

findings about the factors leading women into commercial sex work.

Engagement in sex work is conceptualized through different theoretical lenses. For example, the reasons for engaging in sex work seem to be linked to social, biological, and psychological factors that are not fair and favourable to females. It is theorized that structural inequalities may lead females into sex work, as conceptualized by feminist theory (Farley, 2004). This theory postulates that females' entry into commercial sex work is influenced by social structural inequalities. Social inequalities may diminish women's rights and empowerment by creating various social barriers. This includes gender disparities, patriarchal mindsets, deprivation from income or economic dependence and limited opportunities. These could lower females' participation on education, employment, and decision-making, and leave them vulnerable to gender-based violence, discrimination. This makes survival difficult for them, thus they seek ways out, coping strategies, considering sex work as one of the better options. On the other hand, entry and engagement in sex work may be influenced by exclusionary social phenomena. The social exclusion theory explains the reasons for females to enter into sex work as social marginalization, poverty, lack of education, and deprivation in employment opportunities (Silver, 1994). These reasons could lead them to choose sex work for their livelihood and basic human needs. Similarly, females who are influenced to get involved in sex work may have been suffering from different trauma and violence. Trauma theory stresses that different abuses and violence could lead females into engaging in sex work (Seng et al., 2014). Those who have experienced childhood abuse, domestic violence, neglect, and other psychological trauma may consider sex work as a survival strategy. Such forms of violence and exploitation could result in several psychological problems like low self-esteem, emotional distress, limited coping capacity, and helplessness. Thus, they might be more likely to enter sex work, considering it a means of relief or survival.

The bulk of empirical literature suggests that economic factors predominantly lead women into sex work. It is argued that females engage in sex work due to economic hardship (Nattabi et al., 2025). For example, a study highlighted that poverty as well as limited resources and income, are leading factors to sex work (McCarthy et al., 2014; Saud et al., 2024). Earlier studies found that economic factors are major contributors to Females involvement in sex work (Lim, 1998). Furthermore, several variables independently push females into sex work. These include borrowed money or loans and lack of employment opportunities (Bradshaw et al., 2004). It is reported that severe poverty and resource constraints serve as factors that lead females to enter and engage in sex work (Slim et al., 2020).

On the other hand, sex work is associated with familial factors. Notably, family is considered the union of members, which ensures security, love, confidence, and a source of motivation and enthusiasm. However, some

families who are suffering from troubles or are broken may lead females to become sex workers. It is highlighted that family conditions characterized by inadequate bonding and support may lead to many consequences (Soleimani, 2010). These may include lack of effective family support, security threats, fulfilling basic needs, failing to protect from social harassment and assaults, exclusion, and structural inequalities. In addition, a study stated that parental separation or divorce, sexual or physical abuse at home, familial breakdown, absence of parental supervision, poor family environment, etc., negatively influence females towards sex work. Such incidents within a family may affect children psychologically, making them feel isolated, vulnerable to violence, and helpless, which could ultimately lead females into sex worker (Coetzee et al., 2018).

Another factor that has been predominantly reported is that gender-based violence and inequalities lead females to adopt sex work. Such a type of sex work could have been forced or due to limited alternative opportunities (Balfour & Allen, 2014). It might be considered an obligation of females to escape from violence and physical threats. A study evidenced that female sex workers who experience sexual or physical molestation (assault or abuse) escape from their home to avoid and prevent themselves from assaults, and may adopt sex work as a source of income (Li et al., 2010). Studies reported that household trouble sometimes leads to entry into sex work (Bradshaw et al., 2004). Such trouble includes family quarrelling, childhood abuse, coercion, sexual exploitation, etc. (Saud et al., 2024). Findings from a study supported that frequent experience and coercion have strong linked as a pull factor leading females to engage in sex work. Similarly, childhood abuse, unpleasant experiences, and neglect may develop psychological vulnerability, which may cause their adult life to lead females into sex work (Weitzer, 2005). Importantly, significantly higher rates of gender-based violence are experienced by female sex workers, mostly due to social norms, violent behaviour of parents, and less or no access to support services and psychological counselling (Coetzee et al., 2017). This may lead them to continue sex work unless they receive adequate support and assurance to exit.

Human psychology is a complex influence construct by several factors that may produce either positive or negative outcomes. Negative experiences and environments may lead females into sex work. It is revealed that females suffering from several emotional and psychological issues may consider sex work as one of the coping strategies for survival (Slim et al., 2020). Studies further highlighted that engagement of females in sex work might have previously experienced depression, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional abuse, workload, loneliness, etc. Similarly, another study suggested that females who decide to enter sex work may suffer from fear, anxiety, and internal conflict at the point of entry, considering it a coping strategy (Brunswig et al., 2025).

Additionally, coercion, exploitation, and trafficking are the

most potential factors and critical pathways which may lead females to engage in sex work. Coercive practices often leave females vulnerable to poverty and gender-based inequalities, limiting their access to resources and livelihood opportunities and driving them towards sex work (Ottisova et al., 2016). It is shown that young-aged girls are often engaged in sex work at a young age by force, deceive and trafficking (United Nations, 2000). Similarly, a study evidenced that multiple forms of control were used for trafficking to recruit and retain females in the sex work, such as false promises of employment, threats, sexual violence, psychological manipulation etc. (Kooffreh, 2024).

Education is a powerful tool that enables individuals to make informed decisions and follow socio-cultural norms and legal restrictions. Thus, it is argued that low levels of formal education may also motivate women to enter sex work (Bradshaw et al., 2004). Studies consistently identified that education and awareness are critical structural factors that contribute to females' entry into commercial sex work (Shah et al., 2023). Education and awareness have a direct association with income, safety, etc. Those who have attained low levels of education frequently face social exclusion, restricted employment opportunities that might result in various forms of exploitation, informal occupations, low-paid jobs, etc., which ultimately push them into sex work as their survival strategy (Karandikar et al., 2023).

Interestingly, commercial sex work is not always limited to socio-cultural and economic reasons; the desire for luxurious lifestyles may also be a contributing factor in some cases. For example, Johar et al. (2018) revealed that females, who decided to become commercial sex workers in Central Java, Indonesia's socio-cultural contexts, were influenced by a high-quality lifestyle. The study also indicated that family support, making easy access to whore houses and other arrangements, also influences females into sex work. In the case of Ethiopia, it is worth noting that some female commercial sex workers were motivated to sex work when they received various supports such as formal support services, family support, and saving money (Wilson & Nochajski, 2018; Saud et al., 2024; Yosef & Bihonegn, 2025). However, findings from a study as just mentioned above also contrarily supported that poor family support and security during childhood play a vital role in becoming a sex worker (Soleimani, 2010). This indicates that female commercial sex workers have been deeply linked to not only a single factor, but also social, economic, and enabling factors as well.

The association of female sex work and information and communication technologies has also been widely discussed. ICT includes telecommunication technologies, the internet, smartphones, laptops, and digital platforms. These technologies have rapidly expanded opportunities for communication and social interaction.. Watching erotic videos and scenes, stories, and easily connecting with different people and clients has transformed the conventional dynamics of commercial sex work, providing

new pathways to enter, engage in, and sustain sex work (Jiao et al., 2021). Particularly, ICT has facilitated digital spaces and the emergence of online sex markets (Jiao et al., 2021; Rathore & Khatana, 2022). As a result, female sex workers may benefit in terms of advertisement, communication, and transactions with greater autonomy and social anonymity. It provides a flexible and relatively safe working environment connecting a broader client reach, and enabling client screening through mediated communication without physical venues, which could influence females to enter and continue sex work (Bernier et al., 2021). Thus, access to ICT is an emerging factor that facilitates females to engage in sex work as a means of exchanging messages and feelings. It may help particularly those who have relatively limited resources and are seeking luxurious lifestyles.

Methods

Lived experiences of the female commercial sex workers were captured following the phenomenological study design, which is appropriate when obtaining in-depth experiential information. In this study, data were sought closely related to the difficulties of their lives (Groenewald, 2004). The design provides a rich description of phenomena in the settings where the participants largely gain experience before they decide to enter sex work.

Participants

In this study, six commercial sex workers shared their lived experiences as the participants engaged in sex work in Kathmandu, Butwal, Pokhara and Dharan. The participants were identified through the snowball-sampling technique (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). One of the female sex workers was first connected by a rights-based non-governmental organization that has been supporting them in terms of health and legal issues, while other participants were chosen by using their own informal networks. Through these networks, all participants were reached at different places of Kathmandu during the data collection where they provided relevant experiential information. It was coincidentally possible because of their network pointed out the participants and made them available.

Data Collection Tool

An unstructured in-depth phenomenological interview guideline was developed and used to gather relevant data. It consisted of open-ended, in-depth, and participant-led statements/questions.. The items were developed based on a literature review largely linked to the factors leading females into commercial sex work.

Data Collection Procedure

Firstly, the researchers sought the probable point of the network by visiting an organization that supports female commercial sex workers through various supports. Consequently, the researchers met a female commercial sex worker and introduced themselves to each other. Then, the researchers explained the purpose of the study and the

participants' role in the study.. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and oral audio-taped informed consent was obtained from each participant, while risk-reduction techniques were employed during the interviews.. The interviews were recorded in an audio format, and the setting was a private space in Kathmandu. Eventually, the interviews and entire process of data collection ended with expressing thankfulness. Attention was paid to data saturation until no additional data and their patterns emerged.

Data Analysis

Relevant data collected through in-depth unstructured interviews were analyzed following a thematic approach, which is appropriate to identify recurring patterns, categories, and themes. In this process, it was supplemented by a six-step process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process guides researchers to become familiar with the collected data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the final outcomes/report (Kunwar et al., 2024). Firstly, interviews were transcribed and read carefully, which helped the researcher gain an understanding of participants' lived experiences. Then, meaningful codes and categories with similar meanings were grouped together. Finally, broader themes were generated to reflect patterns in the data. Importantly, participants' identities were coded to protect them by assigning pseudonyms while presenting their experiences and verbatim quotations. Trustworthiness was ensured through a member-checking approach, in which participants were asked to read and indicate whether the interviews were coherent and correctly transcribed and presented. It was noticed that some participants who were less aware of transcription were requested to listen to the researcher and give oral approval. Feedback received from participants was incorporated and/or rephrased in the main body of the transcriptions. Researchers' assumptions and critical reflections were addressed through several ongoing discussions during the study and data analysis process to ensure reflexivity.

Results

This study focused on exploring potential factors that lead females to enter and engage in sex work. Thus, the findings are presented under the broader themes, with the following subthemes emerging from unstructured in-depth interviews.

Participants' Characteristics

The participants in this study appeared with diverse characteristics. Their age ranged from younger adulthood to adulthood (i.e., 25 to 34 years), while their education ranged from general literacy (incomplete school level education) to a master's degree. Box 1 presents participants' additional characteristics.

Box 1: Participants demography and sex work background information

Padma (34 years): She holds an intermediate level of education and has experienced severe economic hardship. She has been raising two children in poor economic conditions, and provides an escort service.

Dina (30 years): She holds an intermediate education, stays at the middle-income level, but has a loan liability and borrowed money to return. She has a family bearing the entire responsibility. She is suffering from emotional issues such as loneliness and anxiety, and provides escort-based sex services.

Shanti (25 years): She is young and holds a master's degree. She has good skills in ICT and is infatuated with a high-quality life. She feels that she has a superior complex and anxiety, and provides sex work to online contact /virtual-based clients.

Narayani (28 years): She is literate (not completed school education), experienced forms of violence from family and boyfriend. Her economic status keeps her at the poverty level, engaged in street-based sex work.

Rupa (31 years): She is also literate, experienced coercion, trafficking, and exploitation at the age of 21. She provides escort-based sex services.

Binita (26 years): She is literate, has been suffering from a psychological problem, experienced coercion at the age of 25 by her father, and engaged in street-based sex work.

As a socially constructed phenomenon, female sex work is interchangeably referred to as sex work among women or sex work by women across the literature.

Factors Leading to Sex Work

Participants vividly reported that their entry and engagement in sex work were influenced by several factors: economic factors, familial factors, gender-based violence, psychological factors, coercion, trafficking and exploitation, education and awareness, infatuation with a high-quality life, and increased access to ICT. Key factors and coding are presented in Fig. 1.

Economic Factor

Participants who were engaged in sex work reported that they were motivated to enter sex work, considering it as a solution to severe economic problems and inequalities. Participants who decided to enter this field shared experiences that varied widely. Some reported due to economic hardship, while some reported due to difficulty paying their bank instalments and returning borrowed money. Fig. 1 presents the key points of the economic factor. One participant shared her reason for entering sex work as:

[Padma, 34 years] "...there was no way to make any income to nourish and take care of my two kids and their education. I tried to find several opportunities, but no one considered me for hire as an employee. I thought of installing a trolley (*Thelagada*) to sell vegetables, but I had very limited money and could not receive any support from relatives and family members. Now, I feel, little is gained to manage my kids' food and education after I have entered into this work".

Severe poverty in the family and females having limited economic opportunities seem to lead them into sex work. However, failing to grow business and maintain economic balance also leads females to enter sex work. One participant who had relatively greater resources and opportunities decided to enter sex work due to her loans and responsibilities. Her motivation to enter sex work was expressed as:

[Dina, 30 years] "We had family business when life was

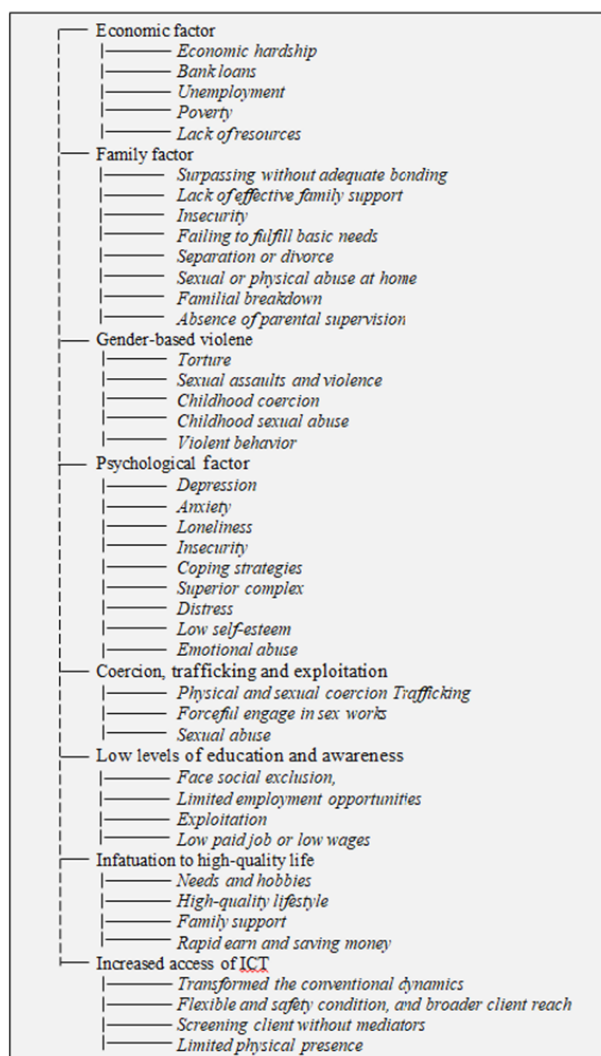


Figure 1: Themes and codes of factors leading to commercial sex work

running normally. All responsibilities were over me, and I was handling it properly rather than my husband. But time changed, and business went down. After, the family started suffering many economic and psychological problems, such as quarrelling in the family, which has been affecting the children's mentality and growth. Then, I adopted this work as an obligation to manage my bank instalments, and a responsibility to return borrowed money to my friends and relatives".

The other two participants also responded to entry sex work due to economic reason. One who entered sex work at the age of 21 [Rupa, 31 years] due to poverty in her family while another participant [Narayani, 28 years] experienced forceful entry due to family poverty.

Family Factor

Family is a strong bond that ensures members feel love, confidence, and security. However, some families lack such fundamental values, which lead to many problems and breakdowns. Sometimes, such a family problem may lead to different consequences and problems, including a female engaging in sex work. Fig. 1 presents the key points of the family factor. One participant who decided to enter sex work mentioned,

[Binita, 26 years] "I never felt bonded with my family. My father never supported me. He used to treat me as a member to marry into another house that makes me insecure in the family. It always made me over-stressed and lack of belongingness. That's why I chose this work".

Similarly, family factors also affected another participant's mind, who also used to feel a lack of family bonding, a lack of fulfilling basic needs and family breakdown. She shared her experience about her entry into sex work as:

[Narayani, 28 years] "My mother left us when I was 20 years old. Then my father and brother started physically abusing me repeatedly. I have never felt parental love, security. Always felt there were insufficient resources for basic needs in our family that insisted me to escape from the family. I found sex work to escape from my pain-creating family".

Thus, it suggests that family issues also appeared as a factor that pushed females into sex work in the specific socio-cultural context of Nepal.

Gender-Based Violence

Due to structural inequalities and discrimination, a wide range of gender-based violence has been reported. Females who are engaged in sex work have had bitter experience of gender-based violence. Participants of this study also reported violence, which led them to become sex workers. Fig. 1 presents the key points that briefly describe gender-based violence as a factor leading females into sex work. Gender-based violence as a factor leading females to sex work was widely expressed by participants. One participant talked about her experience of engaging in sex work:

[Narayani, 28 years] "When I was 21 years old, my

boyfriend started beating me without any true reasons. He used to mentally torture me for his financial limitations, which was not sensible to create over me. Frequent torture made me change my mind and seek an alternative. My family also used to pressure me that I did not earn for my family. Thus, I decided to come into sex work".

Sex work is adopted due to force, coercion, and other forms of abuse in many instances. This is against individual rights to freedom and is a crime under domestic law. Participants who were engaged in sex work mentioned coercion, sexual exploitation, and abuse as the reasons that pushed them into sex work. One participant openly shared her experience as:

[Rupa, 32 years] "I was taken from my village (a remote area of Sindhupalchok district) to Kathmandu without proper information at the age of 17 years. When I arrived here (Kathmandu), they engaged me forcefully in sexual activities. I had to meet a new client for a sexual course. The money they used to give me was grabbed by one who brought me to Kathmandu."

Such types of activities are kinds of human trafficking, abuse, and against the law. However, many incidents have been consistently reported in the media and research. In this regard, another participant stated:

[Binita, 26 years] "We had a small restaurant (chiya/khajaghar), people used to come for tea and breakfast/snacks (khaja). One day, my father offered me to go with a daily customer of our restaurant for sexual purposes. But I denied it at that time. Such pressure was created on me repeatedly. One day, they tricked me and took to an empty house, and raped me. Then, they used to beat and me and forced me to go to different places for sex work; the pain I gained was terrible. Later, I escaped from home and went to Pokhara, where I started servicing sex work."

Psychological Factor

Participants narrated that some of them decided to come into sex work due to their psychological problems. These included a range of problems reported to be mild to severe (Thapa et al., 2016). Fig. 1 presents the key points of the psychological factors leading participants to engage in sex work. One participant was suffering from depression and was using medicines to manage the problem. She shared her experience about entering and engaging in sex work as:

[Binita, 26 years] "I have been engaged in sex work for two years. Before that time, I had no appetite to speak with others, move out of the home, and sustain friendships. Later, I visited a psychiatrist. She assessed my problem and cause, and then prescribed some medicines. However, I was scared about why I had such a problem. Then, I felt I could earn money and save some for further possible complications, but I had no choice. Thus, I decided to enter the sex trade."

Similarly, participants reported how their psychological

condition drove them to engage in sex work as a coping strategy. She said, "I was anxious about my future and family. It makes me still internally conflicted about what to do and not. This is the reason I chose sex work to become a little relaxed and collect some money. Now, I am feeling this is a way to cope with my problems".

Two other participants [Padma, 34 years, Dina, 30 years] also shared their reasons to engage in sex work since they had distress, loneliness, depressive feelings, low self-esteem, and emotional abuse.

Low Levels of Education and Awareness

Education is considered an empowering tool as it prevents individuals from breaking ignorance, injustice, and abusive chains by empowering them. Participants of this study held a low level of education to higher education, which seems to be linked to sex work. Fig. 1 presents the key points of the educational factor linked to sex work. One participant clearly narrated that her low level of education led her to engage in sex work as:

[Rupa, 31 years] "My education is low. Thus, people use me to exploit in different ways and manners. I have experience of sexual coercion and exploitation, but I did not know that it was exploitation. I think it was because of my education. If I had a good education, I would have known that was exploitation. Later, coercion and exploitation pushed me to think about earning money by sex work. Actually, that decision was of little good to me."

Similarly, the linkage of education and sex work was reported that a low level of education is not the only factor that leads females into sex work. One participant who held a Master's degree recognized the advantages of education in engaging in sex work. She shared the benefits of having a higher level of education as:

[Shanti, 25 years] "... for me, my education has significantly helped to contact clients, deal and negotiate for higher pay (income), and arrange escorts. I am good at ICT skills that I have gained during my university studies."

Another participant who had an intermediate level of education narrated that education could have a moderate connection with dealing, negotiation, and safety issues in sex work. As she shared, it was difficult to find employment opportunities due to their education, face social exclusion, and low-paid jobs and low wages.

Infatuation with a High-Quality Lifestyle

It is common for people to have an interest and dedication for a better lifestyle. However, infatuation with a high-quality lifestyle demands relatively more expenses and income. It mostly depends on the income of an individual, while there might be a contradiction between low income and a high-quality lifestyle. If there is no equilibrium, individuals are prone to seek alternative ways to earn regular and high incomes more easily. Participants of this study reported that entering sex work was associated with an infatuation to a high-quality lifestyle. Fig. 1 presents the key points of the

infatuation with a high-quality lifestyle-related factor. One participant openly expressed infatuation that led her to engage in sex work as a better alternative.

[Shanti, 25 years] "I am interested in living a quality lifestyle. Going to different places, meeting new people, shopping, restaurant/bar, I want to pursue my daily hobby. My family has no objection to my being engaged in sex work. They make me aware of diseases and safety, but not complaining about my job. When I decided to enter into sex work, it became a comfort and saving money. It is helping me to fulfil my needs and hobbies. Actually, I can earn as much money as I need and want."

Increased Access to ICT

A wide range of ICT facilities and access has provided many opportunities to frequent communication and sharing feelings. Flexible communication and safety network building have transferred the dynamics of conventional commercial sex work. Participants of this study also acknowledged this benefit of ICT in sex work. Fig. 1 presents the key points of access and the benefits of ICT-related factors. A participant who reported that she was good at ICT skills and use expressed as:

[Shanti, 25 years] "Commercial sex work, as far as I know, is restricted by law. Therefore, safe conditions (e.g., escorts) are necessary. ICT could provide information that made me confident to espouse sex work. It has helped me to reach broader clients without any mediators."

The experience of another participant also supported Shanti's view that she benefited from ICT access to enter into sex work. She narrated as:

[Dinna, 30 years] "I had business, but it went down. Then I had many troubles, especially in financial and home management. My husband used to support me very rarely. As an alternative, my head started spinning with alternative ways to sustain and manage financial difficulties. Then, I found information. Sometimes social media also pumped up information, as I was really interested. I knew little about sex work through social media and ICT. This way, I entered into commercial sex work."

However, some participants reported using limited ICT facilities and access to enter into sex work. One participant said, [Rupa, 31 years] "Initially, I had my mobile phone to contact and meet my people when I entered into sex work. Later, I started using it to manage escort services." Similarly, another participant also expressed a similar experience. She narrated [Dina, 30 years], "The mobile phone was good for me to find information from friends and about sex work. That helped me to decide to enter sex work."

Discussion

This study explored prominent factors that lead females to engage in commercial sex work in the socio-cultural context of Nepal. Participants who responded to the research theme included diverse backgrounds and characteristics, which allowed researchers to describe nuanced information related

to factors that lead females to engage in sex work. Overall findings of this study captured through in-depth exploration of participants' experiences indicate that multiple factors lead females into commercial sex work. In this respect, we identify the economic factor as the most prominent one that attracts females to engage in commercial sex. It was synthesized through the analysis of data expressed by the majority of the participants who openly shared their experience of entering and staying in commercial sex work. Similarly, we further pinpointed other factors that are closely associated with female engagement in commercial sex work. These include family factors, gender-based violence, psychological factors, low levels of education and awareness, infatuation with high-quality lifestyles, and increased access to ICT. All the factors examined in this study are grounded in the theoretical underpinnings highlighted in this section. For example, feminist theory postulates structural inequalities among females (Farley, 2004), while social exclusion theory considers marginalization of females and deprivation of opportunities leading females to sex work as a comparatively better survival strategy (Silver, 1994). Similarly, trauma theory suggests that females who experience childhood abuse, violence, neglect, etc., may create psychological problems, and they might think of sex work as a coping strategy (Seng et al., 2014).

Findings from the present study indicated that the factors leading females to sex work represent both structural and personal factors, as suggested (Nattabi et al., 2025). Reasons to engage in sex work, such as economic, gender-based violence, low level of education, and access to ICT, are closely related to structural levels, while family factors, psychological factors, infatuation with high-quality lifestyles, and access to ICT personal once. Factors that structurally motivate females to sex work require policy intervention and support at personal levels. Thus, the economic factor that was identified as a prominent factor in this study underlies of the need to address predominant social structures. In this regard, findings are consistently align with previous studies that also suggest economic hardship (Nattabi et al., 2025), limited resources and income opportunities and poverty as structural pushing factors to women into sex work (McCarthy et al., 2014; Slim et al., 2020; Saud et al., 2024). Inequalities, deprivation of females of economic resources and employment opportunities, including low paid jobs, discrimination in wages for the same work, also create structural barriers, which play a role in leading females into sex work. Such structural barriers also create gender-based violence that may lead females into sex work since they consider sex work as an escape or coping strategy from violence. The present study also identified gender-based violence as one of the factors that push females into engaging in sex work. This finding of the present study aligns with previous studies, which support that gender-based violence and inequalities lead females into commercial sex work (Balfour, & Allen, 2014). Arguably, it is suggested that violence, house trouble, family quarrelling, childhood abuse, coercion, and sexual exploitation could forcefully push females to sex work since

it leaves them without alternative opportunities to escape and cope with violence (Weitzer, 2005; Li et al., 2010; Balfour & Allen, 2014).

Results from this study indicated that low levels of education and awareness, as well as inaccessibility or limited access to ICT, are also related to structural barriers hindering the empowerment of females (Shah et al., 2023). Studies have shown that there is a strong link to this notion that motivates females to engage in sex work, as highlighted by other studies. For example, it is highlighted that low levels of education and awareness result in females experiencing social exclusion, restricted employment opportunities that may ultimately lead females to sex work as they adopt sex work as a survival strategy (Bradshaw et al., 2004; Karandikar et al., 2023). Similarly, the interlink between education, access to ICT and infatuation with high-quality lifestyles and adoption of sex work. These factors play both pushing and pulling roles. When it is adopted as an informative means that increases access to watching erotic videos and scenes, stories, and easy to connect with different people and clients (Jiao et al., 2021), allowing females to be engaged in sex work, providing digital spaces (Jiao et al., 2021; Rathore, & Khatana, 2022). However, some participants of this study who were less aware and used ICT reported that mobile communication was only a means that rarely helped them in entering into sex work.

Next, the present study identified factors linked to entering sex work that are not directly considered structural influencers but could be consequences of structural inequalities and discrimination. These were related to coercion, trafficking, and exploitation, family factor, psychological factor, and infatuation with high-quality lifestyles. These findings are similar to the results reported by previous studies. It is highlighted that coercive practices, particularly from men, leave females vulnerable to entering into commercial sex work (Ottisova et al., 2016). It was supported by a report that highlighted force, deception, and trafficking at young-aged girls transit them into espousing sex work. It also argued that those who were living with severe poverty, gender-based inequalities, exploitation, and low literacy remain vulnerable to entering into sex work (United Nations, 2000). Sometimes, sex work may have a link to familial factors as well. Arguably, troubles in family, broken family, lack of bonding may provide ground to coercion, trafficking, and exploitation, which ultimately lead females to enter into commercial sex work (Soleimani, 2010). In addition, lack of family support and persisting security threats, familial failure to protect from social harassment, assaults may affect children's psychology, which triggers them to feel helpless and drive them to become sex workers (Coetzee et al., 2018). The psychology of an individual also drives her to espouse sex work. The present study revealed that a wide range of psychological states was reported to drive participants to enter into sex work. This includes depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and security threats, feelings of inferiority, distress, low self-esteem and emotional abuse. These findings are consistent with the studies that also support the present findings (Slim et

al., 2020; Brunswig et al., 2025). Thus, a proper support system and counselling are necessary to manage their psychological issues.

However, sex work is not always limited to economic, family, psychological and other socio-psychological reasons, but is associated with infatuation with a high-quality lifestyle in some cases. This indicates a dynamic shift in traditional sex work. This finding is consistent with other studies, which revealed sex work is espoused due to the reason of infatuation with a high-quality lifestyle. For example, studies conducted in different socio-economic contexts concluded that sex work is also linked with psychological states of an individual as well (Soleimani, 2010; Johar et al., 2018; Wilson & Nochajski, 2018; Saud et al., 2024; Yosef & Bihonegn, 2025). This suggests that preventive and safety measures are necessary and should be widely available for the targeted female sex workers, regardless of their reasons and engagement in sex work.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that there is a strong association between socio-economic vulnerability and women's involvement in sex work compared to other factors. However, this is not the only factor that leads women into sex work; other factors also drive them to engage in it. These can be identified as family and psychological factors, gender-based violence, low levels of education and awareness, infatuation with luxurious lifestyles, and increased access to ICT. The findings of this study align with international studies that consistently identify economic factors as the most prominent influences motivating females to enter sex work. The findings of this study signify the need for comprehensive interventions and support mechanisms to prevent females from entering sex work. It is suggested that empowerment, education, and support systems could address their ignorance and safety concerns, as well as several health-related issues. The participants in this study represent a relatively low socio-economic status. Thus, commercial sex workers who have higher economic status might have been missed in the sample. Further research could explore this issue in greater depth and provide further evidence regarding the involvement of women from different socio-economic backgrounds in sex work. In addition, further studies could explore mental health conditions and psychological issues experienced by female commercial sex workers so that their transition from sex work to employment and social rehabilitation can be made more effective.

Educational Implications

This study may have several implications for different areas. However, it highlights the implications for educational programmes that may underscore the importance of incorporating relevant information into formal curricula. This could increase awareness, insisting on widening social awareness as well. As a result, a foundation could be established for girls' and women's empowerment at

the school and higher education levels. In addition, school education could be designed in such a way that enhances female students with specific vocational skills as part of the overall curriculum. Girls' rights, safe migration, employment opportunities, and social security are areas that should be given higher priority, especially for those who are at risk and vulnerable to sex work.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to the participants who agreed to participate in this study and openly responded to the research concerns. Without their participation and contribution, this study would be incomplete. Furthermore, we express our gratitude to Dr. Rajendra Kunwar for his frequent support and environment, and Devaraj Acharya for substantial guidance during this research.

Authorship

The first author conceptualized the study, collected and analyzed relevant data preparing the draft of the manuscript, where the second author assisted in data analysis and finalized the manuscript. Both researchers worked together in data analysis and composing the discussion section to ensure reflexivity.

Declaration

The authors declare no funding and conflict of interest.

Reference

- Balfour, R., & Allen. J. (2014) A Review of the Literature on Sex Workers and Social Exclusion. London, UK: Report, University College London (UCL) for the Institute of Health Equity. Retrieved on April 4, 2026. From <https://www.coursehero.com/file/60787370/A-Review-of-the-Literature-on-sex-workers-and-social-exclusionpdf/>
- Bancroft-Hinchey, T. (2014). *Scelles Foundation: 42 million people worldwide are prostitutes*. Pravda.ru, Retrieved on 21 April, 2026 from: <http://www.pravdareport.com/society/126700- prostitutes/>
- Beattie, T. S., Smilenova, B., Krishnaratne, S., & Mazzuca, A. (2020). Mental health problems among female sex workers in low-and middle-income countries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS medicine*, 17(9), e1003297. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003297>
- Bernier, T., Shah, A., Ross, L. E., Logie, C. H., & Seto, E. (2021). The use of information and communication technologies by sex workers to manage occupational health and safety: Scoping review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 23(6), e26085. <https://preprints.jmir.org/preprint/26085>
- Biswas, A., Harbin, S., Irvin, E., Johnston, H., Begum, M., Tiong, M., ... & Smith, P. (2022). Differences between men and females in their risk of work

- injury and disability: A systematic review. *American journal of industrial medicine*, 65(7), 576-588. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23364>
- Bradshaw, J., Kemp, P., Baldwin, S., & Rowe, A. (2004). The drivers of social exclusion: A review of the literature for the Social Exclusion Unit in the Breaking the Cycle series. Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/drivers.pdf>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brunswig, F., Desbuleux-Rettel, J., Kratzer, L., Holmström, C., Lotzin, A., Schweizer, K., ... & Schröder, J. (2025). Sex work stigma and psychological distress: A mixed-methods analysis of an international sample of sex workers. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 23, 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-025-01133-4>
- Coetzee, J., Buckley, J., Otjombe, K., Milovanovic, M., Gray, G. E., & Jewkes, R. (2018). Depression and Post Traumatic Stress amongst female sex workers in Soweto, South Africa: A cross-sectional, respondent-driven sample. *PloS one*, 13(7), e0196759. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0196759>
- Coetzee, J., Gray, G. E., & Jewkes, R. (2017). Prevalence and patterns of victimization and polyvictimization among female sex workers in Soweto, a South African township: a cross-sectional, respondent-driven sampling study. *Global health action*, 10(1), 1403815. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16549716.2017.1403815>
- Deering, K. N., Amin, A., Shoveller, J., Nesbitt, A., Garcia-Moreno, C., Duff, P., ... & Shannon, K. (2014). A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers. *American journal of public health*, 104(5), e42-e54. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.301909>
- Farley, M. (2004). "Bad for the body, bad for the heart": Prostitution harms females even if legalized or decriminalized. *Violence against females*, 10(10), 1087-1125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204268607>
- Ghimire, L. (2025). Human Development Index: Comparative Status of Key Countries and the Context of Nepal. *Prashasan: The Nepalese Journal of Public Administration*, 57(1), 179-192. <https://doi.org/10.3126/prashasan.v57i1.80666>
- Ghimire, L., Smith, W. C. S., & van Teijlingen, E. R. (2011). Utilisation of sexual health services by female sex workers in Nepal. *BMC Health Services Research*, 11(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-11-79>
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 3(1), 42-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104>
- Harcourt, C., & Donovan, B. (2005). The many faces of sex work. *Sexually transmitted infections*, 81(3), 201-206. <https://sti.bmj.com/content/81/3/201.short>
- Jiao, S., Bungay, V., & Jenkins, E. (2021). Information and communication technologies in commercial sex work: A double-edged sword for occupational health and safety. *Social Sciences*, 10(1), 23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010023>
- Johar, S. A., Demartoto, A., & Wekadigunawan, C. S. P. (2018). Factors associated with females' decision to become commercial sex workers in Banjarsari, Surakarta, Central Java. *Journal of Epidemiology and Public Health*, 3(1), 72-82. <https://doi.org/10.26911/mid.icph.2018.01.010>
- Karandikar, S., Gezinski, L. B., Casassa, K., & Kaloga, M. (2023). We were not earning enough, so we started this job: Pathways to navigate sex work in Kathmandu, Nepal. *The International Journal of Community and Social Development*, 5(2), 203-217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25166026231173742>
- Karki, R. (2017). Sexual violence and consequences of unintended pregnancy among the street-based sex workers in Nepal. *Journal of Development and Administrative Studies*, 25(1-2), 62-75. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jodas.v25i1-2.23443>
- Kooffreh, B. E. (2024). Examining factors predicting sexual exploitation among victims of human trafficking. *The International Journal of Evidence & Proof*, 28(3), 236-250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13657127231222292>
- Kunwar, R., Laxmi, G. C., Dahal, P. P., & Thapa, K. B. (2024). Unveiling the silent struggle: Exploring the influence of dyslexia on elementary students' mathematics learning in Nepal. *EURASIA Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education*, 20(7), em2474. <https://doi.org/10.29333/ejmste/14752>
- Li, Q., Li, X., & Stanton, B. (2010). Alcohol use among female sex workers and male clients: an integrative review of global literature. *Alcohol & Alcoholism*, 45(2), 188-199. <https://doi.org/10.1093/alcalc/agg095>
- Lim, L. L. (Ed.). (1998). *The sex sector: The economic and social bases of prostitution in Southeast Asia*. International Labour Organization.

- McCarthy, B., Benoit, C., & Jansson, M. (2014). Sex work: A comparative study. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 43(7), 1379-1390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0281-7>
- Miller, W. L., & Crabtree, B. F. (1992). Primary care research: A multimethod typology and qualitative road map. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (pp. 3-28). Sage Publications, Inc. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-97742-001>
- Minichiello, V., & Scott, J. (2017). Kumar, N., Minichiello, V., Scott, J., & Harrington, T. (2017). A global overview of male escort websites. *Journal of homosexuality*, 64(12), 1731-1744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1265356>
- Nattabi, J., Sensoy Bahar, O., Nabayinda, J., Nabunya, P., Kiyangi, J., Kizito, S., ... & Ssewamala, F. M. (2025). Crossroads of choice: a qualitative study of the factors influencing decisions to transition from sex work among females engaged in sex work in Southern Uganda. *BMC Females's Health*, 25(1), 196. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-025-03631-4>
- Niroula, G. (2017). Females' vulnerability in informal entertainment sectors in Kathmandu: A human rights perspectives. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 23-46. <https://doi.org/10.17583/RIMCIS.2017.1928>
- Ottisova, L., Hemmings, S., Howard, L. M., Zimmerman, C., & Oram, S. (2016). Prevalence and risk of violence and the mental, physical, and sexual health problems associated with human trafficking: an updated systematic review. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, 25(4), 317-341. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796016000135>
- Rathore, D. K., & Khatana, S. S. (2022). Impact of Information and Communication Technology on Sex Workers: A Socio-Legal Study. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education (INT-JECSE)*, 4(2), 4752-4755. <https://doi.org/10.9756/INT-JECSE/V14I2.527>
- Ringdal, N. J. (2007). *Love for sale: A world history of prostitution*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc.
- Saud, S. K., Aryal, B., & Ranabhat, C. (2024). Experience of violence and health issues among female sex workers in Kathmandu. *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, 7(1), 117-137. <https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v7i1.67262>
- Sawicki, D. A., Meffert, B. N., Read, K., & Heinz, A. J. (2019). Culturally competent health care for sex workers: An examination of myths that stigmatize sex work and hinder access to care. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy: Journal of the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 34(3), 355-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2019.1574970>
- Scambler, G., & Paoli, F. (2008). Health work, female sex workers and HIV/AIDS: Global and local dimensions of stigma and deviance as barriers to effective interventions. *Social science & medicine*, 66(8), 1848-1862. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2008.01.002>
- Seng, J. S., D'Andrea, W., & Ford, J. D. (2014). Complex mental health sequelae of psychological trauma among females in prenatal care. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(1), 41-49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031467>
- Shah, P., Beattie, T. S., Kabuti, R., Liku, J., Kung'u, M., Babu, H., ... & Seeley, J. (2023). Syndemic of factors that shape the early lives of females who enter into sex work: A qualitative methods study from Nairobi, Kenya. *BMJ open*, 13(4), e068886. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-068886>
- Silver, H. (1994). Social exclusion and social solidarity: Three paradigms. *International Labour Review*, 133, 531.
- Slim, M., Haddad, C., Sfeir, E., Rahme, C., Hallit, S., & Obeid, S. (2020). Factors influencing females's sex work in a Lebanese sample: results of a case-control study. *BMC females's health*, 20(1), 193. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-020-01062-x>
- Soleimani, E. (2010). Prostitution and its challenges as latent social damage and preventive guidelines. In *Proceeding of the first national seminar on effective social factors on safety in Tehran* (pp. 14-21). <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v12n10p106>
- Suresh, G., Furr, L. A., & Srikrishnan, A. K. (2009). An assessment of the mental health of street-based sex workers in Chennai, India. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 25(2), 186-201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043986209333590>
- Thapa, K. B., Okalidou, A., & Anastasiadou, S. (2016). Teachers' screening estimations of speech-language impairments in primary school children in Nepal. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 51(3), 310-327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12209>
- United Nations (2000). Optional Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Females and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, GA Res 55/25. Retrieved 14 April, 2025 from: <http://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf>.
- Weitzer, R. (2005). Flawed theory and method in studies of prostitution. *Violence against females*, 11(7), 934-949. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801205276986>

- Wilson, B., & Nochajski, T. H. (2018). On the continuum of exit: Understanding the stages of change among females in commercial sexual exploitation. *Gender Issues*, 35(2), 98-112. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-017-9201-1>
- World Population Review (2024). Countries where prostitution is legal 2024. Retrieved on 21 April, 2026 from: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-where-prostitution-is-legal>
- Yosef, R. Y., & Bihonegn, A. A. (2025). Understanding the exiting and Re-Entering experiences of Street-Based prostitution among young females in Gondar City, Ethiopia. *Families in Society*, 106(3), 879-890. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894231222142>
- Zeben, D. H., Tesfa, T. B., Tarekegn, G. Y., & Gashaw, B. T. (2025). Factors influencing the early initiation of sex work among female street sex workers in Jimma and Agaro Towns, Southwest Ethiopia. *Scientific Reports*, 15(1), 44772. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-28846-1>