

Prostitution

Paul A. Adekunle¹, Matthew N. O. Sadiku², Janet O. Sadiku³

¹International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

²Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

³Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Prostitution, also known as “commercial sex work,” is the exchange of sexual acts for money/payment or goods, which is often considered as one of the oldest professions but largely illegal or heavily restricted globally. Prostitution is most often driven by many factors such as poverty, unemployment, coercion, or peer pressure, and is associated with risks like sexual exploitation, trafficking, and sexually transmitted diseases (STIs). It is recognized as a complex issue involving, in some cases, the trafficking of vulnerable individuals, particularly women, who may be coerced into the profession or industry. Prostitutes (sex workers) may be female or male or transgender, and may entail heterosexual or homosexual activity, but historically most prostitutes have been women and most clients are men. From religious perspective, prostitution is considered as a moral wrong in itself but individuals involved can obtain God’s redemption and mercy, as it is a violation of divine intent for sexuality, which is designed for the covenant of marriage. Our body is the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” not to be degraded by prostitution, viewed as sin. The paper looks into prostitution in a broader dimension and the social cost to the society at large.

KEYWORDS: Prostitution, prostitute, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), transgender, pornography, stripping. Drug abuse/addiction, Prostitution Prevention Law.

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is often described as the exchange of sexual services for payment or material compensation, which has existed in many societies across recorded history, and as one of the oldest documented forms of labor across human societies, as shown in Figure 1. Its meaning, regulation, and social status have varied widely depending on cultural, religious, economic, and political contexts. It is often referred to in contemporary discourse as “sex work,” which emphasizes the economic and labor dimensions of the activity rather than its moral or criminal status. Definitions vary across legal systems and scholarly disciplines, but most distinguish prostitution from other forms of commercial sexual activity such as pornography or stripping [1-3]. Historically, prostitution is termed the “oldest profession;” it has existed for thousands of years, with evidence of organized sex work appearing in Sumerian records around 2400 BCE, often linked to religious temples. It evolved from sacred, ritualistic practices in the

Ancient Near East to regulated, commercialized, and sometimes taxed activities in Greece and Rome [4].

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The historical overview of prostitution is as presented below:

1. Ancient Civilizations

Mesopotamia: In ancient Mesopotamia (c. 3000-500 BCE), prostitution was documented in legal codes and literature. The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1754 BCE) mentions different classes of women, including temple-affiliated women and independent prostitutes. Earlier scholarship suggested “sacred prostitution,” but many modern historians dispute the scale or even existence of institutionalized temple prostitution [5].

Ancient Greece: In Ancient Greece, prostitution was legal and regulated. This was in different categories i. e.,

- *Pornai* (common prostitutes)
- *Hetairai* (educated courtesans with elite clientele)

How to cite this paper: Paul A. Adekunle | Matthew N. O. Sadiku | Janet O. Sadiku "Prostitution" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-10 | Issue-1, February 2026, pp.1164-1170, www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd100201.pdf



IJTSRD100201

URL:

Copyright © 2026 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



The lawgiver Solon is traditionally credited with establishing state-run brothels in Athens (6th Century BCE) [6].

Ancient Rome: In Ancient Rome, prostitution was legal but stigmatized. Prostitutes had to register and were marked with *infamia* (loss of certain legal rights). Brothels (*lupanarian*) operated openly [2], as shown in Figures 2 and 3.

2. Medieval Period

In medieval Christian Europe, prostitution was officially condemned but often tolerated as a “necessary evil.” Influential theologians like Thomas Aquinas argued that prostitution prevented greater sins. Cities such as Florence and Paris regulated municipal brothels [7].

3. Early Modern Period (1500-1800)

With the Protestant reformation and Counter-Reformation, many cities closed brothels. However, prostitution persisted clandestinely. In England, brothels in Southwark were historically licensed under the Bishop of Winchester. Later, moral reform movements increased suppression [8].

4. 19th Century: Industrialization & Regulation

Industrialization increased urban prostitution in cities like London and Paris. Governments introduced regulatory systems. In Britain, the Contagious Disease Acts allowed forced medical examinations of suspected prostitutes to control venereal disease. Feminist activists such as Josephine Butler led successful repeal campaigns (Acts repealed in 1886) [9].

5. 20th Century

Early 20th Century: International concern about “white slavery” led to early anti-trafficking treaties [10].

Mid-Late 20th Century: During this period, different legal models emerged:

- Criminalization (e.g., much of the United States)
- Legalization (e.g., parts of Nevada)
- Decriminalization (e.g., New Zealand)
- Nordic/Equality Model (criminalizing buyers, not sellers) – selling sex is legal, but buying sex is criminalized (originating in Sweden).

In 2003, New Zealand passed the Prostitution Reform Act, decriminalizing sex work [1].

Due to the fact that prostitution intersects with issues of public health, labor law, gender relations, migration, and human trafficking, it remains a highly contested and evolving subject in social science, law, and public policy.

6. 21st Century

Today, prostitution (often referred to as “sex work”) remains globally contested. The focus is based on:

- Human trafficking vs. consensual sex work
- Workers’ rights and labor protections
- Public health
- Gender equality and exploitation

International organizations such as United Nations and Amnesty International have issued policy recommendations, sometimes differing in approach [3, 11].

TYPES OF PROSTITUTION

Sociological studies classify prostitution based on the visibility, location, and organizational structure of the exchange, ranging from highly visible street-level work to discreet indoor operations. Some of the key types include streetwalkers, brothel workers, escort/call girls, bar/club prostitution (e.g., bar dancers, “beer girls”), religious prostitutes, child/adolescent prostitution, mail-order brides/trafficking, gigolo, pink salon (Pinsaro), forced/coerced prostitution, sex tourism, fricatrice (or feliatrice) prostitutes, camp followers, digital/online prostitution, elderly prostitutes, and massage parlor workers, often stratified by risk, income, and control [12], as shown in Figures 4 and 5.

CAUSES OF PROSTITUTION

The causes of prostitution are driven by complex, interrelated factors, primarily rooted in economic desperation and social vulnerabilities. Some of the leading causes include extreme poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and human trafficking, which force or coerce individuals into sex trade to meet basic needs [13]. Some of the key causes of prostitution include:

- Poverty and economic hardship: This forms the primary driver, forcing individuals to sell sex to survive, afford food, and pay for shelter.
- Unemployment: The lack of legitimate job opportunities restricts income options, making prostitution appear as a viable option or alternative.
- Human trafficking: Coercion, fraud, and force are used to traffic women and children into sexual slavery.
- Childhood abuse and trauma: The history of physical or sexual abuse often leads to vulnerability and entry into street prostitution
- Drug abuse/addiction: Some individuals may engage in sex work to support expensive drug or alcohol habits.

- Lack of education and opportunities: Poor education limits career options, making sex work a “choice” out of the lack of alternatives.
 - Broken homes and lack of parental control/care: The neglect or dysfunctional family environments can lead to homelessness and running away, increasing risk.
 - Peer pressure and social influence: The desire to belong or pressure from peers already involved in the lifestyle.
 - Greed and materialism (“Get-Rich-Quick Syndrome”): This is the desire for a luxurious lifestyle or quick money without conventional work.
 - Societal marginalization and inequality: Deep-seated gender inequalities and the marginalization of vulnerable populations [14, 15].
9. Disruption of community morals: Promotes illegal activities in neighborhoods and lowers the general moral standard.
 10. Economic dependency/vulnerability: This often locks individuals into a cycle of poverty with little opportunity for other employment.
 11. High suicide risk: Studies show that up to 74% of women in prostitution experience lifetime suicide ideation, with a high percentage attempting suicide.

PROSTITUTION PREVENTION

The prevention of prostitution involves a multifaceted approach focusing on reducing demand, offering rehabilitation for individuals, and enforcing laws against trafficking and exploitation. Some key effective strategies would include [13, 20]:

CONSEQUENCES OF PROSTITUTION

Prostitution has significant negative, long-term impacts on individuals and the society, often resulting in severe physical, psychological, and social consequences. Some of the key effects include [16-19]:

1. High risk of STI/HIV transmission: The constant exposure to varied partners leads to high rates of gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS, as shown in Figure 6.
 2. Physical and mental health damage: Frequent violence, injury, and severe psychological issues like PTSD, anxiety, and depression.
 3. Unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion: Lack of protection leads to high rates of unplanned pregnancies and dangerous, illegal abortions.
 4. Social stigmatization and isolation: They face rejection by family and the community, leading to a loss of social standing and “stain” on reputation.
 5. Perpetuation of human trafficking: The demand fuels the kidnapping and forced prostitution of vulnerable individuals.
 6. Broken families and marital instability: Most often cause separation, divorce, and abandonment of children.
 7. Increased crime rates: This is closely associated with drug trafficking, violence, and prostitution-related delinquency.
 8. Drug and alcohol addiction: This are used as a coping mechanism to handle trauma, depression, and the harsh realities of the trade.
1. Reducing demand:
 - John School programs: The program is to educate buyers on the negative consequences of prostitution, which have shown positive results in reducing recidivism.
 - Law enforcement: Targeting pimps, traffickers, and customers (buyers) to reduce the economic incentive and opportunity for the sex trade.
 - Public awareness: This is campaigns to shift societal attitudes towards the commercial exploitation of individuals.
 2. Support and rehabilitation:
 - Exiting services: By providing comprehensive, individualized support to help individuals leave prostitution, including counseling, housing, and job training.
 - Targeted intervention: Addressing root causes such as poverty, abuse, and substance abuse.
 3. Legal and structural approaches:
 - Legal frameworks: Implementing laws that penalize exploiters while decriminalizing or supporting those in the sex industry, as seen in Sweden’s Model and Japan’s Anti-prostitution Law.
 - International cooperation: The UN and other bodies focus on suppressing trafficking and protecting vulnerable populations.
 4. Preventive measures:
 - Education and empowerment: Promoting gender equality and economic opportunities for women and girls to prevent them from entering the sex trade due to necessity.
 - Community-based programs: This is by implementing prevention strategies at the community level, including monitoring and awareness.

The Prostitution Prevention Law (Law no. 118, May 24, 1956) is a law in Japan that aims to prevent prostitution, punish third parties involved in the trade and to protect and rehabilitate women involved in prostitution. It is also known as the “Anti-Prostitution Law” [21, 22].

Additionally, there is the need for a concerted effort by all and sundry to assist end human trafficking via the following ways [23]:

- Know the facts, by finding out how human trafficking happens in your community or around you. Be alert to situations the people around you may be experiencing.
- Seek help
- Increase training
- Speak out
- Be there for people at risk
- Take action in your community
- Build partnerships
- Tap your skills and network
- Think before you buy
- Stay current

BENEFITS OF PROSTITUTION

The “benefits” of prostitution most often is referring to the potential social, economic, or public outcomes observed in certain regulatory contexts. The benefits of prostitution often focus on arguments for its legalization or decriminalization, and primarily identify advantages for the individuals involved (sex workers and clients) and society at large. Some of these are:

- **Economic benefits**
Income generation and economic mobility: for some people, sex work can provide higher earnings compared to low-wage, especially in contexts with limited employment options. In some parts of Germany and the Netherlands, sex industry has been formalized, enabling taxation and labor regulation [3, 24].
- **Public health benefits (Under regulation):**
Prostitution is regulated and sex workers have access to healthcare. Some studies suggest:
 - Increased condom use
 - Regular STI screenings
 - Reduced HIV transmission rates

For example, regulated brothel systems in parts of Australia (e.g., New South Wales) have been associated with relatively low STI rates among sex workers [25, 26]. Both the WHO and UNAIDS have stated that decriminalization can improve health access and reduce violence against sex workers.

3. **Reduced crime and violence:** A study examining the effects of decriminalization in Rhode Island

(2003-2009 period of indoor prostitution decriminalization) found associations with [24]:

- Decreased reported rape offenses
 - Reduced gonorrhea incidence
4. **Autonomy & labor rights (Under Rights-Based Models):** Advocates argue that when treated as legal labor:
 - Workers can report abuse without fear of arrest
 - Labor protections may reduce exploitation
 - Organized collections improve safety

Countries like New Zealand decriminalized sex work through the Prostitution Act (2003), and government reviews reported improved worker safety and rights awareness [27].

5. **Empowerment and reduced stigma** [28].

CONCLUSION

The solutions to prostitution must be holistic, combining social support, legal reform, healthcare access, and community engagement. Such an integrated approach not only protects the rights and dignity of the individuals involved but also contributes to the broader goal of social justice and public health. Prostitution must be understood not as an isolated moral controversy but as a structural phenomenon embedded with global capitalism, gendered power hierarchies, migration regimes, and neoliberal labor markets. A critical analysis therefore requires moving beyond binary categorizations of prostitution as either empowerment or exploitation. Instead, it demands attention to intersecting factors such as class, race, migration status, and gendered precarity, which mediate both vulnerability and agency. Ultimately, any sustainable framework must reconcile respect for individual autonomy with a commitment to dismantling the structural conditions that render certain populations disproportionately exposed to commodified sexual labor. More information on prostitution can be found in the books in [29-39] and the following related journals:

- Research for Sex Work*
International Journal of Sexual Health
Sexuality & Culture
Social & Legal Studies
Sexuality Research and Social Policy
Journal of Public Health
British Journal of Criminology
Journal of Sexual Aggression
Feminist Criminology
International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy

REFERENCES

- [1] G. Abel, L. Fitzgerald & C. Healy (2007), *Taking the crime out of sex work: New*

- Zealand sex workers' fight for decriminalization,*" Policy Press.
- [2] T. A. J. McGinn (1998), *Prostitution, sexuality and the law in Ancient Rome*, Oxford University Press.
- [3] R. Weitzer (2012), *Legalizing prostitution: From illicit vice to lawful business*, NYU Press.
- [4] "History of prostitution," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/history-of-prostitution>
- [5] J. Assante (2003), "From whores to Hierodules: The Historiographic Invention of Mesopotamian Sacred Prostitution," *Ancient Art and Its Historiography*.
- [6] E. Fantham et al. (1994), *Women in the Classical World*, Oxford University Press.
- [7] R. M. Karras (1996), *Common women: Prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England*, Oxford University Press.
- [8] P. Griffiths (1998), *Lost Londons: Change, crime, and control in the capital city 1550-1660*, Cambridge University Press.
- [9] J. R. Walkowitz (1980), *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, Cambridge University Press.
- [10] J. Doezema (2000), "Loose women or lost women?" *Gender Issues*.
- [11] R. M. Bhat (June 2022), "A historical study of prostitution," *Journal of Media Culture and Communication*, vol. 2, no. 04, pp. 1-6.
- [12] "Types of prostitution final 1 PDF - Scribd," <https://www.scribd.com/types-of-prostitution>
- [13] National Institute of Justice, "Prostitution: Pathways, problems and prevention," September 29, 2009, <https://www.nij.ojp.gov/prostitution-pathways-problems-and-prevention>
- [14] S. Qayyum, M. M. A. Iqbal, A. Iqbal & A. Akhtar (September 2013), "Causes and decision of women's involvement into prostitution and its consequences in Punjab, Pakistan," *Academic Research International*, vol. 4, no. 5, pp. 398-411.
- [15] "Prostitution in India," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/prostitution-in-india>
- [16] M. Hartmann (December 10, 2025), "Causes and effects of human trafficking," <https://www.theexodusroad.com/causes-and-effects-of-human-trafficking>
- [17] "Cause and impact of prostitution final," <https://www.scribd.com/cause-and-impact-of-prostitution>
- [18] "Causes and effects of prostitution," <https://www.askfilo.com/causes-and-effects-of-prostitution>
- [19] A. Hussaini, "Causes, types and consequences of prostitution on women in Sokoto State, Nigeria: Implications for small scale enterprises counselling," <https://www.academia.edu/34396612/causes-types-and-consequences-of-prostitution-on-women-sokoto-state-nigeria>
- [20] "More actions taken for prostitution prevention and control," October 15, 2022, <https://www.vietnamnews.vn/more-actions-taken-for-prostitution-prevention-and-control>
- [21] "Prostitution Prevention Law," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/prostitution-prevention-law>
- [22] ThaiLaws.com, "Prevention and suppression of Prostitution Act, B. E. 2539 (1996)," <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/46403/THA46403.pdf>
- [23] Office of the Administration for Children & Families, "Ten things you can do to help end human trafficking," March 27, 2025, <https://www.acf.gov/ten-things-you-can-do-to-help-end-human-trafficking>
- [24] S. Cunningham & M. Shah (2018), *Decriminalizing indoor prostitution: Implications for sexual violence and public health*, National Bureau of Economic Research.
- [25] World Health Organization Reports on HIV Prevention among Sex Workers.
- [26] UNAIDS guidance on Decriminalization and Public Health Outcomes.
- [27] New Zealand Ministry of Justice (2008), *Report of the Prostitution Law Review Committee*.
- [28] Harvard Civil Rights – Civil Liberties Law Review, "To protect women, legalize prostitution," October 1, 2019,

<https://www.journals.law.harvard.edu/to-protect-women-legalize-prostitution>

- [29] M. H. Ditmore (ed.), "Encyclopedia of Prostitution and sex Work." (2 volumes), Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [30] R. Matthews et al., "Exiting prostitution: A study in female desistance," Springer."
- [31] "Prostitution and human trafficking: Focus on clients | SpringerLink," Springer.
- [32] J. L. Mosley, "Sex workers and their clients: In their own words | Springer Nature Link," Springer.
- [33] "Playing the whore," Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playing-the-whore>
- [34] S. Jeffreys, "The industrial vagina: The political economy of the global sex trade."
- [35] G. Pheterson (ed.), "A vindication of the rights of whores."
- [36] N. J. Davis, "Prostitution: An international handbook on trends, problems, and policies," <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2005255.Prostitution>
- [37] R. Weitzer (1999), "The social organization of prostitution."
- [38] J. Sanchez (2015), "The political economy of prostitution."
- [39] N. Manandhar (2017), "Global prostitution: Brothels, sex tourism, and sex trafficking."



Figure 2. History of prostitution
Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_prostitution



Figure 3. Sexuality in Ancient Rome
Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexuality_in_ancient_Rome



Figure 1. Prostitution.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostitution>



Figure 4. Prostitution/images
Source:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Prostitution/Images/15>



Figure 5. Sex trafficking

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_trafficking



Figure 6. HIV/AIDS

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV/AIDS>

