

Hidden Voices: Women's Lived Experiences in Red-Light Streets

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Abstract

Female sex workers (FSWs) experience substantial safety risks and barriers to accessing justice, particularly in contexts where sex work is criminalized and socially stigmatized. This study explored the lived experiences of FSWs in Butuan City, Philippines, focusing on their exposure to victimization and the barriers they encounter when reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. Using a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, the study involved seven FSWs selected through purposive sampling. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed to identify recurring experiences and meanings emerging from the participants' narratives. The findings revealed that participants experienced various forms of victimization, including physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, as well as threats to their personal safety in unsafe working environments. Fear of retaliation, emotional distress, concern for family members, and distrust in the effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms discouraged participants from reporting incidents and seeking assistance. These barriers were further compounded by apprehension about possible legal consequences and the potential for unfavorable treatment by authorities. The findings suggest that victimization and barriers to justice are interconnected, as concerns about personal safety and the consequences of disclosure may limit victims' willingness to engage with formal justice mechanisms. The study underscores the importance of accessible reporting channels, gender-sensitive policing, victim-centered support services, and stronger safeguards against retaliation and discrimination. These measures may help improve access to justice and strengthen the protection of marginalized women experiencing violence and exploitation.

Keywords: female sex workers, victimization, barriers to justice, crime reporting, access to justice, phenomenology

Introduction

Female sex workers (FSWs) experience intersecting challenges involving personal safety, exposure to violence, social stigma, and access to legal protection. Although the circumstances of sex work vary across social and legal contexts, women engaged in this occupation may encounter physical assault, sexual abuse, verbal humiliation, coercion, and threats to their lives. These experiences become particularly concerning when occupational vulnerability intersects with social marginalization and legal environments that discourage individuals from seeking assistance. Consequently, victimization among FSWs should not be understood solely as an interpersonal problem between workers and perpetrators; it also warrants examination in relation to the institutional and social conditions that shape women's ability to protect themselves and pursue justice. The dissertation *Hidden Voices: Women's Lived Experiences*

in Red-Light Streets identifies violence, exploitation, and limited access to protection as central concerns in the experiences of FSWs in Butuan City, Philippines.

One important dimension of this problem is the relationship between victimization and the decision to report crimes. Reporting violence is often regarded as an essential step toward obtaining legal protection, holding perpetrators accountable, and preventing further harm. However, victims may hesitate to approach authorities when they anticipate retaliation, fear exposure of their personal circumstances, or doubt that their complaints will receive appropriate attention. For FSWs, these concerns may be intensified by occupational stigma, fear of discriminatory treatment, and uncertainty regarding the legal consequences associated with their work. The dissertation's findings indicate that fear of retaliation, concern for family members, emotional distress, and distrust in the effectiveness of reporting procedures discourage participants from seeking formal assistance. These experiences suggest that the existence of legal mechanisms does not necessarily ensure that marginalized individuals can access them safely or confidently.

The Philippine context provides an important setting for examining these concerns. The legal treatment of prostitution and the implementation of anti-trafficking measures create a complex environment in which the regulation of sex work, the protection of individuals experiencing exploitation, and the enforcement of criminal law intersect. Republic Act No. 10158 amended Article 202 of the Revised Penal Code concerning vagrancy and prostitution-related provisions, while Republic Act No. 11862, or the Expanded Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2022, strengthened the country's framework for preventing and addressing trafficking in persons. These laws address distinct legal concerns and should not be treated as interchangeable. Nevertheless, the broader legal and social environment remains relevant to understanding how women engaged in sex work perceive their safety, evaluate the risks of reporting violence, and decide whether to seek assistance from authorities. The dissertation's findings indicate that apprehension about possible legal consequences may compound the difficulties participants experience when considering whether to report victimization.

Beyond the formal legal framework, access to justice depends on how victims experience the institutions responsible for receiving complaints and providing protection. When individuals anticipate indifference, inadequate follow-up, or further mistreatment, their confidence in formal reporting mechanisms may diminish. The dissertation documents participants' perceptions of the reporting process as ineffective, particularly when complaints appear to produce little progress or when authorities are perceived as unresponsive. Fear and distrust can therefore operate as interconnected barriers: the prospect of reporting may expose victims to additional emotional and social risks, while uncertainty about the outcome may make formal intervention appear unlikely to provide meaningful protection. Examining these barriers is important because underreporting can leave incidents of violence undocumented and limit opportunities for timely assistance and accountability.

Although the broader literature discussed in the dissertation addresses sex-work stigma, victimization, criminalization, and access to health and social services, the specific experiences of women in less extensively studied local contexts require attention. The dissertation identifies a gap in qualitative understanding of how FSWs in Butuan City experience violence and navigate the personal, social, and institutional obstacles associated with reporting crimes. Understanding these experiences requires an approach that gives priority to participants' own accounts rather than relying exclusively on legal provisions, aggregate statistics, or assumptions about why victims do or do not report abuse. A phenomenological perspective is particularly appropriate because it allows the analysis to examine how

participants interpret threats to their safety and assign meaning to their decisions about seeking protection.

In response to this concern, the present article draws on the dissertation's qualitative data to examine two interconnected dimensions of the participants' experiences: their exposure to violence and victimization while engaged in sex work, and the barriers they encounter when reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. Specifically, the article seeks to understand the forms of harm described by participants, the personal and institutional considerations that influence reporting decisions, and the ways fear, distrust, and perceived ineffectiveness of formal procedures shape their access to justice. By concentrating on these two research questions, the article offers a focused account of victimization and reporting barriers without attempting to address every dimension of the original dissertation.

The study contributes to criminological discussions by foregrounding the experiences of a marginalized population whose accounts may be overlooked in conventional assessments of crime reporting and legal protection. Its findings can inform consideration of more accessible reporting mechanisms, gender-sensitive and respectful treatment by law enforcement personnel, safeguards against retaliation, and appropriate victim-support services. Rather than assuming that all FSWs share identical experiences or that criminalization alone explains every reported incident, the article examines the participants' narratives within their specific local and institutional context. In doing so, it seeks to clarify how experiences of victimization and perceived barriers to justice intersect in the everyday realities of FSWs in Butuan City, Philippines.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of female sex workers (FSWs) in Butuan City, Philippines, with particular attention to their exposure to victimization and the barriers they encountered in reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. The design enabled an in-depth examination of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the circumstances affecting their personal safety and access to justice. Through a phenomenological approach, the study sought to understand how participants experienced violence and how personal, social, and institutional conditions influenced their decisions to seek assistance from authorities.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved seven female sex workers selected through purposive sampling. This non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit individuals whose experiences were directly relevant to the research objectives. To qualify for participation, individuals had to be at least 25 years old, currently engaged in sex work in Butuan City, and have a minimum of five years of experience in the occupation. Participants were likewise required to be willing to share their experiences voluntarily. The selection criteria ensured that the participants had substantial firsthand experience of the phenomenon under investigation and could provide detailed accounts of victimization, personal safety concerns, and challenges associated with reporting crimes and accessing legal protection.

Research Instrument

An in-depth, semi-structured interview guide served as the primary data-gathering instrument. The guide

was developed to elicit detailed narratives concerning participants' experiences of personal safety, exposure to violence and victimization, and perceptions of the barriers to reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their experiences in their own words, while follow-up questions provided opportunities to clarify responses and explore relevant experiences in greater depth. The interview guide was reviewed by qualified validators to assess the clarity, relevance, comprehensibility, and appropriateness of the questions in relation to the study's objectives. Face and content validity assessments were used to evaluate the instrument before its implementation.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained before proceeding with the interviews. The interview process was conducted sensitively, recognizing the personal and potentially distressing nature of experiences involving violence, threats, and barriers to justice. Participants were given the opportunity to explain their experiences in detail and could decline to answer questions they found uncomfortable. The resulting interview narratives provided the qualitative data for examining participants' experiences of victimization and their decisions concerning crime reporting and the pursuit of legal protection.

Data Analysis

The interview data were examined to identify significant statements, recurring experiences, and common meanings relevant to the research objectives. Particular attention was given to participants' accounts of physical and sexual violence, verbal abuse, coercion, threats to personal safety, emotional distress, fear of retaliation, concern for family members, and perceptions of the effectiveness of reporting procedures. These accounts were organized into themes that captured the similarities and variations in participants' experiences.

The analysis focused on understanding the relationship between victimization and barriers to justice as expressed in the participants' narratives. Experiences of violence were examined alongside the personal and institutional considerations that influenced participants' willingness to report incidents or seek assistance. The resulting thematic interpretation provided the basis for presenting the participants' experiences of safety, victimization, and access to legal protection.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the conduct of the study because of the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences and the potential risks associated with disclosing information about their occupation and experiences of victimization. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of their right to refuse participation, decline to answer specific questions, and withdraw in accordance with the study's consent procedures. Aliases were used to protect participants' identities, and personal information was handled confidentially. Interview questions were approached with sensitivity and respect for participants' dignity, while collected data were protected through restricted access. These measures were intended to minimize potential harm and safeguard participants' privacy throughout the research process.

Scope of the Analysis

The analysis concentrated on two interconnected dimensions of the participants' lived experiences: exposure to victimization and barriers to reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. It examined the forms of violence and threats to personal safety described by participants, together with the emotional, social, and institutional factors that influenced their responses to these experiences. Particular attention was given to fear of retaliation, concerns for family members, emotional distress, and distrust in formal reporting mechanisms. By examining these dimensions together, the study sought to develop a contextual understanding of how experiences of victimization and perceived obstacles to reporting shape the pursuit of safety and justice among female sex workers in Butuan City, Philippines.

Results

The analysis of the in-depth interviews with seven female sex workers (FSWs) in Butuan City, Philippines, revealed two major dimensions of their lived experiences: (1) exposure to violence and victimization in the context of sex work and (2) barriers to reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. The findings were organized according to the two research questions addressed in this article. Participants' narratives revealed that threats to personal safety were not limited to physical encounters with abusive customers but also involved unsafe working environments, emotional distress, fear of retaliation, and uncertainty about the effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms. These findings demonstrate the interconnected nature of victimization and access to justice in the participants' experiences.

Exposure to Violence and Victimization

The participants' narratives revealed that violence and victimization occurred in several forms, including physical assault, sexual violence, verbal abuse, coercion, and threats to personal safety. Some participants described encounters in which customers appeared to believe that payment gave them the right to disregard the women's dignity and personal boundaries. In such circumstances, the participants described limited opportunities to resist, particularly when confronted by physically stronger or armed customers. Their accounts indicated that compliance sometimes became a means of self-preservation rather than an expression of willingness to accept the abuse.

Informant 1 described an encounter with an abusive customer who threatened her with a weapon and believed that payment entitled him to behave as he wished. She explained:

"I experienced encountering a sadistic customer who pointed a weapon at me. There are also customers who think that because they paid you, they can do whatever they want to you. We could not do anything. We just do what the customer wants rather than risk our lives." (Informant 1)

This account illustrates how the perceived power imbalance between customers and sex workers could constrain the participants' responses to threatening situations. Rather than risk further injury, the informant described prioritizing her immediate survival. Her experience suggests that the danger involved not only the occurrence of violence itself but also the limited control she felt she had over the situation once a customer became threatening.

The narratives also revealed experiences of physical and sexual violence. Informant 3 recounted being slapped, verbally insulted, and raped. Her account demonstrates that victimization could involve multiple forms of harm within the participants' working experiences. These incidents affected not only physical safety but also personal dignity and the sense of security necessary to carry out everyday

activities. Informant 5 similarly described a life-threatening encounter in which she was taken to an isolated area and feared that she would not survive. She recalled that she eventually survived the incident, emphasizing the severity of the danger she had experienced.

Unsafe working environments further intensified the participants' vulnerability. Some described being taken to distant or unfamiliar locations where assistance was difficult to obtain. Informant 4 explained that customers sometimes brought her to faraway places and failed to pay her afterward. She stated:

"There are situations where you are checked into a faraway place and then not even paid. You cannot fight back because you are a woman and the man is stronger. He can just leave you there, so I no longer react because all I think about is my safety." (Informant 4)

The account illustrates how isolation, physical disadvantage, and uncertainty about a customer's behavior could restrict the participants' options for responding to abuse. The decision to remain calm or avoid confrontation reflected an attempt to minimize immediate danger. Similarly, Informant 1 explained that being taken far away from the city made her afraid because such locations were unfamiliar and potentially difficult to escape. These accounts indicate that perceived safety depended partly on the location of an encounter and the availability of assistance if violence occurred.

Taken together, the findings show that participants' exposure to victimization involved both direct acts of violence and environmental conditions that increased their perceived vulnerability. Physical and sexual abuse, verbal humiliation, threats, and unsafe locations contributed to a working environment in which some participants felt compelled to prioritize survival over resistance. Their narratives provide a contextual understanding of the safety concerns experienced by the seven participants without suggesting that every female sex worker experiences the same circumstances.

Barriers to Reporting Crimes and Seeking Legal Protection

The second research question examined how participants perceived and navigated the barriers associated with reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. The findings revealed two closely related themes: fear and emotional distress when reporting incidents, and perceived futility and distrust in the reporting process. Participants' accounts showed that decisions about reporting were influenced by concerns about further victimization, emotional vulnerability, family safety, and uncertainty about whether formal complaints would result in meaningful action.

Fear and Emotional Distress When Reporting Incidents

Fear of retaliation emerged as a significant concern when participants considered reporting abusive customers. Some feared that perpetrators might return, discover who had reported them, or inflict further harm. Informant 1 expressed this concern directly:

"I am afraid that the customer might come back and retaliate against me if I report." (Informant 1)

This statement illustrates how the possibility of retaliation could extend the effects of victimization beyond the original incident. Reporting was not necessarily perceived as an immediate route to safety; instead, it could be viewed as an action that might expose the participant to additional danger. The fear of being identified as the complainant consequently complicated the decision to seek assistance from authorities.

Participants also described emotional distress when considering whether to report incidents. Informant 2 expressed her experience through the phrase, "Grabeng kakulba," translated in the dissertation as "Extreme nervousness." This account reflects the emotional burden associated with contemplating

formal action after an experience of victimization. Fear and anxiety were therefore not merely reactions to the original incident; they also influenced the participants' willingness to pursue assistance and consider the possible consequences of reporting.

Concern for family members constituted another dimension of these decisions. Informant 5 explained that her thoughts centered on her family, particularly her child. She stated:

"I was thinking about my family, especially my child." (Informant 5)

This account demonstrates that participants' decisions about reporting were not always based solely on their individual safety. The possibility that the consequences of reporting might affect their children or other family members also entered their considerations. For participants who were concerned about retaliation, the perceived risks of seeking justice could extend to people who depended on them or whom they wished to protect.

Overall, the findings indicate that fear of retaliation, emotional distress, and concern for family safety complicated participants' decisions about reporting victimization. These concerns reveal the personal and emotional dimensions of access to justice and help explain why the decision to report could be experienced as a difficult and potentially risky process.

Perceived Futility and Distrust in the Reporting Process

In addition to fear and emotional distress, participants described concerns about the perceived effectiveness of formal reporting mechanisms. Some believed that their complaints did not lead to meaningful progress, while others felt that authorities were indifferent to their experiences. These perceptions weakened their confidence that reporting would result in accountability or protection.

Informant 2 described repeatedly reporting incidents without receiving updates or observing progress. She stated:

"I have reported many times, but there were never any updates or progress. Everything only ended with a blotter report." (Informant 2)

This account reflects the participant's frustration with a process that, from her perspective, did not extend beyond the recording of the incident. The absence of visible progress appeared to diminish her expectation that further reporting would produce a meaningful outcome. Her experience highlights the distinction between having an opportunity to submit a complaint and feeling that the complaint is being addressed effectively.

Distrust was also reflected in participants' perceptions of how authorities responded to their concerns. Informant 4 stated:

"I felt that the police did not care." (Informant 4)

This statement conveys the participant's perception of indifference and suggests that the quality of the response influenced her confidence in the reporting process. When individuals feel that their concerns are not taken seriously, they may question whether formal intervention can provide meaningful assistance. In the context of the participants' experiences, perceived indifference became an additional obstacle to seeking protection.

However, the accounts did not indicate that all encounters with authorities were negative. Informant 1 described being welcomed at the front desk and referred to the Women's Desk, where the incident was recorded. She recalled:

"We were welcomed at the front desk, and when they learned about our case, we were directed to the Women's Desk and the incident was blotted." (Informant 1)

This experience provides an important contrast to accounts of perceived indifference and ineffective follow-up. It indicates that some participants received procedural assistance when they approached authorities. Nevertheless, the coexistence of supportive and discouraging experiences suggests that participants' perceptions of the reporting process were not uniform. Initial assistance did not necessarily resolve broader concerns about the effectiveness of complaints or the likelihood of obtaining justice. The findings therefore reveal that participants' experiences of reporting were shaped by both the availability of formal procedures and their perceptions of how those procedures operated in practice. Reports that appeared to produce little progress, perceived indifference, and inconsistent experiences contributed to uncertainty about the value of seeking assistance. At the same time, the account of procedural support demonstrates that some encounters offered a more positive experience. This variation is important because it prevents the conclusion that all participants experienced the same treatment or that all formal reporting efforts were unsuccessful.

Synthesis of the Findings

Across the two research questions, the findings reveal an important connection between exposure to victimization and perceived barriers to justice. Participants described experiences of violence and threats in circumstances where they sometimes felt unable to resist or obtain immediate assistance. When considering whether to report these incidents, they also had to weigh the possibility of retaliation, their emotional distress, the safety of family members, and their confidence in the response of authorities.

The accounts suggest that the consequences of victimization may extend beyond the immediate incident when survivors perceive reporting as potentially dangerous or ineffective. Fear of further harm can make reporting appear risky, while perceived lack of progress can weaken confidence in the benefits of formal intervention. Conversely, the experience of being received and referred to the Women's Desk illustrates the importance of accessible and respectful procedures.

Taken together, these findings provide a focused account of how the seven participants experienced victimization and understood the challenges associated with seeking legal protection in Butuan City. They underscore the importance of examining not only the forms of harm experienced by marginalized women but also the circumstances that shape their decisions to seek assistance. The findings are specific to the participants and context of this study and should not be interpreted as a statistical representation of all female sex workers in the Philippines.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of female sex workers (FSWs) in Butuan City, Philippines, focusing on their exposure to victimization and the barriers they encountered when reporting crimes and seeking legal protection. The findings revealed that the seven participants experienced various forms of violence and threats to personal safety, including physical assault, sexual abuse, verbal humiliation, coercion, and life-threatening encounters. Unsafe working environments, unfamiliar locations, and unequal power relationships with customers further contributed to their perceived vulnerability. In some situations, participants chose to comply with customers' demands or avoid confrontation because they considered these responses necessary to protect their lives. These experiences demonstrate that the participants' concerns about safety extended beyond individual incidents of violence to the circumstances in which they worked and the limited options they perceived when confronted with danger.

The study also found that fear of retaliation, emotional distress, concern for family members, and distrust in the reporting process influenced participants' decisions to seek legal assistance. Some participants feared that reporting abusive customers might expose them to further harm, while others expressed disappointment over the perceived lack of progress in previously reported cases. The feeling that authorities did not take their concerns seriously further weakened some participants' confidence in formal reporting mechanisms. However, the account of a participant who received assistance through the Women's Desk demonstrates that experiences with authorities were not uniformly negative. This contrast highlights the importance of accessible procedures, respectful treatment, and appropriate institutional responses in shaping individuals' perceptions of justice.

Overall, the findings indicate that victimization and barriers to justice are interconnected in the experiences of the participants. The decision to report an incident was influenced not only by the severity of the harm experienced but also by concerns about personal safety, family welfare, possible retaliation, and the anticipated effectiveness of formal intervention. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the circumstances that may discourage marginalized women from seeking protection. Although the study does not establish that all female sex workers experience the same conditions, it provides contextual insight into the safety concerns and reporting barriers described by the participants in Butuan City. The study therefore emphasizes the need for victim-centered, gender-sensitive, and accessible approaches to protection and justice.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to address the safety concerns and barriers to justice experienced by female sex workers (FSWs) in Butuan City.

Law Enforcement Agencies. The Philippine National Police (PNP), particularly the Women and Children Protection Desk (WCPD), may strengthen its procedures for receiving and handling complaints from female sex workers. Police personnel might benefit from additional training on gender-sensitive, nonjudgmental, and trauma-informed approaches to reporting sexual abuse, physical violence, threats, and other forms of victimization. The PNP may also consider establishing confidential reporting procedures and appropriate follow-up mechanisms to help complainants feel safer and more confident that their concerns will be addressed.

Local Government Units (LGUs). The Butuan City Government, through its relevant social welfare and public safety offices, may develop or strengthen community-based support services for FSWs who experience violence. These services might include access to psychosocial support, referrals to legal assistance, and information about available protection mechanisms. The LGU may also coordinate with law enforcement agencies and service providers to improve access to assistance while protecting the privacy and safety of individuals seeking help.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations. NGOs and civil society organizations working on women's rights, violence prevention, and access to justice may provide confidential counseling, legal information, and referral services for FSWs who experience abuse. These organizations might also facilitate peer-support activities and awareness sessions that help participants understand their rights and available reporting options. Such initiatives may help reduce isolation and encourage individuals to seek assistance when they feel safe and ready to do so.

Policymakers and Relevant Government Agencies. Policymakers and relevant government agencies may review existing policies and practices to identify whether legal, institutional, or social barriers might

discourage FSWs from reporting crimes or seeking protection. Policy discussions could consider how complaint-handling procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and access to support services might be improved. Any proposed reforms should be informed by the experiences of affected individuals and should aim to ensure that reports of violence are taken seriously and handled fairly.

Community and Peer-Support Networks. Community organizations and peer-support groups may help disseminate information about personal safety, available services, and possible avenues for reporting abuse. These networks might also provide opportunities for FSWs to share experiences and access support without pressure to disclose personal information. Participation should remain voluntary, and confidentiality should be respected to avoid exposing individuals to additional risks.

Future Researchers. Future researchers may conduct similar studies in other cities or communities to determine whether the experiences identified in Butuan City are also reported in different settings. Researchers might examine how factors such as stigma, fear of retaliation, trust in law enforcement, and access to legal assistance influence decisions to report victimization. Further studies may also include the perspectives of service providers and law enforcement personnel to develop a more comprehensive understanding of barriers to justice. Since the present study involved seven participants, future research with broader or more varied samples might provide additional insights while preserving participants' safety, privacy, and informed consent.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist in improving the language, grammar, organization, and academic presentation of this manuscript. These tools supported the refinement of selected sections, including the Results, Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations, based on the information provided in the original dissertation. All research data, participant accounts, and substantive findings were drawn from the original study and were not intentionally fabricated or generated by AI. The authors remain responsible for the accuracy, integrity, interpretation, and originality of the manuscript, including the verification of quotations, references, and research findings. AI tools were used as supplementary writing aids and did not replace the researchers' scholarly judgment, responsibility, or ownership of the research.

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