



Sex work is work

Let's affirm the rights of sex workers in the world of work!



Standup
Movement Lanka

Assessment report

On the Labour Rights of Informal Sector Workers

with a focus on FSWs

November 2024

**For
Standup Movement Lanka**

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1. Introduction

Sex work has long been a contested and controversial occupation globally. For female sex workers, the challenges extend beyond societal stigma; they navigate a complex landscape marked by legal, social, and economic barriers that often compound their marginalization. In many countries, sex work exists in a legal gray area or is outright criminalized, which perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and vulnerability for those involved in this line of work.

Female sex workers contribute significantly to the informal economy, often providing for families, communities, and, by extension, fueling local economies. Yet, despite their economic contributions, they are frequently denied recognition, fair treatment, and access to the basic social protections afforded to other labor sectors. This lack of support exacerbates the risks associated with their profession, including heightened health hazards, restricted access to healthcare, and limited or no inclusion in social welfare programs. These systemic barriers not only compromise their physical safety but also their mental well-being, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, insecurity, and social exclusion.

This study focuses on the status and experiences of female sex workers (FSWs) in Sri Lanka, with additional insights from India and Thailand to provide comparative perspectives. These countries each present unique yet interconnected social and economic landscapes that shape the realities for FSWs.

Specifically, the study examines how legal frameworks, societal attitudes, and economic structures influence the lives of female sex workers in Sri Lanka. By identifying the

barriers they face, the study aims to explore opportunities for FSWs to be recognized and included within the informal sector, thereby improving their welfare and economic security.

A core focus of this research is to explore potential pathways for integrating female sex workers more fully into the informal labor sector. The study investigates how legal reforms, public health initiatives, and community support can create more inclusive and supportive environments. Through these pathways, it is possible to improve female sex workers' access to essential services, protect their rights, and enhance their overall quality of life.

The findings will contribute to ongoing discussions around social policy, economic reform, and human rights, offering evidence-based recommendations aimed at fostering a more just and equitable approach to addressing the needs of female sex workers in Sri Lanka.

2. Overview of the Sex Work Industry in India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka

The sex work industry varies considerably across countries, shaped by differing legal frameworks, social attitudes, and levels of support from civil society organizations. Understanding the landscape in each country reveals a complex interplay between the legal status of sex work, the extent of social stigma, and the accessibility of health and social services for sex workers. This section provides an overview of the industry in India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, offering insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by female sex workers in each context.

Country	Estimated Number of Sex Workers	Legal Status	Social Stigma Level
India	Approximately 657,800 (UNAIDS)	Decriminalized in certain states, with ambiguity	High
Thailand	Approximately 123,530 (UNAIDS)	Technically illegal but regulated informally	Moderate
Sri Lanka	Unknown but estimated in thousands	Illegal with high enforcement	Very High

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India

In India, the legal status of sex work is nuanced and varies significantly across different states. While certain forms of sex work are decriminalized, public solicitation, running a brothel, and pimping remain illegal under national law. This ambiguous legal landscape creates a tenuous environment where sex work is often equated with human trafficking. Law enforcement agencies frequently conduct raids and arrests under anti-trafficking laws, and sex workers are often subjected to harassment, detainment, and exploitation.

This legal ambiguity also affects social protection: despite India's expansive social protection schemes for informal workers, sex workers are frequently excluded due to societal stigma and legal hurdles. The limited access to healthcare, social security, and

¹ <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>

legal protections further marginalizes female sex workers, making them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and health risks, including HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). While some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists advocate for sex workers' rights, substantial barriers remain to achieving broader recognition and protection.

Thailand

Thailand's approach to sex work is marked by a contrast between legal technicalities and on-the-ground practices. While sex work is technically illegal, enforcement is selective, and the industry operates with a degree of informal regulation. Law enforcement agencies often turn a blind eye to specific establishments, especially in areas popular with tourists, where sex work has become an economic staple. This tolerance, however, does not equate to full protection, as sex workers remain vulnerable to sudden crackdowns and lack a formal status within the labor market.

Compared to India and Sri Lanka, Thailand provides relatively greater access to health services for sex workers. NGOs and healthcare organizations play a significant role in ensuring that sex workers have access to essential health services, including regular screenings for STIs, HIV/AIDS prevention programs, and counseling. However, due to the lack of formal recognition, sex workers still face barriers to social services, stable income, and legal protections, which perpetuates a precarious existence within the informal sector.

Sri Lanka

Sex work in Sri Lanka has been a widely discussed topic for many years. Despite significant interest within society, there has been little progress from government officials or relevant authorities. Statistics reveal that there are over 47,000 female sex workers in Sri Lanka, primarily located in Colombo, Negombo, and Galle. Sex work occurs across the country, operating both formally in establishments like spas, massage centers, private residences, and hotels, as well as informally through street-based services, mobile call-out services, and online platforms.

Most studies on this subject focus on street-based sex work rather than high-end escort services. Although both are forms of sex work, street-based sex workers are more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially from law enforcement. The actual number of high-end sex workers in Sri Lanka is rarely mentioned in research, as this type of work often takes place in exclusive clubs and casinos, making it difficult to study.

Several organizations in Sri Lanka, The Standup Movement Lanka, Praja Diri Padanama, Community Strength Development Foundation, and the Women's Resource Centre, advocate for the rights and welfare of individuals engaged in sex work. The debate on legalizing sex work in Sri Lanka has both pros and cons, though the potential benefits are often seen as outweighing the drawbacks, as legalization could help address many social issues. If Sri Lanka were to take this step, it would be the first South Asian country to do so, though such a move would likely face opposition from various religious leaders.

In Sri Lanka, female sex work exists under some of the most restrictive conditions, with stringent enforcement and entrenched social stigma creating a hostile environment. The

outright prohibition of sex work leaves female sex workers at the margins of society, where their work is not only criminalized but also heavily stigmatized. This legal and social framework isolates them, perpetuating cycles of discrimination and vulnerability. These barriers restrict their access to health care, social services, legal protections, and the basic rights typically afforded to informal sector workers, highlighting the unique challenges of integrating sex work into the informal economy.

Legal and Social Barriers

The legal landscape in Sri Lanka unequivocally criminalizes sex work, with severe penalties including fines and imprisonment for those caught engaging in it. Law enforcement officers often conduct raids and sting operations to curb sex work, exposing female sex workers to arrest, detainment, and, at times, abuse, or exploitation.

The fear of legal repercussions forces many sex workers to operate covertly, leading to risky practices that increase their vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and health risks. Additionally, the societal stigma attached to sex work is deeply entrenched in Sri Lankan culture, where traditional values emphasize modesty and morality. As a result, female sex workers are often perceived as immoral or deviant, further compounding their marginalization.

This intense stigma extends beyond individual perceptions and seeps into institutional structures, where discrimination is systematic. Healthcare providers, social service agencies, and even some NGOs may hesitate to assist female sex workers due to fear of legal consequences or reputational damage. This pervasive stigma thus creates a self-

reinforcing system that isolates sex workers, making it exceedingly difficult for them to access support, health care, and other resources that could improve their safety and well-being.

Exclusion from Health and Social Services

The criminalization of sex work has significant public health implications, particularly regarding the accessibility of healthcare services for female sex workers. The fear of arrest and societal judgment prevents many from seeking medical attention, even when dealing with urgent health issues. This isolation poses a major risk for untreated conditions, particularly concerning sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV/AIDS, and mental health issues. Without access to routine health screenings, safe practices, and counseling, female sex workers remain at a heightened risk of both physical and mental health issues.

For those who attempt to seek healthcare, stigma within healthcare facilities often results in discriminatory treatment, lack of confidentiality, and even outright refusal of services. This hostile environment discourages many sex workers from pursuing medical support altogether. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's legal stance significantly restricts NGOs and activists from providing direct assistance to female sex workers. Any outreach or support efforts face bureaucratic hurdles and scrutiny, limiting the scope and effectiveness of services that might otherwise offer valuable resources and support networks.

Lack of Integration into the Informal Sector

In Sri Lanka, the informal sector comprises a substantial part of the economy and includes diverse labor, such as agriculture, domestic work, and other non-regulated services. Female sex workers, however, face barriers that prevent them from accessing the minimal protections afforded to informal workers. Informal sector laborers typically have limited access to social protections, such as health insurance and pension schemes, but female sex workers are excluded even from these due to their criminalized status. This exclusion means they lack any semblance of labor rights, including fair wages, working conditions, and recourse in cases of exploitation or harassment.

The legal status of sex work also inhibits any organization or informal unionization among sex workers, leaving them without a collective voice to advocate for their rights and protections. Attempts to create support networks are often obstructed by legal threats and societal opposition, leaving female sex workers particularly vulnerable within the informal economy. While informal labor often lacks formal oversight, many workers benefit from mutual aid networks, small unions, and access to microloans or small business support programs. Sex workers, by contrast, are shut out of these resources, and any advocacy efforts are limited by legal constraints and public resistance.

Sri Lanka's legal stance on sex work is rooted in two colonial-era laws: the Vagrants Ordinance (1842) and the Brothels Ordinance (1889).² The Vagrants Ordinance authorizes police to arrest, without a warrant, any "common prostitute" found wandering in public spaces and behaving in a disorderly or indecent way. Offenders may face up to

² chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/DSLLB180058.pdf

14 days in prison and/or a fine. Section 7(1)(a) further states that any form of illicit intercourse or indecent behavior can result in a penalty of six months' imprisonment, a fine of Rs. 100, or both. Although these provisions technically apply to both sex workers and clients, in practice, clients are rarely brought to court when arrested.

The ordinance also criminalizes anyone who “lives off the earnings” of sex work, and Section 11 penalizes individuals responsible for a minor who “causes or encourages” their involvement in sex work or unlawful sexual activities. Meanwhile, the Brothels Ordinance (1889) imposes penalties on anyone involved in the operation or management of a brothel, with up to six months of imprisonment or a fine of Rs. 500, or both.

Furthermore, Section 360A of the Penal Code, amended by Act No. 22 of 1995, criminalizes procuring or attempting to procure individuals of any age, with or without their consent, for sex work or as residents in a brothel, whether within Sri Lanka or abroad. This offense carries a prison term of 2 to 10 years and a fine

3. Current Challenges Faced by Female Sex Workers

3.1 Health and Safety Risks

- **Physical Health:** Female sex workers face heightened risks of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) due to limited access to preventive healthcare services, testing, and treatment. This risk is compounded by a lack of consistent healthcare access, making it challenging to receive routine health screenings or reproductive health support. Furthermore, limited awareness

about reproductive health and safe sexual practices often leaves them vulnerable to unintended pregnancies and related complications.

- **Mental Health:** The constant threat of physical violence, harassment, and stigmatization creates a high-stress environment that severely affects the mental well-being of female sex workers. Fear of being targeted by law enforcement or exploited by clients and others in the community contributes to chronic anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Compounding this, female sex workers typically have limited access to mental health support services, leaving them to cope with these issues alone, which can lead to long-term psychological impacts.

3.2 Legal and Social Exclusion

- **Legal Recognition:** In many regions, such as Sri Lanka and India, female sex work lacks formal recognition and is often criminalized, resulting in significant legal and social barriers.

This lack of recognition prevents sex workers from accessing essential healthcare, social benefits, and financial resources. They are often excluded from public health schemes and face discrimination when attempting to seek healthcare or other services. Without legal protections, they are left vulnerable to exploitation and harassment without viable means of legal recourse.

- **Social Exclusion:** Stigmatization isolates sex workers from family and community networks, which are vital sources of support and resilience. This social exclusion also limits their access to education and vocational training, making it challenging to seek alternative employment opportunities. Without societal acceptance, female

sex workers often face ostracization, making it difficult to integrate into other aspects of society and access public services without fear of judgment or rejection.

3.3 Economic Instability

- **Financial Access:** The lack of formal recognition extends into the financial sector, where female sex workers are often denied access to basic financial tools like savings accounts, credit, and loans. Without these financial resources, they face barriers to saving money, securing housing, and planning for financial stability. Additionally, their exclusion from government welfare programs further exacerbates their economic vulnerability, leaving them without safety nets in times of need.
- **Occupational Hazards:** Female sex work is characterized by economic instability, marked by an irregular and unreliable income stream. The nature of the work exposes them to frequent exploitation, harassment, and unsafe working conditions, with little to no occupational protection or workers' rights. This instability makes it challenging to achieve financial security, and the risk of exploitation and abuse in the workplace remains a significant concern.³

³ SUML Support Plan for the FSW

4. Informal Sector Overview in Sri Lanka

The informal sector in Sri Lanka is significant, encompassing a wide range of activities and contributing substantially to the national economy. The sector includes small-scale industries, agriculture, construction, street vending, domestic work, and various service jobs. It is characterized by limited regulation, lack of formal contracts, and minimal oversight from governing bodies. The sector employs a large portion of the Sri Lankan workforce—nearly 60% of the total labor force—making it vital to the economy, particularly for low-income households.

4.1 Key Characteristics of the Informal Sector in Sri Lanka:

- **Labor-Intensive:** Predominantly low-wage, labor-intensive jobs without formal protections or benefits.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Provides flexible work opportunities, enabling individuals to generate income even if they lack formal education or skills.
- **Lack of Formal Protections:** Most informal workers lack job security, health benefits, and pensions, making them economically vulnerable.
- **Contributions to the Economy:** The sector contributes to household income generation, poverty alleviation, and reducing unemployment, especially in rural areas. Informal trade, small-scale agriculture, and services make up a substantial portion of the economic activity in rural and urban settings.

4.2 Contribution of Informal Sector Workers to the Economy

Informal sector workers contribute significantly to economic stability and resilience. Their roles in various industries—such as agriculture, construction, services, and small-scale manufacturing—add to national output. The sector enables job creation, entrepreneurial opportunities, and flexible income sources, helping to alleviate poverty and improve living standards, especially in low-income and marginalized communities. In rural areas, informal work is often the primary livelihood, bolstering food production, handicrafts, and local economies.

Despite limited government support, informal workers drive economic activity, often at the grassroots level. This is crucial in times of economic downturn, as the informal sector provides a fallback employment option, thereby cushioning the broader economy.

4.3 Legal and Social Challenges Faced by Informal Workers Globally and Locally

Legal Challenges

Lack of Legal Protections and Rights: Informal workers are generally excluded from labor laws that protect workers' rights, minimum wages, working hours, safety regulations, and the right to organize. This makes it difficult for them to claim or enforce fair wages, safe working conditions, or job security.

Absence of Social Security: Informal workers often lack access to social protection schemes, such as pensions, health insurance, and unemployment benefits. Without a formal employer-employee relationship, they are not entitled to contributions or benefits available to formal sector workers.

Barriers to Unionization: The informal sector's decentralized, scattered nature makes it challenging for workers to organize into unions or associations, which further limits their bargaining power.

Taxation and Economic Policies: In many cases, informal workers do not pay taxes, which can limit their ability to access state services. Additionally, informal workers often face disproportionate taxation through indirect means, such as consumption taxes, despite not benefiting from tax-funded social protections.

Social Challenges

Stigma and Marginalization: Many informal workers face social stigma and discrimination, particularly in roles considered low-status, such as street vending, domestic work, and sex work. This stigma affects their ability to integrate into the broader community, limits their access to public resources, and makes it difficult to transition to formal employment.

Exclusion from Education and Skill Development: Informal workers often lack access to educational and vocational training opportunities, limiting their career development and restricting their employment options. In Sri Lanka, limited skill training for informal workers is a significant barrier to economic mobility.

Health Risks and Lack of Safety: Informal workers frequently operate in unsafe environments, with poor sanitation, lack of protective equipment, and limited access to healthcare. In Sri Lanka, informal workers in agriculture, construction, and street vending are particularly vulnerable to occupational health hazards.

Gender Inequities: Globally and in Sri Lanka, women constitute a large proportion of the informal sector, especially in low-paying jobs like domestic work, handicrafts, and small-scale agriculture. These roles are often undervalued, unprotected, and associated with fewer economic advancement opportunities.

5. Interpretation of How Female Sex Workers' Working Rights Compare to Other Informal Sector Workers

Female sex workers (FSWs) are a unique group within the informal sector, often facing greater stigma and exclusion than other informal workers. While informal workers such as street vendors, domestic workers, and small-scale agricultural laborers face challenges due to the lack of formal recognition and benefits, FSWs encounter additional layers of legal and social marginalization.

For instance, in many countries, including Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand, sex work remains criminalized or is subject to ambiguous laws, which directly limits FSWs' ability to advocate for fair treatment and workplace protections. This legal status forces many FSWs to work in secret or under exploitative conditions, making them vulnerable to

abuse, harassment, and exploitation by clients, law enforcement, and even health workers.

Unlike other informal sector workers who may have limited yet existing avenues for organizing, FSWs often lack legal recognition and are denied the basic right to unionize or demand fair labor practices without risking arrest or social repercussions. Even in countries where sex work is decriminalized or technically legal, like parts of India,

FSWs do not benefit from standard labor protections, minimum wage regulations, or workplace safety standards. In contrast, other informal sector workers may have more freedom to organize for their rights and access some level of support from non-governmental organizations or labor unions. Consequently, while informal sector workers generally face precarious working conditions, FSWs are often further marginalized due to the illegal or semi-legal status of their work, leading to even fewer opportunities for advocacy and workplace protections.

The Gap Between Policy and Practice in the Protection of Female Sex Workers

In theory, some policies exist to protect vulnerable individuals, including those engaged in informal work. However, for female sex workers, a profound gap remains between policy and actual protection. Even in countries where there are anti-discrimination and human rights policies in place, these are rarely extended to FSWs due to the nature of their work and societal stigma. For example, health policies aimed at the informal sector often promote free access to services for all workers, but in practice, FSWs may be denied healthcare or subjected to invasive questioning, discrimination, or refusal of service. In

such cases, the stigma surrounding sex work becomes a barrier to accessing even the basic protections theoretically available to all citizens.

This gap between policy and practice is compounded by the inconsistency in law enforcement. In Sri Lanka, for example, although FSWs technically have the right to access health services and public assistance, the criminalization of their work means they often fear seeking support, as doing so could expose them to harassment, fines, or arrest. Furthermore, in places where there are policies that could benefit FSWs—such as public health initiatives or outreach programs—the implementation of these policies often overlooks the specific needs and risks associated with sex work. For example, HIV/AIDS prevention programs might exist, but FSWs may be wary of participating due to concerns about confidentiality or judgment from healthcare providers. This disconnect between the intent of policies and their practical implementation ultimately leaves FSWs without the protections they need, exacerbating their vulnerability to health risks, violence, and exploitation.

6. Why Female Sex Workers Should Be Considered Informal Sector Workers in Sri Lanka:

A Comparative Analysis with Countries Where Sex Work is Legalized

Female sex workers (FSWs) in Sri Lanka should be considered informal sector workers to address their vulnerabilities and ensure they receive basic rights and protections. In many other countries where sex work is legalized or decriminalized, such as New

Zealand, Germany, and the Netherlands, FSWs are acknowledged as informal sector workers. This recognition enables them to access essential services, labor rights, and social protections like those afforded to other informal workers, ultimately improving their quality of life, and reducing exploitation.

In countries like New Zealand, where sex work has been decriminalized, sex workers are recognized as part of the labor force, allowing them to work legally, access healthcare, and receive protection from exploitation. By being classified within the informal sector, sex workers in New Zealand can report abuse, seek legal recourse if exploit, and access health and safety protections without fear of prosecution. This legal recognition helps prevent many of the common risks associated with underground work, such as human trafficking and workplace violence.

In Germany and the Netherlands, where sex work is also legalized, the state enforces regulatory standards to ensure the safety and well-being of sex workers. FSWs are required to register, pay taxes, and undergo regular health checks, which also gives them access to social protections, health insurance, and retirement benefits. As informal sector workers, FSWs in these countries gain an increased level of job security, fair wages, and health benefits, helping to eliminate some of the stigma and instability traditionally associated with sex work.

In contrast, in Sri Lanka, where sex work is criminalized, FSWs operate outside the law and lack formal recognition. This absence of recognition excludes them from even the most basic worker protections available to informal sector workers, such as healthcare, wage rights, and safe working conditions. They face constant fear of arrest, abuse from clients or law enforcement, and discrimination within the healthcare system, which further

marginalizes them. Recognizing FSWs as informal sector workers would enable them to access social protections, health services, and legal recourse, like other informal workers in Sri Lanka, such as domestic workers or street vendors. This recognition could help reduce exploitation, improve their health and safety, and promote their human rights, ultimately aligning Sri Lanka's approach more closely with countries that treat sex work as legitimate informal work.

By viewing FSWs as informal sector workers, Sri Lanka can help mitigate the risks they face, improve their working conditions, and reduce the stigma associated with their occupation. This approach would create a safer, more equitable environment for FSWs and ensure they receive the protections they need as essential contributors to the economy.

In summary, the harsh legal landscape and social stigma surrounding sex work in Sri Lanka create an environment of exclusion and vulnerability for female sex workers. Their integration into the informal economy is hindered not only by legal barriers but also by deeply ingrained societal attitudes. Achieving any progress will require coordinated efforts from legal advocates, public health professionals, and social activists to dismantle stigma and build systems of support for female sex workers.

7. Findings Based on Pathways for Improvement

Despite the barriers female sex workers (FSWs) face, there are actionable pathways to enhance their welfare within the framework of the informal sector.

One of the most impactful approaches would involve advocating for policy reforms that decriminalize aspects of sex work. Decriminalization would allow FSWs to engage in their work without the constant fear of arrest or legal repercussions, ultimately giving them greater freedom to access health care, social services, and legal protections against exploitation. Policy reform focused on decriminalization could help shift sex work from an underground activity into a more regulated informal sector, enabling these workers to claim basic rights and protections like those afforded to other informal sector employees.

Expanding public health initiatives is another key pathway for improvement. Targeted health services, such as regular STI screenings, reproductive health counseling, and safe sex education, would greatly benefit FSWs by reducing health risks and providing necessary support for their physical well-being.

Partnerships with NGOs and organizations skilled in handling sensitive social issues could facilitate these services, ensuring they are delivered effectively and with respect to the unique challenges FSWs face. Such initiatives could include mobile clinics, peer outreach programs, and anonymous support services that make health care more accessible to those in marginalized occupations.

Addressing societal attitudes toward sex work is also essential for long-term improvement. Public education campaigns could work to reduce the stigma surrounding sex work by shedding light on the economic and social realities that lead individuals into this profession. By emphasizing the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by FSWs, these campaigns could help foster a more compassionate perspective among the public. Destigmatizing sex work would not only improve the social standing of FSWs but also

contribute to a safer, more supportive environment in which they can work and access services without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Through a combination of policy reform, enhanced health services, and public awareness efforts, there is an opportunity to significantly improve the lives of female sex workers and address the unique challenges they face. By integrating them into the broader framework of informal sector workers, these pathways can help ensure that FSWs are afforded basic rights and protections, allowing them to live and work with greater security and dignity.

8. Efforts Needed by the Sri Lankan Government to Include Sex Work into the Informal System

To address the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by female sex workers (FSWs) and to promote a more inclusive approach, the Sri Lankan government could take several key steps to integrate sex work into the informal labor system. These efforts would not only protect the rights of FSWs but also improve public health and enhance social cohesion by reducing the stigma surrounding the profession.

1. Policy Reform and Decriminalization

The first step for the Sri Lankan government is to reform the existing legal framework surrounding sex work. Decriminalizing aspects of sex work—such as allowing consensual adult transactions without the threat of arrest—would reduce the legal barriers that

currently marginalize FSWs. This reform would not only help protect sex workers from legal penalties but also allow them to access social and health services more freely. Clear distinctions should also be drawn between consensual sex work and trafficking or exploitation, allowing law enforcement to focus on human rights abuses while safeguarding the rights of individuals engaged in consensual sex work. Decriminalization would also create pathways for FSWs to be legally recognized as informal sector workers, giving them access to labor protections and public services.

2. Healthcare Accessibility and Public Health Initiatives

The government could implement targeted healthcare programs for FSWs to address their specific health needs. Expanding access to STI testing, reproductive health services, and mental health support would improve the well-being of FSWs and protect broader public health. These services could be delivered through mobile clinics, community health centers, or partnerships with NGOs that specialize in working with vulnerable populations. Government health services could also provide training to healthcare workers to ensure non-discriminatory, respectful treatment of FSWs, encouraging them to seek necessary healthcare without fear of stigma or rejection.

3. Social Security and Benefits Inclusion

Including FSWs in social protection schemes, such as health insurance, pensions, and unemployment benefits, would provide them with economic security and reduce their vulnerability. By creating a registration system that allows informal workers, including FSWs, to enroll in these schemes without disclosing their occupation, the government

could help provide a safety net for these workers. Such a system could allow for anonymous enrollment or involve non-traditional verification methods to accommodate those who fear discrimination. Offering these protections would contribute to economic stability and reduce the pressures that force some FSWs into exploitative work situations.

4. Public Awareness and Anti-Stigma Campaigns

To build public support and reduce societal stigma, the government could initiate public education campaigns aimed at promoting understanding and empathy for FSWs. These campaigns could highlight the economic realities and challenges that lead individuals into sex work, fostering greater awareness of the difficulties faced by FSWs and challenging harmful stereotypes. By shifting public perceptions, these campaigns could reduce discrimination against FSWs in healthcare, housing, and employment, encouraging greater social acceptance and inclusion.

5. Partnerships with NGOs and Community Organizations

Collaborating with NGOs and community organizations that have experience working with sex workers would allow the government to leverage specialized knowledge and established support networks. These organizations could assist in implementing health, legal, and social services for FSWs, ensuring that programs are responsive to their specific needs. By working together, the government and NGOs could develop safe spaces, hotlines, and outreach services that provide resources for FSWs without risk of discrimination.

6. Data Collection and Research

The government should conduct studies and collect data on sex work in Sri Lanka to better understand the population's demographics, health needs, and economic contributions. This research could inform policy decisions, enabling the government to tailor programs and services for FSWs. By adopting a data-driven approach, the government can ensure that interventions are effective, targeted, and responsive to the realities of sex work in Sri Lanka.

Through these efforts, the Sri Lankan government can take significant steps toward recognizing and supporting FSWs within the informal sector, ultimately promoting their rights, safety, and dignity. By creating a legal and social environment that supports rather than marginalizes FSWs, Sri Lanka could also improve public health outcomes, enhance economic stability, and foster a more inclusive society.

9. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the importance of formally recognizing sex work as part of the informal labor sector in Sri Lanka to secure the dignity, rights, and well-being of female sex workers (FSWs). While the challenges surrounding sex work—legal, cultural, and social—are substantial, the findings indicate the potential benefits of a structured, inclusive approach. By addressing FSWs' needs through decriminalization, enhanced health and safety measures, financial inclusion, and social integration, the government and society in Sri Lanka can significantly improve the quality of life for these individuals.

Such an approach not only safeguards the rights of FSWs but also supports broader public health objectives, contributing to social stability and overall welfare.

The recommendations put forward in this study advocate for a pragmatic and humane response to the realities of sex work, focusing on harm reduction and the protection of FSWs' rights. Recognizing FSWs within the informal labor sector would grant them access to essential services and protections available to other informal workers, reducing their risk of exploitation, violence, and health challenges. In addition to directly benefiting FSWs, these measures would promote broader social welfare, creating a healthier, safer environment for all workers and reducing the social costs associated with marginalized, unprotected labor.

10. General Recommendations

Recommendations for Inclusion into the Informal Sector and Well-being Improvement

10.1 Legal and Policy Recommendations

1. **Decriminalization with Protections:** Develop legal frameworks that clearly distinguish between consensual sex work and trafficking, ensuring that sex workers have access to basic rights, including health and safety protections.
2. **Labor Rights Inclusion:** Amend existing labor laws to include sex workers within the informal sector, providing them with health benefits, social protections, and access to legal support.
3. **Simplified Identification Systems:** Implement a unique identification system for informal workers, including sex workers, which would allow them to access benefits without requiring disclosure of their occupation.

10.2 Physical and Mental Health Support

1. **Health Services Accessibility:** Enhance access to health services specifically designed for sex workers, including STD screenings, reproductive health counseling, and emergency medical support.

2. **Mental Health Services:** Integrate mental health programs into public health services, including counseling, trauma support, and peer support networks, particularly in countries where stigma is prevalent, such as Sri Lanka and India.
3. **Awareness and Education Programs:** Conduct regular training sessions that provide sex workers with knowledge on self-care, reproductive health, and legal rights, empowering them to better navigate health and safety concerns.

10.3 Economic Empowerment

1. **Microfinance and Credit Access:** Develop financial literacy programs and microfinance schemes tailored to the unique needs of sex workers, promoting their financial independence and security.
2. **Vocational Training and Alternative Employment:** Offer skill-building programs to those interested in transitioning to other sectors, providing greater flexibility and economic security.
3. **Unionization and Cooperative Models:** Encourage the establishment of unions or cooperatives for sex workers, allowing them to negotiate for fair wages, better working conditions, and social benefits, thereby enhancing their collective bargaining power.

These recommendations provide a comprehensive approach to integrating sex workers into the informal sector while safeguarding their rights and well-being.

Next Steps

To implement these recommendations, it is essential for the Sri Lankan government, NGOs, and community organizations to collaborate on pilot programs that can model and refine these strategies. Key areas of focus for these pilot programs should include:

1. **Community Sensitization:** Working closely with local communities to address misconceptions and reduce the stigma surrounding sex work through public awareness campaigns. These efforts can foster a more accepting environment, enabling FSWs to access healthcare and social services without fear of discrimination. Sensitizing the community also builds the groundwork for smoother policy adaptation and wider social acceptance.
2. **Gradual Policy Adaptation:** The government should consider implementing localized decriminalization efforts and gradually expanding access to healthcare for FSWs, setting the foundation for more comprehensive policy reforms. These initial steps would allow for monitoring and evaluation, providing insights that can inform broader policy changes over time.
3. **Comprehensive Health Services:** Establishing community health programs specifically tailored to the needs of FSWs in partnership with healthcare providers and NGOs. These programs would include services like STI screenings, mental health support, and safe sex education. Offering these services in a respectful and non-judgmental environment would promote the health and safety of FSWs, as well as benefit public health overall.

4. **Gaining Recognition for the FSW:** Conduct a comprehensive investigation into the economic role of the sex industry within the informal sector, focusing on its contributions to income generation, the level of dependency it creates, and its impact on local economies. This assessment should delve into how participation in the sex industry influences workers' prospects for upward mobility, the stability and sustainability of their incomes, and their ability to transition into the formal economy. Understanding these economic interdependencies will provide insights into the barriers and opportunities faced by workers, guiding the development of policies and programs that foster economic resilience, enhance stability, and offer pathways for those seeking formal sector integration.

5. **Promoting Inclusivity and to gain justice:** Identify and advocate for policy recommendations that promote inclusive, rights-based approaches aimed at enhancing protection and access to justice for workers in the sex industry and informal sector. Consider supporting decriminalization or regulatory models that enable sex industry workers to transition into formalized structures where they can access essential legal and social protections. Additionally, propose frameworks that foster collaboration among law enforcement, healthcare providers, and support organizations to create a unified approach focused on human rights, reducing exploitation, and improving overall well-being. These policies should prioritize worker safety, equitable treatment, and access to justice, helping to build a more supportive and protective environment for vulnerable groups within these sectors.

Through these initial, collaborative efforts, stakeholders can assess the effectiveness of these recommendations, adjusting as necessary before scaling them to larger programs. This careful, inclusive approach will enable a smoother transition to policies and practices that promote the rights and well-being of FSWs, ultimately contributing to a more just and compassionate society in Sri Lanka.

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