

# Exploring the decimalization of sex work as an economic social enterprise in Zambia

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## Abstract

This study investigates the challenges faced by women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia, and explores the potential of social enterprises as vehicles for their economic empowerment. Drawing on both Social Capital Theory and Institutional Theory, the research employs a mixed-methods approach involving 35 in-depth interviews and regression analysis to examine the complex interplay between criminalization, socioeconomic vulnerability, and economic opportunity. Findings reveal that women in sex work face multifaceted challenges including poverty, violence, health risks, and social stigma, with 25 participants reporting experiences of violence and 15 lacking access to healthcare services. While sex work provides immediate income (1,800-2,600 Zambian Kwacha monthly), it fails to ensure long-term financial stability. The study's conceptual framework identifies legal social enterprises as an independent variable influencing three dependent variables: challenges faced by women in sex work, economic opportunities available to them, and sustainability of alternative employment. Despite limited awareness of social enterprises among participants, most perceived them as potentially beneficial pathways out of sex work. The research concludes that decriminalization of sex work (currently prohibited under Sections 146-149 of the Penal Code) coupled with well-governed social enterprises could significantly address the economic and social vulnerabilities of women in sex work. Policy recommendations include legal reform, strengthened corporate governance structures for social enterprises, comprehensive support services, and enhanced awareness and accessibility of economic alternatives.

**Keywords:** Sex Work; Social Enterprise; Economic Empowerment; Decriminalization; Zambia; Corporate Governance

## 1. Introduction

Prostitution has been labeled as the oldest profession in the world. The biblical story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38:14-26) provides a depiction of prostitution being practiced in that time period. In this story, the prostitute waits at the side of a highway for travelers to entice them into sex work. Despite Zambia being a Christian nation by declaration, it is evident that several women engage in sex work. Women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia, find themselves trapped in a web of challenges that span economic, social, and legal dimensions. Their daily existence is marked by a confluence of limited economic opportunities leading to poverty, pervasive societal stigma, and tenuous living conditions (Doezema, 2002; Pitcher, 2009; Shannon et al., 2008). These interconnected hardships compound the difficulties faced by these women, fostering a cycle of vulnerability and marginalization.

A central element of the difficulty faced by women in sex work in Lusaka is the legal framework that currently prevails in Zambia. The nation's legal system criminalizes sex work, rendering the practice illegal. This legal stance not only marginalizes women engaged in sex work but also contributes to their socio-economic uncertainty, effectively obstructing their access to crucial support services, including healthcare and legal aid, and further hindering their ability to secure alternative forms of employment (Abel et al., 2014; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). In this context, women in sex work are trapped in a cycle where they lack access to resources, and their voices remain largely unheard.

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The core research problem at the heart of this study revolves around deciphering how social enterprises can be conceptualized, established, and effectively managed in Lusaka, Zambia, to serve as a catalyst for the economic empowerment of women engaged in sex work and ultimately reduce poverty. Such enterprises hold the potential to offer not only financial stability but also avenues for skill development and social integration. However, the effectiveness of these social enterprises in mitigating the multifaceted challenges faced by women in sex work remains largely unexplored, particularly in the context of Lusaka.

Moreover, this research problem is inherently intertwined with the broader question of whether the decriminalization of sex work could serve as a potential solution to the issues faced by these women. The debate over the legal status of sex work is polarized and complex, with arguments both in favor of and against decriminalization (Abel et al., 2014; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). As such, this study aims to critically examine the potential benefits and drawbacks of decriminalization, with a specific focus on its implications for women engaged in sex work in Lusaka.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

The major challenge of sex work in Zambia stems from the criminalization of sex work and any other activities incidental to sex work (Sections 147, 148, and 149 of the Penal Code of Zambia). UNAIDS (2021) estimates that there were around 9,285 sex workers in Lusaka in 2020. This is largely driven by poverty. Women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia, find themselves confronted by a complex and urgent array of challenges that have profound implications for their overall well-being and prospects for a better life.

Firstly, the existing legal framework in Zambia, which criminalizes sex work, has far-reaching consequences. The U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report (2020) highlights that such a legal stance contributes to the vulnerability of women engaged in sex work, making them susceptible to exploitation and human trafficking while also limiting their access to essential support services.

Furthermore, poverty remains a significant challenge. Zambia grapples with a significant poverty rate, as attested by data from the World Bank, which indicates that 54.4% of the population lives in poverty (World Bank, 2021). Women involved in sex work face particularly acute economic instability, struggling to secure alternative employment opportunities and thereby exacerbating their vulnerability in sex work.

Additionally, the burden of stigma and discrimination weighs heavily upon women engaged in sex work. A study conducted by the University of Zambia (2019) found that a staggering 72% of women involved in sex work in Lusaka reported experiencing pervasive stigma and discrimination, further compounding their social marginalization.

The health risks faced by women involved in sex work in Lusaka are equally alarming. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the prevalence of HIV among female sex workers in Zambia is significantly higher than that of the general population, with an estimated 56.4% of female sex workers living with HIV (UNDP, 2020). These health risks compound the challenges faced by women engaged in sex work, further underlining the urgency of the issues.

### **1.2. Theoretical Framework**

The study is guided by two primary theoretical perspectives:

#### ***1.2.1. Social Capital Theory***

Examines how social networks and relationships generate value and benefits (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). This theory is particularly relevant as it helps analyze how social enterprises leverage networks, partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and community organizations to create economic opportunities for women in sex work. Understanding social capital is crucial for examining how these enterprises navigate challenges and gain stakeholder support within Lusaka's context.

#### ***1.2.2. Institutional Theory***

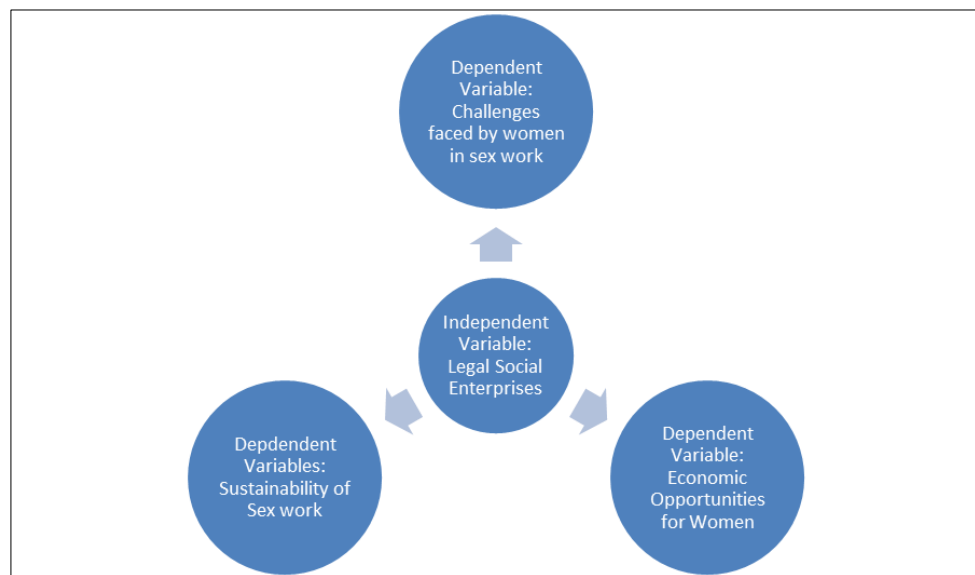
Focuses on how external societal and institutional factors influence organizational behavior and structure (Scott, 2008). It categorizes institutions into regulatory (laws), normative (social values), and cognitive (shared beliefs) pillars. Given that sex work is criminalized in Zambia and carries significant social stigma, this theory provides a framework for understanding how social enterprises adapt to institutional constraints while maintaining effective corporate governance and empowering women.

### 1.3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between legal social enterprises (independent variable) and three dependent variables: challenges faced by women in sex work, economic opportunities for these women, and the sustainability of sex work. The framework posits that legal social enterprises directly impact these three areas, with the arrows in the model indicating that:

1. Legal social enterprises influence the challenges women in sex work encounter
2. Legal social enterprises provide economic opportunities for women engaged in sex work
3. The sustainability and success of sex work as alternative employment depends on legal social enterprises in Zambia

This integrated theoretical and conceptual approach provides a structured methodology for investigating the research objectives and understanding the dynamics involved in addressing challenges faced by women in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia.



**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework showing dependent and independent variables

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Socioeconomic and Health Challenges Among Women in Sex Work

The challenges experienced by women engaged in sex work are complex and deeply ingrained in the global, African, and Zambian socio-economic and legal landscapes. Scholarly literature offers insights into these challenges, which include poverty, violence, and health risks (Doezema, 2002; Pitcher, 2009; Shannon et al., 2008). The criminalization of sex work in Zambia exacerbates these hardships, compounding the difficulties faced by women in the industry.

Sex work and prostitution are not synonymous. Prostitution is viewed as coerced sex work, whereas sex work implies agency and decision-making power within a capitalist system (Commission for Gender Equality, 2013). Feminist perspectives shape these distinctions, influencing policy and discourse surrounding the industry.

Globally, poverty is a primary driver of sex work. The inability to secure stable employment often pushes women into this industry (Shannon et al., 2008). Financial vulnerability persists due to stigmatization, limited economic alternatives, and legal restrictions.

In Africa, the challenges remain consistent, with violence and exploitation being primary concerns. Studies highlight the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse (Shannon et al., 2008). Due to the clandestine nature of sex work and the absence of legal protections, women often do not report violence for fear of prosecution (Abel et al., 2014).

Christine Overall (1992) applies Gale Rubin's democratic morality framework to evaluate sex work. This perspective suggests that not all sex work is coercive or degrading; rather, it can be viewed as labor similar to other forms of female-dominated work that are underpaid, physically demanding, and stigmatized, such as factory work.

In Zambia, health risks are particularly high. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among female sex workers is estimated at 56.4%, significantly higher than the general population (UNDP, 2020). This is compounded by restricted healthcare access, social stigma, and legal constraints (Doezema, 2002).

Zambia's Penal Code further criminalizes sex work, reinforcing societal stigmatization and legal barriers. Sections 146 to 149 of the Penal Code prohibit earning income from prostitution, soliciting, and maintaining establishments for sex work. These laws push sex work underground, increasing vulnerability to violence and exploitation (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Additionally, they create barriers to essential services such as healthcare and legal aid (Abel et al., 2014; U.S. Department of State, 2020).

The cumulative effect of these challenges illustrates the need for innovative economic solutions. Social enterprises offer one such approach, potentially providing alternative livelihoods for women engaged in sex work in Lusaka.

## 2.2. Innovative Economic Empowerment through Social Enterprises

Social enterprises have emerged as an effective strategy for addressing economic and social challenges among marginalized groups (Mair & Martí, 2006; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). These enterprises integrate business principles with social impact, striving for both financial sustainability and societal betterment.

At the global level, social enterprises have proven successful in education, healthcare, and employment generation. Their role in empowering marginalized communities through job creation, skills training, and access to markets is well-documented (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006).

In Africa, social enterprises align with community engagement and economic self-sufficiency principles. They have been instrumental in tackling youth unemployment, healthcare access, and sustainable agriculture (Nicholls & Opal, 2005).

In Zambia, the application of social enterprises to assist women engaged in sex work is particularly relevant due to prevailing economic hardships and legal restrictions. Given the criminalization of sex work, many women face exclusion from formal employment and financial instability. Social enterprises can provide vocational training, employment opportunities, and income-generating activities, facilitating the transition out of sex work (Ward, 2015).

Female sex workers in Zambia frequently experience sexual and reproductive health (SRH) violence, discrimination, and stigma, particularly within healthcare settings (Moyo, 2017). Social enterprises could address these challenges by promoting economic independence, reducing reliance on sex work, and mitigating exposure to violence and exploitation.

The strategic deployment of social enterprises holds the potential to foster economic empowerment and social reintegration, ultimately reducing vulnerability and enhancing community development.

## 2.3. Ensuring Sustainability through Governance in Social Enterprises

Corporate governance is integral to the sustainability and effectiveness of social enterprises (Doherty & Haugh, 2008; Minkler et al., 2010). Effective governance frameworks ensure transparency, accountability, and long-term viability, which are critical for social enterprises seeking to empower marginalized groups.

Key governance principles include:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Social enterprises should involve key stakeholders, including women in sex work, in decision-making processes to ensure that programs align with their needs (Cornforth, 2004).
- **Financial Sustainability:** A balance between profitability and social impact is necessary. Revenue-generating activities must be structured to sustain operations without compromising social objectives (Alter, 2007).
- **Ethical Leadership:** Leadership should be guided by ethical principles and inclusivity, ensuring that the target beneficiaries actively participate in governance structures (Minkler et al., 2010).
- **Legal and Policy Frameworks:** Advocacy for policy changes supporting social enterprises can enhance their impact, particularly in restrictive environments like Zambia, where sex work is criminalized (Doherty & Haugh, 2008).

Ensuring sustainable governance structures within social enterprises enhances their potential to serve as viable economic alternatives for women in sex work. By prioritizing inclusivity, financial stability, and ethical leadership, these enterprises can provide long-term solutions that promote social and economic well-being.

Women engaged in sex work in Zambia face a multitude of challenges, including poverty, violence, health risks, and legal restrictions. The criminalization of sex work exacerbates these difficulties, reinforcing social stigma and limiting access to essential services. Social enterprises offer a promising solution by providing economic empowerment opportunities, vocational training, and pathways for reintegration into society. By blending social impact with financial sustainability, social enterprises can address the root causes of sex work and offer viable alternatives. However, for social enterprises to be effective and sustainable, robust governance structures must be in place. Stakeholder engagement, financial sustainability, ethical leadership, and supportive legal frameworks are critical to ensuring their long-term success. Ultimately, social enterprises represent an innovative and practical approach to empowering women in sex work, fostering economic independence, and promoting social inclusion in Zambia.

## 2.4. Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on sex work globally, several critical research gaps persist that this study aims to address. These include: limited context-specific research on sex work in Lusaka beyond health aspects; insufficient investigation of social enterprises as economic empowerment mechanisms for women in sex work; inadequate examination of corporate governance strategies for organizations operating within criminalized contexts; methodological limitations in existing studies that often rely on single-method approaches rather than mixed-methods designs; limited integration of complementary theoretical frameworks such as Social Capital Theory and Institutional Theory; scarce empirical assessment of decriminalization impacts specific to the Zambian context; and a notable absence of longitudinal studies examining the sustainability of transition pathways from sex work to alternative livelihoods. By addressing these gaps through its mixed-methods approach and integrated theoretical framework, this study contributes both to scholarly knowledge and to the development of evidence-based interventions for women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how social enterprises can effectively support economic empowerment within Zambia's unique socioeconomic and legal landscape.

## 3. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed, comprising 35 in-depth qualitative interviews and quantitative data analysis using regression models. Thematic analysis identified key challenges and opportunities, while statistical regression examined the relationship between financial stability and independent variables such as income sources, healthcare access, and experience of violence. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent, were strictly adhered to.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Key Demographic and Economic Findings

The study involved 35 women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia, with ages ranging from 21 to 40 years and a median age of 29. All participants reported having dependents, ranging from one to four, underscoring the significant financial responsibilities these women bear. Their monthly income from sex work ranged from 1,800 to 2,600 Zambian Kwacha, with the majority earning between 2,001-2,400 ZMW. Despite this relatively consistent income, most participants reported moderate to low financial stability.

**Table 1** Demographic and Economic Profile of Study Participants

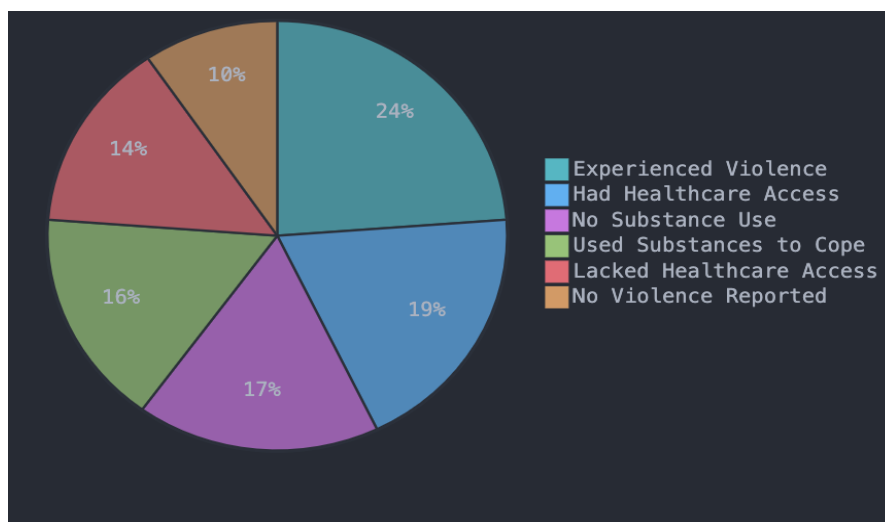
Characteristic	Details
Sample Size	35 women
Age Range	21-40 years
Median Age	29 years
Number of Dependents	1-4 dependents per participant
Monthly Income from Sex Work	1,800-2,600 Zambian Kwacha

Most Common Income Range	2,001-2,400 ZMW
Participants with Supplementary Income	12 out of 35 (34.3%)

While 12 participants had supplementary income sources beyond sex work, this diversification did not necessarily translate to improved financial stability, challenging assumptions about income diversification as a path to economic resilience.

#### 4.2. Health and Safety Findings

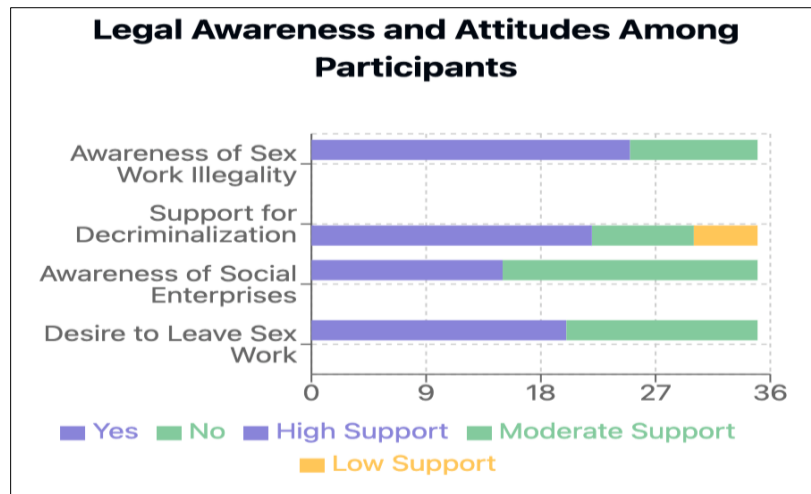
The findings revealed substantial health and safety concerns among participants. Of the 35 women interviewed, 15 lacked access to healthcare services, highlighting significant gaps in healthcare provision for this population. HIV/STI testing frequency varied considerably among participants, with many being tested infrequently—only every six months or less often. Alarming, 25 out of 35 participants reported experiencing violence or abuse in their work, confirming the dangerous nature of their occupation. This finding aligns with extensive research documenting pervasive violence against sex workers globally (Deering et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2015). Nearly half of the participants reported using substances to cope with work-related stress, pointing to the psychological toll of their profession.



**Figure 2** Health and Safety Findings

#### 4.3. Social Stigma and Legal Context

Social marginalization emerged as a prominent theme, with most participants reporting moderate to high levels of perceived stigma due to their work. This finding corroborates existing literature on the stigmatization of sex workers (Benoit et al., 2018; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). Significant discrimination was reported in healthcare settings, with participants experiencing longer wait times and inferior treatment from healthcare professionals despite high HIV prevalence rates among this at-risk group. This finding aligns with research by Beattie et al. (2012) on barriers to HIV service utilization. Regarding legal awareness, 25 out of 35 participants knew about sex work's illegal status in Zambia, which affected their ability to seek help, report abuse, or access services without fear. Most expressed moderate to strong support for decriminalization, a perspective supported by research suggesting that criminalization exacerbates vulnerabilities of sex workers (Krüsi et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2015).



**Figure 3** Social Stigma and Legal Context

#### 4.4. Social Enterprise Awareness

The study found limited awareness of social enterprises among participants, with only 15 out of 35 aware of organizations supporting sex workers in Lusaka. Despite this limited awareness, most perceived social enterprises as potentially beneficial, aligning with research suggesting that social enterprises can play a crucial role in addressing social issues and empowering marginalized groups (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Haugh, 2012). Participants identified several desired services they believed would be beneficial if offered by social enterprises, including healthcare services, vocational training, microloans, support groups, and legal aid. Twenty out of 35 participants expressed a desire to leave sex work for alternative economic opportunities, suggesting that social enterprises focusing on skill development and alternative income generation could play a crucial role in facilitating transitions out of sex work, a strategy supported by research on exit programs for sex workers (Cusick et al., 2011; Pitcher, 2015).

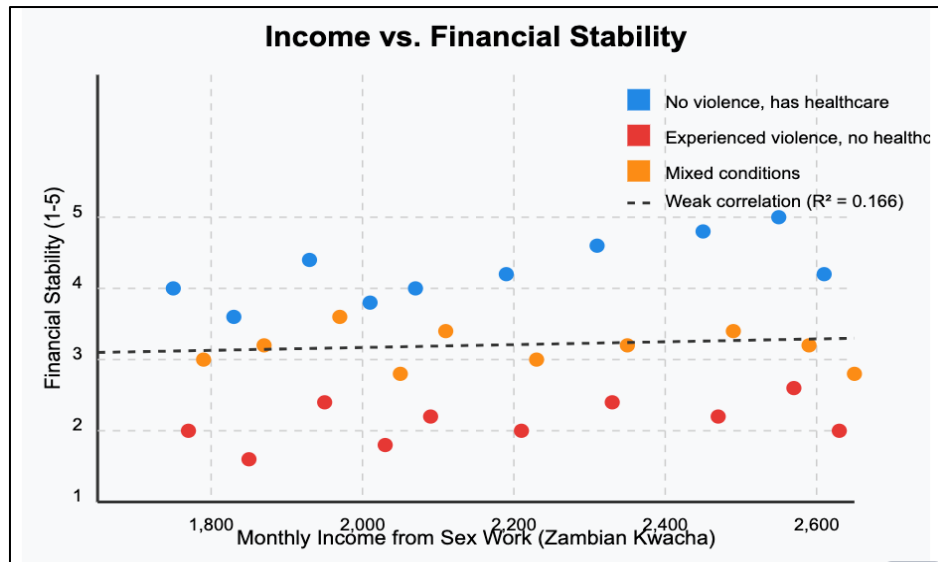
#### 4.5. Regression Analysis Results

The regression analysis examined factors influencing financial stability on a 1-5 scale. The model yielded an R-squared of 0.166, indicating it explained only 16.6% of the variation in financial stability. None of the predictors reached statistical significance (all p-values > 0.05), suggesting that financial stability is influenced by a broader range of factors beyond those included in the model. Notable coefficients included Experience of Violence (-1.1203, p=0.138), Awareness of Social Enterprises (-1.1417, p=0.112), and Support for Decriminalization (+0.3230, p=0.188). The model exhibited multicollinearity issues (condition number=27,300), potentially affecting the reliability of the coefficients and p-values.

**Table 2** Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Financial Stability

Predictor Variable	Coefficient	p-value	Significance
Monthly Income from Sex Work	+0.0002	>0.05	Not significant
Other Sources of Income	+0.1782	>0.05	Not significant
Experience of Violence	-1.1203	0.138	Not significant
Awareness of Social Enterprises	-1.1417	0.112	Not significant
Support for Decriminalization	+0.3230	0.188	Not significant
Model Statistics			
R-squared	0.166		
Condition number	27,300		Multicollinearity present

Note: Financial stability was measured on a 1-5 scale. The model explains only 16.6% of variation in financial stability.



**Figure 4** Income V Financial stability

#### 4.6. Discussion of Economic Challenges

The regression results suggest that monthly income from sex work does not have a significant positive effect on financial stability. This finding aligns with research suggesting that while sex work may provide immediate income, it does not guarantee long-term economic security due to financial volatility, stigma, and the precarious nature of the work (Benoit et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2015). Moreover, the lack of a significant impact from other sources of income suggests that diversifying income does not necessarily translate into greater financial stability. This may be attributed to the informal nature of alternative income sources, which tend to be low-paying and unstable (Deering et al., 2014). The negative coefficient for Experience of Violence highlights a concerning trend, suggesting that exposure to violence further exacerbates financial instability. Similar studies indicate that violence against sex workers reduces their earning potential, increases healthcare costs, and limits access to safer working conditions (Kerrigan et al., 2015; Platt et al., 2018).

#### 4.7. Discussion of Social Enterprise Potential

The findings indicate that Awareness of Social Enterprises does not significantly impact financial stability. This is an unexpected result, as existing literature suggests that social enterprises can enhance economic well-being by providing alternative employment and vocational training (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Haugh, 2012). A possible explanation is that awareness alone is insufficient—actual participation in social enterprises is required for tangible financial benefits. Moreover, barriers such as lack of access, eligibility restrictions, and trust issues may prevent women from engaging with these initiatives (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Despite the limited statistical significance, qualitative studies suggest that well-designed social enterprises can provide meaningful pathways out of sex work by fostering skills development and sustainable employment (Pitcher, 2015).

#### 4.8. Discussion of Legal Context and Governance

The regression results suggest a slight positive relationship between Support for Decriminalization and financial stability, though the effect is not statistically significant. This finding is consistent with studies demonstrating that decriminalization of sex work can lead to improved financial security by reducing legal barriers, enabling safer working conditions, and allowing for better economic opportunities (Krüsi et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2015). The legal context plays a crucial role in the governance and success of social enterprises. Research indicates that social enterprises in legally precarious environments struggle with sustainability due to operational uncertainties and lack of institutional support (Doherty et al., 2014; Stephan et al., 2015). Effective corporate governance practices, including stakeholder engagement, financial transparency, and strategic planning, are essential for ensuring long-term sustainability (Ebrahim et al., 2014).



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## 5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings reveal that income alone does not ensure financial stability, indicating a need for structured economic empowerment programs beyond immediate earnings from sex work. Experiences of violence significantly impact financial well-being, emphasizing the urgency of protective policies and interventions. Social enterprises hold potential but require greater accessibility and active engagement rather than mere awareness. Legal and governance frameworks influence financial stability, reinforcing calls for policy reforms to support decriminalization and structured economic alternatives. The study's findings suggest a multifaceted approach is necessary, integrating economic, social, and legal strategies to improve the financial stability of women engaged in sex work. The criminalization of sex work in Zambia exacerbates vulnerabilities, supporting arguments for decriminalization. International examples from New Zealand and New South Wales demonstrate positive impacts of decriminalization, including empowered sex workers who can better protect themselves against violence, improved relationships with police, reduced trafficking, and no increase in demand for sex work.

The findings ultimately reveal the complex challenges faced by women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, driven by poverty and unemployment, and suggest significant potential for well-governed social enterprises to address these issues through comprehensive services and advocacy for legal reform.

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## 6. Policy Recommendations

### 6.1. Decriminalization and Legal Reform

Legal barriers prevent effective implementation of social enterprises. Repealing sections 146–149 of the Penal Code would allow women in sex work to access economic opportunities without fear of legal repercussions.

### 6.2. Strengthening Social Enterprise Governance

Robust corporate governance structures must be implemented in social enterprises to ensure sustainability. These include financial transparency, stakeholder engagement, and partnerships with legal and health institutions.

### 6.3. Comprehensive Support Services

Integrated programs combining economic opportunities, healthcare access, and legal aid should be established to address the multi-dimensional challenges faced by sex workers.

### 6.4. Enhancing Awareness and Accessibility

Social enterprises should invest in outreach programs to increase awareness and participation, ensuring that women in sex work have access to alternative employment and training.

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## 7. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by women engaged in sex work in Lusaka, Zambia, and the potential of social enterprises as mechanisms for economic empowerment and poverty reduction. Through the theoretical perspectives of the Social Capital Theory and Institutional Theory, the research explored how legal, social, and economic factors intersect to perpetuate vulnerability while identifying pathways toward sustainable solutions. Findings reveal the significant impact of criminalization on women in sex work, as codified in Sections 146-149 of the Zambian Penal Code. This legal framework reinforces social stigma and prevents women from accessing essential services and alternative economic opportunities. The high prevalence of violence reported by participants (25 out of 35) and limited access to healthcare services (15 out of 35 lacking access) underscore the need for policy reform. These findings align with global research demonstrating that criminalization exacerbates rather than mitigates the vulnerabilities associated with sex work.

Economic data reveals a critical insight: while sex work provides immediate income (1,800-2,600 Zambian Kwacha monthly), it fails to translate into long-term financial stability. The regression analysis (R-squared of 0.166) indicates that financial stability is influenced by factors beyond monthly income, including experiences of violence and institutional support. This challenges simplistic economic solutions and points to the need for comprehensive approaches to empowerment. The conceptual framework, positioning legal social enterprises as an independent variable affecting challenges, opportunities, and sustainability for women in sex work, proved valuable in understanding these dynamics. While awareness of social enterprises was limited among participants, their potential

to provide alternative economic pathways was widely acknowledged. This suggests that well-designed social enterprises could play a transformative role, particularly for the 20 out of 35 participants who expressed a desire to transition to alternative employment.

International comparative analysis from New Zealand and New South Wales demonstrates that decriminalization can yield significant benefits: empowering women to protect themselves against violence, improving relationships with law enforcement, reducing trafficking, and not increasing demand for sex work. These examples provide valuable evidence for policy reform in the Zambian context.

The integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical findings leads to four key recommendations: (1) legal reform through decriminalization, (2) strengthened corporate governance structures for social enterprises, (3) comprehensive support services addressing economic, health, and legal needs, and (4) enhanced awareness and accessibility of economic alternatives. Implementation requires collaboration among government bodies, civil society organizations, and social entrepreneurs, with women in sex work as active stakeholders. This study contributes to academic discourse and practical policy by illuminating the lived experiences of women in sex work in Lusaka and providing evidence-based pathways toward economic empowerment. The findings challenge conventional approaches that focus exclusively on criminalization or economic solutions, instead advocating for an integrated approach addressing legal, social, and economic dimensions simultaneously.

Future research should examine the long-term impacts of social enterprise interventions on economic mobility among women transitioning from sex work, investigate the efficacy of different corporate governance models in ensuring sustainability, and conduct comparative analyses of policy reforms across different African contexts. In conclusion, addressing the challenges faced by women in sex work in Lusaka requires transformative change in legal frameworks, social perceptions, and governance structures. By integrating these elements through well-governed social enterprises within a supportive legal environment, sustainable pathways out of poverty and exploitation become possible.

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