

# ‘No More on Our Streets and Not in Our Neighbourhoods’: Exploring Community Activism Against Sex Work

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## Abstract

Sex work within the Nigerian context is generally regarded as a crime and shameful behaviour commonly perpetrated by women and/or girls who exchange sexual services with different people usually men for monetary or other benefits. This present study investigates an approach initiated by some communities in Ilorin metropolis of Kwara, Nigeria to eradicate sex work activities. The study adopted a qualitative research method. Three hundred and seven residents from 5 communities where brothel-based and street-based sex workers are predominant participated in the study. A range of sampling methods including criterion, convenience and venue-based sampling methods were used; in-depth interview was the instrument employed in data collection, and data analysis was done using thematic analysis. Results indicate that while the approach is effective in controlling sex workers' activities, it inspires violence and normalises human rights abuses of sex workers in Ilorin metropolis. The paper suggests a need for a public campaign aimed at sensitising members of the communities about the fundamental rights of their fellow citizens which they are obliged to venerate as Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Sex Work Industry, Sex Workers, Violence, Community Responses, Nigerian Sex Work Policies.

## 1. Introduction

Commercial sex work is one of the oldest professions which serves as a major source of income for some individuals in most countries (Cook, 2014). It is estimated that more than 45 million adults (and underage children in some cases) are making a living from engaging in sex work across the world (Baratosya & Wendt, 2017; United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2014). Sex work is a universally known line of work widely characterized by the trading of sexual services or associated activities for money or some other rewards (Salihu & Fawole, 2020). It is a profession that takes different forms ranging from an escort agency to street walking, pornography, erotic performance, institutionalized brothel, freelance, strip clubs, and others (Open Society Foundation, 2019).

Sex work<sup>i</sup> is essentially practised by young and adult females. Nonetheless, it is not limited by gender this is because young and adult males and transgender also practice it and are typically included in the broad definition of sex workers (Musto, Jackson, & Shih, 2015). Female commercial sex work (FCSW) is the focus of this study. FCSW is a classification of sex work where women basically engage in transactional sex. It is the most common type of sex work widely practised everywhere in the world (Sharpe, 2017). Like other types of sex work, FCSW is a huge commercial and transnational industry with dimensional arrangements (Lever & Dianne, 2010; Osezua, 2011). Nonetheless, it is not always accepted in most societies and female sex workers are not at all times accepted in most communities where they work (Aborisode & Fayemi, 2015; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011).

Accordingly, the regulation of the industry and members' activities became imminent in most countries. For instance, criminalisation (which is administered through an established law/policy purposely targeted at abolishing sex work and punishing associated activities) remains a widely adopted approach to suppressing sex work activities around the world (Saunders & Kirby, 2010). Scholars have repeatedly criticised this approach, particularly in the area of its implementation and the humongous amount of money that goes with it (Muldoon, et al. 2017; Surtees, 2013; Alemayehu, et al. 2015). Besides, most of the extant literature and debates that focused attention on the suppression policies have largely exposed the lapses of the approach, particularly on the issue of human rights abuses that characterised its enforcement, and its failure to curb the pervasive increase in sex workers' activities (Salihu & Fawole, 2020; Aborisade, 2018; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011).

In Nigeria, like other democratic nations where sex work is illegal,<sup>ii</sup> strict and severe measures are meted against sex workers through the enforcement of sex work policies by the law enforcement agencies. Extortion, arbitrary arrest and detention, harassment, and violation of human rights are among the extrajudicial practices perpetrated against female commercial sex workers across Nigerian cities (Salihu & Fawole, 2020; Aborisade, 2018; Aborisade & Oshileye, 2020). This suggests that the structural crackdown on sex workers is a key element of sex work regulation in Nigeria. Notwithstanding, sex work activities are still widespread and the industry is attracting new members from across the country and neighbouring nations (Ogbeche, 2016; Aborisade, 2018).

The structural pressure, according to Salihu and Fawole (2020), is effective only during an intense crackdown period. However, as the pressure begins to calm down, sex workers continue with their normal daily activities. Since the structural efforts seem ineffectual, some communities (particularly where brothel and street-based sex workers are predominant) have adopted collective strategies aimed at ending the unabated activities of sex workers in recent times. Largely, these collective approaches are in the form of drastic responses to what is generally referred to as undesirable behaviour (such as sex work, indecent dressing, rape, trafficking and abuse of drugs, and theft among others) in these communities (Pratten, 2008). The emergence of these measures, according to some quarters, is attached to the widespread perception against sex work among many indigenous groups (Tyoanande & Samson, 2014), and the religious resilience that defined and chastised such behaviour (Ajayi & Buhari, 2014).

Moreover, there appears to be a general notion that attached the prevalence of criminal activities (such as theft, robbery, and rape) to places where brothels are located. Thus, people tend to believe that any action towards eradicating sex work will automatically address other criminal activities. Further, a more important factor that appears to have fuelled these communal responses to sex work is the lack of seriousness on the part of the Nigerian law enforcement agencies in enforcing sex work policies and prosecuting arrested sex workers. The ineptitude of the police is a strong indication that the system is not capable enough to fulfil the desires of the majority to eradicate sex work (Salihu & Fawole, 2020). Thus, it is imperative for people to come up with measures believed to be more effective. Generally, the failure of the Nigerian criminal justice actor- police to control crime, maintain orderliness, arrest and prosecute criminal suspects has made people lose confidence in the system thereby contributing to the increase in mob justice and other illegitimate manners of handling offenders (Salihu & Gholami 2018).

According to Albert et al. (2013), the various approaches adopted in handling criminal suspects outside the law in most Nigerian communities allow and encourage the use of all forms of suppressive and aggressive methods. For instance, reports indicate that sex workers and other criminal suspects are often subjected to suppressive methods (including the use of physical and harmful objects that cause pain) that promote gross violence and abuse of rights (Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015). While sex work and its regulations have received attention from academia and media, issues concerning violence against sex workers from individuals trying to suppress the sex industry and the enormous effects on the wellbeing of female sex workers have barely received any notable coverage. The media rarely report violence that emanates from such social action. Most of the debates related to sex work are, in most cases, dominated by arguments centred on risk and vulnerability, and sex trafficking among others (Richter et al., 2013; Popoola, 2013; Wahab, & Panichelli, 2013). It is against this background that the present study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by contributing to the scientific body of knowledge that explored collective violence and human rights abuses against marginalised groups in Africa and globally. Its aims include gauging peoples' judgement about sex work and sex workers' activities in some communities in Ilorin metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria, and exploring the collective efforts that have been made to suppress and eradicate such activities and the factors that have informed the emergence of such measures.

## 2. Sex Work Industry and the Nigerian Society

Sex work within the Nigerian context has generally been referred to as a dishonourable behaviour commonly perpetrated by women and/or girls who exchange sexual services with different people usually men for monetary or other benefits.<sup>iii</sup> It is a behaviour widely associated with immoral, abysmal, and criminality (Bamgbose, 2000). Nigeria is a country with more than 60 ethnic groups with diverse cultures. Literature reveals that none of these ethnic groups consents to sex

work as a profession and regards sex workers as social outcasts (Alobor & Ndifon, 2014). Thus, anyone who engages in sex work and other associated behaviour (including sex before and outside marriage) is condemned to severe punishments and the entire perpetrator's lineage is disregarded (Alobor & Ndifon, 2014).

In the northern part of Nigeria, for instance, where more than half of the population is Muslim and Islamic jurisprudence has dominated and shaped the cultural practices, sex work is largely perceived as a corrosive behaviour that portends the moral dignity of the larger society, particularly of the upcoming generations (Pereira, 2005). Religious sensitivity in this zone promotes intense animosity against sex work and makes it difficult for sex workers to operate freely (Fawole & Dagunduro, 2014). Similarly, in the southern part, where high esteem is attached to cultural values and family name and where the majority practice Christianity, sex work is viewed as a socially dangerous act that demoralises the social orientation and fabric of the younger generation and interrupts the conventional family and community value (Aderinto, 2006; Osezua, 2011).

From this lens, sex workers are generally referred to as deviants and are routinely denied certain social entitlements and supports enjoyed by other people. Native derogatory names, such as *ashewo*, *olosh*, *káárùwàci*, *Akwunakwuna*, *oni pansaga*, *aristo*, *ala agbere* among others, are used to describe them in everyday interactions, debates, media reports and even in the academic literature (Gungul & Audu, 2014). This clearly shows collective displeasure and the prevalence of symbols that are genuinely created to humiliate any activities associated with sex work. In this way, there appears to be a dominant sense of stigma against anyone who engages or practices sex work.

Accordingly, people frequently demonstrate their disapproval through violence of various forms (Nigeria Sex Workers Association, 2017). The risks associated with the sex work industry in Nigeria, like many other countries, have been well documented. They include physical risks encountered from their clients ranging from not being paid after work, verbal abuse, beating, and rape (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Richter et al., 2013; Popoola, 2013; Wahab & Panichelli, 2013). Additionally, sex workers in most Nigerian communities generally represent one of the most marginalised groups that are widely subjected to stigmatisation. Gungul and Audu (2014) observed that the stigmatisation of sex workers, particularly FCSWs emanate from popular conceptions of the various ways in which sex workers' activities contravene the socially established values attached to sexual intimacy and its purposes (e.g. procreation) and the norms regarding behaviour expected of a woman. Aderinto (2006) noted that the common tradition of virtually all the cultural groups in Nigeria is that any woman who has sexual intercourse with multiple partners either in exchange for money or other benefits is to be dishonoured and her entire family will carry the brunt. This particular stigma, according to Nnabugwu-Otesanya (2005), made many of the sex workers travel far away from their communities.

In addition, the fact that sex workers are at greater risks of contracting and transmitting sexual infections made people portray them as both vectors of HIV/AIDS diseases and as agents of community transmission of such diseases (Fawole et al., 2008; O'Doherty, 2011). In light of this, sex workers are subjected to varying treatments including from health workers when they seek medical help (Scorgie et al., 2013). Salihu and Fawole (2020) noted that by virtue of their unacceptable profession, sex workers are commonly perceived as individuals who have given up their citizenship rights to many things including access to basic amenities. For this reason, once health workers identified a person as a sex worker, they do not accord her with the kind of treatment other citizens enjoy (Scorgie et al., 2013; Wahab & Panichelli, 2013).

Furthermore, the criminalisation of commercial sex and its implementation are reflections of the pervasive stigma that surrounds the sex industry in Nigeria (Salihu & Fawole, 2020). The enforcement of legal regime regulating the industry has been significantly characterised by human rights violations by law enforcement personnel through excessive use of force, invasion and searches of private places, manhandling, verbal harassment, public humiliation, and unjustified arrests and detentions (Salihu & Fawole 2020; Aborishade; 1999). The police in different reported contexts have taken advantage of their powers to exploit and extort sex workers. Salihu and Fawole (2020) reported that police officers do demand for money or bribes from sex workers to avoid being arrested or detained or to be released from custody. Police officers sometimes forced sex workers into unwanted sexual acts. Salihu and Fawole added that police rarely release legitimate items (such as mobile phones and money) confiscated during arrests to the owners when discharged from detention.

### 3. Material and Methods

#### 3.1. Study Setting

The present study was carried out in the city of Ilorin, the Kwara State capital. Ilorin is an ancient and religious city located in the north-central geopolitical region of Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Ilorin has about 777,667 inhabitants (NBS, 2016). Ilorin is a city with unique and diverse ethnic groups, consisting of Hausa/Fulani and Yoruba as the indigenous groups and other ethnic groups from other parts of the country. Majority (about 64%) of the inhabitants (both indigenes and immigrants) are Muslims, 28% practice Christianity, while 8%

practice African Traditional Religion (Nolte et al., 2016). The followers of these three faiths and ethnic groups have lived together in Ilorin for decades without any ethnic or religious rancour. The peaceful coexistence has made the city to be known all over the country and also exemplifies the proximity of the various ethnic and religious groups (Abdulsalam, 2012).

Like other urban settlements in Nigeria, sex work activities are prevalent in Ilorin metropolis (Salihu & Fawole, 2020). It is estimated that around 13000 sex workers operate in different locations within the city of Ilorin (Fawole, Ogunkan, & Adegoke, 2011). There are several brothels and guesthouses that provide rooms for commercial sex workers to attend to their clients across the city. Also, a number of sex workers engage in street-based sex work where they line up and/or position themselves in major street corners of the city in the evening and night to solicit the available clients (Salihu & Fawole, 2020).

### **3.2. Population and Sampling Techniques**

The population of this study includes all the residents of communities where brothels and street-based female commercial sex workers are located in Ilorin metropolis. A variety of sampling techniques including criterion, convenience and venue-based methods were adopted in this study. Firstly, the researcher used first-hand available information and previous academic study on sex workers' activities in Ilorin to survey and locate twenty-one places (both in downtown and outskirts) where sex workers operate (Salihu & Fawole, 2020). Afterwards, a selection based on criterion sampling method was done to pick five areas where sex workers experience persistent intimidation in the hands of the community members where they operate. These areas include Adewole area, Agbo-Oba, Ba'aboko Adabata area, Olorunsogo-Gari Alimi area, and Oloje area. The selected areas are neighbouring communities and are within each other's reach. Their proximity might have informed the adoption of a similar method of intimidating sex workers. Additionally, convenience and venue-based sampling method was used to select 225 and 82 participants respectively, for this study. On the whole, a total of 307 residents across the five communities participated in this study.

### **3.3. Study Instrument**

A semi-structured interview that contained open and close-headed questions was the instrument used in data collection. It was developed through a rigorous process with the support of qualitative research expertise, criminologists, psychologists, and other social researchers (Aborisade & Fayemi, 2015; Nelson, 2018). The interview questions covered some topics including the socio-demographic background of the participants, perception of sex work industry and sex workers, perception of the structural approaches to fighting sex work, collective strategies adopted in eradicating sex workers' activities, and the effectiveness of such strategies. Interviews were conducted during the daytime and evening between the hours of 11-1 pm and 4-6 pm. Most of the interviews took place during weekends so as to allow working residents to participate in the research. Majority of the participants who were interviewed during the weekdays were store-keepers, students and elderly people. Each interview lasted for about 35 minutes.

### **3.4. Analysis**

Data collected from the interviews were analysed based on the objectives of this research using thematic analysis to respond to the research questions raised. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative research method that codifies and analysis data by identifying various patterns of response in the data gathered (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The electronic transcript gathered during the interviews was carefully read on several occasions and defined to identify the key relevant themes in the data after which codes were assigned to the themes for easy understanding of the similarities and identifying the relationships. This process remarkably allows the researcher to combine related responses and responses from different positions from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **4. Results**

The socio-demographic information of the participants elicited that majority (61%) of the participants were male while others (39%) were female. The age range of the participants was between 18 and 65. Majority of them (41.1%) were between the ages of 19 and 25, 35% were between 26 and 32, 16.3% were between 33 and 40, and 7.6% were between 41 and 65. Most of the participants (65%) had tertiary education (such as National Certificate of Education from colleges of education, National Diplomas from polytechnic and university degrees), 23% had at least secondary education while 12% were a student of higher institutions of learning. Moreover, 19% of the participants were civil servants, 18% were employees of private establishments, 36% were self-employed and 27% were unemployed.

### **4.1. Participants' Opinion of Sex Workers and the Sex Work Industry**

The interview information indicates that participants of the study have undesirable views of or against sex workers in their neighbourhoods and the entire sex work industry. Most of them relayed their intense displeasures and detestations towards both sex workers and their clients in different ways. Also, several demeaning names (in local language) such as olosho (prostitute), omo-onise (runs girls), aristo, aja-igboro (public dog) among others were used to debase sex workers and their clients and anyone who aids the profession, particularly those who sell sensitive items such as condoms to them. When asked about the ways sex workers are perceived, one of the participants replied that *'sex workers are aja-igboro (public dogs) with no dignity, shame, and without any meaningful future. They are disgusting fellows and a disgrace to womenfolk. No woman in her right senses will sell her treasure (body) for money'*. Another participant furiously responded by saying that *'is there any other sensible way to describe sex worker than a child born in error? They are poison to our society'*.

The widespread negative perception of sex workers has, to a larger extent, discouraged friendliness between some members of the communities (who are not completely against the sex work profession) and sex workers. The interview information revealed that a small number (8) of the participants, who, though to some extent, disagreed with sex workers and the sex work industry, differ in some aspects, particularly the collective or total disapproval of individuals who engage in sex work. According to responses given by this group of participants, a certain level of friendliness should be encouraged and not total rejection. However, the widespread perception has prevented them from showing such concern towards sex workers in their communities. For instance, while describing his opinion, a participant noted that:

*We cannot reject sex workers completely. Many of them are victims of circumstances; as a result, we need to show them love and some affection so that someday they may opt-out of the profession and earn their living from generally accepted means. Unfortunately, the kind of perception my people hold of sex workers would not allow someone like myself to show them such love because people would brand such a person with different names such as 'promoter of indecency'.*

Additionally, the widespread stigma against sex workers has prevented some petty item sellers in the area where brothels are located from selling to sex workers and their clients. Some participants (who are shopkeepers in the areas where brothels are located), although vehemently described their rejection of the sex work profession and sex workers' activities, also narrated how the general perception has greatly affected their businesses and relationships with sex workers. A participant noted that *'...most of us who have stores in this area and sell some items to sex workers have been warned by the community members to desist from doing so and that failure to yield would have serious reparation. ....most of us have no choice but to stop because we don't want to lose our space'*. Another participant said:

*.....though I do not support sex work and I always try to encourage some of the ladies who patronise my store to stop selling their bodies for money. At the same time, I am a businesswoman, I have to sell whatever they need to them. But since the community leaders have summoned all the storekeepers to a meeting and served a warning letter to stop selling to these ladies, my relationship with them ceased and this is affecting my businesses.*

#### 4.2. Factors Shaping Participants' Responsiveness

**Culture and religion:** Existing literature have documented the significant roles culture and religion played in the day-to-day activities of Nigerian people and other African societies. In fact, religion and culture are considered inseparable in Africa (Falola & Heaton 2008; O'Neill, 2015). These two elements are a way of life and can never be separated from the public sphere and they largely shape everything including politics, marriage, dress, economics, and death among other things (Na'Allah, 1994). The interview information revealed that the dominant culture and religious groups in Ilorin are the basis for the widespread negative perception of sex workers. Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional religion doctrines that evangelize moral, modesty, decency and righteousness among other things in all facets of human life appear to have largely influenced the socialisation of younger generations and shaped people's way of life.

**Failure of the existing structural mechanisms:** Consistent with the previous academic investigations on the failure of the state mechanisms instituted to control and/or eradicate sex work industry in Nigerian communities (Salihu and Fawole, 2020; Aborisade, 2018), information gathered from the participants also indicates that all measures put in place by the Nigerian authority to prevent sex work activities have not, to a reasonable extent, deterred sex workers' activities in most neighbourhoods. Such measures include but are not limited to police crackdowns on sex workers, apprehension, detention and prosecution, and conviction (in rare cases) of sex workers and their clients (Salihu and Fawole, 2020). Majority of the participants believed that the law enforcement agents who are supposed to be the primary enforcer of the laws (that prohibit sex work-related crimes and other infractions) are the promoters of wrongdoings and in most cases aid and abet sex workers. For instance, a participant noted that:

*...all the measures put in place by the government to eradicate sex work-related activities are fruitless because those who are charged with the responsibility (police personnel) are corrupt. They see the enforcement of anti-sex work policies as an avenue to enrich themselves through bribes from sex workers. Police rarely*

*arrest or prosecute sex workers. All what sex workers need to do when encountered with the police is to give the officers some money or other valuable things so as not to disturb their activities'.*

*Sex work and other criminal activities:* Based on the information gathered from participants, the existence of brothel-based and street corners sex work in their neighbourhoods is responsible for the increasing criminal activities. In other words, participants strongly attached the activities of sex workers to other criminalities in their communities. Participants' accounts revealed that brothels and street corners are considered hideouts for crooks, gangsters, and drug syndicates. Therefore, wherever sex workers operate, other criminal activities are not far. Hence, the understanding that sex work activities prompt other crimes considerably fuels participants' rejection of sex work. A participant noted that *'sex workers are criminal accomplices; if we want to end or reduce snatching, shoplifting and drug trafficking and other theft in our community, we must first address sex work as we are presently doing'*. Another participant recounted that *'because brothel and street corner sex workers operate in our communities we experience different kinds of troubles from bandits. We must get rid of these sex workers before we can be safe'*.

### 4.3. Strategies Adopted

For the reason that the enforcement of anti-sex work policies by law enforcement agents have not deterred sex workers' activities in most neighbourhoods and that community members feel unsafe, the interview information disclosed that some communities adopted a radical approach to eradicate sex workers from operating in their neighbourhoods. According to some participants, this radical approach started about 9 years ago. The kinds of strategies described range from collective physical attacks on sex workers and their clients to verbal abuse and invasion of residences used for brothels and locations on the street corners. Participants' recounts indicate that personal attacks on sex workers and their clients usually take the form of ambush, fighting, throwing of pebbles and dangerous objects, that in most cases result in intense beating and severe injuries, verbal abuse which include but not limited to the singing of embarrassing and distressing songs, the use of proverbs, demeaning languages and name-calling. Some of the participants' accounts are as follows:

*We would do whatever it takes to stop sex workers and their activities on our streets and in our neighbourhoods. Since the law enforcement agencies have failed to do the needful and curb activities that are demoralising our younger generations, we, as a people, have decided to engage sex workers and their clients with all available means and regardless of the consequences- physical and spiritual attacks. They are no longer wanted in our mixt and the only way to send them packing is to use force.*

*Enough is enough; all social decadence caused by sex workers on our streets and neighbourhoods should stop. We have adopted a radical approach which includes both confrontation, violence and verbal attacks to put an end to the sex work menace in our communities.*

*We mobilise ourselves to shame sex workers and their clients using physical and verbal abuse because we cannot continue to tolerate them in this community. All the sex workers must be disgraced and their clients must be discouraged by all means.*

Attacks on brothels and street corners (where street-based sex workers wait to solicit clients) range from throwing of pebbles and harmful objects on the roofs of the brothels to the mass invasion of the premises and street corners to disrupt activities, dumping of refuse and injurious objects such metal at the entrance of the brothels and street corners. While strategies adopted to prevent clients from visiting brothels and street corners also include physical and verbal abuse, the arrest of late-night clients by vigilantes and night-watch groups, barricading the street to obstruct clients' access, throwing pebbles and garbage at them. Other methods include deflation of clients' vehicle tyres and putting garbage/rubbish on the vehicle. A participant said that *'we do invade brothels and places where sex workers stay in the night. We put rubbish at the entrance, throw objects at them and their clients and sometimes attack them in their rooms and at the corners'*. Another participant opined that *'we deflate their clients' vehicle tyres and sometimes barricade junctions and streets to brothels to prevent clients from getting access to brothels. If any of them resists, that means he wants to fight then we teach him some lessons'*.

### 4.4. Effectiveness of the Strategies

Information gathered from participants suggests that the radical approach adopted is effective. Majority of the participants justified their position on the following grounds: - that through the adoption of the approach, a. they have been able to stop some clients (including those they are acquainted with) from visiting the brothels; b. some sex workers have packed out of the community and relocated to somewhere else; c. some spaces used by street-based sex workers have been vacated and houses and shops are now built on those spaces; d. a number of apartments used for brothels have been closed down and some rented out to students and other members of the community; e. Criminal activities that appear to have overwhelmed the communities due to the activities of the sex workers have been put to check.

However, few of the participants claimed that some sex workers still reside and carry out their activities in these communities, while some only reside there but carry out their activities outside or far away from these communities. A Participant recounted that *'even the blind could see that the approach is working and it is very effective considering the extent to which sex workers operate some years back. Although we still have a handful of them in our community but their activities have reduced drastically unlike before'*.

Another participant noted that *'the level of rowdiness (in the evening and during the weekends) and crime that we use to experience, as a result of sex workers activities in our area, have disappeared. This tells us that the method we adopted is working. Sex workers' activities and crimes are minimal compared with what we used to have'*. Moreover, a participant said that *'some of the places used by sex workers have been converted to complexes or shops. Many of the sex workers have either relocated to areas where their activities are tolerated within Ilorin or outskirts of Ilorin'*.

## 5. Discussion

This study investigates the collective radical approach adopted in eradicating sex workers' activities in some communities in Ilorin the capital city of Kwara State, Nigeria. The results presented indicated participants' dislike for sex work and the negative perception they hold against sex workers. Given that the study area is sensitive to cultural and religious beliefs, these two elements strongly played a significant role in shaping people's perception of sex work as a dishonourable deed and shaming anyone who engages in associated activities. The religious faith(s) and the cultural practices of residents of Ilorin, like residents of other northern cities in Nigeria, strongly prohibit and forbid sex work and other associated activities. Thus, the role of these two variables cannot be overemphasised when discussing matters concerning morality.

Besides, the significance of these two variables in shaping ideologies in Ilorin and other African societies, particularly on the issue of sex work has been extensively demonstrated in the previous academic investigations. For instance, Na'Allah (1994), Ejizu (2016) and Deegan (2008) observed that all government policies (including matters regarding the sex work industry, political affairs, legal issues and family-related problems among others) in Nigeria have largely been shaped by the dominant culture and religious groups. Hence, the presence of these variables clearly demonstrates the reason for peoples' displeasure with sex work and the widespread negative perception of sex workers. It is evident in the various manners used in describing sex workers.

Additionally, the ineptitude of the law enforcement agencies (as the state apparatus charged with the responsibility of enforcing government's sex work policies in Nigeria) which appears to have rather endowed sex workers and thereby giving them a headway in most communities (Salihu & Fawole, 2020), is a significant concern widely mentioned by participants. According to the participants, it is a major reason for the escalation of sex workers' activities in their communities. It thus appears to have single headedly fuelled peoples' resentment towards sex workers (and anyone connected with their activities including their clients). Moreover, the widespread opinion that sex work is closely associated with or induces other criminal activities makes some people develop a sense of disapproval for the sex work profession. Accordingly, sex workers are perceived as a common enemy; and any effort aimed at eradicating sex work is also an attempt at controlling other criminal activities. These factors, on the whole, appear to have consequently informed the collective formation and backing of activism against sex workers at the community level.

Based on the accounts of the participants, the collective approach incorporates various methods including physical and verbal attacks on sex workers and their clients which in most cases have resulted in fighting and injuries. While participants' opinions indicated that the approach is effective in eradicating sex workers' activities in their communities; nonetheless, the approach is apparently violent and abusive and consequently threatens the wellbeing of sex workers and individuals who patronise them. Like the manner in which the law enforcement agencies enforced sex work policies in Nigerian communities, the collective approach adopted by these communities has seemingly normalised the use of force and violence against sex workers and encourages or permits infringement of certain human rights.

It can be inferred from participants' accounts that the approach is an attempt designed not only to disrupt sex work activities and other banditries, but it is also aimed at humiliating, harassing and causing physical and psychological injuries to sex workers and to force them out of the community. It should be noted, however, that the consequences that result from the application of this approach, in some ways, contravene some sections of the laws of the Federation of Nigeria. For instance, the law expressly provided that no one should intimidate, threaten, or violate other peoples' rights (see Chapter IV, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1999). Moreover, an attempt to force a person or group (sex workers) out of their residence and community contravenes the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) which clearly specified that Nigerians can reside anywhere in the country (see Section 41[1], Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1999). In addition, the fear of being labelled (as promoters of indecency) which prevents some members of the community (who are not completely against sex work) from associating with sex workers violates a fundamental right to freedom of association (see Chapter IV, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 1999). The implication

of this is that sex workers in these communities are generally being profiled and completely segregated from other members of the community.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Violence is a common daily experience in the lives of female commercial sex workers across the globe. In Nigeria, violence against female sex workers is not only common but is also accepted by many and normalised by society. This research examines the collective approach adopted by some communities in Ilorin metropolis, Nigeria in eradicating sex workers' activities and how the approach has intensified violence and other human rights abuses perpetrated against female commercial sex workers. Based on the findings of this research, the authors, concludes that, on the one hand, the collective radical approach is effective in controlling sex workers' activities and other associated criminal activities. On the other hand, the approach inspires violence and normalises human rights abuses of female commercial sex workers in Ilorin metropolis.

The paper, therefore, suggests a need for a public campaign aimed at sensitising members of the communities, about the fundamental rights of their fellow citizens which they are obliged to venerate as Nigerians and to see most of the sex workers as individuals who are victims of circumstance. Moreover, such orientation programs should be extended to sex workers; they should be educated about the potential dangers inherent in continuing with or engaging in such practices. Religious, cultural, and civil society organisations should collaborate to achieve this objective. Finally, as the radical approach adopted is implemented by members of the communities with the sole aim of eradicating sex work, such a drastic approach, though in a manner that complies with the law, should be formed to assist the law enforcement agencies to curb other violent crimes that have ravaged Nigerian societies. This can be done by providing the required intelligence and handing over any arrested suspects to the appropriate agencies.

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<sup>i</sup> Most literature, government policies, and legal instruments continue to use the term prostitution and prostitutes, to refer to activities in the sex industry and individuals who engage in sexual services for some specific reasons. While some scholars prefer to use sex work because 'it underscores the labour/work and economic implications of involvement in the sale of sexual services; and also challenges accounts that depict sellers (sex workers) as victims of others' wrongdoings and not, depending on the social context, as agents of their own fate' (Benoit et al. 2018:1-2). Moreover, using terms such as prostitution or prostitute within Nigerian societies according to Salihu and Fawole (2020:15) 'has connotations of immorality and stigmatization, and it is often associated with criminality. Thus, many people who engage in selling sexual services find the term offensive and demeaning, which contributes to their social marginalization'. For these reasons, this study adopts 'sex work' and 'sex worker' to refer to transactional sexual services in sex industry and individuals who engage in, or provide such services as a profession for specific gains.

<sup>ii</sup> See Section 225A (2) of the Criminal Code, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria which expressly provided that 'any magistrate who is satisfied, by evidence upon oath, that there is a reason to suspect that any premises or any part of any premises are or is used by a female for, purposes of prostitution, and that any male person residing in or frequenting the premises is living wholly or in part on the earnings of the prostitute, may issue a warrant under his hand authorizing any constable to enter and search the premises and to arrest that male person'. Moreover, Section 225B (1-3) made it clear that 'whoever (a) keeps or manages or assists in the management of a brothel; or (b) being the tenant, lessee, or occupier or person in charge of any premises, knowingly permits such premises or any part thereof to be used as a brothel or for the purposes of habitual prostitution; or (c) being the lessor or landlord of any premises, or the agent of such lessor or landlord, lets the same or any part thereof with the knowledge that such premises or some part thereof are of is to be used as a brothel, or is wilfully a party to the continued use of such premises or any part thereof as a brothel, shall be liable: (i) to a fine of 100 naira or to imprisonment for 6 months and (ii) on a second or subsequent conviction, to a fine of 300 naira or to imprisonment for 1 year; or in either case, to both fine and imprisonment'.

<sup>iii</sup> It is important to note that men (and young boys) also engage in sex work- having sexual relationships with multiple female partners for monetary and other benefits, in Nigeria; however, it is not common like that of female sex work. Besides, sex work by men is usually common among young adults (usually between 21-30 year old) who are majorly students of higher institutions of learning and unemployed graduates living in Nigeria's mega cities like Abuja, Lagos, Port Harcourt, Ibadan and Calabar (see Alobor & Ndifon, 2014). This may be due to the composition of the cities in terms of huge and diverse population, religious secularism, individualism/independence, and the cities being considered as large commercial hubs of the country (Okanlawon, Adebawale & Titilayo, 2013). This kind of sex work is uncommon in some other places like Ilorin, the focus of this study.