Voicing the Voiceless: Photovoice and Standpoint Feminism Unveiling the Stigmatization of Ex-Sex Workers

Jefri Setyawan
Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Surabaya
jefrisetyawan@staff.ubaya.ac.id

Abstract

The closure of Dolly's localization did not eradicate the stigma attached to women who are former sex workers. Discussion around the issue of women sex workers often focused on discrimination and violence. However, it paid little attention to the challenges of individuals struggling to achieve autonomy and human rights after leaving prostitution. The research aims to understand how former sex workers navigate stigma and reclaim their autonomy and human rights after the closure of Dolly's localization. Ten women identified needs, aspirations, concerns, and issues related to their lives, using Standpoint Feminism Theory to position them as authorities on their experiences. The research voices the three themes: (1) public and self-stigma, (2) positive motherhood narratives in combating stigma, and (3) strategies in responding to stigma. The photovoice method empowers participants to tell their stories directly and accurately, fostering a participatory knowledge process between researchers and participants. The study contributes to expanding the discussion on the reintegration of women affected by post-prostitution, filling gaps in existing literature on empowerment and stigma reduction strategies.

Keywords: former sex worker, photovoice, standpoint feminism theory, stigma.

Introduction

Women involved in prostitution are among the most stigmatized individuals in society (Sallmann, 2010; Tomura, 2009). They are socio-politically and academically represented as a group whose aspirations are neglected, with minimal engagement and participation. Stigmatization persists even after women have exited prostitution. However, most research indicates that leaving prostitution is a complex and difficult process to halt (Baker et al., 2010). The complexity exists on various levels and often includes trauma, challenges with mental and physical health, poverty, discrimination, and marginalization (Brown et al., 2006). Studies on the impact of stigma on individuals vary; for instance, there is a high prevalence of depression and suicide associated with unique aspects of their work, such as violence perpetrated by partners (Le et al., 2010; Sagtani et al., 2013; Yuen et al., 2016). Global stigma studies still predominantly focus on their status as sex workers, as seen in China where stigmatization of female sex workers contradicts traditional Chinese values and expected social roles for women. Moreover, previous research involving female sex workers has often focused only on inherent issues such as drug use, violence, sexually transmitted diseases, and contraceptive misuse, inadvertently reinforcing stigma (Jani & Felke, 2017; Karandikar & Frost, 2013; Karandikar & Gezinski, 2013; Swendeman et al., 2015). The situation has the potential to exacerbate layered stigmas, meaning additional stigmas will be added on top of existing ones (Nyblade, 2006). Although previous research has highlighted significant challenges faced by sex workers, it is crucial to shift this perspective to examine the experiences of sex workers from a strength-based approach to enhance empowerment and foster community and individual growth for social justice (Burnes et al., 2012; Turner & Maschi, 2015).

Individuals working in red-light districts need protection regardless of their employment status, even though sex work is synonymous with vulnerability and individual pleasure. The role of former sex workers should be considered as strategic partners of the government in efforts to promote human development and health among vulnerable groups. It is also responds to the stigma perpetuated by institutional or structural levels. Empirical evidence from such initiatives has the potential to reduce stigma and promote health efforts among female sex workers (FSWs). For example, in Brazil, the government collaborated with non-governmental organizations to design effective interventions targeting FSWs. These interventions employed a tolerant and respectful approach, with the government often referring to FSWs as "partners" in Brazil's fight against AIDS. In India, the Sonagachi Project empowers FSWs, actively leading successful HIV prevention and health promotion programs (Jana et al., 2004). In the UK, clinical psychology services were established to provide psychological and counseling services accessible to FSWs (Stevenson & Petrak, 2007).

In Indonesia, following the closure of the largest red-light district in Southeast Asia, "Dolly," challenges related to prostitution stigma persist. Despite adopting new job statuses, former sex workers working outside the red-light district are still stigmatized by their colleagues, such as foremen, supervisors, or other female peers. Words like degraded, corrupt, disrespectful, and unworthy have been used to describe women involved in prostitution (Tomura, 2009). A preliminary study on the empowerment support for former sex workers in the Dolly area of Surabaya indicates that women who were once sex workers continue to be viewed as sinful and shameful, despite working outside of prostitution. In addition to the frequently attached labels, they often experience verbal abuse, being called prostitutes, and the normalization of physical abuse towards them. As a result of this treatment, they often feel ashamed. For some individuals, this sense of shame manifests itself in discrimination.

> *"Many of them feel ashamed, feel like they are not accepted and treated differently in their workplace, by foremen, by men in their workplace, because they know what these women's pasts were like."* (Mrs. E, 48 years old).

Stigma towards women who were former sex workers ultimately remains similar to the status of other female sex workers, and a clear pattern for why this stigma is given has not yet emerged. Despite consistent social science research on sex workers, the focus has not been on what is attached to them. When sex work is discussed in the context of discrimination or violence, the discussion is not comprehensive regarding women who have already quit. The need to explore individual challenges within the framework of autonomy, human rights, or self-regulation is also overlooked. The oversight can contribute to the enduring stereotypes and stigmatization of former sex workers. It was a significant negligence.

The study highlights the complexity of experiences post-closure of red-light districts, and these difficulties can be well illustrated by those who have experienced the impact. Positioning women as affected in a broader context has the potential to capture diverse subjectivities and varied experiences and the complexity post-red-light district closure. The research goes beyond traditional qualitative research approaches by applying the photovoice methodology to women affected by the closure of red-light districts. Participants engage in representing visuals (photography) to produce art, collaboratively creating knowledge, and raising awareness of their needs (Wang et al., 2000). The research aims to gain a deeper and more complex understanding of the lived experiences of women affected by the closure of red-light districts through artistic

photography. We use Standpoint Feminism theory to ensure that knowledge outcomes are constructed from the participation of individuals representing themselves, their groups, or their communities. The use of this theory is more sensitive to understanding direct experiences as women and their social realities. Epistemic privileges are granted to participants because they know different things from those with privileges based on what they experience and how they understand it (Harding, 2004). It is particularly relevant to the application of the photovoice methodology, where women are regarded as authorities in their own lives and hold the power to construct knowledge through their visual voices.

Incorporating feminist theory into the photovoice methodology will enhance this participatory process by ensuring that marginalized voices are authentically represented, and their lived experiences are not oversimplified. As Coemans et al. (2017) emphasize, applying feminist and empowerment frameworks in photovoice is crucial to challenging hegemonic narratives. Feminist theory enriches the findings of photovoice studies, protects against superficial representations of empowerment and ensures that women's complex realities are recognized and understood. The lens of feminist theory grants epistemic privilege to participants, positioning them as experts in their own experiences (Harding, 2004), thus empowering women to challenge and resist societal stigmas through visual storytelling.

Therefore, this research seeks to explore post-closure localization experiences from the perspective of affected women, using photovoice to empower them to represent their narratives and create a more nuanced understanding of their lived realities. This research, which incorporates feminist principles, critically engages with the layered stigma faced by these women and offers a framework for understanding how they navigate their identities and social relationships after exiting prostitution. This approach aims to shift the discourse from victimization to one that emphasizes agency, resilience, and empowerment, contributing to social justice and advocacy efforts for former sex workers.

Method
Design
The qualitative study employs a modified photovoice method with group discussions, differing from the original photovoice approach (Wang & Burris, 1997), as the primary data collection method. It is a modified photovoice method previously used to collect data on adolescents (Bunga et al., 2022) and vulnerable communities in West Timor (Kiling et al., 2019).

Participants
The study involves 10 former female sex workers who still reside in the former Dolly red-light district in Surabaya. The sample size is chosen based on the trend of photovoice implementation involving 8 to 15 participants (Febriyantoko, 2021; Hidayah et al., 2020; Novianty & Garey, 2020). The purposive sampling technique is utilized with three main criteria: (a) former female sex workers who have worked or are currently working in other sectors post-closure of the red-light district, (b) still residing or active in the Dolly area, and (c) possessing the ability to operate gadgets and cameras. The research has obtained permission from the Institutional Ethics Committee of the University of Surabaya with the number 90/KE/III/2023.

Procedure
The research stages refer to several previous implementations of photovoice (such as Harley, 2012; I. Y. Kiling et al., 2022; Wayan Ekayanti & Puspawati, 2021), adjusted by the researcher based on participant conditions, such as photo-taking ability and availability of time. Generally,

the following stages are undertaken: (1) the researcher identified participants through key persons of local community networks to ensure accessibility and trust. Each potential participant was provided with a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights to promote transparency and consent. Only after obtaining consent were participants invited to join the research; (2) the researcher conducted a group discussion to build trust. During the discussion, participants are asked to describe their feelings through mental images; (3) participants are instructed to take photos related to the questions. The instruction given to participants is "please take relevant photos that can be used to explain your experiences after working elsewhere"; (4) participants take pictures for one week. Research assistants facilitate the photo-taking process, and the images are confirmed with participants for their appropriateness; (5) all participants use their mobile phones to capture images for this research; and (6) the photos are then discussed by participants and the research team in subsequent group discussions.

Research questions
The main questions for each photo are "why did you take this picture, and what does it mean to you?" To ensure effective communication and understanding, linguistic and cultural nuances are addressed through local languages (Indonesian and Javanese-Surabaya). The researcher is fluent in these languages and ensures that participants' voices are accurately conveyed.. Conversations are recorded using the recording feature available on the devices. Discussions are conducted for an average of three to four hours weekly over two months. In the final meeting, a validation session is conducted to confirm the alignment between participants' stories and their photos. The thematic analysis identifies and develops themes from participants' photos and group discussion narratives. The process begins by transcribing recorded discussions and categorizing them into key themes based on recurring patterns, meanings, and concepts. The researcher analyzes these themes in the context of participants' experiences, ensuring the findings reflect their lived realities. Themes are refined through iterative rounds of coding and validation with participants in follow-up meetings to ensure their perspectives are accurately represented. The study strictly followed ethical guidelines. Participants gave informed consent after understanding the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms and removing personal data. Emotional support was provided by trained assistants during discussions, with referrals to local services offered if needed.

Result
The photovoice process yielded three main themes representing the voices of former female sex workers, as follows: (1) public and self-stigma; (2) positive motherhood narratives in combating stigma; and (3) strategies for responding to stigma. These themes were constructed through an iterative process of analyzing the photographs and accompanying narratives shared by 10 women, each with unique backgrounds and experiences in the red-light district (see Table 1). The analysis revealed recurring patterns and meanings across multiple participants' stories, reflecting their shared experiences and perspectives,

Table 1
Participant profile

No	Participant*	Background
1	Maya	Single parent with two children
2	Siska	Outsourcing staff and human trafficking victim
3	Lidya	Freelancer
4	Yuni	Single parent with a son
5	Atik	Mother with a son
6	Cece	Mother with a toddler
7	Mufida	Human trafficking victim
8	Susi	Non-permanent resident in Surabaya
9	Nanik	Single parent with two daughters
10	Lia	Coffee maker

The participant names were applied under a pseudonym.

Theme 1. public and self-stigma

The public stigma surrounding sex work shapes how individuals view themselves. Yuni, a single mother, describes the profound impact of negative judgment on her self-perception. She illustrates this through a photograph of a black coffee cup, symbolizing the idea that "black is not necessarily dirty, and white is not necessarily pure." She explains, "*That is how everyone judges me. Those criticizing me may not necessarily be good people, but they always perceive me as bad. I am called 'a base sex worker,' even though I strive to lead a virtuous life. In their eyes, I'm still just a sex worker.*" Yuni's image evokes deep reflections on the societal dichotomies of purity and impurity. The black coffee cup serves as a metaphor for the labelling process, where her past occupation as a sex worker is inescapable despite her desire to redefine herself. It reflects the ingrained stereotypes against sex workers prevalent in society.

Figure 1. A Cup of black coffee by Yuni (left) and Own Footsteps by Maya (right)

Similarly, Maya's photograph of two feet walking alone symbolizes her experience of social isolation, especially from her own family. After accruing large debts, Maya was marginalized by her relatives, reflecting a deeper emotional and social stigma, *"I was hated and ignored by my family because of the debt. If they needed something, they only asked me. Since then, I realized that I have to walk alone."* This theme highlights the internalized stigma these women face, further compounded by the judgment from their families and broader society. The emotional toll of stigma contributes to their ongoing struggles with identity and belonging. A single mother, Nanik feels the negative

impact of stereotypes from her job. She faces false accusations and fights against the stereotype of being a thief. Baseless accusations are received from her boarding house neighbours. She buries this heartache and transforms it into motivation to work hard and use her job to support herself and educate her child.

Figure 2. Three family glasses by Nanik (left) and a miniature crocodile by Lia (right)

The photo she took features three glasses to represent herself and her two children, narrating, "*I am a single parent living with my two children. My neighbours accused me because of my job. However, I have never committed theft. The accusations deeply hurt me. Is it just because of my job that people can easily accuse me?*" Lia, a coffee seller, bears the stigma and harsh words from her neighbours. Her photo features a miniature crocodile, narrating, "*I used to be talked about by neighbours like this: 'Girls should not come home late.' They said I was an entertainer, a sex worker, a mistress, and even called me a land crocodile.*" What she experiences is not responded to reactively; she remains steadfast and finds ways to prove her worth as an individual beyond the judgments of others.

Theme 2. positive motherhood narratives in combating stigma
This theme highlights how several participants have used motherhood as a source of empowerment and a tool to challenge the stigmatization they face due to their past involvement in sex work. For many participants, being a mother was framed as a defining aspect of their identity, helping them to resist the societal label of "sex worker" and reframe it through a lens of care, love, and responsibility. Atik, a single mother, diligently pursues her work despite receiving disdainful looks for her profession as a sex worker. Atik demonstrates a firm attitude to fulfilling her and her child's needs, disregarding societal judgments until she reaches a point where she is content with her work and able to meet daily needs. The photo she took features a bite of rice on her hand, conveying, "*I do my current job earnestly to get a bite of rice. However, I often receive scornful looks from people who know about my job. Because it happens so frequently, I feel normal and no longer care about their actions. I am just enough to work and meet daily needs.*"

Figure 3. A bite of rice by Atik (left) and a sprig of lay flowers by Cece (right)

Similar situations occur for Cece; her job as a karaoke guide is perceived differently from her previous role as a housewife. Despite the decline in society's perception of her, she remains resilient and strong in her role as a homemaker. The photo she took features a sprig of flowers, and she narrates, "*I used to liken myself to a flower that was always praised, but now I liken myself to a withered flower because people consider me the worst, labelled as a mistress, having no money, being poor, and being slandered. However, I am a mom.*" Motherhood as a protective and redemptive identity plays a crucial role in resisting the stigma attached to sex work. Participants often expressed how the role of motherhood allowed them to redefine their self-worth and counteract public judgment. For many, the positive narrative of motherhood becomes a counter-narrative to the dominant stereotype of "fallen women" associated with sex work.

Theme 3. strategies in responding to stigma

This theme explores the strategies participants use to cope with or confront the stigma attached to their past. The strategies range from internalizing positive self-affirmations to advocating for other women in similar circumstances. Many participants emphasized the importance of forming strong personal and social networks to help mitigate the impact of stigma. Siska, an outsourcing worker, has experienced harsh treatment, felt belittled, and has been a victim of human trafficking. Today, she focuses on her journey towards independence and a better personality. She does not forget bad experiences, but she understands that bad experiences will never be forgotten; whoever experiences them, she and other women.

Figure 4. Cayenne pepper by Siska (left) and coins money by Lidya

The photo she took depicts chilli peppers, conveying, "*I used to be constantly labelled as a sex worker and subjected to various harsh words, but I remained silent. I tried to be good, but people only looked down on me. Now I realize, let people say what they want, I just. Want to become better.*" From her perspective, she has taken control of her life and opted to concentrate on personal growth, regardless of society's disempowering views.
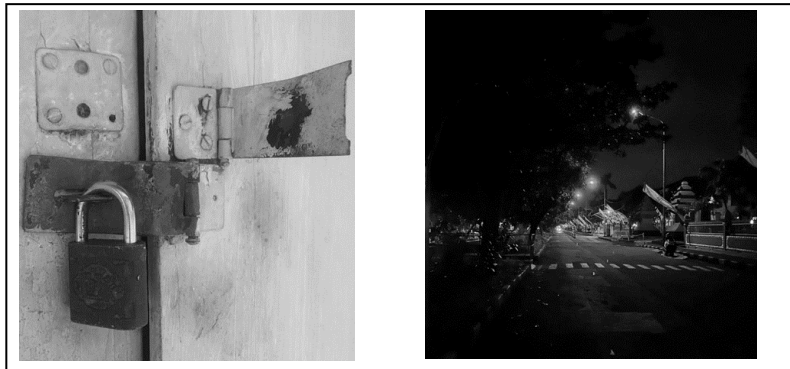

Figure 5. A Padlock by Mufida (left) and Quiet night street by Susi (right)

Additionally, some participants discussed the importance of collective support, where they created solidarity within their communities. These coping strategies are integral to the participants' ability to navigate their daily lives while minimizing the emotional toll of stigma. Mufida, a woman leading a community, has faced stigma related to divorce and her struggle to support herself and her children. She is judged as a 'damaged woman' and a 'village person without skills.' The photo she took features a padlock, narrating, "*Due to divorce, I work alone and come home late. I am considered a dirty woman, a damaged woman, because I struggle to support myself and my child. Moreover, I am regarded as a villager without skills and education. Even everything feels so dark and locked when I was sold to someone.*" She slowly turns this situation into a catalyst for success and self-empowerment. Another participant, Susi, faces stigma and unpleasant treatment from her spouse. While on a deserted night street, she engages in a verbal altercation with her partner. She receives curses, is grabbed, and forcibly pulled along the night street. The photo she took analogizes the situation on the night street, narrating, "*In this dark street, I have experienced insults and mistreatment from a man I know and consider my lover. But that dark period is now in the past. Now I can stand alone.*" After going through difficult times filled with insults and mistreatment, she finds the strength to live independently and enthusiastically. She seeks to challenge this view and turn this experience into a source of empowerment: joining a community and mobilizing other women to become aware of their disempowering situation.

Lidya, a miscellaneous worker and mother, challenges negative perceptions of low-wage employment. For her, money holds a deeper meaning, representing the ability to meet daily needs. She illustrates how the small change she collects has value and meaning. The photo she took features paper bills and small denomination coins, narrating, "*I see myself as a penny warrior hoping to support and educate my child. However, people often associate small changes with poverty. The collected small change can be used to cover daily expenses.*" She transforms the negative view of small change as a symbol of poverty into a more positive perspective. This theme also connects to the broader concept of resilience, which examines how individuals and groups develop coping strategies to overcome adversities. The women in this study demonstrated immense resilience by finding ways to reframe their experiences and seek empowerment in their personal lives.

Discussion

The social stigma against sex work is based on notions of female sexuality and continues to be a significant source of discrimination. Although sex workers often choose this occupation to overcome social and economic challenges, they still face strong stigma and moral condemnation, especially in countries like Indonesia. Female sex workers are often portrayed as victims of sexual depravity and immoral behavior, while the role of male clients tends to be overlooked in social discourse (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008). These views negatively impact sex workers' mental well-being and self-image, as well as create a hierarchy of stigma among them, where they stigmatize each other based on perceived status (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022), complicating their social support networks and hindering efforts to find solidarity. Former sex workers often have to battle negative stereotypes related to their past, such as being labelled as victims, criminals, or perverts, which can hinder their access to mental health support and other resources (Lake, 2013; Rayson & Alba, 2019). However, many former sex workers actively fight against this stigma by redefining themselves as women entrepreneurs, feminists, and activists, advocating for their civil rights and fighting for better social treatment (Lake, 2013). This research found resistance to stigma and efforts to build new identities that are more positive and empowering.

The photovoice method allowed sex workers to visually represent their experiences, revealing unique insights into stigma and identity often missed by conventional methods. As a tool for knowledge translation and advocacy, photovoice addresses marginalized groups' needs by transforming their experiences into actionable insights for policymakers and communities (Ilagan et al., 2020). It fosters social connections and collaboration (Budig et al., 2018), enabling sex workers to build supportive communities essential for their empowerment and well-being. Through photography, participants promote solidarity, collective action, and societal change (Strack et al., 2022), challenging narratives that stigmatize or misrepresent them. Additionally, photovoice captured nuanced aspects of their resilience and coping mechanisms, enriching their understanding of how stigma affects their self-perception and overall well-being. For instance, "A Cup of Coffee" visual representations image symbolize societal dichotomies of purity and impurity, with the black coffee cup representing the persistent labelling and stereotypes tied to her past as a sex worker, despite her efforts to redefine herself.

Negative stigma is experienced not only by the public but also by oneself. Research shows that internalized acceptance of negative social beliefs about oneself correlates with increased loneliness and decreased mental well-being among sex workers (Hart et al., 2023). This stigma, characterized by negative self-stereotyping and social alienation, is prevalent among sex workers and can persist even after they leave the profession. Self-stigma adversely affects psychological health and becomes a barrier to seeking health care (Huber et al., 2019), and predicted lower mental well-being and higher loneliness among sex workers (Hart et al., 2023). External social views and internal dynamics within the sex work community, where stigma hierarchies can exist, influence this internalized stigma (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). For example, street sex workers are rated lower in the stigma hierarchy compared to indoor sex workers as they are perceived to have a more controlled and safe working environment. The internalization of stigma reduces self-esteem, making it difficult for former sex workers to reintegrate into society and pursue new opportunities.

Ultimately, the stigmatization of former sex workers in Indonesia, particularly in the formal employment sector, is a complex issue influenced by societal perceptions, legal frameworks, and economic conditions. This stigma is deeply rooted in social norms that reflect society's negative views and sex workers' internal struggles against such stigmatization (Marsih & Saragih, 2022).

Research shows that individuals who previously worked in the informal sector, including sex work, tend to face more barriers to entry and acceptance into formal employment compared to other workers. This situation confirms that barriers in the transition from informal to formal employment occur and prolong the cycle of discrimination and marginalization (Pratomo & Manning, 2022). In addition to the stigma aspect, efforts to transition from sex work to the legal sector often do not fully compensate for the loss of income, so many former sex workers continue to face financial difficulties. It makes it difficult for individuals to stay in the legal sector, prompting them to turn to the shadow economy in search of income (Setyawan et al., 2024). The growth of the shadow economy signals the need for better regulation and more efficient institutions, as stricter controls alone have a limited effect on reducing illicit work.

Many sex workers, including those in clandestine prostitution, engage in this work due to a lack of viable alternatives in the formal economy, which is often exacerbated by limited education and job skills (Tucker, 2012). The criminalization and stigmatization of sex work significantly limit their opportunities for formal employment and social integration. Thus, addressing stigma and providing adequate support to former sex workers to enter the formal sector is crucial in reducing their marginalization and improving their well-being. Better regulations and more efficient institutions are needed to help former sex workers transition into formal employment and reduce dependence on the shadow economy. Without these efforts, former sex workers will continue to face discrimination, economic hardship, and social isolation, all of which exacerbate existing cycles of marginalization. Sex workers are often linked to economic hardship, with loan sharks and limited access to legal financial services preventing them from leaving prostitution. This study found that many face financial coercion from unemployed partners or relatives, increasing debt burdens. High-interest loans and exploitative practices, including "payday loans" from pimps, perpetuate a cycle of poverty that traps them in the industry, hindering financial independence.

Sex workers who are also mothers face complex narratives, navigating social stigma and conflicting expectations regarding their roles. Studies show that many enter the profession not by choice but as the only way to make ends meet and provide a better life for their children (Ali et al., 2021; Dalla et al., 2019). They often become the backbone of the family when the male partner is unable or unwilling to fulfil the role. Their dual identities as sex workers and mothers are challenging but enable them to provide essential resources to the family. Sex work can be a means of achieving a respectable form of femininity that other livelihoods may not offer (Vijayakumar, 2022). The social stigma attached to sex work affects the maternal identity of sex workers, where they live in constant fear and lose confidence as good mothers if their profession is exposed. Research shows that social and institutional challenges, including criminalization and social inequality, further complicate their role as mothers (Ma et al., 2019). Despite facing heavy stigma, many sex worker mothers report that their involvement in sex work strengthens relationships with their children. They often prioritize their children's needs over their own (McCloskey et al., 2021).

The experiences of survivors of human trafficking show that their role as mothers became a driving force to leave prostitution and strive for a better life for their children despite being faced with challenging circumstances. Through their efforts, sex worker mothers seek to evoke a narrative of good motherhood in the hope that their children will have access to a broader range of employment options in the future (Ali et al., 2021; Dalla et al., 2019). While sex workers often choose this work to overcome social and economic challenges, they face strong stigma and moral condemnation, particularly in countries like Indonesia. Research shows that some sex workers

use their earnings to provide a better future for their children, a decision driven by economic necessity amid limited employment opportunities and significant financial pressures (Dalla et al., 2019; McCloskey et al., 2021). In Indonesia, sex workers must navigate a complex landscape of social, economic, and legal challenges to provide for their families. While the honourable intentions and self-sacrifice of sex worker mothers reflect their normative role as mothers, recognition of these sacrifices remains minimal in broader society (McCloskey et al., 2021). Indonesia's dominant patriarchal and paternalistic ideologies, such as Kodrat and Ibuism, limit women's rights and freedoms and reinforce gender hierarchies that do not recognize the diverse experiences of all mothers, including sex workers (Chin, 2018). Therefore, although the sacrifices made by sex worker mothers align with normative themes of motherhood, they remain unrecognized by Indonesian society, trapped in stigma, legal constraints, and patriarchal ideologies.

Sex workers in Indonesia face stigma and moral conflict, so they use selective disclosure to maintain their identity (Ham & Gerard, 2014). In the context of Indonesia's Islamic moralistic culture and legislative restrictions on sex work, this strategy becomes a response to social pressure (Lee, 2024). Government policies to dismantle prostitution localizations have exacerbated the situation by pushing sex workers into more dangerous environments, increasing their safety risks and legal vulnerability (Dewantary et al., 2023). As a result, sex workers often create separate work identities with pseudonyms to protect themselves (Sanders, 2005). Confidentiality of employment status is challenging for outdoor sex workers who face higher public visibility. The closure of large prostitution areas such as Dolly and Kembang Kuning disrupted their economic and social resources, forcing many sex workers to adapt clandestinely or switch to other occupations (Sudarmo, 2019). In this context, intergroup empathy and helping dynamics are essential, as advantaged groups may help disadvantaged groups by being influenced by collective guilt and moral outrage (Nadler, 2016).

Social identity and self-categorization theories suggest that the primacy of sex categories influences group behaviour and self-stereotyping, which in turn affects the collective actions and self-perceptions of sex workers (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Educational materials and social narratives shape the public perception and social position of sex workers, influencing their identity and collective action (Harris, 1963). Sex workers' experiences are often juxtaposed with other marginalized groups, where collective support and shared experiences play an essential role in overcoming social stigma and personal challenges (Finlay, 2012). This collective support helps sex workers find strength in solidarity and develop effective coping strategies to deal with external and internal pressures. Selective disclosure and manufacturing identities are vital strategies that sex workers use to protect themselves from the negative consequences of such stigma (Ham & Gerard, 2014; Sanders, 2005). Although government policies exacerbate the situation by pushing sex workers into more dangerous environments, solidarity and collective support among sex workers ex-Dolly offer hope for overcoming these challenges.

While this study focuses on the lived experiences of female sex workers affected by the closure of the Dolly red-light district, it acknowledges the potential limitations of the standpoint feminism framework. The emphasis on amplifying women's voices provides critical insights into their unique challenges. However, it may inadvertently overlook the perspectives of other genders or the interplay of factors such as class, race, and religion. However, this deliberate focus aligns with the study's goal of highlighting the voices of a particularly vulnerable group within this context. By doing so, it contributes to addressing a significant gap in the literature regarding the impacts of policy changes on women in the sex work industry. Future research could adopt a more

intersectional approach to explore diverse perspectives and broaden the understanding of how structural inequalities and societal stigma impact different groups within the sex work industry. Such efforts would complement this study's findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the broader social and economic dynamics.

Conclusion

This Photovoice research framed by Standpoint Feminism highlights how social stigma affects sex workers' mental health, self-identity, and economic opportunities. Sex workers use selective disclosure and constructed identities to cope with stigma. Government policies closing prostitution localizations have pushed them into more dangerous environments, increasing vulnerability. Collective support by groups is a way to overcome stigma and internalized discrimination, which harms their social integration. Based on the study's findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed. Policy-wise, efforts should focus on decriminalizing sex work and providing targeted anti-stigma programs, along with improving access to social-financial services, mental health support, and legal aid. Practically, training for law enforcement and healthcare providers to reduce discrimination, be marginalized-group friendly, as well as foster collaboration among NGOs and sex worker-led groups is essential.

While the small sample size and qualitative approach limit generalizability, the study provides valuable, context-rich insights often missed by quantitative studies. The study acknowledges its limitations in capturing diverse gender perspectives and intersectionality. For future research, studies should involve more extensive, more diverse samples, including different genders in the sex work industry, and use mixed methods to explore stigma's long-term impact. An intersectional approach considering class, race, and religion is also recommended to understand diverse experiences better.

Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare that this paper has no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

Data can be provided upon request to the author.

Declarations Ethical Statement

The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

References

Ali S., Chaudhuri S., Ghose T., Jana S. (2021). Examining the role of a community-led structural intervention in shaping mothering among sex workers in India. *Affilia, 36*(1), 80-96. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920939049

Baker, L. M., Dalla, R. L., & Williamson, C. (2010). Exiting prostitution: An integrated model. *Violence Against Women, 16*(5), 579-600. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210367643

Brown, J., Higgitt, N., Miller, C., Wingert, S., Williams, M., & Morrissette, L. (2006). Challenges faced by women working in the innercity sex trade.

Budig, K., Díez, J., Conde, P., Sastre, M. G., Hernán, M., & Franco, M. (2018). Photovoice and empowerment: evaluating the transformative potential of a participatory action research project. *BMC Public Health, 18*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5335-7.https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5335-7

Bunga, B. N., Adu, A. A., Damayanti, Y., Takalapeta, T., Pello, S. C., & Kiling, I. Y. (2022). Synchronous vs. Asynchronous: Photovoice Study on Indonesian Youth's Online Learning Experience. *Child and Youth Services, 43*(3), 276-289. https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2021.1901572

Burnes T. R., Long S. L., Schept R. A. (2012). A resilience-based lens of sex work: Implications for professional psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 43*(2), 137. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026205

Chin, Grace. (2018). State Ibuism and one happy family: Polygamy and the "good" woman in contemporary indonesian narratives. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7065-5_6

Coemans, S., Raymakers, A., Vandenabeele, J., & Hannes, K. (2017). Evaluating the extent to which social researchers apply feminist and empowerment frameworks in photovoice studies with female participants: a literature review. *Qualitative Social Work, 18*(1), 37-59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325017699263

Dalla R. L., Erwin S., Kreimer L. M. (2019). Children of Mumbai's brothels: Investigating developmental prospects, primary relationships, and service provision. *Family Relations, 68*(1), https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12347

Dewantary, Z.R., Citra, A., & Larasathy Pinkan Prameshwary, N. (2023). Disbanding prostitution localization is violating female sex workers' rights: A Case of Indonesia. *IJCLS (Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies), 8*(1), 95-120. https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v8i1.39679

Febriyantoko, D. (2021). Penyesuaian setting ruang bermain anak usia dini pada masa pandemi covid-19. https://doi.org/10.24821/lintas.v9i2.6196

Finlay, W. (2012). The entrepreneurial group: Social identities, relations, and collective action. *Contemporary Sociology, 41*(6), 823-825. https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306112462561t

Hallgrímsdóttir, Helga & Phillips, Rachel & Benoit, Cecilia & Walby, Kevin. (2008). Sporting girls, streetwalkers, and inmates of houses of ill repute: Media narratives and the historical mutability of prostitution stigmas. *Sociological Perspectives - Sociol Perspect. 51.* 119-138. https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2008.51.1.119

Ham, J., & Gerard, A. (2014). Strategic in/visibility: Does agency make sex workers invisible? *Criminology & Criminal Justice: An International Journal, 14*(3), 298-313. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895813500154

Harding, S. (2004). Standpoint theory reader intellectual & political controversies. Routledge: New York

Harris, J. J. (1963). Intergroup relations in social-studies textbooks. *Theory Into Practice, 2*(3), 128-135. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405846309541851

Harley, A. (2012). Picturing reality: power, ethics, and politics in using photovoice. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100402

Hart, G., Allen, A., Aubyn, B.S. et al. (2023). Exploring the relationships between internalised stigma, loneliness, and mental well-being among sex workers. *Sexuality & Culture 27*, 191-210. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10009-3

Hidayah, H., Sarwoprasodjo, S., & Matindas, K. (2020). Photovoice as a participatory extension approaches method in expressing youth views of agricultural work. *Jurnal Penyuluhan, 16*(2), 303-322. https://doi.org/10.25015/16202031773

Hogg, M.A. and Turner, J.C. (1987), Intergroup behaviour, self-stereotyping and the salience of social categories. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 26*, 325-340. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1987.tb00795.x

Huber, J., Ferris France, N., Nguyen, V. A., Nguyen, H. H., Thi Hai Oanh, K., & Byrne, E. (2019). Exploring beliefs and experiences underlying self-stigma among sex workers in Hanoi, Vietnam. Culture, health & sexuality, 21(12), 1425-1438. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1566572

Ilagan, C., Akbari, Z., Sethi, B., & Williams, A. (2020). Use of photovoice methods in research on informal caring: a scoping review of the literature. *Journal of Human Health Research, 1*(3), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.14302/issn.2576-9383.jhhr-20-3573

Jana S, Basu I, Rotheram-Borus MJ, & Newman PA (2004). The Sonagachi Project: A sustainable community intervention program. AIDS *Education and Prevention, 16*, 405-414. https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.16.5.405.48734

Jani N., Felke T. P. (2017). Gender bias and sex-trafficking in Indian society. *International Social Work, 60*(4), 831-846. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815580040

Karandikar S., Frost C. (2013). Exploring patriarchy in sex workers' intimate relationships: A case study from Mumbai, India. Indian *Journal of Social Work, 73*(4). 441-462.

Karandikar S., Gezinski L. B. (2013). Intimate partner violence and HIV risks among female sex workers of Mumbai, India. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 22*(2), 112-128. https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2013.785349

Kiling, I., Due, C., Li, D., & Turnbull, D. (2019). Perceptions of disability, environmental risk factors and available services among local leaders and parents of young children with disabilities in West Timor, Indonesia. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 41*(20), 2421-2432. https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1466924

Kiling, I. Y., Panis, M., Takalapeta, T., Pello, S. C., & Bunga, B. N. (2022). A photovoice study on Indonesian youth's experience in the 'new normal' era. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies, 17*(1), 61-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2021.1904527

Lake, J. (2013). Social Identities, Self-Perception, and the Stigmatization of Female Prostitutes. *UC Merced Undergraduate Research Journal, 5*(1). https://doi.org/10.5070/M451020766

Le, M. N., D'onofrio, C. N., & Rogers, J. D. (2010). HIV risk behaviors among three classes of female sex workers in Vietnam. *Journal of Sex Research, 47*, 38-48. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490902999278

Lee, W.H. (2024). Reclaiming the "good women" identity: A case study of Surabaya's Muslim sex workers negotiating Islam and sex work. *Asian Journal of Social Science*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajss.2024.04.002

Ma, P. H. X., Chan, Z. C. Y., & Loke, A. Y. (2019). Conflicting identities between sex workers and motherhood: A systematic review. *Women & Health, 59*(5), 534-557. https://doi.org/10.1080/03630242.2018.1500417

Marsih, L., & Saragih, C.M. (2022). Sex Worker Stigma in Maupassant's "Boule De Suif" and Tirtawirya's "Catatan Seorang Pelacur". *Anaphora: Journal of Language, Literary and Cultural Studies.*https://doi.org/10.30996/anaphora.v4i2.6072

McCloskey, R. J., Karandikar, S., Reno, R., & España, M. (2021). The Feminist ethic of care: Mothering among sex workers in Mumbai. *Affilia, 36*(1), 43-61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920939053

Nadler, A. (2016). Intergroup helping relations. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 11*, 64-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.016

Novianty, A., & Garey, E. (2020). Memahami makna religiusitas/spiritualitas pada individu dewasa muda melalui photovoice. *Jurnal Psikologi Integratif, 8* (2). https://doi.org/10.14421/jpsi.v8i2.2115

Nyblade, L. (2006). Measuring HIV stigma: Existing knowledge and gaps. Psychology, Health and Medicine, 11(3), 335-345. https://doi.org/10.1080/13548500600595178

Pratomo, D. S., & Manning, C. (2022). Structural change and formal sector employment growth in Indonesia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies, 39*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1355/ae39-1a

Rayson, J., & Alba, B. (2019). Experiences of stigma and discrimination as predictors of mental health help-seeking among sex workers. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 34*(3), 277-289. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2019.1628488

Sagtani, R. A., Bhattarai, S., Adhikari, B. R., Baral, D., Yadav, D. K., & Pokharel, P. K. (2013). Violence. HIV risk behaviour and depression among female sex workers of eastern Nepal. *BMJ Open, 3.* https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2013-002763

Sallmann, J. (2010). Living with stigma: Women's experiences of prostitution and substance use. *Affilia - Journal of Women and Social Work, 25*(2), 146-159. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910364362

Sanders, T. (2005), 'It's just acting': Sex workers' strategies for capitalizing on sexuality. *Gender, Work & Organization, 12*: 319-342. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2005.00276.x

Setyawan, J., Wibowo, J. M., & Indrawardani, K. F. (2024). An analysis of Dolly red-light district closure impact: 10-year post-transformation study on the psychological and economic vulnerability of susceptible women groups. *BIO Web of Conferences, 146*, 01035. https://doi.org/10.1051/bioconf/202414601035

Strack R.W., Orsini M.M., & Ewald D. R. (2022). Revisiting the roots and aims of photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice, 23*(2), 221-229. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399211061710

Stevenson C, & Petrak J (2007). Setting up a clinical psychology service for commercial sex workers. *International Journal of STD & AIDS, 18*, 231-234.https://doi.org/10.1258/095646207780658872

Sudarmo, S. (2019, August 6). Community governance of prostitution: Social rehabilitation for sex workers through social capital. *Jurnal Borneo Administrator, 15*(2), 117-136. https://doi.org/10.24258/jba.v15i2.446

Swendeman D., Fehrenbacher A. E., Ali S., George S., Mindry D., Collins M., Ghose T., Dey B. (2015). "Whatever I have, I have made by coming into this profession": The intersection of resources, agency, and achievements in pathways to sex work in Kolkata, India. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*, 1011-1023. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0404-1

Tomura, M. (2009). A prostitute's lived experiences of stigma. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 40*(1), 51-84. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916209X427981

Toubiana, M., & Ruebottom, T. (2022). Stigma hierarchies: The internal dynamics of stigmatization in the sex work occupation. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 67*(2), 515-552. https://doi.org/10.1177/00018392221075344

Tucker, Gisele Maynard (2012). The invisible challenge to HIV/AIDS prevention: clandestine prostitution in Senegal. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 13*(1), 19-31. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol13/iss1/2

Turner S. G., Maschi T. M. (2015). Feminist and empowerment theory and social work practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 29*(2), 151-162. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2014.941282

Vijayakumar, G. (2022). Labors of love: Sex, work, and good mothering in the globalizing city. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 47, 665 - 688. https://doi.org/10.1086/717700

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior, 24*(3), 369-387. https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309

Wang, C. C., Cash, J. L., & Powers, L. S. (2000). Who knows the streets as well as the homeless? promoting personal and community action through photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice, 1*(1). www.photovoice.com. https://doi.org/10.1177/152483990000100113

Wayan Ekayanti, N., & Puspawati, D. A. (2021). Ecopreneurship berbasis photovoice untuk menggali potensi wirausaha generasi Z photovoice-based ecopreneurship to explore the entrepreneurial potential of generation Z. *Proceeding Biology Education Conference, 18*(1). 124-135.