

Legal Framework and Sexual and Reproductive Health Challenges Faced by Female Sex Workers in Sri Lanka: A Narrative Literature Review

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Review Article

Abstract

Introduction: The term “sex work” refers to adults providing consensual sexual services for money or goods. This study aims to investigate the Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) challenges encountered by female sex workers (FSWs) in Sri Lanka, emphasising the interplay between legal frameworks, SRH issues, access to health services and violence.

Methods: A structured narrative review was conducted using academic databases and grey literature. An initial pool of 257 documents was identified, of which 52 were selected for in-depth analysis. Data from the selected documents were manually extracted, charted, and analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes were categorised under (i) theoretical perspectives, (ii) legal and policy frameworks (national and global), (iii) SRH challenges, (iv) access to SRH services, and (v) experiences of violence and stigma.

Results: The study illuminates the complex challenges faced by FSWs, highlighting the inherent vulnerability resulting from early initiation into sex work (6% before 18 years), a high number of sexual partners (25 per month), and limited access to contraception and SRH healthcare. FSWs are at increased risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections, with high risk for unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. They also endure violence across various life stages, perpetuated by social stigma and discrimination. The current legal framework, which doesn't explicitly criminalise sex work but penalises solicitation and brothel-keeping, remains inadequate to protect FSWs' safety. Debate continues regarding potential legal reforms, with some advocating for legalisation to safeguard FSWs' human rights.

Conclusion: Addressing SRH challenges faced by FSWs in Sri Lanka requires urgent, evidence-based legal reforms and integrated health and social support systems to uphold their overall well-being.

Key Words: Female Sex Workers, Sri Lanka, Legal Framework, Sexual Reproductive Health, Access to healthcare, Legal Reform

Introduction

The terms “sex work” and “prostitution” are often used interchangeably to describe the exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other resources. This practice has a long history in human society and involves individuals of diverse backgrounds, including genders, ages, races, abilities, and sexual orientations. It can be self-initiated, mediated by third parties, or influenced by industry stakeholders [1]. Sociological definition of “prostitution” identifies it as an occupation involving the promiscuous and emotionally indifferent sale of sex, typically divided into four components: occupation, act of selling, sexual exchange, and promiscuity. Legal interpretations of prostitution vary from one country to another, with some recognising it as a legal conduct [2]. The term “sex worker” acknowledges that sex work is legitimate employment. At the same time, in modern society, “prostitute” often carries negative connotations of criminality and immorality, contributing to the stigmatisation and exclusion of individuals from necessary services. The term “commercial sex worker” implies regulation and potential exploitation in the sex work industry [3].

In Sri Lanka, FSWs form a diverse community engaged in sex work, typically practised by both youth and adults – the population size estimation conducted in 2018 projected 30,000 FSWs in the country [4,5]. Street-based FSWs comprised 42% of the total FSW population, followed by homes/shanties (22%), nightclubs/massage parlours (6%), and hotels/brothels (2%) [6]. As the typology of FSWs is diverse, it is essential to understand that their experiences, violence exposure, sexual behaviours, client types, income, and various circumstances significantly differ based on their operating category. For example, studies suggest that street-based FSWs often face higher vulnerability to violence, mistreatment,

and challenging working conditions due to their interactions with clients and potential arrests under vagrancy ordinances [7,8]. Hotel and brothel-based FSWs, on the other hand, encounter unique challenges influenced by the Brothels Ordinance, which aims to protect sex workers but can lead to victimisation [9]. While having some agency over their working conditions, home-based FSWs still grapple with the social stigma associated with their profession [7]. This example shows that the intersection between the legal status and the FSW typology significantly influences their working conditions, vulnerabilities, and behaviours, impacting their SRH.

In this context, the current study was structured around three research objectives. First, it aimed to examine the primary SRH challenges experienced by FSWs in Sri Lanka, with particular focus on their heightened risk of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), violence, unintended pregnancies, and unsafe abortions. Second, it sought to explore the theoretical and legal perspectives surrounding sex work within the broader global context, drawing on comparative frameworks that inform the debates on the regulation and operation of sex work. Third, the review investigated how the existing legal framework in Sri Lanka shapes the rights, safety, and health outcomes of FSWs, with special emphasis on legal provisions that either directly or indirectly criminalise aspects of sex work.

Methodology

A comprehensive narrative literature review explored the intersection between legal frameworks and SRH challenges faced by FSWs in Sri Lanka. Relevant literature was identified through electronic searches in recognised academic and grey literature databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, LENS.org, and Dimensions. Additional sources included institutional websites such

as the National STD/AIDS Control Programme (NSACP), Family Health Bureau (FHB), UN agencies (e.g., UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA), and local NGOs working with key populations. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: "female sex workers", "sex work", "Sri Lanka", "legal framework", "sexual and reproductive health", "HIV", "contraception", "abortion", and "violence". Boolean operators were used to refine and expand the search results. Searches were conducted for literature published between 2000 and 2024.

Documents on FSWs in Sri Lanka and Asia (if findings are contextually relevant) published in English were included. Additionally, the studies addressing legal, policy, SRH, or rights-based aspects of FSWs in the global context were identified for comparative purposes. All credible sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, government reports, technical briefs, United Nations / NGO publications, and policy documents, were included. Studies unrelated to sex work or SRH and articles which do not contain sufficient methodological detail or relevance to Sri Lanka's legal/SRH context were excluded. A total of 257 documents were initially identified. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 121 papers were retained for full-text review. After the full text review, 52 documents were included for data charting. Given the narrative nature of this review, formal quality assessment tools were not applied. Instead, documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, and conceptual contribution to the topic.

Data from the selected literature were charted manually into a structured framework. Data charting was conducted focusing on five thematic subcategories: (i) theoretical perspectives, (ii) legal and policy frameworks (national and global), (iii) SRH issues including contraception, unintended pregnancy, abortion, and HIV, (iv) access to SRH services, and (v)

experiences of violence and stigma. The extracted data were then subjected to manual thematic analysis. This involved identifying recurring patterns and concepts. This review utilised only publicly available secondary sources without the involvement of human subjects or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, the study was conducted with attention to the dignity, rights, and confidentiality of FSWs as a marginalised population.

Limitations

This review has several limitations to be acknowledged when interpreting the findings and recommendations. As a narrative literature review, the study did not employ formal quality appraisal tools or standardised systematic review protocols, which may introduce a degree of selection bias. In the context of the limited research evidence, especially in Sri Lanka, this study calls for including diverse source types, ranging from peer-reviewed articles to grey literature and policy documents, to capture the multidimensional nature of sex work. However, this also meant that the quality and methodological rigour of included sources varied. Additionally, while thematic analysis enabled the identification of intersectional issues, the process relied on manual processes and interpretation, which may be subject to researcher bias despite efforts to ensure transparency and consistency. While international comparisons were included for conceptual grounding, legal and health systems are deeply embedded in local socio-political contexts, and generalisations should be cautiously made. Despite these limitations, the review provides a comprehensive synthesis of evidence to inform context-specific policy and legal reforms to improve the health and rights of FSWs in Sri Lanka.

Theoretical Perspectives of Sex Work

The discourse surrounding sex work encompasses various theoretical perspectives,

primarily sociological, that profoundly influence our understanding of this complex issue. Academic writings and theories predominantly delve into the structural causes of sex work. A fundamental debate exists between the neo-abolitionist perspective, which advocates for the complete eradication of all forms of prostitution due to its perceived oppression against women, and alternative perspectives [10,11].

The neo-abolitionist viewpoint, which underpins the radical feminist and Marxist feminist theories [12,13], condemns prostitution as a form of violence against women, asserting that it can never be entirely consensual. According to neo-abolitionists, prostitution perpetuates gender inequality, reinforcing male dominance and the objectification of women. This perspective calls for the protection of prostituted women as victims rather than their punishment [11]. Conversely, the pro-sex work perspective argues that women should have the autonomy to choose sex work as a form of employment and that consensual sexual commerce should not be considered violence against women. This perspective challenges the conventional feminist stance that all forms of prostitution are intrinsically oppressive, advocating for women's right to define what constitutes intimacy for themselves [10].

Furthermore, the human rights perspective recognises sex work as a legitimate occupation. It seeks to promote and protect the human rights of sex workers, advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work and access to healthcare and other services. It acknowledges the human rights violations sex workers often face and aims to combat discrimination and stigma against them [14,15]. Emerging after the human rights perspective, the empowerment perspective sees sex work as a choice and a means for women to gain control and agency over

their lives. This perspective emphasises safe working conditions, the autonomy for sex workers to negotiate their terms, and the diversity within the sex work industry, challenging the representation of sex workers as passive victims and highlighting their potential to be active agents in their lives [15].

Legal Perspectives of Sex Work

Sex work laws encompass a broad spectrum of legal regulations, policies, and statutes that define the status of prostitution and establish the rights and protections afforded to sex workers. These laws also determine whether sex work is criminalised, decriminalised or legalised within a specific jurisdiction [16]. Importantly, these legal frameworks vary significantly between countries and even within different regions of the same nation. They govern diverse aspects of sex work, such as the buying and selling of sexual services, solicitation, and the operation of venues like brothels that facilitate sex work. Additionally, these regulations often extend to matters including the age of consent for engaging in sex work, health and safety standards for sex workers, and the provision of social services and support for those involved in sex work [10].

On a global scale, two predominant perspectives shape discussions on sex work laws, namely the Prohibitionist Perspective and the Decriminalisation/ Legalisation Perspective. The Prohibitionist Perspective represents an approach that advocates for the comprehensive criminalisation of all aspects of sex work. This includes making the buying and selling of sexual services, pimping, and ownership of brothels illegal [16]. They assert that criminalising sex work is an effective way to reduce the demand for sexual services, emphasising the need to send a strong message that engaging in sex work

is unacceptable [10-17]. According to this perspective, the primary focus should be on eliminating the demand for sex work rather than providing support and services to those who engage in it [17].

The Decriminalisation and Legalisation Perspective introduces two contrasting approaches to the legal status of sex work [16]. Decriminalisation entails the removal of criminal penalties associated with sex work, allowing sex workers to operate without the fear of prosecution. This approach aims to reduce the stigma attached to sex work and improve the safety and well-being of sex workers, emphasising human rights and the equal legal protection of sex workers [10,15]. In contrast, the legalisation perspective recognises sex work as a legitimate occupation and subjects it to regulation and taxation. Legalisation involves the creation of laws and regulations governing sex work, including health and safety standards, zoning laws, and licensing requirements. Advocates of legalisation argue that it can mitigate the harm associated with sex work, including violence and exploitation, while also providing governments with tax revenue [10,15]. In contrast, supporters of decriminalization caution that legalisation often results in a two-tiered system, where only those who comply with regulatory requirements are protected, while others, particularly marginalised or street-based sex workers, remain criminalised. This, they argue, perpetuates stigma, discrimination, and exclusion from legal protections, thus failing to fully safeguard the rights and well-being of all sex workers [16].

Laws governing sex work: Global and Asian context

Sex work regulations vary significantly worldwide, leading to a spectrum of legal approaches. While some nations fully endorse

and regulate sex work, others partially tolerate it under specific conditions, and many outright criminalise it. As of now, only 21 countries fully legalise prostitution, with notable examples including Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Switzerland. In these jurisdictions, sex work is officially recognised, subject to government oversight, and regarded as a legitimate profession. It's important to note that even in countries where it's entirely legal, social acceptance may still vary [18].

Furthermore, there are 63 countries where prostitution is partially legal, featuring diverse regulations that govern the sex industry. In these nations, sex workers can operate within designated areas, like brothels, under government registration. However, engaging in prostitution outside these designated zones is typically illegal and may lead to fines or imprisonment. Examples include Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and Zambia [18]. In India, for instance, prostitution is partially legal, but soliciting in public and operating brothels are strictly prohibited [19]. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, prostitution is partially legal, yet activities such as solicitation in public, brothel-keeping, and pimping remain illegal [20].

Conversely, there are countries where prostitution is entirely illegal, with strict prohibitions in place. This category includes Afghanistan, Bhutan, Iran, the Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan and the United States of America [18]. In the United States, the legal status of prostitution varies by state, with most states considering it illegal and a criminal offence. While particular forms of prostitution are permitted in regulated brothels in Nevada, solicitation and related activities are generally prohibited in many states [21].

Laws Governing Sex Work in Sri Lanka

Laws about sex work in Sri Lanka contain some distinctive features. Consensual sex in private is explicitly legal and not considered a crime. Adultery is also not a criminal offence, but it is regarded as a violation of marriage laws. However, provisions exist within the law to address sex work involving the exchange of money or valuable goods. These legal provisions were revised in 1995, 1998, and 2006 through amendments to the Penal Code, previously governed by the Brothels Ordinance and the Vagrants Ordinance [8,9,22].

Selling sex in private is not illegal in Sri Lanka, but soliciting in public is prohibited under the Vagrants Ordinance [8]. Common prostitutes who publicly exhibit riotous or indecent behaviour are also targeted under this law. Importantly, buying sex itself is not criminalised in the country [22]. The Brothels Ordinance, in contrast, criminalises the management of brothels [9]. These laws are commonly employed to target and prosecute individuals involved in the organisation and management of sex work. Sex workers are also disproportionately affected by the Vagrants Ordinances [22]. It's essential to note that a recent court decision in February 2020 clarified that earning a livelihood through prostitution is not considered an offence in Sri Lanka, distinguishing between prostitution and the operation of brothels [23,24].

Law enforcement regarding sex work in Sri Lanka presents substantial challenges for sex workers. While the law is not explicit in criminalising prostitution itself, acts such as soliciting and brothel keeping are defined as offences [22,23]. Despite the law's ambiguity, sex workers face arrests and harassment. The Vagrancy Ordinance is frequently employed

against them, and pressure to plead guilty to avoid proving solicitation charges is standard. As a result, many sex workers possess criminal records without having committed actual crimes [7].

Sexual Risk Behaviour and HIV Transmission

The sexual risk behaviours of FSWs in Sri Lanka pose significant challenges to their SRH [25]. A substantial portion of FSWs become sexually active at a young age, with more than a third (35%) engaging in vaginal sex before reaching 17 years old, and nearly 6% starting to exchange sex for money as early as 17 years of age. The median age for their first vaginal sex is 18 years, exposing them to a range of social and health risks during their teenage years [26,27]. Furthermore, the majority (73.6%) of FSWs in Colombo reported having 16 or more sexual partners, with a median rate of 25 sexual partners per month. A significant number (65.8%) also reported having non-paying sexual partners, with more than a third (38.6%) having three or more non-paying partners. On average, FSWs reported engaging in sex work for 4.8 days per week, and the median duration of their involvement in sex work was 20 years, putting them at risk for an extended period [26,28].

The vulnerability of FSWs to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Sri Lanka is a well-documented concern [29]. According to the 2019 HIV estimation, FSWs and their clients collectively account for a significant portion of people living with HIV in the country, with FSWs making up 4% and their clients 14%. Furthermore, FSWs contribute to almost 25% of the annual HIV transmission in Sri Lanka, with several new cases reported among them and their clients in 2019 [30].

Although the number of reported HIV cases among adult females in Sri Lanka is low and has remained stable, FSWs continue to be at high risk for HIV infection. In the Colombo district, the prevalence of HIV and syphilis among FSWs was 0.4% and 8.4%, respectively. The legal status of sex work, coupled with pervasive social stigma and discrimination, the underground nature of sex work-related activities, and limited access to healthcare, has exacerbated the vulnerability of FSWs and their clients to HIV infections [26,28].

Contraceptive Practices

Among FSWs in the Colombo district, more than half (57.7%) have experienced at least one pregnancy [26]. While the use of condoms during the last sexual encounter with a client is relatively high, with around 90% reporting condom use in Colombo and Galle, consistent condom use is notably low. Only 22.9% of FSWs in Colombo, 26.6% in Kandy, and 68.4% in Galle reported using condoms with every client in the preceding month. Condom use with regular partners is also inconsistent, with around 80% of FSWs in Colombo, 36.5% in Galle, and 16.9% in Kandy reporting condom use during their last sexual encounter with a regular partner. Although the condom use in the previous sexual encounter is substantially high, consistent condom use is considerably low (22.3% in Colombo, 11.5% in Galle, and 4.4% in Kandy) [26,28].

Moreover, a situation assessment conducted in 2023 revealed that a significant proportion of sex workers (83%) have never received

contraceptives from midwives, and 45% reported not using any contraception. This lack of access to contraception puts sex workers at risk, especially in situations where condom use is not possible. Many sex workers purchase contraceptives at their own expense, placing a financial burden on individuals already struggling to meet their basic needs, with some clients supporting the purchase of contraceptives in rare cases [7].

Unintended Pregnancies and Unsafe Abortions

Unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortion among FSWs in Sri Lanka are a topic of limited research, with only a few qualitative inquiries [25,31]. Still, data from other countries suggest a high prevalence of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions in this population. Studies from China [32], Ethiopia [33], and Benin [34] reveal that a substantial percentage of FSWs experience unintended pregnancies. These pregnancies are associated with factors such as having steady partners, drug use or addiction, long durations in sex work, and a history of abortion [33].

As described in Table 1, more than half of FSWs in some settings have experienced an induced abortion, and in certain regions, a quarter of FSWs report three or more abortions [35]. However, unsafe abortions among FSWs in Sri Lanka remain underexplored. A qualitative study in 2020 found that some former FSWs reported having undergone illegal abortions [25], which indicates that unsafe abortions are not uncommon among FSWs in the country.

Table 1. Lifetime Prevalence of Induced Abortion among FSWs in Selected Countries

	Country	Study	Sample Size (n)	Lifetime Prevalence (%)
01	India	Shahmanesh <i>et al</i> , 2009 [36]	325	28
02	India	Wayal, <i>et al</i> , 2011 [37]	326	26
03	Bangladesh	Katz <i>et al</i> , 2015 [38]	354	39
04	Iran	Karamouzian, <i>et al</i> , 2016 [39]	872	35
05	Afghanistan	Todd <i>et al</i> , 2010 [40]	520	27
06	Colombiaw	Bautista, <i>et al</i> , 2008 [41]	514	53
07	Cambodia	Delvaux, <i>et al</i> , 2003 [42]	632	25
08	China	Lau, <i>et al</i> , 2007 [43]	195	55
09	China (Among adolescent FSWs)	Lim, <i>et al</i> , 2015 [32]	310	93
10	Benin	Sullivan, <i>et al</i> , 2020 [34]	450	67
11	England	Ward <i>et al</i> , 2000 [44]	143	26
12	Global Estimate	Mehrdad, K. <i>et al</i> , 2023 [35]		38
13	Countries where abortion is legal	Mehrdad, K. <i>et al</i> , 2023 [35]		45
14	Countries where abortion is illegal	Mehrdad, K. <i>et al</i> , 2023 [35]		35

Source: Knowledge and Practice of Emergency Contraception among Female Sex Workers: A Global Scoping Review [45]

Sexual and Gender Based Violence

FSWs in Sri Lanka endure various forms of violence throughout their lives. These acts of violence can be categorised across different life stages, from childhood to old age [7, 25, 26]. Many sex workers have experienced neglect, poverty, and violence during their childhood [7]. This often results in interrupted education and limited job opportunities, leading them towards sex work, which begins in their teenage years [7,26]. Early marriages driven by economic motives and abusive environments are common in this phase [7].

In their marital life, FSWs frequently face less-than-ideal situations, including domestic violence. Fear of exposure, societal stigma, and limited access to state and non-state support services contribute to their reluctance to seek help [7,25]. The children of sex workers also experience discrimination, bullying in school, and challenges in accessing

education, further worsening the cycle of violence and vulnerability [7]. Even in their old age, sex workers face uncertainty and a lack of financial security, often needing to continue working due to the absence of familial support [7]. Workplace violence is a constant threat, encompassing issues such as non-consensual sexual acts, name-calling, refusal to use condoms, and fear of exposure [7,25,31]. Fear of law enforcement, concerns about exposure, loss of clients, and the burden of the complaint process lead to underreporting these incidents [7,25]. The prevailing violence and stigma create a harsh environment for FSWs in Sri Lanka, impacting their health, well-being, and safety.

Access to SRH Services

Access to healthcare services is a critical issue for FSWs in Sri Lanka. According to the 2018 Biological and Behavioural Surveillance Survey (IBBS), many FSWs faced difficulties

accessing medical care, with about one in four seeking care in the year before the survey. Almost a third of those who sought care encountered challenges [26]. Studies show that access to HIV testing services and the rate of follow-up visits to obtain test results remain significantly low among FSWs, due to a range of barriers including stigma, fear of discrimination, limited service availability, and lack of trust in healthcare providers [46-48]. IBBS further explained that approximately 58% of FSWs in Colombo had experienced pregnancy, and less than half had visited an antenatal clinic for prenatal care during their most recent pregnancy. Unfortunately, the survey did not investigate access to other essential healthcare services like well-woman services, family planning, and post-abortion care for FSWs [26].

Sri Lanka is known for its robust healthcare system, including contraceptive services provided by public health midwives [49]. However, a survey conducted among FSWs 2023 revealed significant gaps in accessing these services. A majority (83%) reported never receiving contraceptives from a midwife, and a high percentage were unaware of programmes like the 'Suwa Nari – Women's wellness clinic' in the government system. Notably, 45% mentioned not using any form of contraception (other than condoms). While some mentioned receiving support from clients for contraception, this was relatively rare and dependent on having trusted and regular clients [7]. These findings reveal the need to improve access to a wide range of healthcare services, including contraception and other SRH services, for FSWs in Sri Lanka.

Legal Reforms for Sex Work in Sri Lanka

The existing laws governing sex work in Sri Lanka have proven ineffective in safeguarding FSWs and addressing the challenges faced by sex workers. Consequently, various

stakeholders are engaged in discussions regarding the necessity of legal reforms regarding sex work in Sri Lanka. Divergent viewpoints characterise the debate over legal reforms for sex work in Sri Lanka. Advocates contend that legalising sex work is essential to protect sex workers from violence and harassment, provide a recognised societal position for them, reduce social crimes, and create a safer environment. They argue that many women turn to sex work due to factors like poverty, coercion, desperation, and the need to support their families [50-52]. Legalisation, in their view, could ensure proper recognition, social respect, and the right for sex workers to conduct their work as they see fit, emphasising fundamental human rights for this marginalised group [53].

Critics, however, assert that legalising sex work would violate human rights, potentially leading to more harm than good for society [53]. They raise concerns about the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. A formal discussion involving various stakeholders, including legal experts, Buddhist clergy, and socially responsible individuals, is suggested to determine the most appropriate course of action. Nevertheless, supporters argue that these reforms would bring justice to existing sex workers in Sri Lanka, potentially making it the first South Asian country to do so if the legal changes are enacted. Opponents of legalising sex work maintain several arguments against the proposed reforms. They contend that socio-economic and political factors, not personal choice, primarily drive prostitution, with many individuals entering the profession due to circumstances like poverty, war, social conflict, and predatory capitalism [54].

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has brought to light a pressing issue concerning the misuse of the Vagrants Ordinance Act by

the police. This misuse has led to the arbitrary arrest of women engaged in prostitution. The Act is inappropriately applied by deeming possession of condoms as evidence of involvement in prostitution, resulting in the harassment, extortion, and even sexual bribery of these women. To address this serious problem, the committee has recommended the repeal of the Vagrants Ordinance Act. In the meantime, it suggests enforcing penalties on police officers who misuse the Act to target women in prostitution and sexual minority women. Furthermore, the committee emphasises the critical need for gender-sensitive protection and support for these victims, which includes the establishment of exit programmes for women who wish to leave prostitution [55]. This recommendation has been consistently reiterated in all subsequent reports, including the latest one on the issues and questions concerning Sri Lanka's ninth periodic report [56].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the situation of FSWs in Sri Lanka is marked by a complex web of challenges, including systemic violence, social stigma, and discrimination. These FSWs face multiple layers of vulnerability that hinder their access to healthcare, heighten the risk of unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions, and perpetuate a cycle of marginalisation that spans across their life course.

This study has highlighted how the current legal system intersects with the complex challenges that FSWs face: violence, stigma, and limited healthcare access. The existing laws directly affect these sex workers, making their problems even more challenging. These laws contribute to these women's biases and difficulties from childhood through adulthood. Moreover, the existing legal framework has

failed to address the core issues faced by FSWs, and there is a growing call for reform. International bodies like the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has recommended repealing laws that lead to the arbitrary arrest and abuse of these women. Such legal reform, coupled with targeted social support, exit programmes, and healthcare access, offers hope for a future for FSWs in Sri Lanka.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Assisted Technologies

While preparing this work, the authors used ChatGPT to improve the language and readability. The authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the final publication.

Data Availability Statement

As this study is based entirely on previously published literature, publicly available legal documents, and other secondary sources, no new datasets were generated or analysed. All sources referenced in this review are cited in the manuscript and can be accessed through the relevant publishers, repositories, or official websites.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted utilising secondary data and existing literature, with no involvement of human or animal subjects. As such, ethical approval is not deemed necessary.

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