

# Experience of violence perception among Iranian female sex workers and their strategies in confronting violence

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## ABSTRACT

Following the Islamic Revolution, the establishment of an ideological regime brought significant transformations in cultural and social spheres. Consequently, sex work was criminalized in Iran, with severe penalties imposed on those involved. The stigmatization and criminalization of sex work drove the phenomenon from an overt and formal practice into an informal and concealed one. This shift not only eroded the civil rights of female sex workers and marginalized them further but also exposed them to various forms of violence and abuse in the course of their work—all in the absence of legal protections. This qualitative study employs thematic analysis to examine the experiences of violence and coping strategies among sex workers in the city of Mashhad. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 27 participants between October 2022 and March 2023. Findings reveal that women engaged in sex work encounter multiple forms of violence, including economic, sexual, physical, psychological-verbal, and social violence. In the absence of legal and social support, and given their exclusion from public spaces and women's rights movements, these women adopt various strategies to mitigate harm and survive in violent conditions. These strategies include limiting sexual relationships, shifting from street-based to temporary marriage-based sex work (*syghih*), feigning self-harm, or submitting to coercion. By centering the narratives of these women, this study presents a multilayered depiction of systemic violence and individual resistance within one of the most hidden realms of social life. It underscores the urgent need for policy reforms and stronger institutional support to improve the conditions of this vulnerable population.

## Introduction

Female Sexual Workers, often due to their class background and in many cases due to their intertwining with other subaltern forms such as race, migration, disability, etc., are situated at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Additionally, the criminalization of sex work and stigmatization further marginalize them, pushing them to the fringes more than individuals of the same class status. This marginalization is despite numerous studies worldwide indicating widespread sexual violence against sexual workers. Extensive research has highlighted the high prevalence of physical and sexual violence in sex work (Chang & Weng, 2015; Farley & Barkan, 1998; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Monto, 2004). It is estimated that anywhere from two-thirds to 100 % of sex workers have been victims of violence (Bindel et al., 2013; Comte, 2014; Raphael & Shapiro, 2004). Many sex workers have reported feeling excluded from public discourse around their work and violence in the workplace, emphasizing that they have been silenced and dismissed. These women often choose to remain silent about their experiences of

sexual violence to avoid further humiliation and degradation (Cooney, 2018).

Despite the greater vulnerability of sex workers to sexual violence, their distance from the norms of ideal femininity and the existence of false and stereotyped ideas about sex workers have led to the normalization of sexual violence against them. Violence against these women often begins even before they enter sex work and continues throughout it (Firouzjaei & Shifteh, 2024). In some cases, violence against sex workers has become a way to “punish” women, which is actually considered a threat to the moral values and norms of society (Mahmoodi, 2021).

In Iran, due to the taboo nature of sex work, no accurate statistics are available on the number of sex workers. However, based on conducted estimates, it is projected that at least one out of every 70 Iranian women (aged 15 to 49) experienced a transactional sexual relationship involving money, goods, or gifts in exchange for sex in 2015 (Sharifi et al., 2017). At the national level, statistics indicate an increase in sex work and moral deviance among women in recent decades. In Mashhad,

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over the past five years, more than 4000 female sex workers have been admitted to welfare centers for rehabilitation, and also an average of 900 individuals were admitted annually to welfare centers due to sex work between 2017 and 2020 (Welfare Organization of Khorasan Razavi Province, 2023). However, official statistics do not reflect the actual number of sex workers, as in Iranian society, sex works are not legally, socially, or religiously recognized (Firouzjaeian et al., 2023).

The condemned and illegal nature of sex work has pushed this phenomenon from the official and visible sphere into the unofficial and hidden realm. The consequence of this situation has resulted in the erosion of the civic rights of sex workers, ultimately pushing them to the margins of society (Dezhamkhooy & Papoli-Yazdi, 2020).

Consequently, the experiences of sex workers from sexual violence have mainly remained unheard of compared to other groups. So far, only a limited number of studies in Iran have addressed the issue of violence against sex workers, and most have done so in a narrow, superficial manner, often approaching the topic through the lens of sexual health (refer to Yoosefilebni et al., 2020; Hosseini Divkolaye et al., 2021; Larijani & Mirhosseini, 2019; Sadati et al., 2017; Asadi-Ali Abadi et al., 2018). These researchers have briefly addressed the issue of violence among these women in the course of their studies, yet none have examined this matter directly and in depth. What is acutely evident in this field is the lack of studies that critically focus on the lived experiences of these women to investigate their resistance strategies and agency in confronting violence.

This study seeks to present a realistic and multidimensional portrayal of sex work through the women's own narratives and analysis of their lived experiences. Its primary objective is not merely to highlight the harms and constraints, but to reveal the women's resistance and ingenuity in navigating these circumstances. Indeed, this research demonstrates that women in these environments are not passive; rather, despite all pressures, they find ways to maintain their agency and ensure their survival. The significance of this study lies in its examination of one of the most hidden and overlooked spheres of social life in Iran, grounded in the women's own voices.

## Literature review

Violence against female sex workers is a global phenomenon that manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and institutional violence, regardless of a country's governance system or level of development. Empirical evidence indicates that sex workers face high levels of risk in many countries. In the United States, 82 % of sex workers reported experiencing physical violence and 68 % reported rape (Farley et al., 2004). In the United Kingdom, half of all sex workers experienced physical violence within a single year (Church et al., 2001), while in Canada, more than 57 % had been exposed to such violence (Shannon et al., 2009). Similar patterns emerge in the Global South: in India, 70 % of sex workers reported physical violence (Karandikar & Próspero, 2010), while in Brazil the figure was 60 % (Deering et al., 2014). Prevalence rates of 45–55 % have been documented in Thailand and the Philippines (Silverman et al., 2007; Ulbarri et al., 2013).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, while quantitative data remains limited, available evidence indicates the prevalence of more severe structural and institutional violence compared to other parts of the world. In Turkey, a study conducted in Ankara found that 14.5 % of sex workers in brothels experienced physical violence, 70.3 % verbal abuse, and 10.1 % sexual harassment (Odabaşı et al., 2012). Furthermore, according to NSWP reports, 79 % of trans sex workers in Turkey reported experiencing police harassment (NSWP, 2016). In Arab countries, particularly in the Gulf region, the kafala (sponsorship) system has created conditions where migrant women, especially domestic workers, face multiple forms of exploitation and violence. A 2024 Guardian report revealed that women under this system frequently experience passport confiscation, extended working hours, sexual abuse, and physical violence - many of which constitute indicators of human

trafficking (The Guardian, 2024). In Iran, 72.2 % of sex workers reported experiencing sexual violence and 82.3 % reported physical violence (Hosseini Divkolaye et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate that sex workers across geographies face systematic violence that is exacerbated by lack of legal protection, criminalization, and social taboos.

Empirical studies demonstrate that criminalization, policing, and lack of legal protections are directly correlated with increased violence against female sex workers (Platt et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2009). Furthermore, precarious working conditions, economic vulnerability, and gender inequality constitute significant structural factors exacerbating violence against sex workers (Deering et al., 2014). Research has established a direct relationship between social stigma attached to sex work and heightened violence against sex workers (Penfold et al., 2004). The stigmatization and discrimination against sex workers results in their social marginalization and construction as “the Other,” rendering them particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. Studies indicate that while rape-supportive attitudes among sex buyers do not differ significantly from other men, sex buyers may perceive monetary exchange as granting them absolute ownership over sex workers' bodies, legitimizing any form of exploitation (Phipps, 2013). Lowman (2000) elucidates how the “purification discourse” prevalent in mainstream institutions (media and official public discourse) positions sex workers as non-citizens - disposable entities unworthy of protection, thereby normalizing violence against them. These discursive practices construct sex workers as Others, fundamentally differentiated from “respectable women” (Lowman, 2000).

Compared to other conservative societies such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Turkey, the situation of sex workers in Iran presents greater complexity due to a distinctive combination of legal, cultural, and institutional factors. While many of the violence patterns identified in previous research exist in Iran, it is crucial to note that these patterns manifest in uniquely Iranian forms.

In Iran, sex work is fully criminalized with no legal or protective structures in place. Furthermore, Sharia-based penal codes, coupled with severe social stigma and the absence of independent civil institutions, have resulted in most women avoiding formal institutions even when facing violence (Firouzjaeian et al., 2023) and Yoosefilebni et al. (2020). This situation has created a form of double isolation for Iranian sex workers that is rarely observed with such intensity and consistency in other societies.

In response to recurrent experiences of violence, sex workers across different countries employ diverse risk-reduction strategies. Sanders' (2004) qualitative study in England demonstrated that women utilize techniques such as client screening, coded language, and mutual cooperation to enhance safety. These strategies typically emerge from personal experience and peer learning. In another study, Wahab (2003) examined narratives of “agency” and decision-making power among sex workers facing high-risk situations in the United States. Many participants reported establishing informal support networks or selecting specific work environments to minimize exposure to violence. These studies collectively reveal that despite oppressive structural conditions, sex workers continuously develop adaptive strategies to ensure survival and safety. Notably, no existing research in Iran has systematically investigated the coping strategies employed by sex workers to counter violence, representing a significant gap in the literature.

In conclusion, a review of existing research demonstrates that violence against female sex workers constitutes a multifaceted and structural phenomenon shaped by factors including criminalization, gender inequality, social stigma, and precarious living conditions. Within the Iranian context, these factors intersect with specific religious, moral, and cultural considerations that render experiences of violence more complex and frequently concealed. While some Iranian studies have documented various forms of violence and their consequences (Hosseini Divkolaye et al., 2021; Larijani & Mirhosseini, 2019; Mahmoodi, 2021; Yoosefilebni et al., 2020), the majority remain confined to criminological or public health perspectives. Notably, the critical issues

of resistance and survival strategies employed by women facing violence remain substantially underexplored. The present study aims to address this gap by centering women's narratives and lived experiences, thereby providing a more nuanced, multilayered understanding of violence and coping mechanisms within the context of sex work in Iran.

## Method

This research was conducted with a qualitative approach and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method to systematically identify, organize, and provide insight into patterns of meaning in a set of information. The tool used in this research is semi-structured interviews. The research population consisted of all female sex workers in Mashhad, for whom there are no official statistics available. To gather data, the researchers employed a theoretical sampling approach. Sampling continued until data saturation was reached, meaning that no new insights were emerging for the researcher. Given the legal and social constraints in Iran, gaining access to this group posed significant challenges. Nevertheless, the research team successfully conducted 27 in-depth interviews, with theoretical saturation reached by the 23rd. In the final interviews (24 to 27), no substantial new information emerged, confirming the adequacy of the dataset for analysis and theory building. The interviews were conducted with women who differed widely in terms of social backgrounds, including age, educational level, and family socioeconomic status. These interviews were carried out between October 2022 and March 2023 at Welfare Quarantine Centers and health facilities affiliated with the Ministry of Health. Each session lasted between 2 and 4 h and was held in a private, quiet room without the presence of officials or surveillance equipment. At the beginning of each interview, researchers built rapport by clearly explaining the study's purpose. They reassured participants that no personal information would be recorded, that they would not be judged in any way, and that their contributions would be of great value to the scientific community. After establishing trust, informed verbal consent was obtained. Participants were also asked for permission to record the interviews, which were later deleted after transcription to ensure confidentiality. Throughout the data analysis process, participants were anonymized using identification numbers. The interviews began with participants recounting childhood and family experiences, then progressed to their entry into sex work. In the research design process, the study questions served as guiding principles for the investigation. However, the qualitative nature and exploratory approach of the study necessitated ongoing revision and redefinition of these questions during in-depth interviews, in response to emerging field data and the unique characteristics of each case. This methodological flexibility - an inherent feature of qualitative research - enabled the researcher to maintain the overall research framework while aligning questions with the complexities of participants' lived experiences. Through this process, the questions gained greater depth, and in some cases, new questions were incorporated into the research instrument to better capture participants' specific narratives. The most significant research questions include the following (Table 1):

The researchers tried to provide the reliability and validity of the interview data collection with the target group by expressing and recording the details related to the processes followed in conducting the interviews. Therefore, in order to increase the reliability and validity of the collected data, measures such as increasing the quality of recording interviews, documenting the interviews in text form and implementing them verbatim, recording the details of how the interviews were conducted, relying on the constructions of the women participating in the interview sessions and not the constructions were made in the minds of the researchers.

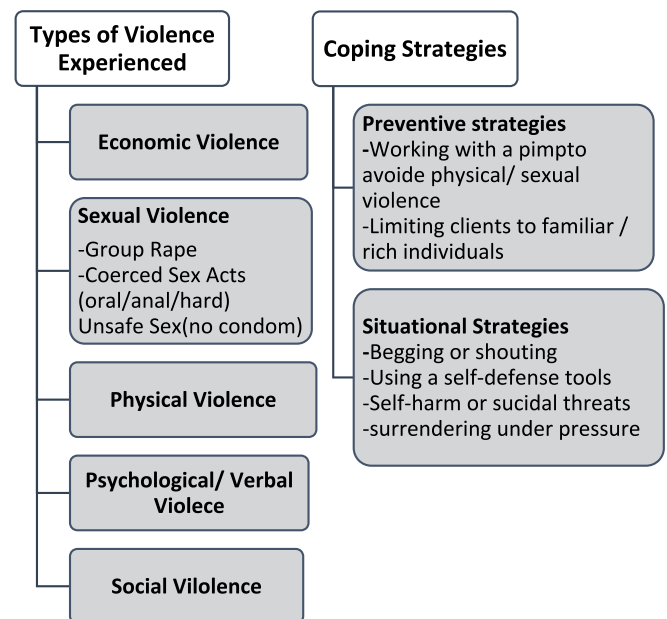
Also, to follow the strategies presented by Creswell, which include a description with low inference, angle of the researcher, and long-term involvement of the researcher with the research environment (Creswell, 2012: 201–220). Researchers have used related quotes in the

**Table 1**

Some key interview questions.

No.	Interview Question	Purpose/Theme
1	Can you tell me about your childhood and family background?	Understanding family and class context
2	How did you enter into sex work? What led you to this path?	Exploring entry into sex work
3	When did you first experience violence in this context?	Initial encounter with violence
4	What types of violence have you experienced?	Identifying categories of violence
5	How did you feel during and after those experiences?	Exploring emotional responses
6	How did you respond to the violence you faced?	Coping and situational strategies
7	Have you ever felt you had no choice but to give in?	Exploring powerlessness and surrender
8	Do you have regular clients or mostly unfamiliar ones?	Preventive strategies and safety patterns
9	Have you ever spoken to someone about these experiences?	Assessing social support and isolation

findings section. Also, the researchers exchanged experiences with professors and outside referees about the conducted interviews. Finally, the researchers had a long-term engagement with the research environment. After building trust with the interviewees, they made continuous observations of the environment and the behavior and feelings of the interviewees. The researchers started their work with narrative interviews to identify the types of violence against these women and bring their strategies. Then, each participant's narrative is reconstructed, or the text of the interview is summarized based on the purpose and questions of the research; the categories of violence and strategies were discussed. Data analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The approach was inductive, meaning that codes and themes were generated directly from the data without relying on pre-existing theoretical frameworks. The analytical process involved the following steps: 1-Familiarization with data: All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times by the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of their content. 2-Generating initial codes: Meaningful units related to experiences of violence and coping strategies were identified and labeled with initial conceptual



**Fig. 1.** The main and sub-themes.

**Table 2**

Description of the participants.

Participants	Age	marital status	Education	Participants	Age	marital status	Education
Participant 1	14	Single	Fifth grade	Participant 15	33	Divorced	Fifth grade
Participant 2	14	Single	Sixth grade	Participant 16	34	Divorced	Associate degree
Participant 3	17	syghuh	Third high school	Participant 17	35	Divorced	high school
Participant 4	18	Divorced	Seventh grade	Participant 18	35	Married	high school
Participant 5	23	syghuh	high school	Participant 19	38	Divorced	
Participant 6	24	Single	high school	Participant 20	38	Divorced	high school
Participant 7	24	Single	Third high school	Participant 21	38	Divorced	high school
Participant 8	25	Divorced	Associate degree	Participant 22	39	Divorced	high school
Participant 9	25	Single	high school	Participant 23	40	Divorced	MA degree
Participant 10	26	Single	Fifth grade	Participant 24	43	Divorced	BA degree
Participant 11	26	Divorced	Fifth grade	Participant 25	44	Divorced	high school
Participant 12	27	Single	Third high school	Participant 26	47	Divorced	Fifth grade
Participant 13	30	Divorced	high school	Participant 27	49	Divorced	high school
Participant 14	32	Divorced	Fifth grade				

codes by the researchers independently. 3-Searching for themes: Similar codes were grouped together to form sub-themes and, subsequently, overarching themes. 4-Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed and refined through collaborative discussions among the research team. Disagreements were resolved by revisiting the transcripts and reaching consensus through group deliberation. 5-Defining and naming themes: Each theme was clearly defined and supported by representative quotes and corresponding codes. 6-Producing the final report: The analysis was written up with rich descriptions and illustrative excerpts from participants' narratives. The following figure provides an overview of the main themes and sub-themes (Fig. 1).

The Table 2 briefly shows the description of the participants.

## Finding

In this section, we address the findings obtained in two categories: the experiences of female sex workers regarding the violence against them and the strategies they employ when confronting such violence.

### *The experience of female sex workers from the violence against them*

Based on the obtained findings, five types of violence against female sex workers have been identified in the process of sex work, including economic, sexual, physical, psychological, and social, which we will address below.

#### *Economic violence*

Economic violence against sex workers is highly prevalent, primarily manifesting as clients refusing to pay or paying less than the agreed amount. Common pretexts include claims such as "I'll transfer the money to your bank account later" or "I'll pay after the service." This pattern of exploitation must be understood within Iran's socio-cultural and legal context. While Iranian society ostensibly emphasizes moral values and contractual fidelity, the stigma attached to sex work enables clients to violate financial commitments with impunity. Clients are acutely aware that sex workers—criminalized by law—cannot seek recourse through formal institutions. The inefficacy of the legal system further traps women in a cycle of violence by denying access to dispute-resolution mechanisms. Even modern financial systems, which could enhance transactional security, become tools of exploitation due to inadequate legal oversight. This structural powerlessness reinforces economic bargaining imbalances, exacerbating inherent inequalities in these transactions.

Participant 26: "Once, someone told me by himself: He would put two hundred and fifty thousand Tomans on my card, but then he left and deposited only one hundred and fifty thousand Tomans, and then he blocked me."

Sometimes, economic violence is accompanied by other forms of

violence, meaning that clients not only fail to pay the agreed-upon amount after a sexual encounter but also threaten women with harm or engage in psychological violence, such as verbal abuse, as well as physical violence such as choking, hitting, and so on.

Participant 27: "It has happened to me that a man tricked me, had sex, and then took my bank card number, but he did not pay me, and I never heard from him again."

In some cases, independent sex workers<sup>1</sup> who operate from their private residences encounter a particular phenomenon: establishing long-term relationships with clients who move into their homes without providing any financial compensation. While superficially this arrangement may appear to be a mutual emotional relationship, it in fact represents a complex form of economic violence. The fundamental nature of this relationship is based on financial exploitation that operates through subtle mechanisms of power. The presence of the male client in the woman's private space generates multiple negative consequences simultaneously. On one hand, it reduces the woman's income potential by limiting her ability to accept new clients. On the other hand, it transforms what should be her only secure and controlled environment into a sphere of masculine domination. The multifaceted harms of this pattern - encompassing financial, psychological, and spatial dimensions - serve to reinforce cycles of subjugation and disempowerment. At a deeper level, this behavior constitutes not only a gross violation of bodily autonomy and personal space, but also demonstrates the imposition of inequitable relational patterns under the guise of intimacy and mutuality.

Participant 20: "A boy had sex with me several times but did not pay. I told him, you have to pay the rent for my house, but he did not pay."

Moreover, women in contact with pimps<sup>2</sup> often experience this model of violence against them extensively. Pimps usually take a significant percentage for themselves and provide less money to the sex workers. In other words, Iran's sex industry operates under an unjust system where pimps, by appropriating a substantial portion of workers' earnings, transform women's bodies into instruments of profit. Within this system, women face a painful dilemma: if they refuse to cooperate with pimps, they risk physical and sexual violence; if they comply, they must endure severe economic exploitation (surrendering a large percentage of their

<sup>1</sup> - There are sex workers who are at an average level; They have a home and usually enter into a relationship with clients they know, and most of the time sexual appointments take place at the woman's home. This type of sex work has nothing to do with pimps. (Taken from the article on the typology of prostitution conducted by the researchers. (Fouladiyan & Kaboli, 2023)).

<sup>2</sup> - Sex workers who do not find a client independently, but enter into a relationship with a woman or a man who is a pimp and through them establish a relationship with a client in a house that belongs to the pimp. (Fouladiyan & Kaboli, 2023)).



income). This situation, a clear manifestation of structural violence, demonstrates how laws and social institutions function to trap vulnerable women in cycles of exploitation. The absence of adequate support systems forces women to choose between two forms of violence—physical or economic—both of which are inherently detrimental. This coercive binary not only perpetuates their subjugation but also highlights the systemic nature of their oppression, wherein institutional failures actively enable exploitative hierarchies.

Participant 18: "I worked with a pimp for four or five months and had sex two days a week; the most sex I had in one day was with eight people. In every relationship, no matter how much the pimp took, he would give me one hundred thousand Tomans, which was very cruel; Because he took 300 or four hundred thousand Tomans or more from the claimant and gave us only 100 Tomans."

One of the economic forms of violence that can be mentioned in relation to pimps includes the procurement of items such as condoms, clean sheets, disinfectant fluid, and masks (during the COVID-19 epidemic) demanded by pimps. Sex work is compelled to acquire these items at their own expense, which results in them using a portion of the money they receive from pimps to purchase these necessities.

Participant 16: "Usually pimps do not give us condoms or masks and disinfectant liquid, and the client must bring it. Many of them do not do this and do not pay for it. I have to be without a condom or buy one for myself."

#### *Sexual violence*

Sexual violence is among the types of violence that occurs frequently against female sex workers. This model of violence can be further divided into several categories.

#### *Being subjected to rape*

Some sex workers have reported that they often arrange to meet with one person, but upon arriving at the designated location, multiple men are present. In such situations, female sex workers are often subjected to rape. Frequently, this violence is accompanied by physical and economic violence. This scenario is highly prevalent among *homeless sex workers*,<sup>3</sup> *hangout sex work*,<sup>4</sup> and *street-based individuals*.<sup>5</sup>

Participant 15: "Once a boy called me that he wanted to come for sex, and I accepted, then when they came, and I opened the door, I saw three or four people entered the house and grabbed my throat with a knife. I was raped, and I did not receive any money."

*Being harassed.* Some sex workers experience harassment from men with whom they have not made any agreement, solely because they have attended parties and gatherings. This form of violence does not occur solely within the process of sex work and at the time of establishing sex.

Participant 19: "There is an old man in our group who offered me sex twice or thrice; we were in the garden one night. This person thought I was drunk and not sober; when I went to the toilet and came back,

he stuck to me from behind, put his hands inside my collar, and put his mouth on my neck."

*Sex without condom usage.* Many female sex workers face the issue of most clients demanding sexual encounters without condoms. In many instances, due to fear of losing clients or being forced by pimps, women are compelled to engage in sexual encounters without condoms.

Participant 11: "Many clients who come say they do not use condoms. It is very difficult for me, but I do it because I have to make money."

*Imposing sexual acts against their inner desire.* Clients force some sex workers into engaging in sexual acts against their inner desires, such as oral sex, anal sex, or hard sex.

Participant 14: "Sometimes a client comes, and we go to the room to have sex, but the person in the middle of the relationship says give me oral or anal sex." "If the pimp is there, we can say no and not do it, but most of the time, we have to do it."

*Sex with a high number of individuals in a day.* This model of violence pertains to sex workers often cooperated with pimps. Women in contact with pimps are sometimes forced to have sex with many clients daily. When one female sex worker is absent, another might be required to engage with the absent individual's clients. If the women refuse, they may experience verbal, psychological, and economic violence from the pimps.

The participant 12: "I work with pimps. Many times, it happens that one of the women is not there, and I have to have sex with his clients. I did not agree to do this once, but in return, the pimp gave me less money and insulted me."

This phenomenon emerges within a context of structural inequality where, on one hand, social stigma and the illegality of sex work deny women access to protective mechanisms, and on the other hand, a patriarchal sexual economy allows clients and pimps to perpetrate violence with impunity. This system of exploitation is reproduced not only through clients but also through intermediaries (pimps).

#### *Physical violence*

Physical violence refers to any form of bodily harm, including beating. This model of violence usually occurs alongside economic or sexual violence, and some female sex workers have reported that they avoid sex with younger clients because younger men tend to be more violent. In certain situations, this occurs for street-based sex workers when, instead of going to the desired location, men take them to remote areas, exploit and abuse them, and not only do not pay them but also subject them to physical harm. This signifies that physical violence against sex workers in Iran is not merely a matter of individual encounters, but rather constitutes an integral component of an organized system of oppression operating across three distinct levels. At the micro-level, Participant 10's experience of being compelled into silence due to fear of being killed exemplifies what might be termed a "economy of fear"—a system wherein fear itself becomes instrumental in regulating and constraining women's agency. At the meso-level, the geographical patterning of violence (displacement to peripheral areas) creates spaces of "engineered lawlessness" where clients perpetrate violence with impunity. At the macro-level, the intersection of this violence with other forms (economic and sexual) reveals the systemic operation of patriarchal power, which asserts control over women's bodies through multiple institutional mechanisms. While adaptive strategies such as selecting older clients may provide temporary security, they ultimately represent forced accommodations to an unjust system that minimizes women's autonomy and freedom of choice. These findings unequivocally demonstrate that physical violence in this context is not exceptional, but

<sup>3</sup> - Sex workers who are at the lowest level of society and are usually addicted to drugs, have to work as sex workers to make ends meet. (Fouladiyan & Kaboli, 2023)).

<sup>4</sup> - Sex workers in hangouts are almost like homeless people; With the difference that these women, who have no supporter and usually have addictions, live in a group in a house or a place that is hidden from public view, and in these cases, the woman is forced to sex with men in order to provide consumables and spend the night. (Fouladiyan & Kaboli, 2023)).

<sup>5</sup> - Street sex workers, as their name suggests, are those who wear specific clothing and make-up and stand by certain streets to find a client. (Fouladiyan & Kaboli, 2023)).

rather a structural norm rooted in gender inequalities and the legal precarity of sex workers.

Participant 10: "When they had sex with me, they would cover my mouth and say, if you say anything, we will kill you and not give you money, and I was scared too. That is why I did not choose young people or those who were several people, and I only went out with old people who were alone in the car."

#### *Mental-verbal psychological violence*

Psychological violence includes insulting words and cursing. Some sex workers have stated they have been subject to verbal and psychological violence. This model of violence is more derived from social violence, which will be explained further. Because of the negative mentality and stigmas given to sex workers in Iranian society, clients use this tactic to hurt sex workers and make them feel worthless.

Participant 6: "He used to say bad and ugly things to me, which made me sad, and I cried because I had become so worthless. He told me, You are only worth sex; otherwise, you are worth nothing, and I only got you for sex. In response, I would say, "I am in a relationship with you only because of your money."

This type of violence often leaves a lasting impression on the minds of sex workers, and they never forget the insults and humiliations they receive from clients or ordinary people.

Participant 13: "Once my mom told me you are a jende (whore), and it is unclear that you are in a relationship with several people. I was very sad then, and even later, I tattooed it on my hand, which broke my heart, Mother."

#### *Social violence*

Social violence against female sex workers in Iran functions as an instrument for disciplining and controlling the female body. As exemplified by Participant 6's experience of being labeled a *the* 'immoral woman' (whore) this form of violence constitutes a systematic mechanism for excluding these women from both public and private spheres. Findings reveal three key functions of this violence: First, it naturalizes violence against sex workers by dehumanizing them. Second, it destroys familial and social support networks. Third, through internalized stigma, it devastates women's self-esteem. This process, which can be explained by Bourdieu's theory of "symbolic violence," not only reinforces women's current vulnerable position but also minimizes their chances of escaping sex work by depriving them of social capital. The experience of Participant 6, who avoids social gatherings for fear of being stigmatized, clearly demonstrates how this violence transforms social spaces into arenas of surveillance and punishment. The systematic nature of this exclusionary practice reflects deep-seated patriarchal structures that seek to regulate female sexuality through multidimensional violence.

Participant 6: "I was at a party with one of my friends; we did not have a good relationship, then he told everyone about me, that I am a 'immoral woman' (whore) and I have relationships with everyone. "I was very upset and stopped attending parties where that woman was."

#### *Sex workers' strategies in facing violence*

This part presents women's strategies for facing the violence clients use. In general, the studied women's strategies can be classified into two general categories: preventive and situational, which we will describe each of them below.

##### *Preventive strategy*

Sex workers change their path to continue their work when they are

subjected to violence and abuse by the client. In these situations, women choose a preventive strategy, which has two modes: 1- changing the pattern of sex work and making an intelligent choice; 2- limiting relationships and establishing relationships with familiar people.

*Changing the pattern of sex work and choosing wisely.* In this model, women who have usually been working in the street or network<sup>6</sup> model try to reduce the violence against them, by communicating with the pimps, to the model of Sighe sex work. Alternatively, they started communicating with the pimps. In these models, even though they earn less income or pimps may force them to establish relationships with many clients, they gain security in return. In both cases, the sex worker faces violence and harassment, but in the second case, the amount of violence inflicted is relatively less. In other words, sex workers are forced to choose the first option between economic violence and sexual and physical violence. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the lens of "survival rationality" in Iranian sociology, where women find themselves at the intersection of physical security and economic independence, forced to make painful calculations. This choice is not a free preference but rather a "structurally coerced decision" where the costs of each option are carefully weighed. In this strategy, the female body simultaneously becomes both a site of resistance and a terrain of surrender.

Participant 24: "These relationships that I go to are not safe; I have been sexually and physically abused several times, that is why I work with a pimp; I prefer to give a percentage to the pimp but to be safe, and Nothing happens to me."

*syghih pattern.* A newly emerging pattern in Iran's commercial sex sector involves the utilization of "temporary marriage" (*syghih*) frameworks - an arrangement legitimized under Shia jurisprudence when observing specific conditions like observing the *iddah*.<sup>7</sup> However, in practice, many women bypass these religious stipulations, potentially engaging in multiple *syghih* contracts within a single week, thereby approximating this arrangement to conventional sex work models. These relationships are typically facilitated through specialized match-making offices or digital channels, granting women greater agency in negotiating relationship terms (including sexual practices, meeting locations, and condom use). Compared to street-based sex work, this more formalized structure creates relatively safer environments with reduced violence exposure, though it simultaneously redirects portions of women's earnings to intermediaries such as channel administrators and brokers. The adoption of *syghih* as a survival strategy - as evidenced in narratives like Participant 12's account - embodies a form of individual resistance. Paradoxically, it simultaneously repositions women's bodies within a regulated, formalized system that exercises control under the guise of security and religious legitimacy.

Participant 12: "... There, they maintain an office where they register the names of both women and men. They call to inform me when there's a potential client matching my criteria: 'There's a gentleman with such-and-such characteristics; if you're interested, come discuss it.' If I agree, I meet with him to negotiate our terms. For instance, I specify that I don't engage in oral sex, and during COVID, I wouldn't even remove my mask—sometimes keeping it on throughout. I insist on condom use only, establish boundaries against rough treatment, and prohibit delay tactics or pills. I clearly state all my conditions... If the client has his own place, I'll go there. For first-time encounters, I

<sup>6</sup> - Sex workers who do not have a fixed model, for example, work with pimps, stand on the side of the street, become *syghih* and...

<sup>7</sup> - (period of waiting) is the period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or after a divorce, during which she may not marry another man. Generally, the *iddah* of a divorced woman is three lunar months (i.e. about 89 days).

prefer paying the 40,000 toman fee to the pimp to ensure safety. You see, this model provides us greater security—we experience significantly less violence this way."

*Limiting sexual relationships and establishing relationships with familiar people.* Some sex workers, in order to avoid sexual and physical violence, decide to enter into a relationship with a few people who know them. This strategy model is more common among women who are at a higher level and unwilling to enter into a client's relationship under any circumstances. In other words, these women try to enter into a relationship with men from the prosperous classes of society, and these relationships have more depth and durability. Women try to choose this strategy in exchange for safety and prevention of physical and sexual violence. In this model, women are not connected with clients but choose their own clients.

This approach constitutes what may be termed *selective sexual investment*. Within such arrangements, women strategically seek to transform sexual encounters from purely financial transactions into experiences yielding social capital dividends - including dining at upscale restaurants, travel opportunities, or receiving gifts. Simultaneously, they employ their bodily capital to cultivate class-appropriate appearances and mannerisms that foster perceived class affinity with affluent clients. This deliberate class mimicry reduces the likelihood of instrumental objectification and consequent violent behavior. Notably, men in these relationships - particularly those from higher socioeconomic strata - demonstrate lower propensity for violence due to fears of social stigma or reputational damage. While this strategy enhances individual security to some degree, it nevertheless remains embedded within broader structures of gender and class inequality.

Participant 25: "I prefer to be in a relationship with a few rich men, but I have the security of my life. I am in a relationship with several excellent men in every way; They are rich and prestigious. We travel together, we go to fancy restaurants, and in return, I have sex with them. "Indeed, I do not make much money; instead, I have security."

#### *Situational strategy*

The meaning of the situational strategy is that women when establishing a relationship with clients, what actions do they take when they face violence and harassment from clients? In the following, we discuss the actions of women in these situations.

*Threats of self-harm and suicide.* Many sex workers self-harm when exposed to violence and harassment, especially sexual violence (rape). Some women declared that when they were going to the place and if they saw several people, they started to self-harm and cut their veins so as not to be raped by a group.

Participant 13: "I kept cutting the vein of my hand so that they would not rape me. Then they rushed me to the hospital."

*Begging.* Some women beg and cry when faced with violence, especially physical violence. In these cases, these women do not receive money and lose their dignity.

Participant 27: "I had no idea what to do, and I just went and said to that man, please, I beg you, do not hit me and take your hand off my throat."

*Shouting.* When some women are subjected to violence, especially physical and sexual violence, they start shouting. This strategy applies to independent sex workers who set up their sex appointments in their own homes.

Participant 8: "When they left, they took the money they gave me. I said to them, why are you taking the money? They put a knife under my throat and wanted to steal my phone. I threatened them and told them to get lost, or I would scream for the neighbors to come."

However, for women who go to clients' houses and are street sex workers or hangouts, this strategy does not work. Because here, no one comes to their aid, they are abused.

Participant 20: "I also started screaming, and the man said, no matter how much you scream, there are several floors here, and no one can hear you, and I was so scared that I just screamed."

*Use of defensive weapons.* Almost most sex workers always carry pepper spray or a small knife with them to defend themselves against violence. Some of these women threaten themselves or their clients with this weapon. Some women, who have no choice, start to kill themselves with these weapons, as explained in the first case. Sometimes, they use pepper spray to buy time for themselves and run away from the place.

Participant 3: "I always have pepper spray with me. "It happened once or twice that someone tried to hit me or rape me, so I quickly sprayed and ran away."

*Surrender.* Due to the lack of social support, female sex workers have no choice but to surrender and indulge in violence in some cases when they are subjected to violence and cannot do anything. This is more common in sexual and economic violence.

Participant 5: "I had no choice in that situation. Finally, they had sex with me, and I had to give in to their wishes."

These behaviors demonstrate how women, in the absence of institutional support, must navigate multiple levels of violence. The paradoxical reality is that each of these strategies inherently contains its own form of violence: self-harm and pleading (Participant 27) represent violence against the self, shouting (Participant 8) exposes systemic violence, and surrender (Participant 5) perpetuates the cycle of violence. These findings clearly reveal how, in a society that simultaneously commodifies and perceives the female body as a threat, women's everyday resistance oscillates between preserving human dignity and ensuring physical survival.

#### **Conclusion**

Sex work is one of the most significant social issues in contemporary Iranian society. Given that Iran's political system is based on the Islamic Republic model, this phenomenon is not only criminalized but also actively targeted for eradication. Regardless of how women enter sex work or the structural factors that lead them there, they are broadly regarded as social outcasts. Even within global advocacy movements such as *MeToo*, their voices remain largely ignored. Amid worsening economic and social conditions in Iran, the number of women engaging in sex work is rising. Due to the lack of legal and social protections, these women are increasingly exposed to various forms of violence by clients, pimps, and even ordinary citizens. For many of them, sex work is characterized by experiences of being hunted, dominated, abused, assaulted, and physically harmed (Farley & Kelly, 2000).

The aim of this study was to examine sex workers' experiences of violence and the strategies they employ in response. Based on the findings, five main types of violence were identified: economic, sexual, physical, psychological-verbal, and social.

The results of this study are grounded in a unique socio-political context in Iran, where poverty, criminalization, religious norms, and social exclusion intersect to create a complex web of violence against female sex workers. Unlike many other countries where sex work is legally recognized or semi-legalized, in Iran, all forms of sexual activity

outside marriage—especially those involving financial exchange—are fully criminalized (Dezhankhooy & Papoli-Yazdi, 2020). As a result, these women are denied not only legal rights but also basic social protections. In this context, violence is not an exception but rather an embedded part of their everyday lives.

One of the key findings of this research was the conscious decision by some women to accept economic exploitation in order to avoid more severe forms of sexual and physical violence. This illustrates that despite their marginal status, these women are not passive victims; they actively adopt strategic decisions within highly constrained conditions to ensure survival. Choosing to work with a pimp and syhhi or limiting their clientele to reduce risk were among the strategies not previously analyzed in detail in Iranian literature.

Sexual violence reported by participants included group rape, coerced sexual acts, lack of condom use, and unwanted physical contact. Physical violence involved beatings, strangulation, and death threats. Several studies have documented the prevalence of such violence in sex work globally (Chang & Weng, 2015; Farley & Barkan, 1998; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010). Additionally, many participants described frequent experiences of verbal and psychological violence, such as insults and derogatory language. Due to the strong stigma surrounding sex work in Iran, sex workers are not only humiliated by clients and pimps but also by the general public. This social violence has long-term psychological effects, leading to deeper isolation. These findings are consistent with studies by Sadati et al. (2017), Yoosefilebni et al. (2020), and Hosseini Divkolaye et al. (2021).

In Iran, all aspects of sex work—including the selling, buying, and brokering of sex—are criminalized. This legal framework significantly increases the vulnerability of sex workers. Fearing arrest or punishment, most women do not report violence to law enforcement and often remain silent (Church et al., 2001; Deering et al., 2014; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Raphael & Shapiro, 2004). This criminalization contributes to a cycle of poverty, exclusion, and violence, pushing sex workers further to the margins of society.

Furthermore, unlike many other countries with civil society organizations, feminist movements, or advocacy platforms such as the *MeToo* movement, Iran lacks similar support structures. This absence further contributes to the silencing and invisibility of sex workers' experiences. As a result, acts of resistance are often individual, invisible, and at times self-destructive—manifesting as self-harm, suicidal threats, or passive surrender to violence.

Compared to the studies done, sex work in Iran operates under a unique “triad of repression”: (1) complete legal criminalization, (2) intense social exclusion driven by religious norms, and (3) the absence of organized support systems. Together, these factors create a far more violent and hostile environment for sex workers compared to many other global contexts. In contrast to countries that offer at least partial legal or social protection sex workers in Iran face not only violence from clients and intermediaries, but also structural violence imposed by the legal and cultural system itself.

Having analyzed the main themes and contextual insights, the next section reflects on the study's constraints, contributions, and policy recommendations.

### Limitations and strengths of the study

This study, while offering unique insights into the lived experiences of female sex workers in Iran, encountered several limitations. First, due to the criminalization of sex work and prevailing cultural taboos, access to participants was highly challenging. Recruitment relied on informal networks and health or welfare centers, which may have limited the diversity of voices represented. Second, some participants displayed hesitation or self-censorship due to fear of judgment or legal consequences, potentially affecting the depth of their disclosures. In a few cases, audio recording was not permitted, and reliance on note-taking may have led to partial data loss.

Nevertheless, this study also had significant strengths. It successfully conducted in-depth interviews with 27 women sex workers—an achievement rarely documented in the Iranian context. The use of a narrative and thematic approach enabled the centering of participants' voices and allowed a nuanced exploration of both the violence they experience and the strategies they adopt. The research also provides a culturally grounded, context-specific understanding of sex work and violence, adding to the limited body of indigenous qualitative research in this area.

### Suggestions for future research

Future studies should consider comparative investigations across different cities or provinces to account for regional variations in the experiences of sex workers. Research exploring the roles of male actors—such as clients, intermediaries, and law enforcement—in the production and perpetuation of violence would provide a more holistic understanding of power dynamics. Furthermore, participatory research involving sex workers as co-researchers can amplify marginalized voices and contribute to more empowering forms of knowledge production.

It is also recommended that future research explore institutional violence, including the roles of police, judiciary, and healthcare systems in either reinforcing or mitigating harm. Psychological or phenomenological studies focusing on embodied experiences such as fear, self-harm, or the trauma of repeated violence may offer deeper insights into the psychosocial dimensions of sex work in Iran.

### Practical implications

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for structural and policy interventions to protect the rights and well-being of female sex workers in Iran. The absence of legal recognition and protective frameworks forces women into risk negotiation between economic, physical, and sexual violence. This situation necessitates the development of harm reduction policies and the expansion of accessible support services.

Non-governmental organizations and public health institutions should offer safe spaces, psychological counseling, STI prevention resources, and legal aid tailored to the needs of sex workers. Public education campaigns aimed at destigmatizing sex work and addressing gender-based violence could foster broader social change. Finally, this research has practical applications in training social workers, psychologists, and frontline service providers to respond more empathetically and effectively to the lived realities of women engaged in sex work.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Majid Fouladiyan:** Supervision. **Atefeh Kaboli:** Writing – original draft.

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