

# Moving the Discourse from Prostitution to Sex Work in Uganda: Beyond Abolitionist versus Positivists Debate

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## Abstract

The discourses surrounding prostitution and sex work in Uganda present two prominent positions in the debate, which have informed the practice and identity of sex workers in Uganda. On the one hand, there are positivists who insist that sex work is work; it can earn income to empower those who practice it. On the other hand, are the pro-abolitionists who argue that sex work is immoral, violates women's dignity, and should be abolished. This study analysed the discourses surrounding sex work and prostitution through field research among female sex workers in Uganda. The findings show that sex work is associated with three themes; the economic, pleasurable, and degrading discourses. The findings show that the majority of those engaged in the practice do not consider what they do to be 'work' because of both the stigma attached to the identities and the social and economic conditions that force sex workers to engage in the practice. The article suggests a need to move beyond pro-abolitionists and sex positivists debate to focus on the unique contextual experiences of the sex workers to facilitate a better understanding of the gendered socio- economic and cultural conditions that the sex workers operate in.

**Keywords:** Sex work, Prostitution, Discourses, Identity, Experiences

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Prostitution has been dubbed in social discourse as ‘the world’s oldest profession’ (Monto2004, Coskin 2018; Garner 1999), and yet the “professionalisation” of prostitution in some countries and (re)naming it as sex work has not liberated it from the social stigma that it evokes. It is prudent to ask why this stigma continues to exist even when society seem to have lived with prostitution for a long time as evidenced in the popular axiom ‘a practice that is as old as humanity.’ What are the new debates informing the identity and place of the prostitute<sup>1</sup> who is now referred to as the ‘sex worker’? How are these debates changing perceptions of identity and the practice of sex work in Uganda? This paper interrogates the discourses surrounding prostitution and sex work to understand their for the identity and position of prostitution and or sex work in Uganda.

A historical background of sex work situates the practice within class and gendered identity politics, where those who sell sex for money were and are still looked at negatively and labelled prostitutes. Within this background, there are contextual, socio-cultural, historical, and time-specific differences in the way sex work has been perceived. Two major

positions inform the discussion about prostitution; the abolitionist school of thought, where selling sex is castigated and viewed as a practice that objectifies those engaged in it, often erroneously viewed as women only, and the sex positivist school – the neoliberal school of thought where sex work is perceived to be a profession that people can choose freely to engage in to earn income. With this broad lens, debates are used to analyse the data on discourses about the identities of female sex workers obtained from the fieldwork done in the Kampala and Gulu Districts.

## **Historical context and Debates about sex work and prostitution**

While sex work has been legalised in some European countries, such as Sweden, Finland, and Germany, it remains illegal in most parts of Europe (Levy & Pye, 2014). In the United States of America, sex work is illegal in all states except Nevada and Maine<sup>2</sup>. In Africa, some literature show that sex work is legal only in Ethiopia, Mali, Madagascar, Benin.<sup>3</sup> Other literature includes Senegal as one of the countries on the African continent where sex work has been legalised (Tamale 2011). Most African countries consider sex work illegal (Mgabuko and Smith 2011). Activities such as living off

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the label prostitute and sex worker interchangeably as I interrogate the meanings and attitudes towards each of the nouns. When analysing negative discourses, the term prostitute is more often used, and I focus my analysis on such meanings related to the negative side. When there is a level of affirmation, the discourse shifts to the positive, and the term sex worker becomes more applicable.

<sup>2</sup> Nevada Prostitution Laws found at <https://decriminalizesex.work/Nevada-prostitution-laws/>

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.thrillist.com/travel/nation/legal-prostitution-world-map-of-every-country-that-has-legal-prostitution>

the earnings of prostitution and soliciting and procuring the services of prostitutes are equally considered illegal and criminalised by many African countries, including Uganda (The Ugandan Penal Code Act, 2014).

With globalisation, sex trade has become a non-circumventing global phenomenon. In practice, the movements of sex workers from rural to urban spaces have now become movements from developing to developed countries and vice versa<sup>4</sup>. With trade liberalisation, governments are encouraging private sector-led development, and the poorest of the poor women who sell sex in exchange for money are left unprotected from capitalist exploitation. The United Nations International Labour Organisation's 2008 Report calls for the economic recognition of the sex industry to be legalised so that sex workers can be extended legal working rights to enable them to operate in a free and safe working environment with good working conditions. For countries like Burma, Thailand, and some States in the United States of America that earn taxes and revenues from prostitution, the attempt to condemn and outlaw prostitution may not yield positive results because sex work is a huge source of income (O'Connell, (2002).

The study sought to determine the social perceptions of the place and identity of sex workers in Ugandan society. This article begins by defining

a prostitute and or sex worker. It then presents the discourses surrounding the identities of sex workers. Finally, it presents conclusions on how these discourses impact gender identity and the place of women and men involved in the sex trade in Uganda today.

There are two main debates surrounding prostitution and sex work in the literature. First, pro-abolitionists consider sex work to be negative and exploitative of the people engaged in it, thus advocating for its abolition. Second, sex positivists consider sex work as empowering and push for it to be regulated to give those involved the right to safety.

Pro-abolitionists, like Radin, (1996), argue that market forces coerce women to sell their bodies for sex. Barry (1984) refers to this sale as sexual slavery orchestrated by the capitalist industry. According to Pateman (1988), prostitution ensures that men have patriarchal rights and access to women's bodies beyond what Marxist critics focus on--the alienation and exploitation of the female body. Although it has been continuously recognised that men are also engaged in prostitution, it continues to be viewed as a predominantly female activity in most societies. Therefore, the oppression that comes with it is viewed as a form of gender-based violence that affects women more than men.

Dworkin (1981, 1993) also argued that commercial sex is a form of violence against women and a crime. To Dworkin, "... commercial sex

<sup>4</sup> Coskun Emel, 2018 did a research on Ugandan migrants in Turkey who resort to sex work for survival.

work is a form of rape enforced by poverty,” and based on “... the assumption that women exist for men’s sexual enjoyment, that all men ‘need’ sex, or that bodily integrity of women is irrelevant...” (Dworkin in Chinyere 2011:351).

Gerassi (2015) complementing the latter scholar’s views argue that sex work is violence against women which is enshrined in the patriarchal culture of societies that consider women to be sex objects who should be exploited at will. To her, sex in exchange for money or materials can never be free of charge. In patriarchal systems, women’s bodies become market capital.

According to Gerassi, most societies are patriarchal, and sexism exists in such societies to exploit women sexually. Gerassi further argues that the patriarchal sex industry in such societies look at women as sex objects available to satisfy what has been a long line of male domination and sexual control of women. Gerassi also cites Dobash and Dobash’s (1979), study, which contextualises sex work as satisfying the patriarchal social order which gives men privilege and promotes gender-based violence and male dominance in all sexual relations. “Sexual commerce provides a patriarchal right of access to women’s bodies, thus perpetuating women’s subordination to men” (Gerassi, 2015: 80).

The second debate surrounding sex work comes from sex positivists. Sex positivists view sex work as a

human rights issue. According to sex-positivists, those who engage in sex work are engaged in a legitimate trade, and therefore, their agency should be protected. Monto (2004), states that prostitution is viewed as a commodification and selling of the body or self, as an exchange of sexual services for money or other goods and services (Marjolein 2001).

The term sex work has been viewed more positively by libertarian radical feminists as work performed by entrepreneurs, self-employed, and empowered agents who use their sexuality to make money. Wardlow (2004) argues that the term sex work gives women agency because it suggests an income-generating activity rather than a totalising identity. Those who advocate for the use of the term sex work perceive it to be culturally more neutral than prostitution which implies judgement. According to Wardlow, the terminology is a political assertion which indicates that monetised sex is a kind of labour like other forms of labour that should be remunerated, made safe, and legal. O’Connell (2002), discussed the merits and demerits of using both labels-prostitute versus sex worker-arguing that it breeds discrimination against people involved in the sex trade.

O’Connell (2002) argues that demonising prostitution through moral lenses makes it even more unsafe for women who engage in the trade. It shifts the debate away from protecting the rights of those who work in the industry and focuses only on morality.

To place the identity question in perspective, it is necessary to identify the debates that inform the practice and safety of sex work and prostitution.

Tong (2009) cites two perspectives within radical feminism that explain different views on prostitution. Radical libertarians such as Gayle Robin (1975) had views that contested the pro-abolitionist perspectives expressed earlier. Gayle argues that all sex is good; it is the judgement that we pass on to it that makes some sexual acts appear bad. She blames contemporary society for favouring sex between married heterosexual couples bent on procreating children. Such 'normalisation' of sexual relations, she argues represses other forms of sexual relations like "... causal sex for pleasure, bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, transsexual, transvestite, fetishist, sadomasochists", sex workers, and "those whose eroticism crosses transgenerational boundaries." (Tong 2009: 66). The sex positivist debate is enshrined in the pro-rights sex workers' movement which aims to protect the sex workers' rights by recognising sex work as a form of labour that needs to be protected.

According to Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires (2004), sex work is a service rendered to society to meet the needs of those who can pay for it. Citing the way sex work is performed in legally accepted places in the United Kingdom, Kantola and Squires argue that women can enter and exit sex work based on their free will. More

recent feminist scholarship from 2000 onwards tends to advance this debate further. Lena Edlund and Evelyn Korn (2002) argue that prostitution is business and it brings income to those involved and to the countries that have legalised it. By 2002, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand had between 0.2 and 1.5% of the female population working as sex workers. Sex workers contributed between 2 to 14% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of these countries. According to Korn and Edlund, these sex workers directly contribute to national development. In their study of patterns of prostitution in the developed world, Korn and Edlund found that there has been a steady decrease in the number of prostitutes because female incomes have increased. This means that the more women were employed in well-paying jobs, the less likely they would want to continue working as sex workers. Sex work is considered as legitimate labour, a trade that one enters into voluntarily to make money. Without other jobs, sex work remains an acknowledged source of livelihood in such contexts.

From another perspective, sex positivists view sex work as similar to marriage. To some sex positivists, sex, whether within or outside marriage, is a source of exchange for women for material goods or for children. This is based on the view that married women exchange sex for reproduction while sex workers exchange sex for money. "... a prostitute sells non-

reproductive sex, commercial sex, a wife sells reproductive sex (sex plus children) (Edlund and Korn 2002).” This perspective can be controversial because it assumes that all marital sexual relations end up with reproduction as the primary goal. There are different types of marital families, and these diversities ought to be recognised as well. However, it is not without merit.

In other feminist literature, married women have indeed been viewed more or less as prostitutes, as those who use sex to gain what they want. Jeffreys (2004) argues that marriage gives men strong entitlements to women’s bodies, and because of this, prostitution and marriage are the same. Among the Baganda, the *Senga*, a paternal aunt to the family, is instrumental in teaching young girls how to give pleasure to their men. Tamale’s study on the roles of the *Senga* in Buganda show that their advice to young girls joining marriage encourages girls to be like prostitutes using advice such as “Be a nice, humble wife, but turn into a *Malaya* (prostitute) in your bedroom!” (Tamale 2005: 27). It is this type of home schooling that teaches wives to use sex to gain what they need. There are common sayings that encourage women in need of favours from their husbands to introduce the topic in bed. While some women see this as married women exercising agency and using sex as a point of negotiation, others have tended to look at that form of negotiation as

warped, exploitative to women, and a discourse instigated by men for male gain. This cements men’s control over sex in marriage which limits women’s authority over the same.

## Methodology

The study was conducted in the Gulu and Kampala Districts within the city centres. The two cities were chosen because the urban areas provided a market for trade, subsequently offering easier access to sex workers. In terms of positionality, Gulu was chosen because the researcher understood Luo which made it easier to communicate with the respondents. Kampala posed a problem with language, so the researcher had to rely on research assistants to conduct the interviews and translation. Secondly, the two cities provided the much-needed contrast; Gulu is mostly occupied by the Acholi and other Nilotes, while Kampala is a melting pot of different ethnic groups. Gulu therefore provided the rather closed, rural urban group while Kampala provided the variety of ethnic and socio-cultural differences that was needed to contrast cultural perceptions about sex work within the more cosmopolitan, and more urbanised city.

The study population comprised female sex workers. The study used snowball sampling which was more appropriate given the secretive nature of the sex trade (Artkinson and Flint 2014). Qualitative in-depth and open-ended interviews were conducted in

safe places where the women could talk freely. In Kampala, the sex workers were identified through the Reproductive Health Uganda-Bwaise Branch, which has had programmes and a good relationship with sex workers in the Bwaise neighbourhood for a long time. According to Apolot (2022), Kimombasa is a hotspot for sex workers. In Gulu, the sex workers were identified through establishing connections with *boda boda*<sup>5</sup> riders, who then helped to randomly link the researcher to the sex workers who were working on the streets of Gulu town at night. A total of 18 women were interviewed<sup>6</sup>. All respondents' names were changed to ensure confidentiality.

Desk research was conducted to analyse the discourses surrounding sex work and prostitution in Uganda. Discourse analysis as a methodology helps uncover underlying socio-cultural meanings and power dynamics. Because language is socially constructed, the gendered meanings that language, especially nouns, carry show societal attitudes, norms, and power dynamics within them. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used because it is significant for the analysis

of the power dynamics and ideologies that language reflects and shapes (Fairclough, 2020, Wennerstrom, 2016). From the fieldwork, personal narratives of labels were collected and analysed using content and discourse analysis (Fairclough 2020) where the meanings of the names and labels associated with prostitution and sex work were decoded in connection with gendered perceptions, socio-cultural forms of knowledge, and linguistic nuances. The analysis peeled back the meanings that lay beneath the surface of words, as explained by Jorgensen & Phillips 2002. The meanings of the words provided by the respondents were analysed, compared, and contrasted with gendered socio-cultural perspectives that defined those labels in Uganda as used in social discourse and as found in the literature reviewed.

### **Discourses Surrounding the Identity of the Sex Worker**

Respondents were asked to identify how their clients refer to them and

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<sup>5</sup> *Boda boda* refers to motorcycles that are commonly used for quick transportation in most cities in Uganda.

<sup>6</sup> My choice to interview women only does not run away from my earlier criticism of the societal discourses where prostitution and the prostitute are mostly identified as women. The scope of my study was limited to women only, even though I was aware that there were some men who were also prostitutes.

also to explain the meanings of those references or names. The details of the labels are in Figure 1 on the next page:

**Figure 1:** Names of Sex Workers and their meaning

<b>Kampala</b>	
<b>Name</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Sexy</b>	I have a slim body that appeals to men sexually
<b>Call Girl</b>	They get me clients on just a call a way and I am always at their service
<b><i>Nekoleragyange</i></b>	I do my own business/ I am self employed
<b><i>Kamaama</i></b>	I look after needy men (sexually)
<b><i>Neeko</i></b>	I do my own business/ I am self employed
<b><i>Kawomera</i></b>	My clients say that I am sweet in bed
Black	My skin is Black and beautiful
Chocolate	They sometimes call me Chocolate also because of my skin colour
<b><i>Kakumukila</i></b>	I am so sweet
<b><i>Ndibesa</i></b>	They are dying for me
<b><i>Malaya</i></b>	Prostitute
<b><i>Musubuzi</i></b>	I purchase penises only
<b><i>Kiteleke</i></b>	Because the person next to you can know what is in your (luggage) bag
Slut	Darling in prostitution
Prostitute	I sell my body
Tomato seller	This is also euphemism for prostitute
<b><i>Namazzi</i></b>	A person who ejaculates a lot of vaginal fluids'
<b><i>Nalwewuba</i></b>	A woman who never settles for one man
<b><i>Nsangayo</i></b>	You will find me there

<b>Gulu</b>	
<b><i>Malaya</i></b>	Means a woman with no husband of her own You do not want a husband and any man is yours
<b>Spoilt</b>	One who does not give respect to her people
<b><i>Agoo</i></b>	Men and women who roam around at night.
<b><i>Agoo</i></b>	is Chameleon in Luo; <i>Agoo</i> can therefore also mean someone who changes colour according to his/ her circumstance

<i>Aguu</i>	It means you have nowhere to stay; if evening comes, you have to go to the street.
<i>Jo Acate</i>	Those who sell themselves
<i>Apoli</i>	The duiker. To be called, <i>Apoli</i> means you are a parasite, a detoother <sup>7</sup> .

The above represents a selective sample of the names and meanings of prostitutes in the Ugandan parlance, especially on the Kampala and Gulu streets. Given the diversity of ethnicities in Uganda, these identities and labels are only representative.

The findings therefore show that the most common name used to identify sex workers in Gulu and Kampala is *Malaya*. *Malaya* comes from Kiswahili, where it means prostitute, and this word has been absorbed into most Ugandan languages. *Malaya* has a negative connotation. All the respondents expressed a dislike for the label *Malaya* and explained that it is degrading. This finding resonates with the literature which shows distrust for ‘city women’ in Kampala in the 1960s; they were historically referred to as ‘bad women’ (Musisi, 2001). When asked how these different names made them feel, the responses varied. Some respondents felt indifferent to some of the names they were called. The responses showed positive and negative representations of the sex

workers. For example, being called *Neekeo* made some respondents feel that their services were recognised and appreciated.

*When called “Musubuzi,” I feel good because I am not insulted, and when I am referred to as “Kiteleke,” I feel that I am secretive.* (Gloria 25, Kampala)

*When people call me “Kawomela,” I feel praised, and when they refer to me as “Ndibosa,” it boosts my morale.* (Angela 28, Kampala). The above constitutes the positive discourses surrounding the names *Musubuzi*, *Kawomela*, *Kiteleke*, and *Ndibosa* used to identify sex workers. The respondents felt happier with the more creative names were both derived from street slang and from the corridors of their workplaces; names that enticed clients to believe they were the best at their game, like *Kawomela* (the sweet one) or *Namazzi* (the juicy one).

The negative names given to sex workers include labels such as *Nsangayo* which loosely translates as ‘you will find me here,’ showing a sense of hopelessness and homelessness, a woman in waiting. This is a label given to women who had no address apart from the streets where they sat and waited for their customers, which was basically the only address they had. Other labels like *Malaya*, *Apoli*, *Jo Acate*, *Aguu*, the spoilt one and slut

<sup>7</sup> A *Detoother* is a term used to identify people who do not like to spend on themselves but who enjoy to manipulate and use other people’s money especially when they are taken out for an evening. In most cases, *detoother*s are women. In social discourse, a *detoother* fits the image of a robber. The hole a *detoother* leaves in the victim’s pocket is equated to the painful experience that someone with a tooth ache undergoes when their bad tooth has been removed.

are negative and make the women feel insulted, as evidenced in the following response:

*When people refer to me as “The spoilt one”, I feel pain and ashamed (Susan 36, Gulu).*

These negative labels appended to sex work influence how society treats prostitutes and sex workers in Uganda.

When asked whether they considered what they do to be work, thus the label sex workers, some of the women interviewed from Kampala agreed that the work they do is selling sex and ideally they qualify to be called sex workers. Half of the women interviewed from Gulu also thought that what they do is sex work. They provided some reasons to justify their actions:

*I do what I do consciously; therefore, sex work is a job. (Natasha 22 years old, Kampala)*

*It is my source of survival, she said. (Kay, 30 years old, Kampala).*

*“I can be called a sex worker rightly because in the evening that is what I do.” (Harriet 26 years old, Gulu).*

*“I also call myself Malaya because this is my source of survival,” (Nancy, 21 years old, Gulu)”*

However, half of the respondents from Gulu thought that what they did was not work at all. To this group, sex work is not a job because they hate it and would like to stop doing it. Some explained that they joined prostitution because of the difficult conditions of their lives. To some, prostitution is not

something they would have wished to do if they had an alternative job. Even when they said that what they do can be called sex work, some of the women respondents argued that they may not consider themselves sex workers, citing the following reasons.

*I just make my money; I do not see it as work. (Sophia 25, Kampala)*

*To me it is a hobby. Although sometimes I consider it a job, because others call me a sex worker, I hate it because it has many bad things. (Martha 22, Kampala)*

Another said she could not call herself a sex worker because *she was not paid a salary. (Joyce 26, Gulu).*

From these responses, it was clear that the sex workers interviewed recognised that sex work earned them income and provided for their livelihoods, even though they were not very happy with it. Although several reasons have been advanced to explain why women engage in prostitution, economic hardship tops the list of reasons why most women join prostitution in Uganda. Ten of the 16 women interviewed joined prostitution to earn money for different reasons; five of the women were stuck with hungry children after separating from their fathers and had to sell sex to feed their children<sup>8</sup>.

A critical analysis of the discourses surrounding sex work, as mentioned

<sup>8</sup> The numbers cited here are not meant to generalise for the whole population but rather to contextualise the representativeness within the sample chosen. This is a qualitative research, and I do not wish to claim that these experiences are generalisable to the entire study population. I claim that the experiences are singular but valid and contextual within the contexts quoted.

by the respondents above, can be clustered into three major thematic areas. The first discourse is derived from the economic reasons behind the decision to engage in sex work. The second theme deals with discourses surrounding the pleasurable aspects of sex work. The third discourse relate that exposes the sexist and demeaning nature of sex work.

### **Economic nature of sex trade and the accompanying discourses**

The following were the economic reasons why most of the women interviewed engaged in sex work.

#### **Economic Reasons for joining sex work**

“I dropped out of school at 17 years when I got pregnant in Senior 4. I got my twin babies but could not look after them because the man denied responsibility. Since then, my friends told me about the fastest way of making money.” (Queen 27, Kampala).

“I had problems; my husband was a student, and I was staying with my mother-in-law, and she started abusing me. My mother picked me up and took me home, and I went with the child whom I had to take care of. Because I never went to school, no one wanted to employ me. So this was my last resort.” (Agnes, 21, Gulu).

“Sometimes you have children, but your husband has left you, and you have to feed the children. You think about how to survive; and how you are going to pay school fees for the children. You also want a good life among people. (Harriet 26, Gulu).

When my husband died, my in-laws took his bank account book away. My brother in-law grabbed all the property, and I was left with nothing to live on. That is why I joined prostitution. (Ayerango 29, Gulu).

“I was at Makerere in first year and my friend introduced me to a group of pimps who used to take us to night clubs and got money from men on our behalf.” (Nalulange 25, Kampala).

“When my husband rejected me, I started looking for money because I wanted a future for my child. My friends introduced me to sex work. The father of my child does not help me. He is not around but is away in Kapchorwa. He doesn’t know that I do sex work.” (Joyce 26, Gulu).

“My mother had died, and I had nowhere to start from. So I talked to my close friend Angel who introduced me to this business of commercial sex.” (Fatuma 27, Kampala).

“My Mummy died when I was seven years old, and my father remarried another woman with whom we could not coordinate. I moved in with my aunt, who lived in Bwaise at the time. I could go with her to the bar. Ever since customers started using me and after that they gave me money, it motivated me.” (Angela 28, Kampala).

“My sister invited me to Kampala to come and visit her, and on getting to Kampala, she was staying with other women (friends) in Kisenyi. She told me that a woman must find a way to survive in Kampala. Since then I joined sex work.” (Kay 30, Kampala).

Underneath these economic reasons, there are a couple of underlying gender issues that are responsible for women joining sex work. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship represents a relationship of power where the older mother exercises power, over the younger daughter-in-law. In one of the cases above, the absence of the husband made it difficult for a young woman to continue staying in her marital home with her mother in-law. This point to a gender concern; women who are married off young without any source of income are disempowered and struggle for survival if their husbands leave or die. Without personal finances, a woman is forced to sell her body to feed herself and her child(ren).

Another economic reason that comes out prominently in the above extracts is the economic pressures of daily survival, lack of school fees, lack of tuition, and managing pregnancy alone without a spouse. When these economic reasons are compared to the discourses surrounding sex work, the labels given to sex workers begin to reflect these economic pressures. The discourses that point to the economic nature of sex work that were identified by the respondents reflect this pressure.

*Jo Acate* - those who sell themselves

Tomato seller - I sell my body

*Nekoleragyange* - I do my own business/  
I am self employed

*Musumbuzi* - I purchase penises only.

All the above names given to sex workers reflect the economic nature of the sex trade in the country. Sex work is commercial and performed for profit. The people who belong to this school of thought are the positivists who want sex work regulated so that they are provided a safe space for the work which either the economic conditions have forced them into or that which they choose to continue doing.

Sex workers' experiences are central to the analysis of these discourses for feminist scholarship at a broader level. According to feminist standpoint theory, experience is the beginning of knowledge. While cognizant of the assertion that women's experiences constitute knowledge, it is important to recognise the differences in women's experiences as

a further basis for understanding and theorising women's experiences. The recognition of these differences is based on arguments made by several Afro-feminist scholars, including Oyeronke Oyewumi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Molaria Ogundipe Leslie, and Chandra Mohanty, who argue that there is no single category of women.

Mohanty (1984) argues that women should not be constituted as a homogenous group based on their sex because, besides the biological similarities, there are age, cultural, historical, ethnic, economic, and other forms of differences that define and constitute the category women. I use Mohanty's idea to develop my standpoint in this study and recognise the situated knowledge that Ugandan sex workers bring to the table in presenting truths – subjective truths about their experiences. These truths are situated, located, and differentiated by the categories of women represented in the sample of the women interviewed for this study in Gulu and Kampala. These differences further help to explain and interrogate the Western-centric debate between pro-abolitionists and sex positivists cited earlier. What were the experiences of sex workers? How did their experiences advance the empowerment and sex-positivist debates of Western feminism? What aspects of the 'situatedness' informed our understanding of the experiences of the Ugandan prostitutes? These are very significant questions, answers

to which I sought to understand the place of the sex workers in Kampala and Gulu.

The majority of the respondents had more negative experiences than positive ones while plying their trade. Negative experiences include customers refusing to pay them money after, some clients refusing to use condoms, some clients strip them and leave them naked, some want rough sex, and some verbally abuse them. Others complained about their clients stealing their phones. There are also customers who come and pick up a sex worker and pretend to request individual services, and then take them to a room full of men and force them to serve all of them. Other problems include condoms bursting and exposing sex workers to the risks of STIs and HIV/AIDS. At times, they are threatened with violence; threatened that their throats will be slit open or that they will be chopped with a Machete/*panga*, especially when the client wants to dodge payment after enjoying their services. Comparing the negative experiences of respondents from Gulu with those from Kampala, one finds that the two common negative experiences were found: customers refusing to pay and customers refusing to use condoms. This implies that there are more economic and health risks for sex workers in general, but the number of refusals to pay in Gulu was higher than refusals by clients to pay in Kampala. Sex workers are exposed to violence, and there is no mechanism to protect

them. The research shows that the sex workers in Gulu were more disempowered and disadvantaged than those in Kampala. One of the respondents shared her experience of violence as follows:

*Other customers take you and say that there is no money. If you insist and say, 'give me my money', he picks a knife. There was one who took me to his house and did that to me. I do not know his name, but I know his house. (Joyce 26, Gulu).* These are some of the forms of gender-based violence that sex workers are exposed to. In Gulu, there was a case where a sex worker had been strangled the night before I conducted the interviews, and one of our respondents narrated the grisly story to us.

*Most of the girls who die do so because sex work has become very risky in Gulu. Yesterday, they killed one of us at the Custom Corner. We went and saw her. They broke her neck. They found an ID (Identity Card) and a wallet at the scene. It was picked, and the owner of the ID was traced (Ayerango 29, Gulu).*

Unfortunately, it was not possible to follow up to determine whether the suspect whose ID cards were found near the body of the deceased was arrested. The sex workers collected money to take their friend's body home for burial. Such is the solidarity among street sex workers when crises arise. Overall, the ratio of negative experiences of sex workers in Gulu was higher than that in Kampala. Workers in Kampala complained more about police raids than harassment from clients. However,

not all the experiences were negative. The positive experiences of sex workers with customers in Kampala can be summarised as follows: customers are more understanding, friendlier, and good to the sex workers. The women have developed a network of people whom they alert in case they leave for the night and do not return. The respondents from Kampala also explained that they have semi-permanent clients who come specifically for their services, and these customers pay very well. They also have access to good health services because of organisations like Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU) and Most At Risk Population Initiative (MARPI) – Mulago, which help them access health services. Some can afford to visit good private clinics. In Gulu, the positive experiences reported were few in comparison, although some reported occasionally having customers who pay well. The sex workers also stressed that they have more customers on days when there are dances in town because many clients tend to come on those days. Overall, the findings show that money comes first in determining good or bad relations between sex workers and their customers. As if we see from the summary above, the majority of the sex workers entered the trade because of economic hardships, yet they also feel exploited by the trade, which means that there is a need for change. Unless the conditions surrounding sex work are improved, sex work will continue to be a risky venture.

## The pleasurable nature of sex work

The question of class cannot be ignored in the situational analysis of the experiences of these sex workers. Kampala tends to have high-class prostitutes who ply their trade in posh hotels, compared to low-class prostitutes who operate from the streets. Of those interviewed, two were in the high-class category. They did not have any negative experiences to share because they said that they operate from high-class secure places and serve high-class customers only. The two respondents high-class sex workers shared this experience:

According to where I conduct my business from, my customers are a bit understanding and considerate so I don't have many issues with them so long as we negotiate (Natasha 22, Kampala).

It is not bad. Recently, when the Pope visited Uganda (in 2015), I spent a week with a Mzungu who gave me 150 dollars for being good in bed. (Nalulange 25, Kampala).

These were the categories that identified themselves as sex workers and not prostitutes. Their narratives showed that they had a choice of what to do and where. They were "Call girls"- whenever a client needed them, he would call, and they would negotiate their pay and the place to go ahead of time. In such categories, the discourses of sex work were associated with pleasure. Reflecting on the names identified earlier by respondents, the pleasurable nature

of sex work was captured in the following labels:

*Kawomera*: My clients say I am sweet.

*Kakumikila*: I am sweet.

*Namazzi*: A person who ejaculates a lot of vaginal fluids.

*Ndibesa*: They were dying for me.

To move the discourse from the negatives of the identity of a prostitute to sex work and pleasure, many things need to be considered. The social conditions of sex workers are critical. As long as they are not economically empowered, they cannot control their sexual activities. Economic control translates into the ability to negotiate fair transactions in a safe space.

The discourse surrounding sex work as pleasurable is therefore influenced by economic gains which depend on social class, as can be seen from the above discussions. The rich sex workers can negotiate better packages for themselves and they will identify sex work with pleasure, while the poorer sex workers are pressed by the need to make whatever little money they can and are usually disadvantaged, exploited, and labelled derogatively as prostitutes.

## Demeaning and derogative discourses associated with sex work

All six sex workers interviewed from Gulu had at one time or another been arrested and were released after paying a fine of between five thousand to sixty-five thousand

Ugandan shillings<sup>9</sup>. In Kampala, only two out of the twelve women interviewed had not been arrested by the police, and their reason was that they operate from very high class locations that were not raided by the police. Some respondents accused the police of coercion and of getting sex in exchange for not charging or arresting them. Some accused the police of stealing their money when they were arrested.

The following labels reflect the derogatory nature of the identities associated with sex work. In fact, the label prostitute is considered negative in social discourse, as explained earlier.

*Malaya/ Alaya* - Prostitute

*Musubuꜛi* - The one who purchases penises

*Kiteleke* - the one next to you knows what is in your luggage

*Nalwewuba* – The one (woman) who never settles for one (man) only

*Nsangayo* - You will find me here

*Aguu* - Homeless

*Apoli* - the sly duiker

*Agoo* - The chameleon

The meanings behind these identities reflect discourses in the broader socio-cultural context, showing the relationship between meanings and societal perceptions. Prostitutes are considered homeless. She changes colour like a chameleon, implying that she cannot be trusted. She is a sly trickster like the duiker, who looks

beautiful and innocent on the outside, but steals from farmers' gardens. In fact, there is a song in Luo about an *Apoli* who chews money that has been recalibrated into modern rap which youngsters now enjoy from the Luo entertainment industry<sup>10</sup>.

The sex worker is considered a vagabond, a home-breaker, a woman who has failed to get married, and a woman who poaches on the husbands of other women who are properly married. She is a service provider of goods that most people will not mention in public discourse, yet, that is the identity she chooses to have—a *Musubuꜛi* -the one who purchases penises.

## Conclusion

These demeaning discourses surrounding sex work point to the problems that sex workers face. The debate should shift from abolishing sex work because it disempowers women to more nuanced, concrete realities that social discourses expose us to. These discourses mainly emphasise the social conditions (class position) which drive some women to sell sex and the structural reasons that condition their engagement. The main critique of the sex positivist

<sup>10</sup> *Apoli Apoli Camo Poto* is a song that was derived from oral folklore and modernised into a rap version available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daHtAUJj0LI>

In the original folk dance song, Apoli is a sly, beautiful animal that was notorious for feeding on the crops of farmers. In the lyrics, the farmer wonders how such a beautiful animal can be so destructive to crops. In the rap lyrics, Apoli eats money; the Apoli of Kampala wears trousers like men and can chew money so badly from their victims.

<sup>9</sup> One (1) United States Dollar is equivalent to between 3500-3800 Uganda shillings depending on the rates in the stock market.

school is that they tend to argue that once sex work is legal, sex workers will have better access to safe working conditions. However, they tend to ignore the existence of gendered social structures that would make the operationalisation of sex work difficult in society, even if it were to be legalised. These discourses show examples of some of these gendered attitudes embedded in the social fabric of society. This implies that to make sex work potentially empowering, we must first focus on eliminating the structural reasons which make women more vulnerable to moral judgement, poverty, and exploitation. It is not only about the moral stigma attached to prostitution; it is about identifying the negative discourses and empowering society to look at the humanity of sex workers by understanding their lives as a whole.

Therefore, more emphasis must be placed on protecting sex workers from all forms of economic, gendered, attitudinal, and institutional exploitation. They should be provided a safe working environment, safe health services, and affordable judicial services as the work gets decriminalised. Alternatively, for those who are forced to go into the trade due to economic hardship, the

government should offer them loans as business start-up capital or offer alternative job opportunities.

In conclusion, sex work in Uganda is more about survival than work. Sex workers are mainly perceived as prostitutes, and vagabonds rather than as empowered women in charge of their bodies and destinies, as seen in the many negative discourses about sex workers. There is no significant difference in the perception of sex workers in Gulu and Kampala. It is a practice that is characterised by negativity, and the experiences of the majority of women have not been good. Given other opportunities, they would abandon it and earn money through other jobs. The debate around sex work should move beyond the Western-centric discussion between pro-abolitionists and sex positivists to consider context-specific realities that may warrant protecting sex workers from harm inflicted upon them by individuals as well as institutions. These discourses surrounding sex work can be used to rethink and redesign a middle position where social realities inform policy, activism, and identity politics of sex workers in Uganda to govern how they are treated by the public.

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