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COMMERCIAL SEX WORK AND STATE REGULATION IN NIGERIA: A POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS, 2015–2025

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ABSTRACT

Commercial sex work remains one of the most complex and controversial socio-economic issues in Nigeria, reflecting the interplay of poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, public health concerns, criminal justice policies, and human rights. Although the practice is prohibited under Nigerian law, it has continued to expand and diversify between 2015 and 2025, driven by worsening economic conditions, rapid urbanisation, youth unemployment, internal migration, and the growing influence of digital technologies that facilitate online solicitation and networking. This study examines the political economy of commercial sex work in Nigeria by analysing its underlying socio-economic drivers, the effectiveness of existing state regulatory frameworks, and their implications for governance and sustainable development. Anchored in Political Economy Theory, the study adopts a qualitative documentary research design based on a documentary review of peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, legal instruments, and reports. The findings reveal that punitive legal and law enforcement approaches have achieved limited success in reducing commercial sex work while simultaneously increasing the vulnerability of sex workers to violence, exploitation, social stigma, health risks, and economic insecurity. The digitalisation of commercial sex work has also complicated regulatory efforts and exposed significant gaps in existing legal and institutional frameworks. It concludes that a more balanced and sustainable policy response should integrate economic empowerment programmes, expanded social protection, strengthened anti-trafficking initiatives, rights-based public health interventions, and evidence-based governance reforms. The study contributes to contemporary debates on informal economies, state regulation, gender, and social policy, while providing practical recommendations for improving governance and protecting vulnerable populations in Nigeria.

Keywords: Commercial Sex Work, Political Economy, State Regulation, Governance, Public Health.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex work remains one of the most persistent and contested dimensions of the informal economy in many developing countries. Although often examined through moral, legal, and public health perspectives, it is equally a product of broader political and economic structures that shape patterns of livelihood, inequality, and social exclusion. Across sub-Saharan Africa, rapid urbanisation, unemployment, widening income disparities, migration, and weak social protection systems have increased the vulnerability of many individuals, particularly women and young people, to survival-based and transactional forms of commercial sex work (Scorgie et al., 2012; Shannon et al., 2018). These structural conditions have become more pronounced in recent years as many African economies have struggled with economic shocks, inflationary pressures, insecurity, and the socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, commercial sex work has evolved beyond traditional brothel-based operations into more decentralised and technology-driven forms facilitated by mobile communication, digital payment systems, and social media platforms.

Nigeria presents one of the most compelling contexts for examining these developments because of its large population, persistent socio-economic inequalities, and complex regulatory environment. Despite abundant natural and human resources, the country continues to experience high rates of poverty, unemployment, youth underemployment, and gender disparities that have constrained inclusive development (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; World Bank, 2024). These conditions have expanded the informal economy, within which commercial sex work has become an important, albeit controversial, livelihood strategy for some individuals. The industry is concentrated in major urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Kano, Benin City, and Calabar, but it has also spread to mining communities, border towns, transport corridors, university environments, tourist destinations, and rapidly growing suburban settlements. Increasingly, commercial sex work is organised through digital platforms, encrypted messaging applications, escort services, and social media, making conventional policing and regulatory approaches less effective.

The legal status of commercial sex work in Nigeria further complicates this reality. While prostitution-related activities are prohibited under provisions of the Criminal Code applicable in southern Nigeria and the Penal Code applicable in many northern states, enforcement has largely focused on arresting and prosecuting sex workers rather than addressing the structural factors that sustain the industry. In addition, Nigeria operates extensive anti-trafficking legislation through the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), reflecting the state's commitment to combating human trafficking and sexual exploitation. However, important distinctions exist between trafficking, sexual exploitation, and consensual adult commercial sex work, and these distinctions are not always consistently reflected in law enforcement practices or public policy. As a result, criminal justice responses frequently intersect with broader concerns relating to corruption, police harassment, extortion, arbitrary detention, stigma, and restricted access to healthcare and legal protection for sex workers (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The persistence of commercial sex work despite decades of criminalisation raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of existing regulatory approaches. Available evidence suggests that punitive legal frameworks have not eliminated commercial sex work but have instead pushed many activities underground, increasing exposure to violence, exploitation, sexually transmitted infections, and other public health risks (Shannon et al., 2018; UNAIDS, 2023). Fear of arrest and social discrimination may also dis-

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courage sex workers from accessing health services, reporting violence, or seeking legal remedies against abuse. These outcomes have stimulated international debates on whether criminalisation, decriminalisation, or alternative regulatory approaches are more effective in protecting public health, promoting human rights, and reducing exploitation. While these debates have received considerable scholarly attention globally, empirical evidence from Nigeria remains fragmented and often concentrates on HIV prevention, trafficking, or gender-based violence rather than examining commercial sex work as part of the country's wider political economy.

The political economy perspective provides a broader analytical framework for understanding why commercial sex work persists despite legal prohibition. Rather than viewing sex work solely as an individual moral choice or criminal behaviour, political economy emphasises how structural inequalities, labour market failures, declining real incomes, unequal access to education, and limited employment opportunities shape livelihood decisions. Nigeria's recurring economic crises, fluctuating oil revenues, high inflation, currency depreciation, and rising cost of living during the last decade have intensified economic vulnerability for many households. Women and young people have been disproportionately affected because of unequal access to productive assets, persistent labour market discrimination, and inadequate social safety nets. Under such circumstances, commercial sex work may emerge as one of several survival strategies adopted within the informal economy. This perspective does not romanticise or endorse commercial sex work; rather, it situates the phenomenon within broader political and economic structures that influence individual choices and constrain available alternatives.

The period between 2015 and 2025 is particularly significant for examining commercial sex work in Nigeria. This decade encompasses major political, economic, and social transformations that reshaped livelihoods and labour markets. The period witnessed economic recession, exchange-rate instability, rising inflation, increasing youth unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic, expanding digital technologies, heightened internal migration, and significant changes in security conditions across different parts of the country. These developments altered both the demand for and the organisation of commercial sex work, while simultaneously presenting new challenges for law enforcement, public health authorities, and policymakers. The rapid growth of online platforms, mobile applications, and cashless payment systems further transformed the operational dynamics of the industry, requiring regulatory institutions to confront forms of commercial sex work that extend beyond traditional physical locations.

Although an expanding body of literature has examined prostitution, transactional sex, HIV/AIDS, trafficking, and sexual exploitation in Nigeria, several important gaps remain. Much of the existing scholarship adopts public health, criminological, or gender-based approaches, with comparatively limited attention devoted to the interaction between economic structures, governance, legal regulation, and the informal economy. Studies also tend to examine individual dimensions of commercial sex work in isolation rather than integrating questions of state regulation, labour precarity, poverty, digital transformation, and sustainable development into a single analytical framework. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how contemporary political and economic conditions shape both the persistence of commercial sex work and the effectiveness of government responses.

Against this background, this study examines the political economy of commercial sex work in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. Specifically, it investigates the structural socio-economic factors driving commercial sex work, evaluates the effectiveness of Nigeria's legal and institutional regulatory framework, and analyses the implications of existing policies for

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governance, public health, and sustainable development. By integrating insights from political economy with recent empirical literature, the study contributes to broader scholarly debates on informal economies, social policy, gender, and state regulation in developing societies. It also provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers seeking to address the structural drivers of commercial sex work while strengthening anti-trafficking efforts, improving public health outcomes, protecting vulnerable populations, and promoting inclusive socio-economic development in Nigeria.

2.0. LITERATURE REVIEW

Commercial sex work has attracted sustained scholarly attention across sociology, political science, criminology, economics, public health, gender studies, and development studies because of its complex relationship with poverty, labour markets, migration, governance, and human rights. Contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects explanations that portray commercial sex work solely as a moral or criminal issue, arguing instead that it is embedded within broader political and economic structures that shape opportunities, vulnerabilities, and livelihood strategies (Weitzer, 2012; Plambech, 2014; Shannon et al., 2018; Scorgie et al., 2012). Within developing countries, particularly those characterised by persistent unemployment, widening inequality, and weak social protection systems, commercial sex work is increasingly analysed as part of the informal economy where individuals respond to constrained economic opportunities and labour market exclusion (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022; Essien et al., 2022). This perspective has gained prominence in African scholarship, where researchers argue that structural economic conditions rather than individual moral failure provide a more convincing explanation for the persistence of commercial sex work.

The political economy literature consistently identifies poverty, unemployment, income inequality, gender discrimination, inadequate educational opportunities, rural-urban migration, and weak institutional capacity as the principal structural drivers of commercial sex work (Agwu et al., 2020; Scorgie et al., 2012; Shannon et al., 2018; ILO, 2022). Rather than representing purely individual choices, participation in commercial sex work is widely understood as a livelihood strategy adopted under conditions of economic deprivation and social exclusion (Platt et al., 2018; Weitzer, 2012). Agwu et al. (2020), in their systematic review of migration into sex work from Edo State, found that economic hardship, unemployment, and limited educational opportunities were the most frequently reported motivations for entering the commercial sex industry, while weak governance and corruption undermined policy interventions. Within Nigeria, the socio-economic environment has deteriorated considerably during the last decade. Rising inflation, youth unemployment, declining household purchasing power, exchange-rate instability, and recurrent economic recessions have significantly affected livelihoods across both urban and rural communities (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; World Bank, 2024). According to the World Bank (2024), increasing poverty and declining real incomes have expanded informal employment, particularly among women and young adults who face limited opportunities within the formal labour market. Persistent unemployment and underemployment may expose Nigerian youths to precarious occupations, including commercial sex work. Scholars therefore argue that commercial sex work should be analysed within the broader context of labour market failures, inadequate economic diversification, and weak social welfare institutions rather than as an isolated criminal phenomenon (Essien et al., 2022).

A substantial body of literature has also examined commercial sex work from a public health perspective. Much of this research has focused on HIV/AIDS

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prevention, sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health, and access to healthcare among female sex workers. Although considerable progress has been achieved through targeted interventions, including condom promotion, HIV testing, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and community-based health programmes, recent studies indicate that significant barriers to healthcare persist because of stigma, discrimination, criminalisation, and social exclusion (UNAIDS, 2023; Shannon et al., 2018; Poteat et al., 2021). In Nigeria, female sex workers continue to constitute one of the populations disproportionately affected by HIV despite improvements in prevention programmes (National Agency for the Control of AIDS [NACA], 2023). Recent empirical studies further demonstrate that fear of arrest, police harassment, and social discrimination discourage many sex workers from seeking healthcare, reporting violence, or participating fully in public health programmes (Scorgie et al., 2012; Poteat et al., 2021). Consequently, scholars increasingly advocate integrated approaches that combine healthcare access with social protection and legal reforms.

Another important strand of literature examines violence, exploitation, and occupational vulnerability within commercial sex work. Studies consistently report that sex workers experience disproportionately high levels of physical violence, sexual assault, extortion, economic exploitation, and psychological abuse from clients, criminal networks, and, in some instances, law enforcement personnel (Deering et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2018; Amnesty International, 2022). Criminalisation has been identified as an important factor that intensifies these vulnerabilities because fear of prosecution discourages victims from reporting crimes or seeking legal remedies (Platt et al., 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Nigerian studies similarly reveal that police raids, arbitrary arrests, extortion, and public stigma remain common experiences among commercial sex workers, thereby reinforcing social marginalisation and limiting access to justice (Essien et al., 2022). These findings have stimulated growing scholarly debates regarding whether punitive legal approaches achieve their intended objectives or instead produce unintended social and public health consequences.

The literature on state regulation presents equally divergent perspectives. Countries adopt different legal approaches to commercial sex work, ranging from complete criminalisation and partial criminalisation to legalisation and decriminalisation (Weitzer, 2012). Nigeria maintains a prohibitionist legal framework through the Criminal Code, Penal Code, and various anti-trafficking laws enforced primarily by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). Existing scholarship acknowledges the importance of anti-trafficking legislation in protecting victims of forced prostitution and sexual exploitation but argues that enforcement often fails to distinguish adequately between consensual adult commercial sex work and human trafficking (Akanle et al., 2022; NAPTIP, 2023). This ambiguity has generated criticism from human rights scholars who contend that criminal justice interventions frequently target economically vulnerable sex workers rather than organised criminal syndicates or traffickers (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022).

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the digital transformation of commercial sex work. The rapid expansion of smartphones, social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, online escort services, and electronic payment systems has fundamentally altered the organisation of commercial sex work globally (Sanders et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2018). In Nigeria, digital technologies have increasingly enabled independent solicitation, client screening, and online transactions, reducing dependence on traditional brothel-based operations while simultaneously creating new regulatory challenges for law enforcement agencies (Essien et al., 2022). Despite these

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developments, empirical studies examining digital commercial sex work in Nigeria remain limited, indicating an important area requiring further scholarly investigation.

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights into commercial sex work in Nigeria, several important gaps remain. First, most studies concentrate on HIV prevention, reproductive health, trafficking, or gender-based violence, while comparatively few examine commercial sex work through a political economy perspective that integrates governance, labour markets, economic restructuring, and institutional effectiveness. Second, many Nigerian studies are geographically limited to specific urban centres or health programmes, making broader national generalisations difficult. Third, existing scholarship rarely examines the combined effects of economic recession, COVID-19, inflation, youth unemployment, digitalisation, and governance challenges on commercial sex work during the period 2015–2025. Finally, relatively little attention has been devoted to evaluating how Nigeria's legal and institutional frameworks respond to the changing organisation of commercial sex work within an increasingly digital and informal economy.

This study addresses these gaps by adopting Political Economy Theory as an analytical framework for understanding commercial sex work in Nigeria. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on health or criminal justice outcomes, the present study integrates economic structures, governance institutions, labour market dynamics, legal regulation, and social policy into a single explanatory framework. By analysing the interaction between structural socio-economic conditions and state regulatory responses between 2015 and 2025, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of commercial sex work in contemporary Nigeria and provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening governance, protecting vulnerable populations, promoting public health, and addressing the structural drivers of commercial sex work.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Political Economy Theory, which explains how the interaction between economic structures, state institutions, and social relations shapes livelihood opportunities and human behaviour (Gilpin, 2001; Caporaso & Levine, 1992). Rather than viewing commercial sex work solely as an individual moral choice or criminal act, the theory situates it within broader structural conditions characterised by poverty, unemployment, labour market exclusion, gender inequality, and weak governance. It therefore provides a useful framework for analysing commercial sex work as a socio-economic phenomenon rooted in structural inequalities rather than personal deviance (Harvey, 2005; Standing, 2011).

Political Economy Theory has its intellectual foundations in the classical works of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx, with contemporary scholars extending its application to issues of globalisation, neoliberal reforms, informal economies, and state regulation (Marx, 1867; Gilpin, 2001; Jessop, 2010). The theory argues that persistent economic hardship, limited access to formal employment, inadequate social protection, and unequal distribution of resources compel vulnerable individuals to adopt alternative livelihood strategies, including commercial sex work (ILO, 2022; Weitzer, 2012; Shannon et al., 2018). It further emphasises that the state plays a critical role in shaping these outcomes through policies on employment, education, healthcare, poverty reduction, and law enforcement (Evans, 1995).

The theory is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where the period 2015–2025 was characterised by economic recession, rising inflation, exchange-rate instability, youth unemployment, and declining household incomes (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; World Bank, 2024). These conditions disproportion-

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ately affected women and young people, increasing dependence on informal economic activities, including commercial sex work. From a political economy perspective, the persistence of commercial sex work despite legal prohibition reflects not only weaknesses in regulatory enforcement but also deeper structural challenges such as poverty, labour market failures, gender inequality, and inadequate social welfare systems.

Although critics argue that Political Economy Theory may understate individual agency and cultural influences, it remains the most appropriate framework for this study because it links commercial sex work to the broader dynamics of economic governance, social inequality, and institutional capacity. It therefore provides a comprehensive basis for examining the socio-economic drivers of commercial sex work, evaluating Nigeria's regulatory responses, and proposing policy interventions that address the structural conditions sustaining the phenomenon.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design to examine the political economy of commercial sex work in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic, political, legal, and institutional factors shaping commercial sex work without relying on primary data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study draws exclusively on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government publications, legal instruments, and reports produced by reputable national and international institutions, including the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), National Agency for the Control of AIDS (NACA), World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and UN Women. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis, which enabled the systematic identification, coding, comparison, and interpretation of recurring themes relating to the socio-economic drivers of commercial sex work, state regulation, governance, public health, and human rights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, evidence from multiple sources was triangulated, allowing for the development of a comprehensive understanding of commercial sex work within Nigeria's broader political economy while providing a robust basis for evidence-based policy recommendations.

4.0. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Political Economy Drivers of Commercial Sex Work in Nigeria

The documentary evidence analysed in this study indicates that the expansion of commercial sex work in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 is primarily a consequence of deteriorating socio-economic conditions rather than individual moral failure. Across the documents reviewed, poverty, unemployment, declining household income, inflation, gender inequality, rural-urban migration, and the growth of the informal economy emerged as the principal structural factors sustaining commercial sex work. These findings are consistent with the assumptions of Political Economy Theory, which argues that livelihood decisions are largely conditioned by the interaction of economic structures, labour markets, and state institutions (Gilpin, 2001; Standing, 2011).

A recurring theme in the documentary evidence is the relationship between poverty and commercial sex work. The World Bank Nigeria Development Update (2024) attributes the worsening socio-economic situation to persistent inflation and declining purchasing power, observing that high inflation has continued to erode household purchasing power and increase

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poverty (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, the National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that increasing numbers of Nigerians continue to depend on informal economic activities for survival because of declining real incomes (NBS, 2023). These documents suggest that commercial sex work increasingly functions as a livelihood strategy for economically vulnerable individuals who lack sustainable income opportunities. This finding corroborates earlier studies which identify poverty as the strongest predictor of entry into commercial sex work in Nigeria and other developing countries (Agwu et al., 2020; Essien et al., 2022; Shannon et al., 2018).

The analysis further demonstrates that youth unemployment and labour market exclusion have significantly contributed to the expansion of commercial sex work. According to the Nigeria Labour Force Survey, labour underutilisation remains disproportionately higher among young persons and females (NBS, 2023). Likewise, the International Labour Organization notes that informality remains the principal source of employment in many developing economies (ILO, 2022). These findings indicate that many young Nigerians, particularly women, experience prolonged exclusion from stable employment despite improvements in educational attainment. Consequently, informal occupations, including commercial sex work, become viable alternatives for income generation. From a political economy perspective, this reflects structural deficiencies in labour market performance rather than individual preferences for commercial sex work (Standing, 2011; Harvey, 2005).

The documentary evidence also highlights the role of gender inequality in shaping participation in commercial sex work. The UN Women Gender Snapshot observes that women continue to face barriers to decent work, equal pay and economic opportunities (UN Women, 2023). Similarly, the World Bank (2024) reports that women remain disproportionately represented among low-income and vulnerable households . These structural inequalities limit women's access to productive assets, formal employment, and financial resources, increasing their vulnerability during periods of economic hardship. The findings therefore support feminist political economy arguments that commercial sex work is closely linked to unequal access to economic opportunities rather than merely individual decision-making (Elson, 1999; Fraser, 2016).

Another significant finding concerns the influence of rural-urban migration. Documentary evidence from the International Organization for Migration (2023) indicates that economic migration within Nigeria is largely driven by the search for employment and improved livelihoods. However, many migrants encounter unemployment, housing insecurity, and weak social support upon arrival in urban centres. Previous empirical studies similarly demonstrate that migration increases vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation because migrants often lack stable employment and social protection (Agwu et al., 2020; Scorgie et al., 2012). The findings suggest that commercial sex work has become concentrated in rapidly growing urban centres where economic opportunities coexist with high living costs and expanding informal economies.

The documents further reveal that economic shocks between 2015 and 2025 intensified these structural pressures. Nigeria experienced recession, exchange-rate volatility, rising food prices, and sustained inflation during the study period. According to the World Bank (2024), economic growth has not translated into sufficient poverty reduction because inflation has outpaced income growth. These macroeconomic conditions reduced household resilience and expanded dependence on informal survival strategies. Commercial sex work therefore emerged not as an isolated social phenomenon but as one manifestation of broader economic vulnerability.

Overall, the documentary evidence demonstrates that

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the principal drivers of commercial sex work in Nigeria are structural rather than individual. Poverty, labour market exclusion, gender inequality, migration, and macroeconomic instability consistently appear across the analysed documents as interconnected factors that shape participation in commercial sex work. These findings support Political Economy Theory by demonstrating that commercial sex work reflects deeper inequalities in the distribution of economic opportunities and social protection. Having established these structural drivers, the next section examines how Nigeria's legal and institutional framework has responded to the phenomenon.

4.2. State Regulation and the Effectiveness of Nigeria's Legal Framework

Having established that commercial sex work in Nigeria is primarily driven by structural socio-economic conditions, this section examines the effectiveness of the country's legal and institutional responses. The documentary evidence indicates that although Nigeria has developed an extensive legal framework to regulate prostitution-related activities and combat human trafficking, implementation has achieved only limited success. Rather than substantially reducing commercial sex work, existing regulatory measures have largely displaced the industry into less visible physical locations and increasingly into digital spaces. The findings suggest that weaknesses in enforcement, institutional coordination, corruption, and the absence of clear distinctions between consensual adult sex work and trafficking continue to undermine regulatory effectiveness.

The documentary analysis shows that Nigeria maintains a predominantly prohibitionist legal regime through the Criminal Code Act, Penal Code Act, the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015, and other related laws. Sections of the Criminal Code criminalise activities associated with prostitution, including living on the earnings of prostitution and operating brothels (Criminal Code Act, Cap. C38, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004, ss. 223-225). Similarly, the Penal Code applicable in many northern states contains provisions prohibiting prostitution-related activities (Penal Code Act, Cap. P3, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004). These legal instruments demonstrate the state's commitment to suppressing commercial sex work while protecting public morality. However, documentary evidence suggests that legal prohibition has not eliminated the industry but has instead altered its organisation and methods of operation.

A recurring finding across the reviewed documents is that enforcement efforts have focused predominantly on periodic arrests and raids rather than sustained structural interventions. The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Annual Report (2023) notes that the Agency intensified surveillance, investigations and prosecutions of trafficking offences through enhanced inter-agency collaboration (NAPTIP, 2023). While this demonstrates institutional commitment to combating trafficking, the report primarily documents actions against trafficking networks rather than providing evidence that commercial sex work itself has declined. This distinction is significant because trafficking and consensual adult commercial sex work are related but legally and conceptually different phenomena. The findings therefore suggest that existing enforcement mechanisms have been more effective in addressing organised trafficking than in reducing economically driven commercial sex work.

The analysis further indicates that institutional coordination remains a significant regulatory challenge. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) observes that effective responses to trafficking and sexual exploitation require strong coordination among criminal justice institutions, social welfare agencies and civil society organisations (UNODC, 2023). However, documentary evidence reviewed for

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this study reveals overlapping institutional responsibilities among the Nigeria Police Force, NAPTIP, state ministries, immigration authorities, and judicial institutions, sometimes resulting in fragmented implementation. Such institutional fragmentation limits information sharing, delays prosecutions, and weakens victim protection mechanisms, thereby reducing the overall effectiveness of regulatory interventions.

Another important finding concerns the criminalisation of sex workers rather than structural drivers. The UNAIDS Global AIDS Update (2023) states that punitive laws and law enforcement practices continue to discourage sex workers from accessing essential health and protection services (UNAIDS, 2023). Similarly, Amnesty International (2022) argues that criminalisation frequently exposes sex workers to harassment, arbitrary arrest, extortion, and social exclusion rather than addressing the economic conditions that sustain commercial sex work. These documents suggest that the dominant regulatory approach remains reactive and punitive, with limited emphasis on employment generation, social protection, rehabilitation, or economic reintegration. Consequently, enforcement often addresses the visible manifestations of commercial sex work without reducing the structural pressures identified in the preceding section.

The documentary evidence also highlights the impact of digital technology on regulatory effectiveness. Recent studies indicate that smartphones, encrypted messaging applications, social media platforms, and electronic payment systems have transformed the organisation of commercial sex work, reducing dependence on traditional brothels and street-based solicitation (Sanders et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2018). Existing legal frameworks were largely designed to regulate conventional forms of prostitution and have struggled to respond effectively to technology-enabled commercial sex work. As a result, enforcement agencies increasingly face difficulties in monitoring online transactions, identifying offenders, and gathering admissible digital evidence. This institutional gap has contributed to the continued evolution of commercial sex work despite existing legal prohibitions.

Overall, the documentary evidence indicates that Nigeria's legal and institutional framework has achieved partial success. While the country has strengthened anti-trafficking legislation and improved institutional capacity to investigate trafficking offences, the broader objective of reducing commercial sex work has remained largely unmet. The findings suggest that the limited effectiveness of the regulatory framework stems less from the absence of legislation than from implementation challenges, institutional fragmentation, technological change, and the continued influence of the structural socio-economic factors discussed in the previous section. Consequently, legal enforcement alone cannot effectively regulate commercial sex work without complementary policies that address poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, and social exclusion. The next section therefore examines the implications of these regulatory approaches for governance, human rights, and public health in Nigeria.

4.3. Commercial Sex Work, Human Rights, and Public Health

Building on the structural drivers and regulatory challenges discussed in the preceding sections, this section examines the broader implications of commercial sex work for governance, human rights, and public health in Nigeria. The documentary evidence indicates that the continued reliance on punitive regulatory approaches has produced significant governance and public health consequences while offering only limited success in reducing commercial sex work. Rather than revisiting the socio-economic causes already identified, the analysis here focuses on the outcomes of existing policies and institutional practices.

A major finding is that the criminalisation of commercial sex work has important human rights im-

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plications, particularly for economically vulnerable women. The UNAIDS Global AIDS Update (2023) observes that criminalization, stigma and discrimination continue to undermine access to HIV services for sex workers (UNAIDS, 2023). Likewise, Amnesty International (2022) documents cases in which sex workers experienced arbitrary arrest, extortion, intimidation, and physical abuse during law enforcement operations. These documents suggest that criminalisation frequently increases the vulnerability of sex workers rather than guaranteeing their protection. From a governance perspective, this raises important questions regarding accountability, proportionality in law enforcement, and the state's obligation to protect the fundamental rights of all citizens irrespective of occupation.

The documentary analysis also reveals significant public health consequences. According to the World Health Organization (2022), stigma, discrimination and punitive legal environments remain major barriers to equitable access to health services for key populations (WHO, 2022). Similarly, UNAIDS (2023) reports that fear of arrest and social exclusion discourages many sex workers from accessing HIV testing, treatment, and reproductive healthcare. These findings indicate that criminalisation may inadvertently weaken disease prevention efforts by driving commercial sex work further underground. Consequently, public health interventions become less effective because health authorities experience greater difficulty reaching vulnerable populations with preventive and treatment services. This finding is consistent with Shannon et al. (2022), who argue that supportive legal and policy environments significantly improve health outcomes among sex workers.

Another important implication emerging from the documents relates to governance and institutional credibility. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2023) emphasises that effective criminal justice responses require transparent institutions, inter-agency cooperation and respect for the rule of law (UNODC, 2023). However, reports reviewed for this study indicate that corruption, inconsistent enforcement, and weak institutional coordination continue to undermine regulatory effectiveness. Where enforcement is perceived as selective or associated with extortion and abuse, public confidence in regulatory institutions is weakened. The findings therefore suggest that governance challenges extend beyond the existence of legal provisions to include issues of institutional integrity, accountability, and effective implementation.

The documentary evidence further demonstrates that commercial sex work has implications for Nigeria's sustainable development agenda. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report (2023) stresses that ending poverty, reducing inequalities and achieving gender equality are mutually reinforcing objectives (United Nations, 2023). The persistence of commercial sex work reflects continuing deficits in these development goals, particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). The findings therefore suggest that commercial sex work is not merely a criminal justice concern but also a development challenge linked to employment, education, healthcare, and social protection. Addressing these broader development deficits is essential for reducing long-term vulnerability.

The analysis also shows that civil society organisations and public health agencies have increasingly complemented state institutions by providing healthcare, legal assistance, psychosocial support, and economic empowerment programmes for vulnerable populations. According to NACA (2023), partnerships with community-based organisations have improved HIV prevention and treatment coverage among key populations through outreach and peer education initiatives. These collaborative interventions

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demonstrate that multi-sectoral approaches combining public institutions with civil society organisations produce more sustainable outcomes than enforcement measures alone.

Overall, the documentary evidence indicates that the implications of commercial sex work extend far beyond criminal law enforcement. Existing regulatory approaches have generated complex governance, human rights, and public health challenges that require integrated policy responses. As established in the preceding sections, structural socio-economic inequalities continue to drive commercial sex work, while the findings in this section demonstrate that punitive responses alone may unintentionally increase vulnerability and weaken institutional effectiveness. The evidence therefore supports a balanced governance approach that combines effective law enforcement against trafficking and exploitation with stronger social protection, improved public health interventions, institutional accountability, and inclusive economic policies capable of addressing the broader developmental context within which commercial sex work persists.

4.4. Digital Transformation and the Changing Dynamics of Commercial Sex Work

The documentary evidence demonstrates that digital transformation has fundamentally altered the organisation, visibility, and operation of commercial sex work in Nigeria. Whereas commercial sex work was traditionally concentrated in brothels, hotels, bars, and street locations, digital technologies have increasingly shifted recruitment, advertising, client engagement, and financial transactions to online platforms. The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 observes that traffickers misuse technology during all the stages of trafficking in persons and for all forms of exploitation (UNODC, 2023). Although the report primarily addresses trafficking, the reviewed documents indicate that the same technological infrastructure has transformed the wider commercial sex industry by reducing reliance on identifiable physical spaces and facilitating more decentralised and less visible forms of operation.

The documents further show that social media platforms, encrypted messaging applications, online dating sites, and digital payment systems have become central to the organisation of commercial sex work. According to UNODC (2022), the internet and digital platforms offer traffickers numerous tools to recruit, exploit and advertise victims; organize their transport and accommodation; and hide criminal proceeds. The report further explains that these technologies allow offenders to operate with greater speed, cost-effectiveness and anonymity (UNODC, 2023). Documentary evidence therefore suggests that platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and online dating applications increasingly facilitate direct communication between clients and sex workers while reducing dependence on traditional intermediaries.

Another significant finding is that digital technologies have expanded the geographical reach of commercial sex work while simultaneously complicating regulatory oversight. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery notes that online advertisements have increased exponentially over the course of time, generating a large sum of profits in the industry (United Nations, 2023). The report further observes that hobby platforms... are known to be used to lure clients for offline sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2023). The reviewed documents indicate that digital communication enables individuals to negotiate services, arrange meetings, and receive electronic payments across multiple jurisdictions, making conventional policing strategies that focus on brothels and street-based activities increasingly ineffective.

The documentary evidence also demonstrates that digital transformation has blurred the distinction be-

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tween consensual commercial sex work and trafficking for sexual exploitation. According to the United Nations (2023), it is important to highlight... that these exploitative practices are often conflated with sex work. This finding is particularly important because the reviewed documents show that online advertisements, fake employment opportunities, and social media recruitment are increasingly used both by consensual adult service providers and organised trafficking networks. Consequently, digital investigations require stronger victim identification procedures capable of distinguishing voluntary adult commercial activities from coercion, deception, and exploitation.

The findings further reveal that digital technologies have generated new forms of vulnerability alongside greater operational autonomy. The UNODC Working Group on Trafficking in Persons recommends that States strengthen the expertise and capacity of law enforcement agencies to use new technological tools to conduct efficient and lawful investigations (UNODC, 2024). The Working Group further recommends enhancing cooperation between cybercrime and anti-trafficking agencies while improving the use of digital forensic evidence. These recommendations reflect the growing recognition that commercial sexual exploitation increasingly occurs within digital environments that require specialised investigative capacity beyond traditional criminal justice approaches.

Recent scholarly evidence equally supports the documentary findings. Ayodele et al. (2026), in their qualitative study of transactional "hook-up" practices in Nigeria, found that digital platforms have become integral to commercial sexual exchanges, observing that hook-up networks increasingly utilise mobile applications and online platforms to connect clients with service providers. Their study concludes that digital technologies have reshaped recruitment strategies, client selection, and commercial transactions within Nigeria's evolving informal sexual economy.

Overall, the reviewed documents consistently demonstrate that digital transformation has fundamentally changed the dynamics of commercial sex work in Nigeria. Technology has decentralised commercial transactions, increased anonymity, expanded geographical markets, and complicated traditional regulatory mechanisms. At the same time, digital platforms have created new opportunities for trafficking, cyber-enabled exploitation, financial fraud, and online coercion. The evidence therefore suggests that effective governance can no longer rely solely on conventional policing of physical locations but must increasingly incorporate cyber-investigation, digital forensic capability, financial intelligence, and technology-based victim identification while safeguarding privacy and human rights.

4.5. Governance Implications and Sustainable Development

The documentary evidence indicates that the persistence of commercial sex work in Nigeria raises fundamental questions about governance and the country's progress towards sustainable development. Rather than simply revealing weaknesses in criminal justice enforcement, the reviewed documents suggest that the phenomenon reflects broader governance deficits in employment generation, social protection, public service delivery, institutional coordination, and inclusive development. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises that the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions... is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Viewed from this perspective, commercial sex work becomes an indicator of wider developmental challenges that require coordinated policy responses extending beyond law enforcement.

The findings further demonstrate that commercial sex work has significant implications for Nigeria's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

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(SDGs). The reviewed documents consistently show that the conditions surrounding commercial sex work intersect with poverty, public health, gender inequality, unemployment, and institutional effectiveness, thereby affecting several interconnected goals, particularly SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, and 16. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023 notes that progress towards many of the Goals is either moving much too slowly or has regressed below the 2015 baseline (United Nations, 2023). The report further warns that the most vulnerable people and countries continue to suffer the most (United Nations, 2023). These observations correspond with the documentary evidence reviewed in this study, which indicates that economically and socially vulnerable populations remain disproportionately represented within commercial sex work, illustrating how governance shortcomings continue to impede inclusive development.

Another important governance implication concerns institutional effectiveness. The reviewed documents indicate that Nigeria possesses an extensive legal and policy framework addressing trafficking, sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, and public health. However, documentary evidence consistently suggests that implementation remains uneven because of fragmented institutional responsibilities, inadequate coordination, resource constraints, and limited technological capacity. The World Bank's 2024 development reporting emphasises that institutions are central to creating opportunities, managing risks and delivering public services effectively (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stresses that effective responses require coordinated, multidisciplinary approaches involving criminal justice, health and social service institutions (UNODC, 2023). These findings suggest that governance outcomes depend less on the existence of legislation than on the capacity of institutions to implement policies collaboratively, transparently, and consistently.

The documentary evidence also highlights the importance of governance that balances law enforcement with human rights and public health objectives. The World Health Organization maintains that health services should be accessible, acceptable and of good quality for everyone without discrimination (WHO, 2022). Likewise, UNAIDS argues that ending AIDS requires that legal and policy environments protect the rights of key populations and ensure equitable access to health services (UNAIDS, 2023). These documents suggest that governance approaches founded solely on punitive enforcement may undermine broader development objectives by discouraging access to healthcare and social support services. Sustainable governance therefore requires institutions capable of protecting public health while safeguarding the dignity and rights of vulnerable populations.

The findings further demonstrate that commercial sex work provides an important lens through which to evaluate state capacity and policy coherence. The reviewed documents reveal that sustainable development depends not only on economic growth but also on the ability of governments to translate development policies into measurable improvements in citizens' welfare. As the World Bank Nigeria Development Update 2024 states, creating more and better jobs is essential for reducing poverty and improving living standards (World Bank, 2024). Similarly, the International Labour Organization affirms that productive employment and decent work remain central to inclusive and sustainable development (ILO, 2022). These documents indicate that governance should ultimately be assessed by its capacity to expand decent employment opportunities, strengthen social protection systems, and reduce the structural vulnerabilities that undermine sustainable development.

Overall, the documentary evidence demonstrates that the governance implications of commercial sex work extend well beyond criminal regulation. The phenomenon reflects the interconnected nature of economic policy, institutional performance, public health,

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gender equality, and social inclusion. The findings therefore suggest that progress towards sustainable development in Nigeria will depend on strengthening institutional effectiveness, improving policy coordination, expanding decent work opportunities, and ensuring that governance interventions simultaneously promote human rights, public health, and social justice. In this sense, commercial sex work should be understood not merely as a regulatory challenge but as an important indicator of the broader quality of governance and the inclusiveness of Nigeria's development trajectory.

5.0. CONCLUSION

This study examined the political economy of commercial sex work in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025 using a qualitative documentary research design anchored in Political Economy Theory. The findings demonstrate that commercial sex work is fundamentally a manifestation of broader structural socio-economic and governance challenges rather than merely a criminal or moral issue. Documentary evidence from government publications, international organisations, legal instruments, and scholarly literature indicates that persistent poverty, youth unemployment, gender inequality, labour market exclusion, rural-urban migration, and weak social protection systems have collectively sustained the growth of commercial sex work despite Nigeria's prohibitionist legal framework. The study further found that while existing laws and anti-trafficking institutions have strengthened the prosecution of trafficking offences, they have had limited success in reducing commercial sex work because implementation is constrained by institutional fragmentation, technological changes, corruption, and inadequate attention to the underlying structural drivers. The findings also reveal that punitive regulatory approaches have significant implications for human rights, public health, and governance by increasing the vulnerability of sex workers and limiting their access to essential health and social services. Consequently, the study concludes that commercial sex work in Nigeria cannot be effectively addressed through law enforcement alone. Sustainable and long-term solutions require an integrated governance framework that combines inclusive economic growth, decent employment opportunities, gender-responsive social protection, strengthened institutional coordination, effective anti-trafficking measures, rights-based public health interventions, and evidence-based policymaking. Addressing these structural conditions will not only improve the regulation of commercial sex work but will also contribute to poverty reduction, social inclusion, institutional effectiveness, and the achievement of Nigeria's sustainable development objectives.

6.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Promote Inclusive Employment and Economic Empowerment Programmes:** The Federal Government should prioritise large-scale employment creation, vocational skills development, entrepreneurship support, and access to affordable credit for women, unemployed youth, and other economically vulnerable groups. Strengthening social protection programmes such as conditional cash transfers and livelihood support schemes would reduce dependence on survival-based informal occupations. This recommendation responds directly to the finding that poverty, unemployment, labour market exclusion, and declining household incomes are the principal political economy drivers of commercial sex work in Nigeria.

2. **Strengthen the Implementation and Coordination of Regulatory Institutions:** Government should improve coordination among the Nigeria Police Force, National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), immigration authorities, the judiciary, public health institutions, and relevant state agencies through integrated intelligence sharing, specialised training,

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and clearly defined institutional responsibilities. Greater investment in digital investigative capacity and institutional accountability will enhance the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks. This recommendation emanates from the finding that Nigeria possesses adequate legislation but that weak implementation, institutional fragmentation, and technological changes have significantly reduced regulatory effectiveness.

3. **Adopt Rights-Based Public Health and Human Rights Interventions:** Public health policies should expand access to HIV prevention, reproductive healthcare, psychosocial support, legal aid, and counselling services for vulnerable populations without discrimination or unnecessary barriers to access. Law enforcement agencies should also strengthen oversight mechanisms to prevent arbitrary arrests, extortion, and other human rights violations during enforcement operations. This recommendation addresses the finding that punitive regulatory approaches have increased the human rights and public health vulnerabilities of commercial sex workers while limiting their access to essential healthcare services.

4. **Strengthen Anti-Trafficking Measures While Distinguishing Trafficking from Consensual Adult Sex Work:** NAPTIP and other criminal justice institutions should intensify intelligence-led investigations targeting organised trafficking networks, recruiters, and exploitative criminal syndicates while improving victim identification and rehabilitation services. Clear operational guidelines should distinguish trafficking victims from economically vulnerable adults engaged in consensual commercial sex work to ensure that enforcement resources are appropriately targeted. This recommendation is informed by the finding that existing enforcement has been more successful against trafficking offences than in addressing the broader structural conditions sustaining commercial sex work.

5. **Integrate Commercial Sex Work into National Development and Governance Planning:** Federal and state governments should incorporate poverty reduction, gender equality, youth employment, urban development, and social inclusion policies into broader strategies for addressing commercial sex work. Policy responses should be evidence-based, regularly evaluated, and aligned with Nigeria's commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those relating to poverty reduction, decent work, gender equality, health, and strong institutions. This recommendation follows directly from the finding that commercial sex work is fundamentally a development and governance challenge rooted in structural socio-economic inequalities rather than solely a criminal justice issue.

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