

COMMERCIAL SEX WORKER AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION IN RIVERS STATE

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of women in commercial sex work in Rivers State has remained a persistent social issue, often exposing them to stigmatization, economic instability, and emotional trauma. Social work interventions, including advocacy, vocational training, and psychosocial support, are implemented to address these challenges and facilitate reintegration into families, alternative employment, and mainstream society. This study examines the extent to which these interventions effectively meet the needs of commercial sex workers and support their reintegration. The Ecological System theory by Urie Bronfenbrenner was adopted to guide the study. A descriptive survey research design was employed, involving interviews with 25 purposively selected participants, including commercial sex workers and social workers engaged in intervention programs. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, experiences, and outcomes related to advocacy, vocational training, and psychosocial support. The findings revealed that advocacy programs moderately improved awareness, reduced overt discrimination, and enhanced participants' confidence, although stigma remains entrenched. Vocational training enhanced employable skills and income diversification, leading to partial economic reintegration, but limitations such as lack of start-up capital and economic pressures constrained full transition from sex work. Psychosocial support significantly improved emotional well-being, self-esteem, and coping mechanisms, yet structural and social barriers continue to limit long-term reintegration. The study recommends integrated, sustained, and policy-backed interventions that combine advocacy, economic empowerment, and psychosocial support to ensure the holistic reintegration of commercial sex workers.

Keywords: *Commercial Sex Workers, Social Work Intervention, Advocacy, Vocational Training, Psychosocial Support, Reintegration, and Ecological System Theory.*

1. Introduction

Commercial sex work often referred to as prostitution or transactional sex is a global phenomenon influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors. In many societies, including Nigeria, commercial sex workers (CSWs) engage in sex trade primarily as a means of economic survival in contexts of unemployment, poverty, inequality, and limited access to formal employment (Onyango, Kinyanjui, & Mutere, 2017). In Rivers State, an oil-rich but seemingly economically unequal region of Nigeria, the prevalence of commercial sex work has been linked to urbanization, migration, and economic hardship (Ayo-Amaize & Erhun, 2020). Many individuals especially

young women enter the sex trade due to lack of educational and economic opportunities, family pressure, and gendered expectations (Okafor & Odonye, 2019). Commercial sex work exposes individuals to a range of vulnerabilities, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV/AIDS, discrimination, violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion (Oluwole & Ojo, 2018). The stigma attached to sex work often limits these women's access to health, legal, and social services, further deepening their marginalization (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2021). In Nigeria, sex workers face widespread stigma from families, communities, health workers, and law enforcement, which negatively affects their

mental health and overall well-being (Adebayo, 2022).

In Rivers State, the rapid growth of urban centers like Port Harcourt has created spaces where commercial sex work thrives due to an influx of transient workers, heightened demand, and weak regulation of sex work practices (Eze & Anugwom, 2021). Despite the risks associated with commercial sex work, social work interventions in the region remain limited, fragmented, or poorly coordinated. Social workers play pivotal roles in advocating for vulnerable populations, facilitating access to health and social services, promoting human rights, and empowering individuals to improve their life conditions (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). Yet, existing interventions often fall short due to inadequate funding, weak institutional support, and cultural barriers that hinder effective practice (Nwosu & Obi, 2020).

The need for comprehensive social work intervention becomes even more urgent when considering public health concerns. HIV/AIDS prevalence in Nigeria remains a critical issue and key populations such as CSWs are disproportionately affected (National Agency for the Control of AIDS, 2023). Social workers, therefore, have a unique responsibility to engage in targeted prevention efforts, counseling, advocacy, and empowerment programs designed to reduce infections, enhance health literacy, and address socio-economic vulnerabilities of CSWs. Without proper social work engagement, CSWs in Rivers State continue to be marginalized, with limited access to essential services and opportunities for positive social change.

2. Statement of the Problem

Commercial sex work remains a persistent and complex social issue in Nigeria, particularly in economically vibrant but socially unequal states such as Rivers State. Despite its oil wealth and rapid urbanization, Rivers State continues to experience high rates of poverty, unemployment, youth restiveness, and gender inequality, which contribute to the growth of commercial sex work. Many women and young girls engage in sex work as a coping strategy for economic survival, limited educational

opportunities, family instability, and rural–urban migration (Okafor & Odonye, 2019; Eze & Anugwom, 2021).

Although commercial sex work is often driven by structural economic hardship, it exposes individuals to significant social, psychological, and health risks. Commercial sex workers (CSWs) are disproportionately vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancies, substance abuse, violence, and exploitation (National Agency for the Control of AIDS [NACA], 2023; Oluwole & Ojo, 2018). Beyond health risks, CSWs frequently face stigma, discrimination, harassment from law enforcement agencies, and social exclusion, which further marginalize them and restrict access to health care, legal protection, and social welfare services (Adebayo, 2022; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2021).

In Rivers State, particularly in urban centers such as Port Harcourt, the increasing presence of commercial sex workers around oil servicing hubs, hotels, and nightlife districts reflects deeper socio-economic and structural inequalities. Despite the magnitude of the problem, social work intervention targeting CSWs remains insufficient, fragmented, and largely focused on short-term health outreach rather than holistic rehabilitation and empowerment. Social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (2018), emphasizes social justice, human rights, empowerment, and the enhancement of well-being for vulnerable populations. However, in practice, there appears to be limited structured intervention programs in Rivers State that address the multi-dimensional needs of CSWs, including counseling, vocational empowerment, family reintegration, advocacy, and policy reform.

Furthermore, existing interventions are often driven by non-governmental organizations and health-focused agencies, with limited integration into mainstream social welfare systems. This creates a gap between policy intentions and practical implementation. The absence of coordinated, evidence-based social work strategies contributes to the continued vulnerability of CSWs and hinders

sustainable reintegration into society. Another dimension of the problem is the persistence of stigma and moral judgment, which undermines professional social work engagement. Many CSWs avoid seeking help due to fear of discrimination and confidentiality breaches. This limits the effectiveness of outreach programs and perpetuates cycles of poverty, abuse, and health risks (Adebayo, 2022). Without structured social work interventions that address both preventive and rehabilitative dimensions, commercial sex work in Rivers State may continue to expand, exacerbating public health challenges and social instability.

Therefore, the central problem this study seeks to address is the apparent gap between the increasing prevalence and vulnerability of commercial sex workers in Rivers State and the inadequacy of comprehensive, sustainable social work interventions designed to empower, rehabilitate, and socially reintegrate this population. There is a pressing need to examine the extent, effectiveness, and challenges of social work intervention among commercial sex workers in Rivers State in order to inform policy, professional practice, and sustainable social development.

Based on the foregoing, it will be pertinent to ask the following question: To what extent has advocacy, vocational training and psychosocial support effectively addressed the needs and reintegration of commercial sex workers in Rivers State?

Objective of the Study

The study objective was to find out the relationship between commercial sex workers and social work intervention in Rivers State. Specific objective was to identify the extent advocacy; vocational training and psychosocial support effectively address the needs and reintegration of commercial sex workers in Rivers State.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Ecological Systems Theory, originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how individual behavior is shaped by multiple

interacting environmental systems. In social work practice, the theory is widely used to analyze how social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors influence vulnerable populations.

The theory assumes that individuals do not function in isolation; rather, their behavior is shaped by interactions within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the context of commercial sex work, women's involvement is not merely a personal choice but is influenced by poverty, unemployment, family instability, and social inequality within Rivers State.

Bronfenbrenner identified different environmental systems that influence behavior:

Microsystem: Immediate environment (family, peers, intimate partners).

Mesosystem: Interactions between microsystems (e.g., family and community relationships).

Exosystem: External settings indirectly affecting individuals (e.g., labor market conditions, law enforcement practices).

Macrosystem: Cultural values, societal norms, laws, and economic structures.

Chronosystem: Changes over time (economic crises, urbanization trends).

These systems interact to shape life outcomes. For commercial sex workers in Rivers State, the macrosystem (economic inequality, gender norms), exosystem (limited employment opportunities), and microsystem (family breakdown) collectively influence entry into sex work. The theory assumes that social issues are rooted in structural and environmental conditions rather than solely in personal failings (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2017). Thus, commercial sex work should be understood within broader socio-economic and cultural contexts rather than moral judgment.

Ecological Systems Theory helps explain why women in Rivers State enter commercial sex work. Economic hardship, rural–urban migration, oil-related urbanization, and gender inequality operate at the macro and exo levels, while family instability and peer influence operate at the micro level. The theory therefore supports examining socio-economic drivers as identified in the study. The stigma,

discrimination, violence, and health risks faced by CSWs are products of systemic interactions. Cultural stigma (macrosystem), weak social welfare systems (exosystem), and strained family relations (microsystem) reinforce marginalization. This aligns with the professional mandate of the International Federation of Social Workers (2018), which emphasizes addressing structural injustice and promoting social inclusion.

The theory emphasizes modifying oppressive environments rather than blaming individuals. Social workers, therefore, are encouraged to focus not only on rehabilitating individuals but also on addressing poverty, unemployment, and discrimination that sustain sex work.

4. Conceptual Review Commercial Sex Worker

The concept of a commercial sex worker (CSW) refers to an individual who engages in the exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other material benefits as a means of livelihood. Commercial sex work is commonly described as prostitution, transactional sex, or survival sex, depending on context and motivation. The term “sex worker” is widely used in academic and human rights discourse because it is considered less stigmatizing and recognizes the activity as a form of labor rather than a moral failing (Weitzer, 2012). According to the World Health Organization (2012), sex workers are persons who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally. This definition emphasizes the economic dimension of the activity and recognizes that individuals may engage in sex work under varying conditions voluntary, coerced, or survival-driven.

Scholars argue that commercial sex work exists within a broader socio-economic structure characterized by poverty, gender inequality, unemployment, and limited access to social protection (Weitzer, 2012). In many developing countries, including Nigeria, economic hardship and limited employment opportunities push women and young girls into commercial sex work as a coping mechanism (Okafor & Odonye, 2019). Thus, the concept is

closely linked to structural vulnerability rather than purely individual choice. Commercial sex workers often operate in diverse settings, including brothels, streets, clubs, hotels, and increasingly through digital platforms. These variations influence their exposure to risk, access to protection, and relationship with law enforcement agencies. In contexts where sex work is criminalized or socially condemned, CSWs experience stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion (Adebayo, 2022). This marginalization frequently limits their access to healthcare, housing, and legal protection.

From a public health perspective, CSWs are considered a key population due to their heightened vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. The UNAIDS (2023) identifies sex workers as one of the groups disproportionately affected by HIV because of factors such as inconsistent condom use, violence, limited healthcare access, and legal barriers. However, public health experts emphasize that the vulnerability of CSWs arises largely from structural inequalities and social marginalization rather than the nature of the work itself.

The concept of a commercial sex worker is approached from a rights-based and empowerment perspective. The International Federation of Social Workers (2018) stresses the importance of social justice, human rights, and the dignity and worth of all persons, including those engaged in stigmatized occupations. This perspective encourages professionals to address underlying social problems poverty, violence, gender inequality rather than focusing solely on moral judgments. In the Nigeria, commercial sex work is shaped by urbanization, migration, oil-based economic activities, and youth unemployment. While some individuals may report agency in their decision to engage in sex work, many enter the trade due to structural constraints, family breakdown, trafficking, or economic desperation (Eze & Anugwom, 2021). Therefore, understanding the concept of a commercial sex worker requires examining both individual circumstances and systemic factors.

Social Work Intervention

Social work intervention refers to the deliberate, professional actions taken by trained social workers to assist individuals, families, groups, and communities in addressing social problems, enhancing well-being, and promoting social justice. It involves planned strategies grounded in theory, ethics, and evidence-based practice to bring about positive change in the lives of vulnerable and marginalized populations. The International Federation of Social Workers (2018) defines social work as a practice-based profession and academic discipline that promotes social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. This definition underscores that intervention is not merely charity or informal assistance but a structured professional process aimed at improving human functioning and addressing systemic inequalities.

Social work intervention is intentional and systematic. It begins with assessment, followed by planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Hepworth et al., 2017). The intervention process is designed to identify client needs, set achievable goals, and apply appropriate strategies for change.

Social work intervention operates at different levels:

Micro level: Working directly with individuals and families through counseling, case management, crisis intervention, and therapy.

Mezzo level: Engaging groups and community-based programs to address shared problems.

Macro level: Advocating for policy reform, social justice, and structural change to reduce inequality (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018).

This multi-level nature makes social work intervention comprehensive, especially when addressing complex social problems such as poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, or commercial sex work.

A core assumption of social work intervention is that individuals have strengths and capacities that can be developed. Intervention is therefore not only remedial but also empowering. It seeks to enhance clients' ability to cope with challenges and improve their socio-economic conditions. According to Miley, O'Melia, and DuBois (2017), empowerment is central to social work

practice, enabling clients to gain control over their lives and environment. Social work intervention is guided by professional ethics that emphasize dignity, worth of the person, confidentiality, and non-discrimination. The National Association of Social Workers (2021) highlights that social workers must promote client well-being while challenging social injustice and discrimination. Thus, intervention extends beyond individual support to addressing structural barriers affecting vulnerable groups.

Types of Social Work Intervention

Social work interventions may include:

Preventive interventions: Public education, awareness campaigns, and early identification of risk factors.

Therapeutic interventions: Counseling, psychotherapy, and trauma-informed care.

Rehabilitative interventions: Skill acquisition programs, reintegration services, and recovery support.

Advocacy and policy interventions: Campaigning for inclusive laws and social protection systems.

These approaches demonstrate that social work intervention is holistic and adaptable depending on the nature of the social problem.

In where individuals face poverty, stigma, violence, or marginalization, social work intervention plays a critical role in linking clients to resources, strengthening coping mechanisms, and influencing systemic reform. It bridges the gap between individuals and social institutions, ensuring access to health care, education, employment opportunities, and legal protection.

Commercial Sex Workers and Social Work Intervention

The relationship between commercial sex workers (CSWs) and social work intervention is rooted in the profession's mandate to promote social justice, protect vulnerable populations, and address structural inequalities. Commercial sex workers often operate within socio-economic environments characterized by poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, violence, and stigma. These conditions create multidimensional vulnerabilities that require structured professional intervention. Social work,

therefore, plays a crucial role in responding to the needs, rights, and empowerment of this population. According to the International Federation of Social Workers (2018), social work promotes social change, social development, and the empowerment of people. This definition establishes a clear professional obligation to engage marginalized groups, including CSWs, through rights-based and empowerment-oriented strategies. Rather than adopting a moralistic stance, social work frames commercial sex workers as individuals deserving dignity, protection, and access to social services.

Commercial sex work is often linked to structural factors such as economic hardship, limited education, family instability, and rural–urban migration (Okafor & Odonye, 2019; Weitzer, 2012). Social work intervention addresses these root causes through economic empowerment programs, vocational training, family counseling, and advocacy for inclusive social policies. By targeting systemic inequalities, social work seeks to reduce the push factors that lead individuals into sex work, particularly in economically unequal settings such as Rivers State. This relationship demonstrates that social work is not limited to crisis response but extends to preventive and developmental approaches aimed at improving social conditions.

Commercial sex workers are disproportionately vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, as well as violence, substance abuse, and psychological trauma (World Health Organization, 2012; UNAIDS, 2023). Social work intervention bridges the gap between CSWs and essential health services through counseling, case management, health education, and referral systems. At the micro level, social workers provide psychosocial support and trauma-informed care. At the mezzo and macro levels, they collaborate with community organizations and advocate for improved health access and anti-discrimination policies. This multi-level engagement highlights the dynamic relationship between CSWs and professional social work practice.

Stigma and discrimination remain

major barriers to service access for commercial sex workers (Adebayo, 2022). Social work intervention promotes human rights, dignity, and social inclusion. The National Association of Social Workers (2021) emphasizes the ethical responsibility of social workers to challenge social injustice and discrimination. Through advocacy, public sensitization, and community engagement, social workers help reduce societal stigma that isolates CSWs. This protective and advocacy-oriented function strengthens the relationship between social work and marginalized populations.

Another key dimension of the relationship is empowerment. Social work intervention supports CSWs who wish to transition out of sex work by facilitating access to skill acquisition programs, employment opportunities, and family reintegration services. Miley, O’Melia, and DuBois (2017) stressed that empowerment-oriented practice enhances clients’ ability to gain control over their circumstances and improve their life outcomes. In Rivers State, where commercial sex work intersects with urbanization and oil-based economic disparities, social work intervention can play a transformative role by creating sustainable livelihood pathways and strengthening social support systems.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design. The descriptive design is appropriate because it allows the researcher to systematically collect data on the characteristics, experiences, and perceptions of commercial sex workers and social work practitioners without manipulating variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study is conducted in Rivers State, Nigeria, particularly in selected urban areas such as Port Harcourt and Obio/Akpor, where commercial sex work is prevalent due to urbanization, oil-related economic activities, and population influx. These locations provide access to a concentration of CSWs and relevant intervention agencies.

The population consists of commercial sex workers operating in selected areas of Rivers State and Social workers involved in intervention programs targeting CSWs.

Including both groups ensures a balanced understanding of both service beneficiaries and service providers. Due to the hidden and stigmatized nature of commercial sex work, the study adopts a snowball sampling technique for selecting commercial sex workers. Snowball sampling was effective for hard-to-reach populations because initial participants help identify other participants within their network which resulted to 20 CSWs. For social workers, purposive sampling was used to select 5 respondents with direct experience in intervention programs. The sample size was therefore 25 respondents.

The primary instrument for data collection was in-depth interview. Data was collected through structured interview questions. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained before participation. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Interview Question One

In your experience, how have advocacy programs (such as awareness campaigns, rights education, or community sensitization) influenced the way commercial sex workers are treated in Rivers State?

Response of Respondents

IDI REPORT 1

Many participants reported that advocacy campaigns helped educate communities about the realities faced by commercial sex workers. Awareness programs clarified misconceptions about HIV transmission, human rights, and the socio-economic factors driving sex work.

Participants noted that advocacy efforts helped link commercial sex workers to HIV testing centers, counseling services, and support groups. Rights education increased their willingness to seek help.

Respondents indicated that community sensitization reduced myths and fear, particularly regarding health risks. Some social workers noted that health workers became more professional and less judgmental after

attending advocacy workshops.

This suggests that advocacy contributes to cognitive change at the community level by challenging stereotypes and misinformation. Awareness appears to be the first step toward behavioral change.

Advocacy has improved institutional responsiveness and service accessibility, demonstrating effectiveness at the service-delivery level.

Interview Question Two

To what extent has participation in vocational or skill acquisition programs improved the economic stability or livelihood options of commercial sex workers?

Response of Respondents

IDI REPORT 2

Many participants reported that vocational training programs (e.g., tailoring, hairdressing, catering, cosmetology, small-scale trading) equipped them with practical skills. Respondents expressed that the training enhanced their self-confidence and gave them alternative means of income generation.

Several respondents stated that after participating in skill acquisition programs, they began combining small businesses with sex work or gradually reduced their dependence on it. For some, the new skills created alternative livelihood pathways. Participants indicated that even when income from new ventures was modest; it reduced total reliance on commercial sex work.

Some social workers noted that skill acquisition programs provided certificates and starter kits, which increased participants' employability.

Vocational training has a positive foundational impact by increasing human capital and employability. Participants gain technical competence, which is a prerequisite for economic stability. This suggests that structural poverty and economic inequality reduce the transformative impact of vocational training. Economic survival needs may override long-term reintegration goals.

Interview Question Three

How has counseling or psychosocial support helped commercial sex workers cope with

stigma, trauma, or emotional challenges?

Response of Respondents

IDI REPORT 3

Many participants reported that counseling sessions provided a safe and confidential space to discuss experiences of abuse, violence, family rejection, and exploitation. Respondents stated that being listened to without judgment reduced emotional burden. Some participants described counseling as helping them “release bottled emotions” and process traumatic experiences.

Several respondents indicated that counseling helped them see themselves beyond societal labels. They reported improved confidence and a sense of personal worth after participating in structured counseling sessions. Participants expressed that rights-based discussions and affirmations during sessions reduced feelings of shame.

Psychosocial support plays a therapeutic role by addressing unresolved trauma. It facilitates emotional expression and contributes to psychological stabilization. Psychosocial support strengthens identity reconstruction. By affirming dignity and worth, counseling challenges negative self-perceptions associated with stigma.

Interview Question Four

Can you describe any changes you have observed in the reintegration of commercial sex workers into families, alternative employment, or mainstream society after receiving these interventions?

Response of Respondents

IDI REPORT 4

Several participants reported improved relationships with family members after receiving counseling and participating in empowerment programs. Some noted that mediation facilitated by social workers helped restore communication. Some participants successfully transitioned into alternative employment such as tailoring, hairdressing, catering, and petty trading following vocational training. A smaller number reported complete exit from commercial sex work, while many indicated reduced dependency.

Participants described improved self-

confidence and greater willingness to engage in community activities. Some reported attending church programs, community meetings, or joining cooperative groups. Counseling and advocacy programs reportedly reduced fear of public interaction.

Interventions contribute positively to family reintegration, particularly when psychosocial support and economic empowerment are combined. Financial stability appears to strengthen reconciliation outcomes. Reintegration into alternative employment is occurring, but the extent varies. Sustainable transition depends on capital access, market opportunities, and continued mentorship.

Interview Question Five

What challenges limit the effectiveness of advocacy, vocational training, and psychosocial support programs for commercial sex workers in Rivers State?

Response of Respondents

IDI REPORT 5

Participants consistently reported that stigma remains a major obstacle. Despite awareness campaigns, community members often continue to label and marginalize commercial sex workers. Forms of stigma identified include social exclusion, verbal harassment, discrimination in employment and religious condemnation.

Social workers reported that many intervention programs operate under short-term donor funding. As a result counseling sessions are limited, skill acquisition programs are not continuous, follow-up support is weak. Some programs reportedly stopped midway due to lack of financial resources.

Some social workers reported that participants occasionally withdraw from programs due to immediate financial needs, relocation, distrust of institutions and competing survival priorities. This affects program continuity and outcome measurement.

Advocacy programs have made incremental progress, but deeply rooted cultural and moral attitudes continue to undermine reintegration efforts. Without sustainable funding models, interventions

cannot produce long-term impact. Program discontinuity weakens trust and reduces outcomes. Economic survival pressures reduce consistent engagement. Interventions must align with participants' immediate realities.

6. Discussion of Findings

The Extent to which Advocacy, Vocational Training, and Psychosocial Support Address the Needs and Reintegration of Commercial Sex Workers in Rivers State

Findings revealed that advocacy initiatives such as awareness campaigns, rights education, and community sensitization have contributed to increased awareness of human rights and a gradual shift in community attitudes. Participants reported reduced overt discrimination and improved confidence in asserting their rights. This aligns with the empowerment theory perspective, which posits that increasing awareness of rights and social inclusion reduces marginalization (Lee, 2001). Similarly, global evidence suggests that community-led advocacy reduces stigma and improves access to services among sex workers (World Health Organization, 2012). However, despite observable improvements, stigma and discrimination remain deeply entrenched. This supports the findings of Scambler and Paoli (2008), who argues that sex work stigma is socially embedded and resistant to rapid change. The persistence of moral judgment and structural discrimination in Rivers State reflects broader societal attitudes toward sex work in Nigeria. Therefore, advocacy programs in the study area are effective at promoting awareness and reducing overt hostility, but they have not fully dismantled structural stigma. Their impact is incremental rather than transformative.

It was found that vocational training programs improved participants' skills, employability, and income diversification. Some respondents established small businesses and reduced reliance on sex work, while a smaller proportion achieved complete transition. These findings are consistent with human capital theory, which posits that skill acquisition enhances productivity and economic mobility (Becker, 1993). Similarly, research by the

International Labour Organization (ILO, 2015) indicates that skills training improve employability among vulnerable populations. However, participants emphasized that lack of start-up capital and weak follow-up support limited the sustainability of economic transition. This aligns with findings by Oselin (2014), who observed that vocational training without financial empowerment often results in partial rather than complete exit from sex work. The data suggest that vocational training is effective at the capacity-building level but insufficient in isolation. Economic reintegration requires integrated financial inclusion strategies, including microcredit access and mentorship support. Thus, vocational programs address economic needs moderately, but structural poverty and limited institutional backing reduce their long-term impact.

Psychosocial interventions emerged as one of the most impactful components of social work intervention. Participants reported improved self-esteem, trauma healing, reduced internalized stigma, and enhanced coping mechanisms. These findings align with trauma-informed care frameworks, which emphasize the importance of safe, supportive environments in addressing emotional distress among marginalized populations (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Research by Benoit et al. (2018) also highlights that psychosocial support improves resilience and mental health outcomes among sex workers facing stigma and violence. However, while counseling improved psychological well-being, ongoing socio-economic challenges continued to generate stress. This supports the ecological systems theory perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which argues that individual well-being is influenced by broader environmental systems. Without addressing structural poverty and social exclusion, psychological gains may be constrained. Therefore, psychosocial support effectively addresses emotional and psychological needs but does not independently guarantee full social reintegration.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness

of advocacy programs, vocational training, and psychosocial support in addressing the needs and facilitating the reintegration of commercial sex workers in Rivers State. Based on the findings, the study concludes that social work interventions have made meaningful but partial progress in improving the well-being and reintegration outcomes of commercial sex workers. The findings demonstrate that advocacy initiatives have increased awareness of rights and contributed to modest shifts in community attitudes. While stigma and discrimination persist, there is evidence of gradual reduction in overt hostility and improved confidence among beneficiaries. However, deeply rooted socio-cultural beliefs continue to limit the full impact of advocacy efforts.

Vocational and skill acquisition programs were found to enhance employability and promote income diversification. Participants acquired practical skills and, in some cases, established alternative livelihood sources. Nonetheless, the absence of adequate start-up capital, weak institutional support, and prevailing economic hardship in Rivers State constrained the sustainability of these economic transitions. For many participants, reintegration into alternative employment was gradual and often partial. Psychosocial support emerged as a critical component of intervention. Counseling services significantly improved emotional well-being, reduced internalized stigma, and strengthened coping mechanisms. These interventions enhanced psychological resilience and readiness for reintegration. However, persistent structural challenges such as poverty, discrimination, and limited policy protection continue to affect long-term stability.

The study concludes that reintegration of commercial sex workers is a multidimensional and ongoing process rather than an immediate outcome. Advocacy, vocational training, and psychosocial support are effective at the individual level but insufficient in isolation to achieve full structural transformation. Sustainable reintegration requires integrated interventions that combine economic empowerment, continuous

psychosocial support, community reorientation, and stronger institutional and policy backing. The study therefore affirms that social work interventions in Rivers State are impactful but require greater coordination, funding sustainability, and structural reform to fully address the complex needs of commercial sex workers and support their long-term reintegration into families, alternative employment, and mainstream society.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are proposed:

Since stigma and discrimination remain significant barriers, advocacy efforts should be expanded and sustained through: Continuous community sensitization campaigns targeting religious leaders, community heads, and youth groups. Rights-based education programs to reduce moral judgment and social exclusion. Media engagement strategies to reshape public narratives about commercial sex workers. Government agencies and NGOs should institutionalize advocacy programs rather than relying solely on short-term donor funding.

The findings revealed that lack of start-up capital limits the effectiveness of skill acquisition programs. Therefore vocational training programs should be linked with microcredit schemes and grant opportunities. Government and financial institutions should establish low-interest or interest-free loans specifically designed for vulnerable women. Business incubation and mentorship programs should accompany skill acquisition to improve sustainability. Economic empowerment should move beyond training to include structured financial inclusion strategies.

Given the strong positive impact of counseling services psychosocial support programs should be expanded and made continuous rather than short-term. Group therapy and peer support networks should be strengthened to enhance social solidarity. Trauma-informed care approaches should be adopted in all intervention programs. Sustained emotional support is essential for long-term reintegration.

The study identified weak institutional coordination as a limitation. Therefore stronger

collaboration should be established between government ministries (Women Affairs, Social Welfare, Health), NGOs, and community-based organizations. A coordinated intervention framework should be developed to ensure integrated service delivery. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be strengthened to track long-term reintegration outcomes. Institutional synergy will improve program sustainability and impact.

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