

Sex Work in Peru: Social Challenges, Regulatory Framework, and Economic Contributions

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Abstract: Sex work in Peru lies at the intersection of public health, labour rights and legal regulation, in a context marked by stigmatization and regulatory gaps. This study explores, in a qualitative and narrative manner, the available evidence on the main social challenges, the regulatory framework, and the potential economic contributions of sex work in the country, based on secondary academic and institutional sources published between 2019 and 2025 in Spanish and English. Through a narrative analysis of scientific literature and regulatory documents, patterns, tensions and thematic gaps related to the issue were identified. The findings show that most research focuses on the health sector and reveals barriers to accessing services, experiences of violence and stigmatization processes, as well as the persistent regulatory ambiguity surrounding the practice. The economic dimension is based mainly on international comparative studies and grey literature, revealing a scarcity of verifiable local estimates. Overall, the review suggests that sex work in Peru poses multidimensional challenges that demand informed public policy responses, with an emphasis on human rights, health, and progressive regulation. This article offers narrative and analytical inputs useful for authorities and social organizations, as well as a research agenda aimed at strengthening understanding of this complex phenomenon.

Keywords: Sex work, Qualitative analysis, Narrative, Public health, Regulation, Public policy

1. Introduction

Sex work is a social phenomenon present in many societies and historical contexts and has been examined from social, legal, economic and public health perspectives. At the international level, academic literature indicates that this activity often develops within contexts of social, economic and gender vulnerability, where many individuals turn to it as an alternative in situations of poverty, social exclusion or limited employment opportunities (Trujillo-Florián, Vargas-Chaves and Arévalo-Buitrago, 2020). These dynamics suggest that sex work should not be understood solely as an economic activity but as a complex social phenomenon shaped by structural conditions that influence the labour trajectories and living conditions of those involved.

From a public health perspective, several studies identify individuals engaged in sex work as a population exposed to significant health risks, particularly sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The incidence of these conditions is frequently associated with social, economic and labour factors that increase vulnerability and limit access to prevention programs and healthcare services (Jiménez-Morón et al., 2021). Research also indicates that sex work often occurs in contexts characterized by structural inequality, labour precariousness and economic deprivation. These circumstances may be linked to forms of social and institutional violence and to processes of stigmatization that restrict the social inclusion of individuals engaged in this activity (Almanza Beltrán, 2022).

In Latin America, the treatment of sex work varies between countries depending on regulatory frameworks and public policy approaches. While some states have developed mechanisms aimed at recognizing labor rights or implementing health controls, in other contexts the activity operates mainly within informal sectors. In Peru, sex work occurs in a context marked by social stigma, informality and limited regulation.

In light of this context, the present study seeks to answer the following research question: What are the main legal, social and structural barriers faced by individuals engaged in sex work in Peru, and how do these conditions influence their vulnerability and access to rights?

2. Methodology

This study is a qualitative narrative review of the existing literature on sex workers in Peru and the social challenges they face, with the main purpose of compiling, critically evaluating, and synthesizing the available information on the regulations governing this activity, as well as the social and economic implications derived from it. An interpretative approach was adopted, prioritizing academic and institutional sources, including

databases recognized for their scientific and academic rigour, as well as regulations and institutional reports that provided contextual and conceptual evidence relevant to the subject of study.

2.1 Search Strategies

The time frame analyzed is 2019-2025, were consulted 36 academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Scopus, JSTOR, EBSCO, Redalyc, Scielo and university repositories. Strategic keywords reflecting the central aspects of the research were defined for the literature search: "sex workers," "prostitution," "social challenges of sex work," "sex work regulations," and "public policies on sex work in Peru." These keywords were combined using Boolean operators to optimize the search and ensure the inclusion of relevant studies that addressed the topic from different perspectives, including economic, social and regulatory.

2.2 Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria considered studies and documents published in Spanish that specifically addressed sex work in Peru, as well as international research related to the topic, with the aim of comparing experiences, identifying proposals and placing the Peruvian reality in a broader regional context. The selected studies were evaluated using rigorous criteria that took into account the quality of the content, methodological validity, soundness of the arguments, and originality of the contributions, ensuring that the evidence collected was reliable and relevant for comparative analysis. Articles without full access, duplicate documents, and those focused solely on contexts of forced sex work were discarded.

2.3 Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out in four stages:

- **Selection:** Sources published between 2019 and 2025 were included, mostly in Spanish, supplemented by some articles in English that provided relevant perspectives. Thematic relevance was prioritized over language, provided that the documents offered useful evidence for interpretative analysis.
- **In-depth reading:** Each source was analyzed using open coding, extracting categories related to sex work, access to basic services, structural barriers and regulations.
- **Narrative synthesis:** The information was organized into five thematic areas: (i) historical trajectories, (ii) socio-cultural factors and stigma, (iii) legal and regulatory framework, (iv) economic dimensions (v) health risk, violence and vulnerability.
- **Interpretative analysis:** An integrative narrative was developed that links findings, tensions, and gaps, highlighting the relevance of an intercultural and sensitive approach to the topic analyzed.

3. Context and Narrative Findings

3.1 Historical Trajectories of sex Work in Peru

Sex work has been present in various societies throughout history and, although each country has regulated it differently, all experiences share tensions linked to public health, morality, gender and rights. Internationally, some countries such as the Netherlands and Germany have opted to recognise it as a form of labour, incorporating licensing systems and health controls (Servicio de Investigación Parlamentaria, 2022). In contrast, in regions such as Northern Asia, the colonial period in British India imposed registration requirements and medical examinations to control the sex trade, while in Latin America, regulatory and restrictive models coexisted (UGT, 2021).

In Peru, these global dynamics interact with a national trajectory marked by social and moral tensions dating back to the Inca period, where practices of sexual exchange with economic and social implications existed (Ministerio de Cultura, 2019). With colonization, such practices began to be interpreted through European moral frameworks, associating prostitution with public health risks and promoting the earliest mechanisms of surveillance over women's bodies (Drinot, 2022). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Peruvian State reinforced this approach through mandatory registration, medical examinations and the establishment of designated zones such as the Huatica district, created in 1928 (Ministerio de Cultura, 2019). Although these measures were presented as protective, they reproduced stigma and limited the agency of sex workers.

The closure of Huatica in 1956, driven by feminist and human rights movements, heightened legal insecurity: adult sex work is not a crime, but it is not recognized as formal employment either (Drinot, 2022). This history reveals that international tensions, including stigma, health controls and moralization, remain present in Peru.

Today, these continuities continue to affect those who engage in sex work, who still face inequality, lack of protection and moralizing narratives inherited from these historical practices.

3.2 Sociocultural Factors and Stigma

Sexism is a central pillar in Peruvian society and sustains its traditional character. This pattern, still present today, reflects sociocultural factors that directly influence the public perception of sex work as an “immoral” practice, which contributes to the social stigmatization of sex workers. The cultural and religious norms surrounding prostitution shape not only society’s view, but also the self-image of sex workers, reinforcing their social discrimination (Roldán and Carbajal, 2023). These traditional values linked to marriage, purity and the control of the female body reproduce a moral condemnation that portrays them as adulterous or libertine.

Furthermore, psychosocial research shows that factors such as authoritarianism, conservative political ideology and religious beliefs predict prejudice towards sex workers (Imhoff, Dreisik and Brussino, 2022). This combination of moral prejudice, lack of legal protection and institutional rejection deepens the stigma and hinders these women’s access to their fundamental rights.

From a contemporary theoretical perspective, these dynamics can be better understood through gender studies and the intersectional approach. Authors such as Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2020) explain that systems of oppression, including machismo, religious conservatism and traditional moral norms, do not operate in isolation; instead, they intersect and mutually reinforce one another, generating specific forms of inequality. Applied to the context of sex work in Peru, this means that sex workers are discriminated against not only because of their occupation, but also because of their gender, their socioeconomic position and their place within hierarchical social structures that reproduce inequality. Thus, social condemnation of sex work cannot be understood solely as a moral judgement, but as the result of interconnected systems that regulate the female body, restrict autonomy and perpetuate structural inequalities.

3.3 Legal and Regulatory Framework

The legal framework for sex work in Peru is fragmented and does not recognize autonomous sex work as a labour activity. The regulations are divided between criminal, health, municipal and labour laws, but none of them establish rights or guarantees for those who voluntarily engage in this activity. In general, the focus is on preventing trafficking, exploitation, infections and maintaining public order, so it remains more punitive and health-oriented than labour- or human rights-oriented. (MINSA, 2020; SUNAFIL, 2023).

In the criminal sphere, the Peruvian Criminal Code establishes penalties for trafficking, sexual exploitation and pimping; however, it does not criminalize the voluntary practice of sex work, which creates a regulatory vacuum with regard to its recognition as a remunerated activity (Ministry of Justice, 1991). At the same time, the Ministry of Health is developing regulations aimed at addressing sexual violence and preventing STIs and HIV, without incorporating a differentiated approach for sex workers or considerations related to working conditions (MINSA, 2021).

At the local level, several municipalities have issued ordinances that associate sex work with moral risk or public disorder and that prohibit or seek to eradicate its practice in public spaces. This reinforces dynamics of stigmatization and clandestinely (Municipality of El Agustino, 2019). On the other hand, labour inspections carried out by SUNAFIL are aimed at identifying forced labour, but do not establish parameters that differentiate coercion from autonomous sex work (SUNAFIL, 2023).

In terms of health, policies focus on the prevention and treatment of STIs and sexual violence, contributing to improvements in public health, but without recognizing the labour autonomy of the group (MINSA, 2020; 2021).

Table 1: Relevant regulations related to sex work in Peru

Regulation	Level	Main content	Actors involved	Gaps	Implications
Penal Code (arts. 153, 179-183)	National	Criminalises trafficking, exploitation and pimping	Public Prosecutor's Office, PNP, Judiciary	Does not recognize independent sex work	Protects against exploitation, but maintains a legal vacuum
R.M. 649-2020-MINSA	National	Care for victims of sexual violence	MINSA, CEM, Public Prosecutor's Office	Victim-centred approach, without labour rights	Improved post-violence healthcare
R.M. 450-2021-MINSA	National	SRH guidelines for STIs/HIV	MINSA, health establishments	Lack of a differentiated approach	Prevention and care without recognition in the workplace
R.D. 105-2025-ENSAP-MINSA	National	Training on HIV care	ENSAP, DPVIH	Does not address working conditions	Improves healthcare quality without regulatory impact
Ord. 669-2019-MDEA	Municipal	Prohibits sex work	Municipality, PNP	Moralizing approach	Reinforces stigmatization
Ord. 11-1999-MPT	Municipal	Eradicates street prostitution	Municipality, PNP, M.P.	Punitive approach	Increases clandestinity
Dir. 001-2023-SUNAFIL/DINI	National	Inspection of forced labour	SUNAFIL, PNP, municipalities	Does not distinguish between coercion and autonomy	Allows intervention in cases of exploitation
D.S. 007-2023-IN	National	Intersectoral protocol against trafficking	MININTER, SUNAFIL, PNP	Lack of differentiation in sex work	Strengthens inter-institutional coordination

Source: Own elaboration

These regulations address sex work through criminal, public health and municipal control approaches, without adopting a labour rights perspective, which perpetuates its informality and vulnerability (Ministerio de Justicia, 1991). From a comparative standpoint, countries are generally situated within three models: the prohibitionist model, which criminalises the activity; the abolitionist model, which permits sex work but does not recognise it as employment; and the regulationist model, which formally incorporates it into the labour framework. Within this typology, Peru aligns with an abolitionist approach, as it does not criminalise the voluntary exercise of sex work but neither does it recognise it as autonomous labour, maintaining an emphasis on public health, public order, and crime prevention rather than on the protection of labour rights.

3.4 Economic Dimensions of sex Work

The economies of many countries depend on various productive activities that influence macroeconomic indicators, but these only reflect the formal sector and leave out the informal sector, despite its real impact. Sex work is one example: it is practiced without recognition or regulation, especially in developing countries in Latin America, which limits its economic visibility and reinforces social exclusion. In contrast, in some regions of Asia and Europe, this activity has already been incorporated into formal economic frameworks.

(Huertas Castillo, 2022), the productive supply of the sex market in these countries is considered a legitimate source of income, contributing to the growth of their economies and the recognition of the labour rights of sex workers. According to (Sanchis and Serra, 2011), the sex work market in Spain generates a considerable amount of money each year, estimated at around 2.5 billion euros, which shows that when this activity is analyzed as a productive sector, it has a much more significant financial impact than is usually assumed in public debate. r

estimations of this type show that when sex work is recognized and regulated, it can become a significant source of income and tax revenue.

(Fernández, et al., 2025) In Latin American countries such as Colombia and Chile, policies of coexistence and regulation for sex work have begun to be considered, which can be interpreted as an acceptance that this activity, beyond needing attention for its workers, can also be a source of income for the country's economy when regulated.

Peru should not be oblivious to the responses adopted by neighbouring countries, as it faces a similar and even more critical situation in terms of informal employment. The Ministry of Labour and Employment Promotion, (Ministry of Labour and Employment Promotion, 2022), revealed that the informal employment rate exceeded 70%, with Metropolitan Lima being the region with the highest incidence. By occupational category, self-employed workers accounted for the largest proportion, a group within which it is reasonable to assume that sex workers are also included. According to (Peruvian Institute of Economics, 2025), informality reached 71%, confirming the structural persistence of the problem. If the country were to take the practices of its peers within the legal and economic system as a reference, it could generate a substantial increase in GDP.

The Peruvian economy, based on public and private capital, includes activities that are not regulated for moral reasons, such as prostitution. This lack of legitimacy not only keeps the activity outside the legal and tax framework, but also indirectly contributes to phenomena such as an increase in human trafficking, gender violence and other associated crimes. Cases of trafficking increased by 12.4% compared to the previous year, and reports of missing women also increased in 2023 (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics, 2023).

Sex work can combine formal and informal sectors, such as hotels, restaurants, bars, and warehouses. This activity could represent a significant source of income and consumption, currently invisible due to its informal nature. (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics, 2025). Although it is true that in the Peruvian context there are no official estimates of its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is possible to consider an estimate of its magnitude through hypothetical revenue scenarios that allow its economic potential to be gauged.

In a hypothetical conservative scenario, approximately 20,000 sex workers generate an average monthly income of S/ 2,000, which would result in an annual flow of S/ 480 million. This figure is not an official statistic, but rather an analytical approximation based on general assumptions, used solely to gauge the potential economic magnitude of an activity that currently operates largely in the informal sector. This exercise shows that, without labour recognition or tax registration, this economic flow remains outside any social protection, state supervision or health control mechanisms. Precisely for this reason, the possible regularization of sex work would not only broaden the tax base, but also open the door to safer and more regulated conditions, benefiting both those who engage in this activity and the general population.

3.5 Health Risks, Violence and Vulnerability

3.5.1 Risks to physical and mental health

The stigma faced by sex workers goes far beyond physical abuse and social exclusion, due to the negative view that others have of them, believing that they deserve to endure all of this and even blaming themselves for the difficulties they face. This distorted perception is compounded by the lack of opportunities offered to them by the state and society, which creates vulnerability in their physical and mental health. They face significant risks to their physical and mental health due to constant exposure, lack of access to medical services, and the social stigma surrounding them. (Rangel, et al., 2021) refers to the fact that the health risks faced by sex workers continue to increase, with their mortality rate being 40% higher than that of the rest of the population. As part of the population vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), which can be fatal if not diagnosed and treated in time. According to the Ministry of Health (, in Peru, more than 8,000 new cases of sexually transmitted infections were diagnosed in 2024, mainly in the 20-29 age group, with a higher concentration in urban areas.

The Ministry of Health (2024) reported that more than 15,000 free tests were carried out for men who have sex with men, sex workers and transgender women. Even so, many people do not access these services due to lack of information, fear of discrimination, or lack of resources when testing is not free. Even so, many people do not access these services due to lack of information, fear of discrimination, or lack of resources when testing is not free. In this sense, the health risks emerge from the context of informality, stigma, and exclusion, not from the activity itself. A rights-based approach highlights that formalizing and regulating sex work would reduce these

vulnerabilities by ensuring safe working conditions, non-discriminatory healthcare, and access to systematic prevention and monitoring services.

3.5.2 Violence and vulnerability

In Peru, as in many parts of the world, sex workers face a wide variety of forms of violence due to the prejudice and stigmatization associated with their employment. In response to this situation, Law 30364 was implemented in November 2015, with the aim of preventing, punishing and eliminating abuse against sex workers and their families, identifying all forms of violence against sex workers. The enactment of this law marks a significant step forward in the battle against the sexual abuse of women's rights (International Organization for Migration, 2023)

. This perspective is supported by Law No. 30364, Article 8, which establishes that there are four types of violence that are particularly important for understanding the experiences of sex workers. These include physical violence, mental violence, financial violence and sexual violence.

These attacks can come from clients, pimps, or other people seeking to exercise control, and are exacerbated by stigma, secrecy, criminalization, and lack of protection and support.

4. Discussion and Policy Implications

Academic literature shows that comprehensive regulation of sex work, articulated with public health, labour rights and citizen security, can reduce violence, exploitation and stigma, while also generating sustainable social and economic benefits (Aguayo, Westwood and Calderón Hernández, 2020). International experiences such as Tijuana's Zona Norte, which has operated for more than seven decades, demonstrate positive results in organizational management and sanitary control (Hernández Hernández, 2022). In Singapore, the Geylang district maintains authorized brothels subject to municipal licensing and health supervision (James et al., 2021). In Germany, the 2002 Prostitutionsgesetz recognizes sex work as a legitimate activity with access to social security and legal protection (Bundesministerium für Familie et al., 2007), while the Netherlands and Japan have established regulated tolerance zones that have helped decrease violence and improve state oversight (Mena Roa, 2021; Kastoryano, Bisschop and van der Klaauw, 2015). Although these experiences offer relevant insights, their transferability to the Peruvian context is limited by socioeconomic, institutional and cultural differences.

Building on these international references, the creation of regulated zones for the exercise of sex work in Peru is proposed, located in non-residential areas with potential for economic development. Evidence suggests that such zones could reduce the stigma associated with the activity, improve access to healthcare through periodic check-ups and appropriate infrastructure, and contribute to labour formalisation through voluntary registration and social protection mechanisms. Various studies agree that any regulatory model must be grounded in a rights-based approach that prioritizes the autonomy of sex workers and incorporates effective social protection measures, considering the informality, stigmatization and lack of adequate infrastructure present in the Peruvian context (Aguayo et al., 2020; Fiolka, Marshall and Kramer, 2022). Before implementing these zones, it is essential to develop a regulatory framework adapted to local dynamics with active participation from sex worker organizations and civil society, ensuring that regulation does not generate urban ghettos or forced displacement. International evidence indicates that, under appropriate state supervision, regulated zones can significantly reduce sexual violence and associated crimes (Kastoryano, Bisschop and van der Klaauw, 2015), although their implementation must be socioculturally adapted to Peruvian realities.

From a theory of change perspective, the necessary inputs for this proposal include the formulation of a national regulatory framework, budget allocation for infrastructure and oversight, and the training of technical staff in health and safety. The planned activities include participatory urban planning, the issuance of licenses, the implementation of sexual and reproductive health campaigns, and the creation of safe channels for reporting and monitoring. The expected outputs include an increase in formalized sex workers, improved access to medical services and the consolidation of registered establishments operating under sanitary and human rights standards. However, risks such as gentrification, corruption in licensing processes and the expansion of sex tourism must be considered. To mitigate these risks, urban impact studies and rent control policies in regulated zones are proposed, along with the creation of an independent oversight system with social participation, a strict sanctioning regime against exploitation and trafficking, and awareness campaigns on human rights and responsible tourism (Scarlet Alliance, 2024). With these measures, regulation would have greater potential to reduce stigma, improve healthcare access and contribute to labour formalisation within a human rights framework.

5. Limitations

The proposal has limitations due to its reliance on secondary literature, which may restrict the analysis of the Peruvian reality due to the scarcity of recent studies and local economic data on sex work. Furthermore, much of the evidence comes from research conducted in Lima, which introduces a geographical bias that limits the generalization of the findings to regions with different socio-economic and cultural dynamics.

6. Conclusions

The evidence of social inequalities and lack of tolerance among citizens themselves is latent. Prostitution will never be a job, nor the dream profession in a conservative society. However, it is the reason why a large group of women can survive and have a certain quality of life despite lacking access to labour rights linked to any work activity.

Thousands of women in Peru and around the world continue to be part of the sex trade. Some countries in Europe and parts of Latin America have set aside moralistic criticism and embraced opportunities for growth, recognizing that this activity is not going away and can contribute to GDP like any other economic activity.

Prostitution is not exclusive to one gender continuing to marginalize, it means not considering this activity as an economic source. By emphasizing regulation and control, progress will be made in the different economic sectors involved and, above all, in protecting those who engage in it.

Paying attention to health needs, formalizing employment, and controlling and reducing illegal activities such as human trafficking, kidnapping, and bribery will allow for an effective contribution to the country's economy, guaranteeing above all equal rights and economic contribution, thus minimizing the gaps and inequalities suffered by those engaged in this activity.

Ethics declaration: Respectful and non-stigmatizing language was used, focusing on the work they do. The limitations inherent in the exclusive use of secondary sources were recognized, and the reproduction of stereotypes or judgements about the cases analyzed was avoided

AI declaration: An artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) was used solely as a support for reviewing the wording, ensuring the correct use of punctuation marks and translating fragments previously written by the authors. The tool did not generate original content; its intervention was limited exclusively to linguistic corrections and spelling adjustments.

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