

# *DIRTY WORKERS OR DIRTY WH\*RES?*

*Examining the Cycle of Dirty Work Stigma and Structural  
Violence as It Affects Monrovia's Sex Workers*

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*30 July 2021*

*A Thesis Submitted to*

*The Board of Examiners*

*In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights*

Supervisor: dr. Lauren Gould

Date of Submission: 30 July 2021

Programme Trajectory: Fieldwork & Thesis Writing (30 ECT)

Word Count: 26,997

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I started this process some months ago, I genuinely had no idea how I was going to be able to complete the work you see before you. And indeed, I do not believe it would have been possible without the incredible support of those around me.

Firstly, my immense gratitude to my supervisor, Lauren Gould; your encouragement and enthusiasm for this project kept me motivated through my toughest days. You guided me through every step of this process and helped me navigate all of my fears as I embarked on what was a brand new venture for me. Your support is irreplaceable.

To the other faculty members of the MA programme; in particular my second reviewer Chris van der Borgh, and Jolle Demmers, Mario Fumerton, and Antoine Buyse. Teaching a master's programme in the middle of a pandemic is no small feat, and yet this past year was engaging, challenging, and worth every moment. I hope to take your lessons with me throughout the rest of my career.

To Klara, Clara, and Nicchelle: for the laughs, for the tears, for the study sessions and wine nights, for the endless discussions on theory and for Co-star's wacky horoscopes.

To Mom & Dad: Letting your oldest daughter cross an ocean for a year couldn't be easy, and yet you let me fly. Thank you for helping me to grow the wings that got me here. Every day I hope to make you proud.

To Catie: You're only ever a call away, and for that I couldn't be more grateful. This paper wouldn't be under the word count without you either, so thanks for making sure I graduate 😊

To my supervision group: Aoife, Emma, Floortje, Maha, Ruben, and Klara again, I couldn't have asked for a better group of peers to bounce ideas off of, motivate one another, or go through this massive process together.

To Mandi Donahoe: Five years ago, you planted the first seeds of curiosity in my brain about a field I knew nothing about. I would not be doing what I am today without your mentorship and friendship. It's only fitting that this final culmination of my academic career concerns the very first conflict I wrote about in your course. What can I say but thank you.

To NSWP, ASWA, TAMPEP, PIC, and IRSCE: The work you do for sex workers is invaluable, and I only hope this thesis can serve as a small contribution to your movement. If you, dear reader, are moved by their cause, consider giving one of these organizations some of your time or your dollars.

And finally, to my favorite Twitter mutual, Johan Galtung. One day I'll figure out what I did to earn the privilege of your follow.

## ABSTRACT

This research seeks to examine the stigma against sex work in a post-conflict setting as an issue that lies at the intersection of gender and labor, and how that stigma contributes to the structural violence so many sex workers worldwide suffer. To this end, the case of Monrovia, Liberia was chosen for its rebuilding effort's significant emphasis on gender equality as well as the prevalence of sex work as a profession among its population. The analytical frame of *dirty work* was selected to better break down the various components of sex work and public opposition to it, and how those components contribute to the marginalization and violence perpetuated against Monrovia's sex workers. This frame also allows us to examine the tension between essential and non-essential labor that sex work operates within. Using secondary research and open-source document analysis collected from relevant political institutions, local NGOs, IGOs, religious organizations, Liberian news outlets, and online comments posted by Liberian citizens, this research examines how sex work is portrayed as physically, socially, and morally tainted in the public discourse. Ultimately, this research finds that through physical, social, and moral taint, sex work in Monrovia is portrayed as a threat to Liberia's rebuilding process and future stability, as it is attributed as a cause of Monrovia's other social ills and as a physical manifestation of patriarchal violence contradicting UNMIL's overarching goal of gender equality. As a result, numerous institutions in Monrovia enact barriers that severely decrease the quality of life for sex workers while simultaneously exacerbating the very issues they claim to be solving. This raises questions into sex work's role in a post-conflict recovery process and how its status as essential labor can be used to ensure the human rights of sex workers.

**Key Words:** Sex work, structural violence, dirty work, stigma, Liberia, post-conflict

**Content Warning:** This thesis contains references to sexual assault, forced prostitution, physical assault, drug use, police violence, and child abuse.

*For any questions, ethical concerns/critiques, or requests for further information regarding data sources, please contact the author at [sophia2398@gmail.com](mailto:sophia2398@gmail.com)*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY/PLAGIARISM DECLARATION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE “WORK” IN “SEX WORK”</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW</b>	<b>10</b>
SEX WORK AND ITS COMPLICATIONS	10
STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: UNSEEN BUT DEEPLY FELT	12
DIRTY WORK: SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT	13
<b>CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>16</b>
ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES	16
RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCESS	16
TIME DEMARCATION	16
OPERATIONALIZATION	17
DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING	17
ANALYSIS PROCESS	18
LIMITATIONS	19
ETHICS & POSITIONALITY	19
<b>CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<b>21</b>
CLEAN WORK FOR LIBERIAN WOMEN	21
PHYSICALLY CLEAN WORK	21
SOCIALLY CLEAN WORK	23
MORALLY CLEAN WORK	24
SEX WORK AS ESSENTIAL LABOR: UTOPIAS VS. REALITY	26
SEX WORK AS PUBLICLY NON-ESSENTIAL	26
SEX WORK AS PRIVATELY ESSENTIAL	28
<b>CHAPTER 4: SEX WORK AS PHYSICALLY TAINTED</b>	<b>32</b>
OCCURRING IN DANGEROUS OR NOXIOUS SETTINGS	32

CRIME-RIDDEN AREAS	32
IMPOVERISHED AREAS	33
<b>ASSOCIATED WITH GARBAGE OR DEATH</b>	<b>35</b>
PALM GROVE CEMETERY	35
<b>STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE &amp; PHYSICAL TAIN</b>	<b>36</b>
HOUSING & PHYSICAL CONDITIONS	36
ACCESS TO JUSTICE & POLICE VIOLENCE	38
<b><u>CHAPTER 5: SEX WORK AS SOCIALLY TAINED</u></b>	<b><u>41</u></b>
<b>SERVILE OR DEGRADING RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>41</b>
DEHUMANIZING SEX WORKERS	41
VICTIMS OF POWER IMBALANCES & MISOGYNY	42
<b>CONTACT WITH STIGMATIZED GROUPS</b>	<b>44</b>
SEX WORKERS & DRUG USERS AND DEALERS	45
SEX WORKERS & THE HIV+	46
<b>STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE &amp; SOCIAL TAIN</b>	<b>47</b>
ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE	48
FAMILIAL INSECURITY	49
<b><u>CHAPTER 6: SEX WORK AS MORALLY TAINED</u></b>	<b><u>52</u></b>
<b>CONTRARY TO VIRTUE AND GOODNESS</b>	<b>52</b>
RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO SEX WORK	52
CORRUPTING INFLUENCES	54
THE DISSOLUTION OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY	55
UNPRODUCTIVE, MEANINGLESS, VALUELESS WORK	56
<b>STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE &amp; MORAL TAIN</b>	<b>58</b>
ECONOMIC INSECURITY	58
LABOR RIGHTS & SOCIAL WELFARE	60
ACCESS TO EDUCATION	63
MISREPRESENTATION & SILENCING	64
<b><u>CONCLUSIONS</u></b>	<b><u>67</u></b>
<b>WHAT COMES NEXT? IMAGINING A SEX WORKER INCLUSIVE RECONSTRUCTION</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>GAPS &amp; AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</b>	<b>68</b>
<b><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u></b>	<b><u>70</u></b>

## INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE “WORK” IN “SEX WORK”

Is it cliché to begin a thesis about sex work with a reference to “the world’s oldest profession”? Perhaps. But its descriptor as a “profession” is a loaded one, and the argument regarding sex work’s status as a form of labor is about as old as the profession itself. Opposition to sex work crosses numerous ideological and cultural lines worldwide; and yet for all the controversy it has caused, the ubiquity of sex work (and demand for its services) has not declined in the slightest. But while some communities have accepted the reality of sex work’s existence and (in some cases, begrudgingly) incorporated it into the fabric of their society, this type of labor is still often pushed to the fringes, with little protection against any harm suffered by sex workers.

In many instances, the places where it is most precarious to engage in sex work is where sex work is most common.<sup>3</sup> Areas that have faced significant levels of violent conflict, for one, tend to see an increase in sex work following an end to the conflict, usually as a result of the lack of viable economic opportunities for women in these cases.<sup>4</sup> Combining the general instability of a region freshly emerging from violence with the criminalization of sex work as a form of labor, one of the few pathways of survival becomes one of the most dangerous. Furthermore, recovery and rebuilding efforts rarely include sex workers in their plans for transitions, and periods that are supposedly designed to uplift and empower a population seem to only further marginalize sex workers.

The case of Liberia presents an intriguing possibility for us to examine the ways that sex work is not only excluded from rebuilding efforts, but potentially even targeted for additional harm. Liberia, which faced back-to-back civil wars throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, stands unique among post-conflict settings for a few reasons. For one, the most prominent peace movements that helped end the conflict were led chiefly by women, who then continued their political activism and peacebuilding efforts throughout the recovery to further engage women in the political sphere. For another, the first general election following the conflict was won by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female President in Africa, who prioritized women’s empowerment and protection in her administration. Finally, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), lasting from 2003 to 2018, was one of the first UN missions to operate under UNSCR 1325, which called for the recognition of the specific harm faced by women during armed conflict and supported their inclusion in rebuilding efforts through increased support for women’s education and political participation as well as “gender mainstreaming” efforts. One may be led to believe that, with such an emphasis placed on gender equality and women’s rights, sex work as a profession with a workforce of almost entirely women might also receive the support enjoyed by other forms of labor.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen M. Jennings, “Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism,” *International Peacekeeping* 17, no. 2 (2010): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533311003625126>.

<sup>4</sup> Claire Duncanson, *Gender & Peacebuilding* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> I’d like to take a moment to acknowledge now that not all sex workers are women, and the global population of sex workers represents every gender identity and sexuality under the sun. However, for the purposes of this paper and in accordance with the availability of the data sources open to my use, I will be referring to cisgender female sex workers throughout this paper unless otherwise noted. This does not imply that male sex workers or trans or nonbinary sex workers do not exist in Liberia; rather, that I am unable to draw any conclusions regarding them as I found little to no references to them. Indeed, their absence in my data more likely suggests that they are at risk for increased harm as a result of their invisibility.



However, sex workers in Monrovia, the country's capital, experience little to no protection of their human rights. Sex work remains criminalized and sex workers are the subject of numerous "rehabilitation" programs. They are often degraded by the media and dismissed by powerful political figures. In contrast to the robust and ever-growing sex worker advocacy movements spreading in other African countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Uganda, Liberia can boast of no sex worker collective, no sex worker-specific service organizations, and no coordinated, pro-sex work political movement arguing on their behalf. Sex work exists only on the very fringes of Liberian society and are subjected to various forms of structural violence.

We see this discrepancy between gender-focused peacebuilding and the protection of sex workers' rights because, I posit, that the true issue of sex work is not entirely a *gender* issue or a *labor* issue. I would not be alone in arguing this; the very inception of the term "sex work" stems from a desire to cast the profession as just that— a profession.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the voices of male and trans sex workers often serve to break down arguments that cast sex work as a uniquely female form of labor that is, by extension, a manifestation of male power over female existence. But one cannot separate gendered experiences and perceptions from sex work,<sup>7</sup> even if the core of opposition to sex work is also the economic, transactional nature of commodifying and selling sexual acts. That is why, when examining the myriad of direct and indirect ways societal institutions can harm sex workers, it is beneficial to examine the stigma against sex work from a perspective that incorporates both labor and gender issues as integral.

It is to that end that the analytical frame of *dirty work* best serves our purposes when we investigate the particular effects of stigmatizing sex work. Dirty work, first coined by Everett Hughes, looks at the particular ways that a form of labor is stigmatized by the society it occurs in through culturally defined *taints*.<sup>8</sup> These taints have the potential to influence social, political, and economic structures in ways that can cause direct and indirect harm against the population of "tainted" laborers. Because dirty work as a framework recognizes the mutability and contextuality of stigma, it also allows us to incorporate gendered views as a building block of stigma without making it the sole focus. Thus, this paper seeks to answer the question: *how do the various tainted dimensions of dirty work stigma influence social, political, and economic institutions that perpetuate structural violence against sex workers in Monrovia, Liberia in the post-conflict transition period from 2003-2018?*

Because the academic debates on sex work, structural violence, and dirty work are complex, Chapter 1 is a theoretical overview of the three concepts, during which time I will identify the academic gaps I aim to contribute to through my research. Chapter 2 will outline the research design and methodology used to conduct my research, building upon these concepts. Chapter 3 will review the contextual considerations required to understand the nature of women's labor in Liberia and the scope and depth of sex work in Monrovia during this period, as well as raising questions regarding the "essential" nature of sex work as a form of labor in Liberia.

Following this, we will begin to examine the three cases of taint as they are most prevalent in Monrovia regarding sex work. Chapter 4 will examine the ways that sex work is perceived as *physically*

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Leigh, *Unrepentant Whore: The Collected Writings of Scarlot Harlot* (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Nor from any facet of life, this feminist would argue.

<sup>8</sup> Everett C. Hughes, *Men and Their Work* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958), 49.

*tainted* and the resulting effect these perceptions have on sex workers' access to adequate housing and fair justice. Chapter 5 will examine the ways that sex work is perceived as *socially tainted* and the connections this has to sex workers' access to safe and necessary healthcare and familial stability. Chapter 6 will examine the ways that sex work is perceived as *morally tainted* and the ways this stigma affects sex workers' economic security, labor rights, access to education, and fair social representation. Finally, I will conclude this thesis by drawing connections to sex work's existence as a perceived threat to Liberia's recovery efforts and the resulting stigma-structural violence co-construction cycle that significantly restricts sex workers' human rights, and offer avenues for further research. But for now, an overview of the connections between sex work, structural violence, and dirty work.

## CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

### SEX WORK AND ITS COMPLICATIONS

Since the 1970s, academic debates in gender studies around sex work fall into two camps: *abolitionists* who seek to eliminate the sex work industry; or *assimilationists*, AKA *sex-positive* feminists who support destigmatizing sex work as a legitimate profession. Abolitionist critiques of sex work cast sex work exclusively as a gendered issue that represents men's exploitation of women. For radical feminists, it is a potent example of the violent nature of hetero-patriarchy.<sup>9</sup> Catherine MacKinnon was vocal against prostitution and pornography from a legal standpoint, stating that it is more than a 'moral issue' and thus should not be dealt with using obscenity laws; rather, it is 'forced sex, a practice of sexual politics, an institution of gender inequality' and an extension of tangible violence committed against women.<sup>10</sup> As is common within many abolitionist circles, Kathleen Barry conflates sex work with sexual slavery, and suggests that women never truly volunteer to engage in sex work, the reason being that in a heteropatriarchal society in which women hold little to no power, there can be no actual "choice" in such a decision.<sup>11</sup> The conclusion that sex work is inherently coercive and perpetuates a violent form of male entitlement to the female body is undermined by what some offer as the next logical extension of that, in which *any* form of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is coerced and thus a form of rape.<sup>12</sup>

These arguments fall apart quickly however, once one acknowledges the existence of queer, trans, or male sex workers; heteropatriarchy has its own effects on these communities, but once removed from the supposedly "inherent" dynamic of man-over-woman, sex work becomes a more nuanced issue. That is why sex-positive feminists, by listening to sex workers<sup>13</sup>, instead advocate for the decriminalization of sex work as a legitimate form of labor that has the potential to empower all sex workers socially and economically.<sup>14</sup> Sex work is only a violent profession because stigma allows people to treat sex workers with violence.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to the perception that sex workers are taken advantage of, sex workers emphatically assert their agency in their decision to engage in sex work, even as they acknowledge that dire financial circumstances limited their options.<sup>16</sup> It is for that reason that at the First World's Whore's Congress in 1985, sex workers began their World Charter for

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<sup>9</sup> Meagan Tyler, "All Roads Lead to Abolition? Debates About Prostitution and Sex Work Through the Lens of Unacceptable Work," *Labor & Industry: A Journal of Social and Economic Relations of Work* 31, no. 1 (2020): 76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2020.1847806>.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine A. Mackinnon, "Not a Moral Issue," *Yale Policy & Law Review* 2, no. 2 (1983): 325.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Barry, "Female Sexual Slavery: Understanding the International Dimensions of Women's Oppression," *Human Rights Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1981): 46.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Something Mackinnon, Barry, and Dworkin were repeatedly called out by sex workers for *not* doing.

<sup>14</sup> Heather Berg, "Working for Love, Loving for Work: Discourses of Labor in Feminist Sex-Work Activism," *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 3 (2014): 703.

<sup>15</sup> Gail Pheterson, ed., *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Chi A. Mgbako, *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 49.

Prostitutes' Rights by demanding world governments immediately 'decriminalize all aspects of adult prostitution resulting from *individual decision*'.<sup>17</sup>

To answer the question of what sex work actually looks like, Ronald Weitzer conducted a study of patterns found in the sex industry. His findings categorized the different forms sex work may take, classified who engages in sex work for what reasons, and determined how sex work's location can impact the safety of sex workers.<sup>18</sup> These classifications are useful to understand the sex industry's diversity and to operationalize the different aspects of the trade that affect sex workers' livelihoods and dignity. Ultimately, Weitzer asserts that there is no one kind of sex worker performing one kind of sex work for one particular reason, and further research conducted in this area should take into account the full spectrum of sex work's reality.<sup>19</sup>

Weitzer does note that his research is representative of Anglo-American societies and recognizes a need for greater research of the industry in other locales.<sup>20</sup> Mgbako and Smith provide a more comprehensive overview of sex work in Africa, finding generally that sex workers are excluded from conversations regarding inequality or violence against women, despite being disproportionate sufferers of both.<sup>21</sup> They find abolitionist discourse pervades legal systems in most African countries; in Liberia, buying and selling sex is explicitly criminalized.<sup>22</sup> In post-conflict settings like Liberia, leaders have described 'prostitution as incompatible with African culture' and runs contrary to society's attempts to rebuild, despite evidence that the sex trade actually increases as a result of the gendered economic impacts of conflict.<sup>23</sup> Mgbako and Smith find abolitionist stances, despite claiming to protect women, 'take a hard line approach to a complex and multidimensional challenge', subjecting women to further kinds of violence.<sup>24</sup>

For example, Okigbo et al.'s study of risk factors associated with transactional sex in Liberia shed light on the violence faced by sex workers. Their work correlated prior assumptions that many young women in Monrovia engaged in sex work driven by economic factors and also found that many of them had less education, more histories of sexual violence, and were at an increased risk of contracting HIV.<sup>25</sup> However, the combination of physical harms and the prohibitory attitude of Liberia's stance towards sex work as described by Mgbako and Smith proves that the violence faced

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<sup>17</sup> International Committee for Prostitutes Rights, "World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights" (International Committee for Prostitutes Rights, 1985), [https://www.walnet.org/csis/groups/icpr\\_charter.html](https://www.walnet.org/csis/groups/icpr_charter.html).; emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Weitzer, "Sociology of Sex Work," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 215.

<sup>19</sup> Weitzer, 217.

<sup>20</sup> Weitzer, 214.

<sup>21</sup> Chi A. Mgbako and Laura A. Smith, "Sex Work and Human Rights in Africa," *Fordham International Law Journal* 33, no. 4 (2010): 1180.

<sup>22</sup> Mgbako and Smith, 1182.

<sup>23</sup> Mgbako and Smith, 1189; Jennings, "Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism," 235.

<sup>24</sup> Mgbako and Smith, "Sex Work and Human Rights in Africa," 1206.

<sup>25</sup> Chinelo C. Okigbo et al., "Risk Factors for Transactional Sex Among Young Liberian Females in Post-Conflict Liberia," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 18, no. 3 (2014): 136.

by Monrovia sex workers is also distinctly structural in nature— which is why we now turn to a discussion on structural violence and its theoretical applications.

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE: UNSEEN BUT DEEPLY FELT

Johan Galtung was the first to define structural violence, wherein he rejects a narrow definition of violence as physical harm and instead defines it as ‘the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual’.<sup>26</sup> Galtung describes how this kind of violence becomes structural when it is embedded into institutions rather than perpetuated by individuals, thus resulting in ‘unequal power and unequal life chances’.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, the definition of structural violence operates under the belief that all human beings can expect a certain quality of life, and that when a system of power deprives a population of that quality of life, structural violence has been enacted against them. Because it cannot be pinned to one actor, this violence may be unintentional, or even culturally accepted as ‘the way it is’;<sup>28</sup> however, this does not negate the harm it inflicts.

Because Galtung’s definition is still abstract, it is useful to have a more concrete idea of the kinds of structural violence that may exist. Bandy X. Lee updates Galtung’s concept to define structural violence as follows:

It refers to the avoidable limitations society places on groups of people that constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. These limitations could be political, economic, religious, cultural, or legal in nature...<sup>29</sup>

Lee’s definition is useful for two reasons. First, it points to the specific places that structural violence is most likely to originate. Second, the specific mention of “groups of people” acknowledges that structural violence may be targeted towards any one kind of identity group, or that a certain group may unintentionally experience the violence on a disproportionate level.<sup>30</sup> This is how structural violence may manifest itself as systemic racism, sexism, etc. This relates to Kenneth Parsons’ examination of structural violence in light of power dynamics. Whereas Galtung views power as a ‘resource’ that can be given or deprived, Parsons views power as a relationship that is both an undercurrent of and is shaped by structural violence.<sup>31</sup> Using this view, structural violence is something that can be used and/or resisted by actors, often to the disadvantage of those already powerless as a result of structural violence.<sup>32</sup> This kind of cyclical relationship will become significant when we later discuss the co-construction of structural violence and stigma.

The effects of structural violence on sex workers has not gone unresearched, and sex workers themselves have been vocal about their suffering. The International Committee on the Rights of Sex

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<sup>26</sup> Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, & Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 168.

<sup>27</sup> Galtung, 171.

<sup>28</sup> Galtung, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Bandy X. Lee, *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2019), 110.

<sup>30</sup> Lee., 112.

<sup>31</sup> Galtung, “Violence, Peace, & Peace Research,” 175; Kenneth A. Parsons, “Structural Violence and Power,” *Peace Review* 19, no. 2 (2007): 173–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402650701353612>, 178.

<sup>32</sup>

180.

Workers in Europe (ICRSE) published a community report utilizing the stories of sex workers to illustrate the “oppressive and unjust social conditions” faced by many.<sup>33</sup> In the report, five specific, common forms of structural violence are detailed: misrepresentation & silencing, lack of access to justice, lack of access to labor rights and welfare, inadequate healthcare, and familial insecurity.<sup>34</sup> Many of these concerns are echoed by the sex workers served by their African counterpart, the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA).<sup>35</sup> There have been attempts to correct these harms, not by abolishing sex work, but by addressing the institutions that perpetuate these issues. In Mysore, India, a sex-worker led collective attempted to reduce rates of HIV infection by forging cooperative relationships with the police and setting up more equal partnerships with ‘brothel owners, two institutions that have previously enacted structural violence against sex workers.<sup>36</sup> Not only did these efforts help to accomplish their goal, researchers discovered that the collective’s engagement with the community decreased stigmatization against sex workers and led to an overall decrease in physical violence.<sup>37</sup>

This kind of research suggests a direct link between stigmatization and structural violence, (and between structural violence and physical violence). By addressing the core issues at the heart of powerful institutions, harm can be redressed and human rights protected. In order to begin addressing concerns of structural violence, we need to first understand the nature of the stigma that influences them. That brings us to the concept of dirty work.

## DIRTY WORK: SOMEONE HAS TO DO IT

Dirty work, coined by Hughes, describes forms of labor considered essential to society while simultaneously viewed as physically, socially, or morally repugnant in nature.<sup>38</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner expanded upon Hughes’ definition and created more explicit criteria for the listed three dimensions to better operationalize the dynamics of dirty work stigma. They label the three dimensions as ‘taint’ to signify dirty work’s opposition to purity.<sup>39</sup> The criterion for each dimension are as follows:

- *Physical taint* as ‘directly associated with garbage, death, effluence, and so on [...and/or] performed under particularly noxious or dangerous conditions’<sup>40</sup>; eg., sanitation workers, coal miners, or morticians

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<sup>33</sup> International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, “Structural Violence: Social and Institutional Oppression Experienced by Sex Workers in Europe,” Working paper (Amsterdam: ICRSE, 2015), <https://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE%20CR%20StrctrViolence-final.pdf>. 1.

<sup>34</sup> International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Mgbako, *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa*, 60-66.

<sup>36</sup> Elena Argento et al., “Confronting Structural Violence in Sex Work: Lessons from a Community-Led HIV Prevention Project in Mysore, India,” *AIDS Care* 23, no. 1 (2011): 71-72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2010.498868>.

<sup>37</sup> Argento et al., 73.

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<sup>39</sup> Blake E. Ashforth and Glen E. Kreiner, “‘How Can You Do It?’: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity,” *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 3 (1999): 415, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.2202129>.

<sup>40</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, 415.

- *Social taint* as involving ‘regular contact’ with other stigmatized groups or occurring in a ‘servile relationship’<sup>41</sup> (in other words, labor that often works with groups like criminals, drug users, etc., or labor that is viewed as occurring within a form of servitude); eg., social workers, prison guards, or maids
- *Moral taint* as being ‘generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue’ or involving methods that ‘defy norms of civility’<sup>42</sup>; e.g., exotic dancers, casino dealers, or debt collectors<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, Rivera introduced *emotional taint* in her work on the US border patrol and defined it as ‘characterized by performances of emotion, whether “real” or “fake”, that are viewed as inappropriate[...], excessive[...], or vulnerable’.<sup>44</sup> Examples of emotionally tainted work may include therapists or salespeople.

Furthermore, Ashforth and Kreiner acknowledge the ‘social significance of dirt’, and dirty work’s framing as a ‘threat’ or ‘pollution’ of a perceived social order based on cleanliness and purity.<sup>45</sup> Dirty work stigma lies in the tension between its socially-constructed threatening nature and the necessity for the labor’s existence. However, Ashforth and Kreiner rarely extend their research into investigating the potential causes and effects social orders and dirty work stigma have on one another. Hughes also discusses how society must ‘delegate’ dirty work, and references a system of people who can cast taboo labor on those in a lower position.<sup>46</sup> He also describes the concept of mobility, how dirty workers seek to improve either their own status or the status of their labor, for both economic reasons and personal dignity.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the backdrop of Hughes’ work is that of a hierarchical, stratified society. But two questions have gone unanswered in the seventy years since Hughes’ initially defined dirty work: what role do societal systems play in constructing dirty work stigma in the first place? And how does the perpetuation of this stigma affect these systems and encourages further systemic barriers to uphold that stigma? This research seeks to fulfill this academic gap by investigating exactly how dirty work stigma and structural violence interact and feed one another to perpetuate harm. In the case of a population as marginalized as sex workers, research into this gap is vital because they are marginalized for the nature of their labor. It is intriguing to analyze sex work’s enduring criminalization and the resulting structural violence in spite of its demand.

The role of dirty work stigma in Monrovia’s post-conflict transitional context has been previously studied by Joelle Cruz, who demonstrated that dirty work stigma *can* shift and its worker *can* benefit as a result. She discusses how Liberian market women redefined their role in society following the conflict, shifting previously negative traits into signs of resilience, and translating their

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<sup>41</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, 415.

<sup>42</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, 415

<sup>43</sup> Also, amusingly, investment bankers following the 2008 financial crisis.

<sup>44</sup> Kendra Dyanne Rivera, “Emotional Taint: Making Sense of Emotional Dirty Work at the U.S. Border Patrol,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2015): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318914554090>.

<sup>45</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, “How Can You Do It?: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity,” 416.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 51.

<sup>47</sup> Hughes, 53.

resiliency to empowerment.<sup>48</sup> Cruz's work notes, however, that market work fulfilled two significant criteria that allowed it shift the stigma. First, market women created a new association with their work that was in line with 'acceptable' or 'clean' ideas of women's labor, that of community-keeping.<sup>49</sup> Second, they were able to reposition their work as essential or 'indispensable', particularly in a post-conflict context.<sup>50</sup> This reveals a second gap in the extant literature; in light of the social status shifts a number of professions underwent in Monrovia's post-conflict period, why was sex work unable to do the same? If we are to understand how sex work is affected by dirty work stigma, and in turn how sources of structural violence are influenced by stigma, we must examine the (in)ability of sex workers to navigate these conditions as well as the potential associated taints.

Keeping the intertwining concepts of sex work, structural violence, and dirty work in mind, we can begin to consider the complex interactions between the three in Liberia's context and the tangible effects they have on the lives of sex workers in Monrovia. From these concepts, we arrive at the central puzzle of this research: *how do the various tainted dimensions of dirty work stigma influence social, political, and economic institutions that perpetuate structural violence against sex workers in Monrovia, Liberia in the post-conflict transition period from 2003-2018?* To better answer this rather complicated question, seven sub-questions were developed:

- SQ. 1 What cultural values define attributes of Liberian women perceived 'clean' or 'appropriate'?
- SQ. 2 How is sex work considered essential labor in Monrovia's post-conflict transition?
- SQ. 3 How is sex work perceived as being physically tainted?
- SQ. 4 How is sex work perceived as being socially tainted?
- SQ. 5 How is sex work perceived as being morally tainted?
- SQ. 6 How is sex work perceived as being emotionally tainted?
- SQ. 7 What limitations are placed on sex workers that prevent them from achieving quality of life?

Because these questions are layered and complex, a comprehensive and detailed method was required to conduct satisfactory research in hopes of answering them.

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<sup>48</sup> Joelle Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times," *Women's Studies in Communications* 38, no. 4 (2015): 433-434, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2015.1087439>.

<sup>49</sup> Cruz, 434.

<sup>50</sup> Cruz, 430.



## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to produce high-quality, informed research, an appropriate research design must be created, consistent with chosen ontological and epistemological stances. To this end, this chapter will describe the ontological and epistemological positions this research has taken, how my research process was designed, and overview the data collection, sampling methods, and analysis method selected to conduct this research. I will finish the chapter with an acknowledgement of the limitations of my research design as well as my positionality and the ethical concerns.

### ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL STANCES

This research takes a qualitative approach, as it is designed to conduct an in-depth analysis of abstract concepts and describe them in concrete terms. In this case, the research will be examining the relationship between dirty work stigma and structural violence, and describing the nature of the relationship and the effects it has on a specific population, Monrovia's sex workers. This presents a complication for my ontological position; traditionally, ontological stances are divided between concerns of *structural* or *individual* agency.<sup>51</sup> 'Structural violence', naturally, comes from a structural ontological position. This research also acknowledges the ways that individuals both shape and are shaped by the structures within their society by the development and perpetuation of stigma. As such, I have taken a *structurationist* ontological approach, which is defined by Jabri as viewing the world as shaped through interactions between individuals and systems.<sup>52</sup> In this research, I will be examining how stigma and structure affect one another, how they are affected by individuals, and how they all together affect human lives.

Because these dynamics are not inherently objective, this research requires an epistemological approach that is *interpretive* in nature in order to be able to describe and communicate these otherwise abstract relationships. Specifically, my interpretive approach is best informed by *critical theory*, which is defined by Mason as believing that "life is determined through social and historical processes and power relations—the researcher seeks to uncover these and question the taken-for-granted".<sup>53</sup> The social construction of a stigma like dirty work is a social and historical process, and one that has tangible effects on power relations. My question is not *if* sex workers are stigmatized, but *how* they are stigmatized, and specifically what about their work stigmatizes them. Critical theory allows me to unpack societal beliefs about aspects of sex work that contribute to its stigmatization, and how that stigmatization further affects the lives of sex workers as said stigma becomes ingrained in Monrovia's social, economic, and political structures.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCESS

#### *TIME DEMARCATION*

I have chosen the time frame of 2003–2018 as this coincides with a) the end of the second Liberian Civil War, and b) the length of UNMIL. This second reason is particularly important as

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<sup>51</sup> Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 18.

<sup>52</sup> Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), in Demmers (2017), *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction*, 130.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2018), 8.

research suggests that the presence of UN Peacekeepers plays a significant role in Monrovia's sex trade.<sup>54</sup>

### *OPERATIONALIZATION*

The concepts of dirty work and structural violence are abstract, so concrete definitions must be developed in order to appropriately operationalize variables for analysis. In regards to dirty work, the two criteria provided for each dimension of taint by Ashforth and Kreiner served to operationalize the concepts of physical, social, and moral taint. The criteria provided by Rivera was used to operationalize the concept of emotional taint. Key words from these definitions and related synonyms were used as indicators throughout data collection and coding for the relevant dimension of taint.

For the concept of structural violence, the definition provided by Lee served as a starting point for operationalization; any barrier that was political, legal, economic, or social in nature that produced some form of harm or prompted a complaint was considered an indicator of structural violence. Furthermore, the IRSCE report on structural violence against sex workers provided specific sectors to serve as indicators: misrepresentation & silencing, lack of access to justice, lack of access to labor rights and welfare, inadequate healthcare, and familial insecurity. Any barrier associated with these concerns was considered an indicator for structural violence.

### *DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING*

Research was conducted through document analysis of open source documents gathered digitally. The seven sub-questions raised in the previous chapter were each answered with a data collection method best appropriate for the sub-question.

*SQ1 What cultural values define attributes of Liberian women perceived 'clean' or 'appropriate'?*

*SQ2 How is sex work considered essential labor in Monrovia's post-conflict transition?*

Data for these sub-questions consists primarily of secondary academic research, which was obtained via Google Scholar and Utrecht University's WorldCat. Whenever possible, priority was given to research conducted by Liberian or West African researchers, particularly when the research concerned cultural values and beliefs specific to Liberia.

*SQ3-6 How is sex work perceived as being physically/socially/morally/emotionally tainted?*

Data for these sub-questions consists of primary sources gathered via targeted Google searches, the All Africa archive, Liberian government websites, NGO websites, the official website for UNMIL, and social media accounts and pages of various political figures and organizations, religious figures and organizations, and local NGOs. Primary sources include: reports from the Government of Liberia (i.e., Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection); reports from the Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Informational Services (LISGIS); policy and legislation; official government press releases; speeches from political leaders; speeches and sermons from religious leaders; reports from local NGOs, IGOs and UNMIL; newspaper articles from Liberian media outlets; recordings from the

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<sup>54</sup> Jennings, "Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism."

archive of official UNMIL radio shows; and a wide variety of online blogs, personal writings, and opinion pieces from Monrovia's community members.

*SQ7 What limitations are placed on sex workers that prevent them from achieving quality of life?*

Data for this sub-question was collected via the same method as SQs3-6. The data collected for SQs3-6 was reviewed first, both for potential pieces of evidence as well as for indicators as to where to search for more potential data. Data for SQ7 utilized more quantitative reports generated by LISGIS and similar entities than SQs3-6, but data sources generally remained consistent with the kinds of data sources used to answer SQs3-6.

While a desired minimum sample size was determined for each question based on conservative estimates as to what I believed would be available online, data was collected through a form of snowball sampling, in which information provided by one source would point me to another source to collect data from. Data was then collected until an intuitive saturation point was reached, after which the data was reviewed and then determined whether additional data was needed. In total, 20 documents were analyzed to answer SQ1, 15 documents were analyzed to answer SQ2, and 230 documents and 57 radio recordings were analyzed to answer SQ3-7.

#### *ANALYSIS PROCESS*

SQ1 regarded definitions of 'clean work' for Liberian women, drawn from secondary research. Data was collected, narrative patterns were identified and coded appropriately, and a preliminary definition was created to serve as a comparison point for 'clean' vs. 'dirty' work. SQ2 regarded the 'essential' nature of sex work in Monrovia. For this question, collected data was aggregated and paired with relevant commentary to determine wider patterns over time and illuminate the role sex work plays in Monrovia. These two steps were completed before continuing with the research.

SQ3-SQ6 corresponded with the definitions of the various dirty work taints, and research to answer these questions was conducted simultaneously. After an initial attempt at collecting data to code later, I found that simultaneously collecting and coding data proved more efficient. Data was first coded into one or more of each criterion for the relevant taints. After the first round of coding, data was reviewed again within each code and more specific codes were generated within each criterion. This process was repeated following a second and third round of data collection.

SQ7 regarded the forms of structural violence faced by Monrovia's sex workers. The data from the previous step was reviewed for potential sources, which were then investigated for additional data yield. Collected data was coded according to the forms of structural violence identified by the ICRSE report discussed above, with additional codes generated as needed. When this step was complete, I conducted a pattern analysis to determine linkages between the examples of taint and the forms of structural violence identified. Significant linkages could be determined between structural violence and physical taint, social taint, and moral taint. These conclusions are described in chapters 4, 5, and 6. While evidence of emotional taint was discovered, I did not find sufficient evidence to draw conclusions between that data and evidence of structural violence.

## LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and faced a number of limitations. Due to the constraints of the pandemic, data was collected solely digitally and represents a gap in this research. I occasionally faced trouble accessing data I hoped I would find useful; some websites no longer existed or returned technical errors, and emails sent to relevant institutions received no response. Regardless, a significant data yield was located so as to discover some preliminary findings.

The most glaring concern in this research is the distinct lack of sex workers' voices, unless they are selectively quoted by journalists. Within sex work advocacy and research, the words of sex workers, from their own mouths, under the circumstances they agree to, should take priority over other forms of data whenever possible. However, the decision not to interview sex workers for the purposes of this research was made consciously for two reasons. First, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented travel to Monrovia, and the ability to locate and contact sex workers virtually would be limited without local connections I did not possess.

Secondly, the topic of sex work is sensitive, and in places like Monrovia where sex work is criminalized, dangerous as well. As an inexperienced researcher, I did not trust my ability to conduct interviews that would not harm sex workers or place them in a position where they would not be harmed by others. Therefore, I decided to design and conduct a research project that did not rely on the voices of sex workers, as it is predominantly concerned with others' perceptions towards sex work. It should be noted, however, that due to the constraints of the pandemic and my lack of local contacts, that interviews with non-sex workers and members of the general public were also not conducted. This too represents a limitation within my research, as the views and beliefs discussed throughout this paper will be gleaned from representative sources.

## ETHICS & POSITIONALITY

I fully acknowledge my own biases as I approach this research from an assimilationist, sex-positive perspective. However, when beginning this research, I approached my questions with an open mind, fully prepared to find evidence that stood in support of sex work in Monrovia, or did not connect stigma to structural violence. Where that evidence has been found, it will be highlighted in this paper.

In an attempt to address this gap, I followed ethical guidelines and recommendations for journalists and researchers published by the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), ICRSE, and ASWA. These recommendations advise against generalizing conclusions about sex worker populations when using the sampling method I selected, and avoiding classifying sex workers as inherent deviants or victims. They also recommend the utilization of sex worker voices and the recognition of sex workers as experts of their own lives, which is a recommendation I regret being incapable to adequately follow based on the limitations described above.<sup>55</sup> To that end, I located and utilized texts

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<sup>55</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, "Recognising Sex Workers as Experts," Guide, *The Smart Person's Guide* (Amsterdam: NSWP, 2020), [https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/sg\\_to\\_sw\\_as\\_experts\\_nswp\\_-\\_2020.pdf](https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/sg_to_sw_as_experts_nswp_-_2020.pdf); Sonke Gender Justice, "Sex Workers and Sex Work in South Africa: A Guide for Journalists and Writers," Guide (Cape Town: Sonke Gender Justice, Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force, Women's Legal Centre, 2014), <https://www.nswp.org/resource/member-publications/sex-work-and-sex-workers-south-africa-guide-journalists-and-writers>; Stephanie Wahab and Lacey Sloan, "Ethical Dilemma's in Sex

written by sex workers and trusted allies to contextualize myself as best as possible. At no point during the course of this paper do I attempt to speak on behalf sex workers and their needs, and encourage critique where I fail to address issues properly.

Additionally, I recognize my position as a white, cisgender woman who grew up in the US and conducted this research in the Netherlands. I have no experience living in a post-conflict setting or engaging in sex work, and I firmly believe that where lived experience can be found it should be uplifted and held to a higher priority than my research. To this end, where secondary research was necessary to describe cultural values and traditions, I prioritized research conducted by Liberian and West African researchers in order to gain the most accurate sense possible. I made an active effort to approach my research from a decolonized and intersectional mindset, recognizing that my experiences with Western feminism may not apply to the data I encountered. While I believe my interpretations are grounded in an informed manner, I acknowledge that it is possible for my findings to have misinterpreted the data in the cultural gap. Any concerns regarding the accuracy or ethics of this work should be directed to the contact information listed at the beginning of this document.

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Work Research," *Research for Sex Work* 7 (2004): 3–5; WONETHA, "Organizational Policy for Visiting Researchers and Professionals" (WONETHA), accessed May 12, 2021, [www.nswp.org/resource/organisational-policy-visiting-researchers-and-professionals](http://www.nswp.org/resource/organisational-policy-visiting-researchers-and-professionals).

## CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the hallmarks of any form of stigma is its subjective nature; what is considered stigmatized in one context is perfectly normalized in another. Dirty work is no different, and the cultural values and attitudes surrounding forms of labor decidedly shape its status as either ‘dirty’, ‘clean’, or even ‘essential’. In order to understand sex work’s status in Monrovia, we must first situate it appropriately within Liberia’s cultural context of clean, acceptable labor.

What follows is an analysis conducted through secondary research in order to answer two questions. First, I answer, what cultural values define attributes perceived as ‘clean’ or ‘appropriate’ regarding women’s labor in Liberia?<sup>56</sup> Through this analysis, I am able to determine various traits and values associated with physically, socially, and morally clean work in Liberia, in order to create a comparison point for labor seen as potentially physically, socially, and/or morally tainted.<sup>57</sup>

Second, I attempt to answer, how is sex work considered ‘essential labor’ in Monrovia’s post-conflict transition? My research into this question gave rise to a fascinating complication regarding the meaning of the word ‘essential’ in this context, and the potential disconnect between an idealized society built on ‘essential’ labor and the actual reality of Monrovia’s labor force. What follows in this section is the problematization of the term ‘essential’ within the definition of dirty work research as applied to Monrovia’s context.

### CLEAN WORK FOR LIBERIAN WOMEN

Similarly to the ways that dirty work can be physically, socially, and/or morally tainted, clean work can also be categorized along these attributes. If we invert the definitions of the taints described earlier, we can tentatively define clean work as operating within these boundaries:

- *Physically clean* work occurs in settings considered safe and sanitary, and/or with little contact with garbage or death
- *Socially clean* work occurs with little or infrequent contact with stigmatized groups, and/or within relationships of relatively equal power dynamics
- *Morally clean* work occurs in accordance with societal values of virtue and goodness, and/or within standard practices of civility.

My research yielded a few identifiable themes for each dimension of clean labor, all with various nuances to take into account.

#### *PHYSICALLY CLEAN WORK*

On a basic level, physically clean labor is that which occurs in safe, sanitary settings. But our understanding of the stigma associated with physically tainted labor becomes much richer when we take the time to further explore the nuance associated with clean labor in Liberia’s context.

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<sup>56</sup> I have chosen to focus on women’s labor as opposed to general labor so as to incorporate and address the gendered components of both stigma against sex work and Liberia’s recovery efforts.

<sup>57</sup> As significant evidence tying emotional taint to structural violence against sex workers could not be located, emotionally clean labor will not be discussed here.

For one, the observation that work occurring in office buildings, as opposed to outdoors, is considered physically clean feels perhaps obvious. However, in Liberia's case, this is connected to tensions between urban and rural areas and a 'civilization' discourse that has been prevalent in Liberia's cultural history for over a century. Beginning in the 1870s, Liberian society faced a significant division as members of the population were classified as 'civilized' Americo-Liberian settlers or 'uncivilized' Afro-Liberian indigenous peoples. Civilized women were educated, good Christians, domestically-minded, and well-mannered.<sup>58</sup> They lived in Liberia's growing cities and took care of their home and children, and in the modern era took advantage of greater opportunities for economic empowerment.<sup>59</sup> Uncivilized women, by contrast, were often 'uneducated', had to be converted to Christianity, and generally considered 'of a lower social class'.<sup>60</sup> Their work was often of a domestic nature, but because it took place in 'the bush' and 'under dangerous and inclement conditions', it possessed an entirely different connotation compared to domestic work which occurred in an urban home.<sup>61</sup>

However, the destruction endured nationally during Liberia's civil wars significantly decreased opportunities for both Americo- and Afro-Liberian women, and the lines between physically clean and physically dirty work blurred. Market work, the domain of 'uncivilized' Afro-Liberian women, raised its status significantly in the post-conflict context by physically situating it as occurring 'within the community' in urban centers.<sup>62</sup> Here, work that is visibly done within a community locale can still be seen as clean work, despite the potential physical presence of dirtiness. As my research later indicated that Monrovia faces a distinct lack of physically clean spaces, I believe this is a strong indicator of the relativism of dirty work stigma; when coupled with another form of physical cleanliness, the presence of more traditionally dirty factors can be overlooked.

However, there is still controversy regarding the physically clean and dirty natures in urban locales like Monrovia. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, there is a distinct effort to purge cities of its dirtiness through various "beautification" campaigns because of a firm belief that cities should be clean. Gobachop, the area where most of Monrovia's market work occurs, is considered "a breeding ground for criminality" and referred to as a Red Light District, a title infamously used to describe hotspots of the sex industry.<sup>63</sup> A recurring theme throughout this research is the tension between an idealized vision of Monrovia's society versus the actual reality<sup>64</sup> and efforts to reconcile the two.

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<sup>58</sup> Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times." 425.

<sup>59</sup> Mary H. Moran, "Our Mothers Have Spoken: Synthesizing Old and New Forms of Women's Political Authority in Liberia," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 59.

<sup>60</sup> Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times," 425.

<sup>61</sup> Babatunde Tolu Afolabi, *The Politics of Peacemaking in Africa: Non-State Actors' Role in the Liberian Civil War* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2017), 151; Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times," 429.

<sup>62</sup> Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times," 435.

<sup>63</sup> Cruz, 435.

<sup>64</sup> Which in and of itself echoes theories of structural violence.

### *SOCIALLY CLEAN WORK*

At its core, the social dimensions of clean and dirty work are related to a labor's position within a societal hierarchy and its relationships with others. In the Liberian context, two significant conclusions can be drawn: first, contact with stigmatized groups is excused within the boundaries of community work; and second, forms of labor that place women on equal economic or political grounds and oppose a patriarchal, subservient employment dynamic are highly valued.

As mentioned in the section on physically clean work, labor grounded in community care is also considered socially clean. Two examples emerged in Liberia's post-conflict era: market women and Peace Hut workers. Market women, as previously discussed, were considered as engaging in tainted dirty work prior to the conflict, but negotiated that stigma throughout Liberia's reconstruction by re-framing their labor as that of 'community keeping'.<sup>65</sup> With most of the country's formal economy in tatters following the conflicts, the informal agricultural economy aided in the survival of many Liberians. Market women describe their work as having a higher purpose, as a "task transcending profit".<sup>66</sup> Drawing from previously established perceptions of women's labor and their status as essential workers in agricultural and domestic work, they shifted these perceptions to a logical conclusion of women as the ultimate community providers, particularly in a post-conflict context where community rebuilding and preservation is of utmost importance.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, other community-based work was uplifted, such as Liberia's Peace Huts. This work would traditionally be seen as socially tainted as a result of its contact with stigmatized groups like ex-combatants or rape victims. However, because of its contribution to the community and its dedication to maintaining stability in Liberia, it negates this dimension of stigma. Furthermore, peace workers are regarded because they display characteristics of motherhood, a deeply valued role in Liberian culture. Women working in Peace Huts represent a kind of 'politicised motherhood,' connecting 'the family, household, community and social justice' into one larger network of community care and a dedication to Liberia's stability.<sup>68</sup> These women exhibit the most exalted traits of motherhood that are simultaneously ideal for the work they perform, such as 'wisdom, caring, and self-respect'.<sup>69</sup>

Work placing women on more equal economic and political grounds is also considered socially clean. Peace work, to some extent, exemplifies this, as it allows women to 'participate in the political process, make rights-based claims, exercise a degree of agency over their lives, ensure the

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<sup>65</sup> Cruz, "Dirty Work at the Intersections of Gender, Class, and Nation: Liberia Market Women in Post-Conflict Times," 434.

<sup>66</sup> Cruz, 436.

<sup>67</sup> Veronika Fuest, "'This Is the Time to Get in Front': Changing Roles and Opportunities for Women in Liberia," *African Affairs* 107 (2008): 206, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adn003>.

<sup>68</sup> Erica S. Lawson and Vaiba K. Flomo, "Motherwork and Gender Justice in Peace Huts: A Feminist View from Liberia," *Third World Quarterly* n41, no. 11 (2020): 1867, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1793663>.

<sup>69</sup> Lawson and Flomo, 1862.



viability of their families and contribute to rebuilding their communities'.<sup>70</sup> UNMIL and its implementation of UNSCR 1325 likely played a large role in encouraging this emphasis on women's involvement in decision-making, as did President Sirleaf's election; as such, a more Western-style ideal of women's empowerment dominates efforts to uplift Liberian women. However, this still requires Liberian women to navigate a delicate web of locating employment that financially and/or politically empowers them without disrupting a pre-ordained patriarchal hierarchy. Programs like the ILO-funded EPAG attempted to do this by encouraging entrepreneurship through building traditionally female skills, such as sewing or soap-making.<sup>71</sup> The success of the program is described as follows:

Survey respondents reported a high degree of freedom of mobility, a high degree of control over money (both earned money and the money needed to pay for items like food and medicine), and a high level of agreement with statements such as "If I had the chance, I would like to become a leader in the community, as I would be a good one".<sup>72</sup>

With support from UNMIL and President Sirleaf, women's empowerment is central to the core of Liberia's post-conflict recovery. In response to the mass victimization and rape of women during the conflicts, in which they were "construed to have been mere objects of exploitation by men and treated like chattels in traditional society", it is vital that women's status avoids degradation so as not to threaten the hard-won but tenuous stability that exists in Liberia.<sup>73</sup> Thus, it is not necessarily a servile relationship that is seen as socially dirty, but one that explicitly places women under men.

### *MORALLY CLEAN WORK*

'Goodness' and 'rightness' are abstract concepts that can vary widely from culture to culture, community to community, and person to person. However, I identified a few themes that emerge as representative of Liberia's moral values for labor. Motherhood and Christian-based religious values are readily apparent, as well as a set of values that I argue are a direct result of Liberia's status as a transitional country: that of productive, contributing, meaningful work.

Motherhood, as discussed, is a culturally significant virtue in Liberia. As such, women are considered suited to certain kinds of morally clean work because of their association with motherhood; they are usually perceived as 'more honest, more sensitive to issues, and bring[ing] a stronger sense of commitment and dedication to what they do'.<sup>74</sup> For example, traditional midwives are valued over more Western-educated doctors, due to the belief that midwives are 'called into their profession or chosen by a higher power to become a midwife' as a result of their own connections

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<sup>70</sup> Lawson and Flomo, 1864.

<sup>71</sup> Franck Adoho et al., "The Impact of an Adolescent Girl's Employment Program: The EPAG Project in Liberia" (The World Bank, 2014), 8, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/610391468299085610/pdf/WPS6832.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> Adoho et al. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Veronika Fuest, "Liberia's Women Acting for Peace: Collective Action in a War-Affected Country," in *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, ed. Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (Boston: BRILL, 2009), 126.

<sup>74</sup> Gwynn Thomas and Melinda Adams, "Breaking the Final Glass Ceiling: The Influence of Gender in the Elections of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Michelle Bachelet," *Journal of Women, Politics, & Policy* 31, no. 2 (2010): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15544771003697270>.

and experiences with motherhood.<sup>75</sup> Teaching is also associated with motherhood, as ‘the desire to work with children and adolescents... [is] as important in Liberia as in other parts of the world.’<sup>76</sup> Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, during her first campaign for presidency, wholeheartedly embraced her nickname of ‘Ma Ellen’, positioning herself as a mother of the nation and thus uniquely suited to bring Liberia into an era of stability through her compassionate, maternal qualities.<sup>77</sup> Any form of work that can tap into the deeply respected values of motherhood stands in good position to situate itself as clean, essential labor.

Additionally, Monrovia is an overwhelmingly Christian city, so values informed by Christian religious beliefs are prominent. Women who are pious, charitable, and of course, chaste, are the ideal in Liberian society. This image is so powerful that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf also utilized this perception to her advantage during her presidential campaign, crafting her public image to mirror ‘the uniform of an old-fashioned “mother of the church”’.<sup>78</sup> One might think that these values are what drive a majority of the stigma against sex work, but an even more intriguing theme emerged in my research that directly targets sex work as a form of labor.

During UNMIL’s 15 year presence in Liberia, much of the country’s government, economy, and social fabric needed rebuilding. The necessity of such recovery was not lost on the Liberian people, and created our final theme: morally clean work is work that is productive, holds meaning and value for Liberia’s recovery, and contributes to Liberia’s future stability and prosperity. This is evident in high stakes, highly visible employment such as politics, evidenced by women like President Sirleaf, Mayor Mary Broh, and Vice President Jewel Howard-Taylor; or in peacebuilding, exemplified by women like Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee or the women working in Liberia’s Peace Huts. But it is even seen in more casual contexts, such as the market women or *susu* mas.<sup>79</sup> Many of these lower-profile women emphasize their determination and resiliency, particularly as many of them survived the violent conflicts without the aid or support of the men who would normally be in their lives.<sup>80</sup> This self-sufficiency and recognition for the need for hard work has continued well into Liberia’s post-conflict era. Within the marketplace, there is a ‘low tolerance for idleness’, and an emphasis on ‘the importance of hard work, and accountability to the community’;<sup>81</sup> *Susu* mas discourage gossiping within their circles as ‘plenty talk’ is considered significantly less valuable than

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<sup>75</sup> Jodi R. Lori and Joyceen S. Boyle, “Cultural Childbirth Practices, Beliefs, and Traditions in Postconflict Liberia,” *Health Care for Women International* 32, no. 6 (2011): 463, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2011.555831>.

<sup>76</sup> Nelly P. Stromquist et al., “Women Teachers in Liberia: Social and Institutional Forces Accounting for Their Representation,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 33 (2013): 532, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.08.002>.

<sup>77</sup> Jemima Asabea Anderson and Patience Afrakoma hMensa, “Powerful Women in Powerless Language: Media Misrepresentation of African Women in Politics (The Case of Liberia),” *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (2011): 2512, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2011.02.004>.

<sup>78</sup> Anderson and hMensa. 2514.

<sup>79</sup> *Susu* is a form of collective loan system that is prominent within Liberian markets and traditionally dominated by women. A *susu* ma is the designated woman who collects, pays out, and controls the *susu* for a group of market women. Again note the use of “ma” as an honorific, and its association with a *susu* ma’s trustworthiness and reliability in its connection to motherhood.

<sup>80</sup> Fuest, “Liberia’s Women Acting for Peace: Collective Action in a War-Affected Country,” 127.

<sup>81</sup> Joelle Cruz, “Reimagining Feminist Organizing in Global Times: Lessons from African Feminist Communication,” *Women & Language* 38, no. 1 (2015): 30.

action and labor.<sup>82</sup> Thus, performing work that contributes to Liberia's future can be considered as morally clean. This is particularly salient when a woman has children, as these children's survival is paramount to the survival of Liberia. In these cases, 'the desire for women to undertake any kind of work, however menial or potentially exploitative, to survive and sustain their dependents is very high'.<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, while maternal and Christian values hold a good deal of weight in defining Liberia's perceptions of goodness and virtue, the notion of productive labor in a post-conflict context is a highly relevant and complicating factor for understanding sex work's position in Liberian society. It is also where we run into a potential issue when utilizing dirty work as a framework. Because dirty work requires that a form of labor is seen as essential to society's function, we must investigate the essential nature of sex work in Liberia and its clash with these values of productive work.

### SEX WORK AS ESSENTIAL LABOR: UTOPIAS VS. REALITY

Dirty work occupies a fascinating tension between ideas of what is desired and what is necessary, and it is precisely this tension that makes labor described as dirty so ripe for interrogation. The essential nature of dirty work is what causes much of the controversy around its existence; if the work was not vital, why wouldn't a society simply eliminate it? Few would argue that sex work, despite its ubiquity, is a necessary service in a community, and its criminal status in Monrovia certainly supports advocacy for its abolition. However, two important questions arise when we begin to think further on sex work's essential nature in Monrovia: first, can sex work be considered essential if it is publicly declared non-essential, but privately appears to be a thriving industry?; and second, who is determining the meaning of 'essential' in Monrovia society? Discussing both of these questions will help us to better understand the complex nature of sex work in Monrovia so that we can fully appreciate the stigma it generates.

### SEX WORK AS PUBLICLY NON-ESSENTIAL

For all intents and purposes, sex work in Monrovia is publicly considered non-essential. The most prominent example of this would be sex work's criminal status. The penal code explicitly states sex work's criminal nature:

A person has committed prostitution, an infraction, if s/he: (a) Is a resident in a house of prostitution, or engages in sexual activity therein or otherwise as a business; or (b) Solicits another person with the purpose of being hired to engage in sexual activity.<sup>84</sup>

While this prohibition has done little to stem the growth of sex work in Monrovia, it is a telling statement on the government's official stance. However, it does appear that this law is rarely as fully enforced as the government suggests. While Monrovia sex workers state that the law is often used

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<sup>82</sup> Cruz, 38.

<sup>83</sup> Fiiifi Edu-Afful and Kwesi Aning, "Peacekeeping Economies in a Sub-Regional Context: The Paradigmatic Cases of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2015): 401, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2015.1070020>.

<sup>84</sup> Republic of Liberia, "Penal Law," Title 26 Liberian Code of Laws § 18.4 (1976), [https://www.rightofassembly.info/assets/downloads/1978\\_Penal\\_Law\\_of\\_Liberia.pdf](https://www.rightofassembly.info/assets/downloads/1978_Penal_Law_of_Liberia.pdf). (note: for additional context, the law against prostitution is not found under chapter 14, 'offenses involving danger to a person', subchapter D, 'sexual offenses'. Rather, it is found in chapter 18, for 'offenses against public morality'.)

as a threat by police officers, the Liberian National Police (LNP) admits that arrests and prosecution for acts of prostitution are few and far between.<sup>85</sup> In fact, Monrovia's lax enforcement of the law may be what drives the increase of trafficked women into Monrovia from other countries that more strictly regulate the sex trade.<sup>86</sup>

Still, the *de jure* criminalization of sex work does contribute to other government policies that reinforce its non-essential nature. Support for greater regulation over the sex trade prompted President Sirleaf and the Ministry of Gender to enact multiple 'rehabilitation' campaigns against sex workers in Monrovia. Both were conducted with the aid of Mary Broh, mayor of the city in 2013 and special executive appointee in 2015. These campaigns were essentially round-ups of women suspected to be sex workers, who were then brought to organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) for programs designed to encourage them to leave sex work. Both campaigns received little opposition from the wider public until the 2015 campaign ended in uproar after Broh was accused of publicly beating a child she suspected was engaging in sex work and refused to apologize for her actions. Even this anecdote tells us much about the overall sentiment towards sex workers; older sex workers who had been similarly assaulted by Broh and others did not receive any similar outrage because it is implied that they 'deserved' it.

Sex work's non-essential nature is also reflected in its absence in official documentation, research, and other literature regarding Monrovia's labor force, both nationally and internationally. When conducting research on this topic, I found it difficult to access concrete estimates regarding the size and scope of the sex industry in Monrovia, simply because few formally endorsed studies on the subject exist on it. On a national level, a 2010 report commissioned by the Ministry of Labor and carried out by the Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-information Services (LISGIS) was designed to conduct a census of the country's labor force; while extensive research was conducted on informal labor, sex work goes entirely unmentioned in the report.<sup>87</sup>

A similar story exists on the international level, where a report carried out by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2013 on labor market transitions in Liberia again discussed the prominence of informal labor in Liberia's economy, with no indication that sex work is considered a part of that sector.<sup>88</sup> A strategic plan for Liberia developed by the UN Development Fund (UNDPF) in 2012 placed heavy emphasis on reproductive health and education, gender-based violence (GBV), and maternal healthcare; sex work is mentioned exactly once as 'common', with no further discussion for how that might affect policy or funding decisions.<sup>89</sup> Although GBV is considered a top priority of

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<sup>85</sup> Clara Mallah, "\$5LD for Sex," *New Narratives*, 2010, n.p.

<sup>86</sup> Nika Stražišar Teran, "Peacebuilding and Organized Crime: The Cases of Kosovo and Liberia," Case study (Swisspeace, 2007), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep11100.7>, 26.

<sup>87</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "Report on the Labor Force Survey 2010" (Monrovia: LISGIS, 2011), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/presentation/wcms\\_156366.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/presentation/wcms_156366.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Sajith de Mel, Sara Elder, and Marc Vansteenkiste, "Labor Market Transitions of Young Women and Men in Liberia," Work4Youth Publication Series (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2013), [https://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/youth-employment/work-for-youth/publications/national-reports/WCMS\\_228127/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/youth-employment/work-for-youth/publications/national-reports/WCMS_228127/lang--en/index.htm).

<sup>89</sup> United Nations Population Fund, "Draft Country Programme Document for Liberia," Draft (New York: UNPFA, 2012), p. 2, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/731765?ln=en>.

UNMIL, and while forced prostitution is a serious issue the UN has directed energy towards resolving, at the consensual sex work did not receive specific attention, consideration, or protection.<sup>90</sup> On what appears to be nearly every level of Monrovia's recovery effort, sex work is sidelined, supporting the belief that for Monrovia's future, it is non-essential.

One of the most fascinating discoveries I made throughout this research process is the portrayal that sex work is not only non-essential, it is a threat against Monrovia's stability and potential recovery from 14 years of conflict. It is this belief that does not allow sex work in Monrovia to simply exist on the fringes of society, but instead drives efforts to abolish the industry entirely. Particularly, likely due to the gender mainstreaming focus of UNMIL and Liberia's transition process overall, sex work is portrayed as an act of violence against women, in line with many abolitionist beliefs of sex work. This language creates a discourse wherein the removal of sex work is encouraged as a solution to help end a widespread epidemic of GBV, not only to protect women but also to negate the effects greater violence against women has on contributing to greater violence overall in threatening Liberia's fragile peace.<sup>91</sup> In many cases, consensual sex work is lumped under the umbrella of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), thus creating a popularly-accepted narrative of sex workers as perpetual victims.<sup>92</sup> The UN in particular is invested in reducing SEA among its peacekeepers, who often are drivers of sex industries in mission locales (as will be discussed in the next section). The connection of SEA with UNMIL, a mission that conspicuously promotes gender equality and safety, could be seen as highly hypocritical and counterproductive to the mission's peacekeeping work, so there is a vested interest on their part in maintaining a narrative of sex work as non-essential.<sup>93</sup>

Overall, public discourse dictates that sex work is not only a non-essential form of labor, but one that should be abolished for the protection of Monrovia's future. If we were to go by this public perception alone, sex work in Monrovia would not fit the definition of dirty work and my research would likely end here. However, there are a number of peripheral discoveries I made that suggests that while there is a vocal opposition to sex work, there is a silent acceptance of sex work's place in Monrovia's social fabric, throwing its non-essential nature into question.

### *SEX WORK AS PRIVATELY ESSENTIAL*

How we define the word 'essential' in Monrovia's context is a significant question. Traditionally in dirty work literature, the concept of 'essential' refers to society's (in)ability to operate should dirty workers stop performing their labor; its why the examples of janitors or sanitation workers are so often used to highlight dirty work's importance and how that importance is contrasted by society's disgust. Using this definition, it could be difficult to argue that sex work is 'essential'. However, two complications come to mind when considering a strict adherence to this definition. First, if an industry takes up a significant sector of the economy, regardless of its contributions to

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<sup>90</sup> Sharon Abramowitz and Mary H. Moran, "International Human Rights, Gender-Based Violence, and Local Discourses of Abuse in Postconflict Liberia: A Problem of 'Culture'?", *African Studies Review* 55, no. 2 (2012): 139.

<sup>91</sup> Pearl Karuhanga Atuhaire et al., "The Elusive Peace: Ending Sexual Violence During and After Conflict" (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2018), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep20222>, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Atuhaire et al., 5.

<sup>93</sup> Kwesi Aning and Fiifi Edu-Afful, "Unintended Impacts and the Gendered Consequences of Peacekeeping in Liberia," *International Peacekeeping* 20, no. 1 (2013): 29., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2013.761828>.

societal maintenance, could it be considered essential, in that its sudden disappearance would have a significant effect? Secondly, does the work only have to be considered essential to greater society, or can it be considered essential for those performing it? In Monrovia's case, I would argue that the answer to both of these questions is yes, and that an expanded understanding of dirty work is necessary to fully capture the complexity of the stigma against sex work.

To address the first question, we need to understand the size and scope of the sex industry in Monrovia. Concrete information is difficult to obtain; there are no official numbers provided by reliable sources, and the criminal nature of sex work would likely lead to under-counting due to fears of prosecution. However, a few studies that have been conducted by researchers provide some telling and stunning estimates. According to a study conducted by Beber et al. on the connections between peacekeepers and the sex trade in Liberia, they estimate that over 50% of women in Monrovia have engaged in transactional sex<sup>94</sup> at some point; over 75% of those women are estimated to have engaged in transactional sex with peacekeepers specifically.<sup>95</sup> Exclusively among younger people, this proportion may be even higher. Okigbo et al.'s study surveyed young people in Montserrado county (which contains Monrovia) ages 14-25, and found that 72% of the women surveyed had engaged in transactional sex.<sup>96</sup> <sup>97</sup> These numbers indicate there is both a significant demand for sexual services in Monrovia, and that women who choose to engage in sex work can find a willing customer with relative ease.

Most of the studies I reviewed indicated that the size of the industry largely increased as a result of the conflict, with the presence of peacekeepers significantly contributing to its growth.<sup>98</sup> There is also a widespread recognition that there is no one form of sex work that defines the Monrovia sex industry.<sup>99</sup> As noted below, women may engage in a sexual transaction only once or very sporadically; some prefer to engage in more relationship-style transactions with a single person,

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<sup>94</sup> 'Transactional sex' is a term that is both distinguished from and conflated with sex work throughout the literature I studied. In some cases, it refers only to sexual activities exchanged for material goods, services, or advantages that are not money; in others, it's a general catch-all term that includes both cash- and goods-based sex work. For my purposes throughout this paper, we will use the latter definition.

<sup>95</sup> Bernd Beber et al., "Peacekeeping, Compliance with International Norms, and Transactional Sex in Monrovia, Liberia," *International Organization* 71, no. 1 (2017): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818316000242>.

<sup>96</sup> Okigbo et al., "Risk Factors for Transactional Sex Among Young Liberian Females in Post-Conflict Liberia," 136.

<sup>97</sup> It is important to note that both of these studies included participants who had only engaged in transactional sex once or sporadically, and potentially would not consider themselves 'sex workers' in the sense that they view it as their primary occupation

<sup>98</sup> Katherine A. Atwood et al., "Transactional Sex Amongst Youths in Post-Conflict Liberia," *Journal of Health, Population, and Nutrition* 29, no. 2 (2011): 113–22, <https://doi.org/10.3329/jhpn.v29i2.7853>; Beber et al., "Peacekeeping, Compliance with International Norms, and Transactional Sex in Monrovia, Liberia"; Jennings, "Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism"; National AIDS Commission Republic of Liberia, "National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework II 2010-2015," Strategic framework (Monrovia: NAC, n.d.), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---ilo\\_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms\\_151222.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_151222.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> Kathleen M. Jennings, "Service, Sex, and Security: Gendered Peacekeeping Economies in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo," *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 4 (2014): 319, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614537330>.

and may classify themselves as ‘home-girls’ with ‘god-pas’<sup>100</sup> rather than a traditional prostitute.<sup>101</sup> Both of these forms of sex work seem to be significantly popular amongst the women who engage in transactional sex with peacekeepers, who may be the biggest driver of Monrovia’s sex trade. According to Beber et al., an estimated 58,000 women engaged in some form of transactional sex with one or more UNMIL peacekeepers since 2003.<sup>102</sup> The economic effect on these women should the sex trade suddenly disappear would be difficult to understate; for these sex workers, their labor was essential for them.

This brings us to the final question of dirty work’s definition: who defines *essential*, and who must it be essential for? Perhaps in a context where women have the absolute freedom to engage in whatever labor they choose, sex work could be considered a non-essential service. However, post-conflict Monrovia, like so many other post-conflict settings, unfortunately presented few opportunities for women to work merely to survive, let alone have a full choice of profession. While many women engaged in sex work purely for subsistence, the reasons women chose to begin selling sexual services represent ‘a continuum of needs’ that are highly complex and are indicative of the fullness of women’s lives beyond survival.<sup>103</sup> For example, Okigbo et al.’s study found that young women who engaged in transactional sex tended to be less educated and made less money than their peers before entering the sex industry;<sup>104</sup> one of the primary expenses sex workers point to as driving their engagement in sex work is school fees.<sup>105</sup> Education is one of the most important factors for women in Monrovia to obtaining formal work, and in this way, sex work itself may even be perceived as essential to the pathway of leaving the necessity of engaging in sex work.

Even when this work presents itself as the only option for Monrovia women, many of them simply do not see themselves as victims. Sex workers in Monrovia acknowledge the potentially lucrative nature of the business, particularly in ‘high-class areas,’ and that it only makes good financial sense to perform that kind of work.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, many Monrovia sex workers are not only supporting themselves but families as well, particularly if the men in their family have difficulty obtaining work.<sup>107</sup> In some cases, these women are even encouraged by their families to perform sex work, especially if they can ‘be discrete’ so as not to contradict the public discourse on sex work.<sup>108</sup> But sex work often allows women to become the primary breadwinners for their families, a significant paradigmatic shift in household power dynamics that can mean a great deal for women. Many Monrovia women are acutely aware that the recovery effort, for all its emphasis on women’s

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<sup>100</sup> The Western equivalent would be a ‘sugar daddy’ - generally a wealthy, older man paying for companionship that may or may not include sexual favors.

<sup>101</sup> National AIDS Commission Republic of Liberia, “National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework II 2010-2015,” 22.

<sup>102</sup> Beber et al., “Peacekeeping, Compliance with International Norms, and Transactional Sex in Monrovia, Liberia,” 3.

<sup>103</sup> Jennings, “Unintended Consequences of Intimacy: Political Economies of Peacekeeping and Sex Tourism”; Atwood et al., “Transactional Sex Amongst Youths in Post-Conflict Liberia,” 118.

<sup>104</sup> Okigbo et al., “Risk Factors for Transactional Sex Among Young Liberian Females in Post-Conflict Liberia,” 139.

<sup>105</sup> Aning and Edu-Afful, “Unintended Impacts and the Gendered Consequences of Peacekeeping in Liberia,” 25.

<sup>106</sup> Jennings, “Service, Sex, and Security: Gendered Peacekeeping Economies in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” 319.

<sup>107</sup> National AIDS Commission Republic of Liberia, “National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework II 2010-2015,” 22.

<sup>108</sup> Atwood et al., “Transactional Sex Amongst Youths in Post-Conflict Liberia,” 116.

empowerment, more often than not leaves them behind, and sex work is a way they can regain both financial and social agency so they may 'catch-up'.<sup>109</sup> It is important to state that sex work does not need to be considered 'empowering' for it to be classified as decent work, but the fact that it does provide a certain level agency for Monrovia women is significant considering the primary goals of Liberia's recovery plans.

In summary, the status of sex work as 'essential labor' in Monrovia is simply more nuanced than asking if it is vital labor that contributes to the functioning of a society. Publicly, sex work is viewed as a hindrance to women's empowerment, a meaningless engagement that prevents women from providing 'real' contributions to Monrovia's future, and even a threat to Liberia's fragile stability. In a utopian Monrovia, sex work is non-essential. But in reality, many privately accept the existence and even necessity of sex work, acknowledging the role it plays in Monrovia's post-conflict economy and the agency it provides to women who have few other options. There are women who are being exploited and would like nothing more than to leave the sex trade, and sex work in Monrovia can be incredibly risky, dangerous work that should not be taken lightly. Neither of these considerations, however, can negate the implicitly essential nature of sex work in Monrovia's post-conflict context. But, as we will see in the following chapters, the stigma against sex work as a form of dirty work influences many aspects of the lives of sex workers, and despite its essential nature, sex work is often the target of numerous forms of structural violence.

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<sup>109</sup> Atwood et al, 115.



## CHAPTER 4: SEX WORK AS PHYSICALLY TAINTED

As we begin to dissect the causes and effects sex work's stigmatization in Monrovia, we start with the most visible dimension of dirty work: physical taint. Ashforth and Kreiner define physically taint as 1) occurring in dangerous or noxious settings, and/or 2) as being associated with garbage or death.<sup>110</sup> This chapter will explain how sex work is physically tainted in Monrovia through its association with crime-ridden and impoverished areas, and its association with an infamous graveyard. I will then examine how sex work's physical taint has impact on the ways that sex workers are (un)able to obtain safe and sanitary physical conditions or access fair and equitable justice, two possible forms of structural violence.

### OCCURRING IN DANGEROUS OR NOXIOUS SETTINGS

I analyzed 41 documents containing references to sex work occurring in either crime-ridden areas or heavily impoverished areas within Monrovia. Many contained similar references to the same areas across sources and years.

#### *CRIME-RIDDEN AREAS*

By legal definition, all sex workers in Monrovia are criminals and any area where they congregate can be considered a 'crime-ridden area'. However, it is fascinating to see that when such areas are discussed, sex workers are consistently, specifically mentioned alongside the more general terms of 'criminals', and the term 'hardened criminals' appears repeatedly within my data in relation to sex workers. Take, for example, the nearly exact same phrase used four years apart, in two different news sources, regarding the same locale:

110 Street is a haven for hardened criminals, seasoned prostitutes, and ghetto guys...<sup>111</sup>

110 Street is a haven for harden (sic) criminals, seasoned prostitutes and ghetto goers...<sup>112</sup>

Singling out sex work in this way alongside a more general term serves to inextricably link sex work to more serious forms of crime while simultaneously implying that sex work is so egregious, the general term of 'crime' is not enough to cover its baseness. When additional crimes are mentioned, sex work is most commonly mentioned alongside drug use, thievery, and general disturbances, as described in this news article:

...public nuisance is promoted, prostitution and drug use and abused, adding that the entire Airfield community is now a breeding ground for criminals.<sup>113</sup>

The use of the term "breeding ground" provides an interesting peek into the roots of criminal associations with sex work. The presence of sex work doesn't simply denote the presence of crime, it is an active factor in *creating* and *encouraging* crime. Sex work and drugs are not simply linked, but

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<sup>110</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, "'How Can You Do It?': Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity," 415.

<sup>111</sup> "Mary Broh Demolishes '110 Street, Poli-Bureau' in Clara Town," *The Informer*, May 25, 2009, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>112</sup> E.J. Nathaniel Daygbor, "CDC Rep Goes Gutter— Dares Mayor Broh," *The New Dawn*, February 6, 2013.

<sup>113</sup> "Airfield Residents Want Samoa Bar, Other Night Clubs Closed," *The Informer*, August 21, 2012, AllAfrica.com, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201208220519.html>.

rather actively enable the other. No consideration is given as to why sex workers may be using drugs, or why drug users may turn to sex work; they go hand in hand simply because they are crimes.

The “breeding ground” concept is also demonstrated by the focus on entertainment centers<sup>114</sup> and the role they play in drawing sex workers, and by extension, other crime. One of the more infamous entertainment centers, Delta Booth, is repeatedly mentioned over the years as a hotspot for crime, and at one point was even vocally targeted by the LNP.<sup>115</sup> Early in Monrovia’s rebuilding process in 2004, plans for a ‘floating hotel’ were heavily protested under the belief that it would encourage opportunities for sex work, and eventually, other ‘illicit activity’.<sup>116</sup> The prevailing assumption is that if one prevents sex work, all other forms of crime will have difficulty following.

On occasion, sex workers working near these entertainment centers become the victims of violent crime themselves, as I discovered reports of at least three different sex workers murdered in the same neighborhood over the years. Even when a female murder victim found in these areas cannot be positively identified as a sex worker, the presence of sex work in the area is still mentioned:

The area where the victim was found opposite the ‘Rendezvous’ night club a.k.a ‘Monkey, Monkey’ near Barnerville Junction close to the Christ Embassy Church in Gardnerville is noted for notorious practices, including high prostitution.<sup>117</sup>

Again, the purpose of these associations appears to be that murders were directly related to the presence of sex work, even if the victims cannot be positively identified as sex workers themselves. As is sadly common in many locales where sex work is criminalized, the underlying message is almost threatening, suggesting that these women ‘got what they deserved’ for engaging in such criminal behavior.

#### *IMPOVERISHED AREAS*

Similarly to crime-ridden areas, sex work is often described as occurring in solely impoverished areas that lack proper sanitation or physical safety. Once again, the assumption is not that sex work is a symptom of poverty, but rather an aggravating factor that makes living in these impoverished areas more degrading. For example, sex workers become a visual eyesore as a result of them engaging in their work outdoors. Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee discussed on Facebook witnessing women engage in sex work ‘in old cars and behind trees’,<sup>118</sup> and numerous reporters have entered infamous areas to describe the conditions:

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<sup>114</sup> A Liberian colloquialism to refer to bars, nightclubs, and other public spaces to spend time and drink.

<sup>115</sup> Garmonyou Wilson, “Police Rounds up Several ‘Prostitutes,’” *The Inquirer*, August 6, 2013, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>116</sup> A Concerned Liberian, “Floating Hotel Is Not Good,” *The Analyst*, December 14, 2004, sec. Opinion, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>117</sup> “Girl Raped, Murdered in Shoes Factory,” *The New Dawn*, September 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Leymah Gbowee, “Women, O Women! When the Battle Cry Fails,” Facebook post, *Gbowee Peace Foundation Africa*, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/GboweePeaceFoundationAfrica/posts/women-oh-women-when-the-battle-cry-failsby-leymah-r-gboweenobel-laureate-2011i-r/889001514521252/>.

Reporter Mae Azango ventures into the demonic and infamous Liberian community where men, women and underage girls have sex and consume narcotics in the open illustrating how poverty is wreaking havoc and forcing many into a life of crime and mischief.<sup>119</sup>

In these instances, sex work is seen as an act that contributes to the dilapidated conditions of these locales. There exists a possible implication that because sex workers care so little about their surroundings, they do nothing to better them and in fact make them worse.

Indoor conditions for sex workers are rarely better, and they are often targeted for destruction. Some news articles mentioned the presence of sex workers in squatting communities. A few also described how multiple sex workers often share a single room and a single dirty mattress, thus requiring them to do their work outside.<sup>120</sup> While the entertainment centers discussed earlier do exist, their association with criminality also makes them a more likely target for police intervention and thus a riskier place to be found in. Circumstances are what bring sex workers out into impoverished areas, but sex workers did not create the circumstances themselves.

There also appears to be a disconnect regarding the definitions of the terms 'ghetto' and 'slum'. Monrovia political officials, such as Mayor Mary Broh, often seem to equate ghettos with the presence of sex work:

Madam Broh explained that the girls were collected from the basement of the LoneStar Cell Tower in Mamba Point after she (Madam Broh) was hinted that there was a ghetto and a prostitution center under the tower.<sup>121</sup>

A ghetto, of course, would be a primary concern for government officials, and it would make sense for them to try and devise strategies to rectify the issues facing a ghetto's residents. In the above case, however, Mayor Broh chose to spend her energy on the prostitution aspect of the issue, ignoring the many other concerns residents have. Take for example, concerns presented by a resident of a well-known ghetto:

A stretch of land surrounded by swamps completely cut off from the rest of the city. On an island without electricity, public schools, a police station and not one health centre.<sup>122</sup>

These are tangible, dangerous issues facing many members of Monrovia's population; the presence of sex work is not listed among them. Yet the programs undertaken by Monrovia's officials to 'clean up' these ghettos were single-minded in their approach by nearly exclusively focusing on the activities of sex workers.

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<sup>119</sup> Mae Azango, "Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base," *FrontPageAfrica*, January 13, 2016, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>120</sup> Clara Mallah, "'I Sleep with More than 20 Men a Night'— Teen Prostitution Grows in Monrovia," *New Narratives*, 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Edwin Genoway Jr., "Mary Broh Defends Public Whipping of Girls amid Criticism," *FrontPageAfrica*, November 9, 2015, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>122</sup> Tamasin Ford, "Women Find Their Voice," *Inter Press Service*, October 8, 2010.

## ASSOCIATED WITH GARBAGE OR DEATH

I analyzed only five documents referencing sex work in connection to a well-known graveyard, Palm Groves Cemetery; however, these references felt prudent to include regardless as they occurred over a wide span of years and left a significant impression of severity.

### *PALM GROVE CEMETERY*

Perhaps one of the more shocking discoveries in my research was the continued references to Palm Grove Cemetery, an abandoned graveyard in Monrovia and a dwelling place for many who live on Monrovia's fringes. Unsurprisingly, sex workers are counted amongst that group. As in the above section, it appears that many Monroviaans question the humanity of those who live in Palm Grove, going so far as to compare them to 'ghosts from... the underworld' inhabiting the cemetery itself.<sup>123</sup> Typically, the taint associated with death in dirty work stems from revulsion to the decay and decomposition of bodies. But in this case, there also appears to be a metaphorical connection to sex workers' decision to live and work in a cemetery; they are dead inside, or dead spiritually, and their location inside a cemetery only physicalizes that belief.

I also noticed that many of the sources referencing Palm Grove also placed specific emphasis on the presence of child prostitutes in this area more so than others. While efforts to cease child prostitution should absolutely be held paramount, it is intriguing to notice when and where child prostitution is mentioned. I found it was often discussed in the most "sensationalizing" stories about sex work to emphasize the outrageous nature of it. While consenting adult sex workers and exploited children live in Palm Grove, in some cases, only the children are mentioned in these sources.

As with crime and poverty, there appears to be an association with those living in Palm Grove and its reflection on Monrovia's stability. Take the following remarks from a single opinion piece published in *FrontPageAfrica* for a Liberian national holiday:

...graves were desecrated, the environment was depraved, and a gross exhibition of debauchery marked the day. During those years, Decoration Day observance was a complete confusion, and demonstration of uncivilized behavior, lasciviousness, drunkenness and complete breakdown of law and order...

...Because everybody burned some dirt, the huge mass of smoke that rose from the graveyard appeared like several houses on fire. Center Street and Gurley Street were jam packed with all kinds of people including thieves, drug addicts, vagrants, and prostitutes...

...Will we return to the old days of depravity and debauchery? Will the thieves and vagrants, the dope addicts and prostitutes regain the cemeteries? Will the stinking iniquity and rancor permeate the sanity of the graveyard again?<sup>124</sup>

The image this writer portrays is one of absolute chaos and utter degradation, centering around an invasion of a sacred cemetery by the most base members of society— sex workers included. That it occurs on a national holiday in Liberia helps to create a kind of metaphor, implying this desecration is

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<sup>123</sup> Wade C. L. Williams, "No Respect for the Dead in Liberia- Looters, Vandals, Wreak Havoc on the Departed," *FrontPageAfrica*, March 13, 2013, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>124</sup> M. Blonkanjay Jackson, "Decoration Day 2014 in Liberia— Reminiscences of Mary Broh's Vision," *FrontPageAfrica*, March 11, 2013, sec. Opinion, AllAfrica.com.

of more than a cemetery, but of the soul of Liberia itself. Living in a place like Palm Grove is more than just an act of desperation; it represents an almost existential threat to Liberia's hard-won stability. That a majority of Palm Grove's residents are sex workers presents a dismal outlook for these women. When we examine how this association and others combine to create a stigma able to justify violence against sex workers, it is not long before we can see tangible ramifications.

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE & PHYSICAL TAINT

Stigma like that experienced by sex workers has significant effects on the lives of stigmatized people, especially when said stigma is supported by those in positions of power and influence. Structural violence is created when the institutional workings of a society are consciously or unconsciously guided by the beliefs of powerholders and upheld by wider society; if those beliefs discriminate against a certain population, that population will suffer. In this section, we will see how the aspects of physical taint described above have the potential to perpetuate structural harm against sex workers in regards to the safety of their physical conditions and their access to justice.

### *HOUSING & PHYSICAL CONDITIONS*

On UNMIL radio, 2017 Presidential candidates discussed Monrovia's crumbling infrastructure and the resulting danger it presents to the population. For example, a housing and population census conducted by LISGIS in 2008 revealed that 47% of households lived in unsafe housing conditions in which outer walls consisted only of mud and sticks.<sup>125</sup> While poor sanitation and unsafe housing conditions are not issues faced exclusively by sex workers in Monrovia, sex workers are at a higher risk and face disproportional effects because of their status as sex workers.

The illegal nature of sex work relegates it to the outskirts of Monrovia, in areas that are described as highly impoverished and with increased crime rates. Not coincidentally, these areas are the target of gentrification campaigns designed to 'clean' the city, both literally in their efforts to remove waste, and figuratively in their targeting of 'undesirables', i.e. sex workers. Between 2012 and 2015, Monrovia mayor Mary Broh<sup>126</sup> spearheaded these campaigns, ordering teams of volunteers to remove people from buildings deemed unsuitable for the 'new' neighborhood and occasionally personally driving a bulldozer into homes, shops, and makeshift market stalls. These campaigns left numerous Monroviaans homeless, to which Broh responded, 'Not my issue'.<sup>127</sup> Monroviaans interviewed by numerous news sources over the years, sex workers and non-sex workers alike, describe being told that their losses of homes and livelihoods were their own fault by choosing to live and work in these areas. This creates a vicious cycle for sex workers: because their work is illegal, the only places they can work are in the 'undesirable', dangerous, and unclean parts of the city; their presence raises the impoverished and high crime profile of these areas due the implicit association between sex workers, crime, and poverty in the public mind; these areas become targeted for demolition and they are forced to work in even more extreme conditions. The cycle then repeats.

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<sup>125</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "2008 Population and Housing Census: Analytical Report on Housing Conditions and Housing Facilities," Sub-report, 2008 Population and Housing Census (Monrovia: LISGIS, 2011), 26, [https://www.lisgis.net/pg\\_img/Housing%20Condition%20final%20210512.pdf](https://www.lisgis.net/pg_img/Housing%20Condition%20final%20210512.pdf).

<sup>126</sup> Nicknamed 'Hurricane Mary' by opponents and supporters alike, for reasons to be made abundantly clear in a moment.

<sup>127</sup> Kai Thaler, "Hurricane Mary," *Roads & Kingdoms*, February 17, 2016.

On occasion, poor sanitation or unsafe physical conditions are used as justifications to close down areas specifically utilized by sex workers, without actually following through on plans to ‘clean up’ the area beyond removing the people living and working there. In one Red Light District, this was exactly the case:

Although the Waterside area is now cleared of street sellers as at the Paynesville Red Light, the area remains in garbage and stinking scent. There are piles of garbage in many parts of Waterside; most of the areas have not been swept to give the place a clean look as Government says it wants.<sup>128</sup>

Ostensibly, the area was cleared of people like sex workers so that the removal of garbage and waste could be easily facilitated. Instead, sex workers were removed and forced to find a new location, while the original locale sat as dirty as before. This demonstrates that the vested interest of the government at the time was not in actual sanitation, but in the removal of sex workers. Entertainment centers were also shut down by Broh and others, although the reason given was not explicitly sex work; rather, Broh’s team closed down locales like the Samoa Bar for ‘sanitation reasons’ with the promise that they could reopen should these issues be fixed.<sup>129</sup> Privately, however, sources indicate these bars were shut down due to the presence of sex work.

Indoor entertainment centers like Samoa Bar are some of the few places where women can engage in sex work with some expectation of safety. When these places close down, many women choose to work on the streets, which carries increased risks of its own. It also makes sex workers more vulnerable to round-ups from the police and rehabilitation campaigns, wherein they are placed in conditions that are only marginally better. The idea behind these rehabilitation campaigns is to provide sex workers with shelter and skills workshops to empower them economically.<sup>130</sup> However, these ‘safe homes’ are rarely successful in practice:

The former Grand Bassa County Superintendent would not disclose any more details about the ‘safe homes’ to reporters stating that, ‘we cannot tell you where these safe homes are.’ Minister Duncan-Cassell admitted that the ‘Operation Safe Our Future [sic]’ campaign has fallen off course because of budgetary constraints.<sup>131</sup>

When little other information could be found regarding these ‘safe homes’ programs, two questions remained: if not enough ‘safe homes’ could be located, where are sex workers placed? And if they are placed in a ‘safe home’, what effects do ‘budgetary constraints’ have on the conditions of these shelters? In answer to the first question, some sources suggested that sex workers are simply placed in holding somewhere until they are released back into the unsafe conditions from which they were ‘rescued’. This situation repeats itself for well over a decade, with sex workers given little recourse for the conditions in which they live and instead are removed repeatedly as part of a ‘clean-up’ that does little to clean.

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<sup>128</sup> Gibson W. Jerue, “Liberia: Cleared, but Not Clean,” *The Analyst*, February 28, 2006, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>129</sup> “Go beyond Samoa Bar, Mary!,” *The New Dawn*, October 28, 2010, sec. Op-ed, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>130</sup> Azango, “Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base.”

<sup>131</sup> “Gender & Development Min. Attributes Increase in Prostitution to Poverty,” *Heritage*, August 10, 2012.

Because sex workers are implicitly associated with crime and poverty, they will be primary targets for cleaning efforts, even though they are primary victims of these concerns as well. However, the physically tainted nature of their labor allows those with the power to fix their housing and physical conditions to justify their removal as part of the solution. In this way, actual housing and sanitation issues go unaddressed, and sex workers are forced to live and work in dirtier, more dangerous locations that will continue to make them targets.

### *ACCESS TO JUSTICE & POLICE VIOLENCE*

As stated earlier, sex work is a crime in Monrovia, even when it is performed voluntarily by an adult in the absence of duress. The criminalization of sex work is in and of itself a form of structural violence, as it institutionalizes a barrier to sex workers' abilities to achieve a potential quality of life. One of the ways criminalization succeeds in this is by preventing sex workers from accessing their right to justice when a crime has been committed against them, out of fear of being prosecuted for a crime themselves. The role that physical taint plays in exacerbating this concern becomes apparent as we examine the ways Monrovia's justice system fails sex workers.

Generally, the justice system in Monrovia faces significant issues; numerous presidential candidates acknowledged rampant corruption amongst the judiciary, and a lack of funding equates to a large backlog of cases. Rape cases in particular face above-average delays,<sup>132</sup> and general instances of violence against women have proven difficult for the LNP to decrease.<sup>133</sup> Sex workers in Monrovia in particular are at an increased risk for rape and other violent crimes, in no small part due the dangerous areas in Monrovia they are forced to work. Numerous sex workers reported to news outlets over the years the extent to which they suffer violent assaults, and yet feel they are without avenues for aid. For those who do bring the crimes committed against them to the authorities, the following situation exemplifies what they risk by doing so:

PAP Boss also gave instance of the case of Kaba Lassana, aged 27 who was convicted of prostitution by the West Point Magistrate Court and sentenced to 30 days imprisonment since 27 September 2005 is still said to be behind bars at the Monrovia Central Prison up to today.<sup>134</sup>

The inability for sex workers to access justice without a fear of retribution is deeply ingrained in Monrovia's institutions, despite the fact that the stigma against sex workers is what puts them in greater need of justice.

Monrovia's judiciary is not the only institution where sex workers are discriminated against due to the physical taint. The LNP also inflicts serious harm against sex workers, either by disregarding violent acts against sex workers, or by wielding their power to commit violent acts themselves. Generally, sex workers avoid reporting crimes to the police, as many stated they feel at best unheard, and at worst, actively threatened. On the first level, many sex workers do not feel keen to report

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<sup>132</sup> Secretariat of the National Population Commission, "Country Report: AADP+5/ICDP@25" (Monrovia: Government of Liberia, 2018), 25.

<sup>133</sup> "Women in Policing Will Defeat Crime- IGP," *The Analyst*, December 1, 2008, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>134</sup> J. Nathaniel Daygbor, "Justice System Going from Bad to Worse, PAP Executive Alleges," *The Analyst*, December 7, 2005, AllAfrica.com.

abuse as police officers will simply ignore their complaints.<sup>135</sup> On the second, more serious level, because of sex work's criminal association, there is a persistent belief that sex workers cannot have a crime committed against them when they themselves are committing a crime; a common sentiment sex workers hear is 'You are just whores; you can't be raped'.<sup>136</sup> When sex workers are viewed as a source of crime, crimes against them are considered either impossible or even well-deserved.

Sadly, police officers themselves are often perpetrators of violent acts against sex workers. Many sex workers describe to news outlets that officers patrolling the areas they are forced to work in will forcibly rape them or extort money or sexual acts from them in exchange for not arresting them. One sex worker's account in *FrontPageAfrica* is particularly harrowing:

I am tired with the street life because when we go hustle, the Police can beat us and naked us and take all our money from us, all in the name of catching criminals. This is the only area where I have seen Police men putting their hands in our panties to take our money from us... They can come in Police uniform but no ID card, but they can say they are Police officers and they can beat us and naked us and take our money from us. So we are working for the Police people.<sup>137</sup>

While the acts police officers commit are decidedly physically violent in nature, it is important to emphasize the structurally violent dynamic at play as well. The LNP wields their institutionally-bestowed power as means to justify their violence and ensure they will face little to no consequences. The sex work's physical taint places sex workers lower in Monrovia's social hierarchy, creating an inability to either deny police officers' demands or attempt to seek justice; the LNP's power presents a genuine threat to sex workers' human rights and ability to achieve quality of life.

The LNP are not the only institutionally-powerful actors that enact violence against sex workers, as Mary Broh is repeatedly brought up for the violence she commits during her beautification campaigns, alongside the Gender Ministry for their sex worker rehabilitation campaigns. In a widely publicized incident, Broh visited an area well-known for sex work and other crimes in order to collect a group of teenage girls suspected of being sex workers; she 'paraded them in the public sphere and physically abused them' by whipping them and posting videos and pictures on Facebook.<sup>138</sup> The outrage surrounding the incident, however, largely centered on the victims' ages as opposed to their status as sex workers. Even still, supporters and non-supporters of Broh alike questioned why the girls were even in the location Broh found them in, with some even going so far as to suggest that the girls deserved their punishment for being in such a physically tainted locale.<sup>139</sup>

The sex work's physical taint and its concentration in specific undesirable areas contributes greatly to sex workers' arrests and their inability to access justice. Entertainment centers are primary targets of police raids as part of rehabilitation campaigns, and women are often arrested simply for

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<sup>135</sup> Debo Belvis O'Diaji, "Violence against Women," *The Analyst*, December 2, 2005, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>136</sup> African Sex Workers Alliance, "Violence Against Sex Workers in Africa," Working paper (ASWA, 2019), 15, [https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/aswa\\_report\\_final\\_low\\_res-2.pdf](https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/aswa_report_final_low_res-2.pdf).

<sup>137</sup> Azango, "Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base."

<sup>138</sup> Seltue Karweaye, "Unmasking Mary Taryonnoh Broh," *Nordic Africa News*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>139</sup> Rufus S. Berry II., "It Does Take a Whole Village to Raise Our Children," *The Liberian Observer*, November 27, 2015.



being found in these buildings. Notably, women with no history of sex work found themselves arrested at entertainment centers because sex work's associations with these locales was considered enough probable cause to take any woman into custody.<sup>140</sup> This is also where the gendered dimension of sex work becomes prevalent, as it was only ever women arrested during these raids; some Liberian NGOs pointed to these arrests as 'negative gender profiling' and 'a complete violation of their rights as human beings'.<sup>141</sup> Once again, the outrage was directed specifically at the fact that *non-sex workers* were arrested without due process, and little to no concern was given to sex workers that face this kind of harassment on a regular basis with significantly higher risks for retribution if they do not cooperate.

Because sex work is only found in these crime-ridden areas, and are considered a large contributor to the nature of these areas, these violations are considered legitimate, justifiable acts taken to protect and progress Monrovia. Physical taint against sex workers is deeply embedded within Monrovia's structures to the point that individuals are given power by these institutions to regularly enact harm against sex workers. Physical taint in this regard is more than just the abstract thought of sex work as physically dirty; it is representative of Monrovia's collective conscious that provides justification to perpetuate structural violence against sex workers.

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<sup>140</sup> Genoway Jr., "Mary Broh Defends Public Whipping of Girls amid Criticism."

<sup>141</sup> "Girls Alliance Picks Bone with Gender Minister," *The Informer*, June 4, 2012, AllAfrica.com.

## CHAPTER 5: SEX WORK AS SOCIALLY TAINTED

Social taint moves from the observable to the interactional nature of dirty work. Ashforth and Kreiner define social taint as 1) occurring in what is perceived as a servile or degrading relationship, and/or 2) often coming in contact with other stigmatized groups.<sup>142</sup> Sex work in Monrovia fulfills both of these criteria in a few specific patterns. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how sex work is socially tainted through perceptions that sex workers are dehumanized or perpetual victims of power imbalances, and through their contact with drug users and the HIV+. I will then explain how sex work's social taint impacts sex workers' (in)ability to access adequate healthcare and maintain familial security, two forms of structural violence.

### SERVILE OR DEGRADING RELATIONSHIPS

I analyzed 34 documents containing references to sex work using dehumanizing language or describing sex workers as victims of power imbalances. While these references span a number of years within Monrovia's transition period, they were most commonly found in 2012 and 2013.<sup>143</sup>

#### *DEHUMANIZING SEX WORKERS*

Descriptions of Monrovia's sex workers demonstrate a perception that goes beyond standard beliefs about servile relationships. Many believe that by becoming a sex worker, a woman has given up her humanity and is content with merely being a product. The act is often described throughout the data as akin to full objectification of her body, if not outright slavery. Furthermore, there appears to be a refusal to differentiate between the act of selling sex and the person selling it, in that the way she chooses to use her body has an effect on her status as a human being in society. The job of "sex worker" becomes a sex worker's entire identity:

'Today, we have problems only,' says Elizabeth Brown, a Weah supporter during a party rally. 'We are suffering, our rice is too dear, our daughters are prostitutes, our sons do drugs. We want change.'<sup>144</sup>

Notice the difference in language—our daughters *are* prostitutes, our sons *do* drugs. Prostitution is the whole of their being. This suggests a form of permanence to the concept of sex work. Whereas drug use is an issue that can be overcome, sex work is an identity that cannot be shed, and thus should be stopped from occurring at all. By creating the identity category of 'prostitute', it becomes

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<sup>142</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, "How Can You Do It?": Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity," 415.

<sup>143</sup> It is useful to note that two major events occurred in these years that likely gave rise to sex work's prominence in the national conversation. In 2012, popular Montserrado County Representative Edwin Snowe faced a sex scandal in which he was accused of paying a woman to strip naked at a bachelor's party. This was met with a certain amount of irony, as Snowe himself was a significant critic of fellow representative Willis Knuckles when he was embroiled in his own sex scandal some years prior. In 2013, Mayor Mary Broh, with the support of the Ministry of Gender and President Sirleaf, engaged in a rehabilitation campaign for sex workers, and publicly rounded up suspected sex workers in Monrovia to place them in supposed educational workshops through the YWCA.

<sup>144</sup> Bram Posthumus, "Liberia's Presidential Run-off: On the Strange Appeal of George Weah," *African Arguments*, November 1, 2017.

much easier justify the treatment of sex workers as second-class citizens. In an extreme example, notice the support this voter gives for a political candidate's "solution" to Liberia's rape crisis:

'For him he believes that since all attempts are not yielding the required result of curbing rape - he had proposed to rapist to make use of prostitutes that are available.'<sup>145</sup>

There appears to be a sincere concern for female rape victims throughout this post, but the author does not count sex workers as actual women. They are tools that can be used to satisfy violent sexual urges, rather than human beings who are often the subjects of violent assaults themselves.

Often, this dehumanization is perceived as a result of a loss of dignity, and is part of a cultural gendered response to ideas of women's worth. In Monrovia, a woman's self-respect appears tied to her sexual history; as a result, women who engage in sex work are perceived as having little self-respect, and thus little to prove their humanity. This is most evident when viewing the responses of both the public and those accused when sex scandals of well-known politicians were brought to light. On the accusatory side, numerous pieces reference how politicians 'debased' or 'degraded' women, and inflicted irreparable damage to these women's dignity. The responses from politicians directly combat this accusation, and focus on their commitment to protecting 'womanhood', as Montserrado County Representative Edwin Snowe chose to phrase it.<sup>146</sup> Dignity, above all else, appears to be the greatest loss sex workers face, and as such, it becomes the primary focus of efforts to 'rescue' sex workers:

...the Gender Ministry can do better if it works with female groups in the country to do a complete case study of the escalating prostitution rate and come out with approaches that are less harmful but effective in restoring the dignity of the street girls and women.<sup>147</sup>

Womanhood and dignity are the concern here; clients are condemned for damaging the respect and reputations of women who engage in sex work, and sex workers are stigmatized for their apparent acceptance in trading their worth as a woman and a person for money. If sex work was not perceived as inherently dehumanizing, but instead as a financial transaction, the issue of a woman's dignity might no longer be contested.

### *VICTIMS OF POWER IMBALANCES & MISOGYNY*

As discussed earlier, women's empowerment was a prominent goal throughout Monrovia's transition, and its achievements in that sector were highly touted by its officials. It stands to reason, then, if sex workers are viewed as inherent and perpetual victims of patriarchal exploitation, that sex work as a form of labor would be perceived as highly socially tainted. This hypothesis is demonstrably

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<sup>145</sup> Ibrahim Al-bakari Nyei, "Critical Issues of a National Concern (VII): Emphasizing the Reality of Bropleh's Alternative to Rapists," *Voice of a Patriot* (blog), December 23, 2008, [https://ibrahimnyei.blogspot.com/2008\\_12\\_21\\_archive.html](https://ibrahimnyei.blogspot.com/2008_12_21_archive.html).

<sup>146</sup> Edwin Snowe, "Edwin Snowe Breaks Silence on Naked Women Affairs," Press release (Monrovia: Office of Representative Edwin Snowe, January 10, 2012), [http://gnnliberia.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2877:liberia-edwin-snowe-breaks-silence-on-naked-woman-affairs&catid=34:politics&Itemid=54](http://gnnliberia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2877:liberia-edwin-snowe-breaks-silence-on-naked-woman-affairs&catid=34:politics&Itemid=54).

<sup>147</sup> "Right Decision Wrong Approach— Sammitta Tells Gender Minister Cassell," *The Analyst*, June 4, 2012, [AllAfrica.com](http://AllAfrica.com).

proven over the years, as emphasized by the Secretary General of Girls Alliance for Future Leadership, Sammitta Entsua:

She emphasized that the men and boys who pay for the illicit sex are the main culprits who need to face the law and not the women and girls who are mere victims.<sup>148</sup>

Numerous politicians, NGOs, and even UNMIL itself worked incredibly hard to reverse cultural attitudes that place men in a higher status of society over women. However, because sex work in Monrovia largely consists of men purchasing sex from women<sup>149</sup>, and as this act is viewed as dehumanizing, sex work exists as a physical manifestation of male dominion over women. Furthermore, men who purchase sex work are portrayed as weaponizing the power they possess for their own ends, as illustrated in this post:

Its foundation is deeply rooted in insecurities, financial difficulties, and frankly, the everyday Liberian hustle; a disadvantage that older guys take advantage off (sic).<sup>150</sup>

In some of my data, it appears that sex workers are aware to some degree of the power imbalance present in their relationships. For sex workers, a power hierarchy does not seem to be an inherently unacceptable circumstance; but to the wider public, a hierarchy that places men in a position where they may feel enabled to commit physical harm, contributes to sex work's stigmatization.

Of particular relevance is the role that exceptionally powerful men play in developing sex work's social taint. UNMIL peacekeepers played a large role in expanding Monrovia's sex trade, and Monrovia's were not blind to their activities nor the power imbalances in relationship between peacekeepers and sex workers:

...the so called peace makers that were inserted in our nation have exploited to abuse our women. They were vulnerable for the sake of bread.<sup>151</sup>

This disdain for UNMIL peacekeepers appears more vitriolic across my data than compared to comments made against other powerful men. It is possible that because UNMIL's explicit purpose is for Liberian stability, and because sex work is seen as a threat to that stability, UNMIL peacekeepers' decisions to purchase sex appears hypocritical and counterproductive to their goals. However, Liberian politicians who purchased sex are also subject to significant anger, as demonstrated here:

The failure of Mr. Knuckles to resign honorably would grossly affect the fight against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, thereby making more and more Liberian girls and women vulnerable to men who think they are untouchable in exercising their unlimited power.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> "Girls Alliance Picks Bone with Gender Minister."

<sup>149</sup> I was able to locate a single reference in 2017 on FrontPageAfrica in which a woman who owned a brothel admitted to selling other women as sexual slaves, but male purchasers and pimps were a far more common occurrence.

<sup>150</sup> Girlchild, "LGIC: The Liberian Godpa Industry Complex," *Sleepless in Monrovia* (blog), July 15, 2018, <https://sleeplessinmonrovia.com/op-ed/lgic-the-liberian-godpa-industrial-complex/>.

<sup>151</sup> James Torh, "Legal or Not, Sex Trade Is Destroying Our Society," *The Perspective*, February 26, 2007.

<sup>152</sup> "Snowe Must Clarify," *The Analyst*, February 22, 2007, AllAfrica.com.

The perceived indiscretions of government officials like Knuckles and Snowe were exacerbated due to their roles in Liberia's rebuilding. Despite the relative commonality of sex work, these men's actions were particularly egregious because they supported an industry that is considered counterproductive to Monrovia's future.

In some cases, however, sex workers are still portrayed as victims even without the presence of men in their work. President Sirleaf, for example, points to the role poverty plays in introducing women to sex work:

A deprived environment leads to prostitution and early marriages real temptation for many of our socially disadvantaged girls and women.<sup>153</sup>

Economic conditions appear to be the primary driver for women to begin engaging in sex work. In the above remarks, these women are stripped of all agency; instead of acknowledging that women made a choice to become sex workers, they are considered victims pushed into the industry by some abstract external force.<sup>154</sup> Similar language is used when women engage in sex work to support their families, and the words 'forced' or 'pushed out' are used almost exclusively throughout the data, with little to suggest that women could choose to engage in sex work. Compare this, however, to the resiliency sex workers choose to define themselves by when given the opportunity, as one sex worker described to a reporter:

People insults, beat and even forcefully take our money from us many times, but we still bear it.<sup>155</sup>

Removing sex workers' agency can cause significant harm. Sex work's perpetual association with dehumanization and victimhood ironically removes the individual person from concerns about the form of work, and in turn, allows those in power to gloss over the concerns of individuals in the name of stopping the abstract 'evil' that is sex work.

## CONTACT WITH STIGMATIZED GROUPS

I analyzed 50 documents containing one references to sex workers being connected to criminals, drug addicts, or those testing positive for HIV. The references connecting sex workers to criminals led me to similar conclusions as those drawn during the analysis of sex workers in crime-ridden areas discussed in chapter 1. For the sake of space, we will focus on the connections with drug users and the HIV+.

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<sup>153</sup> Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, "Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, at the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Meeting of the 'Women for a Better World' on the Occasion of International Women's Day" (Speech, Women for a Better World, Madrid, March 7, 2007), 7, <https://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/womendayspain.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> Chi Mgbako notes that this is a common theme for sex workers in many African countries; sex workers are well aware that their financial options were limited when they chose to engage in sex work, but still claim ownership over the decision. See C. Mgbako, *To Live Freely in This World*, 2016.

<sup>155</sup> "Prostitutes, Gays Fight for Space," *The New Republic*, April 23, 2014, AllAfrica.com.

### *SEX WORKERS & DRUG USERS AND DEALERS*

The use of marijuana, opiates, and other drugs has become a steadily increasing issue among the Monrovia population since the end of the conflict. Overwhelmingly, it appears that Monrovia society draws an inherent connection to sex work and drug use, whether or not sex workers are drug users, sell to drug users, or both. As one journalist described it in 2010, ‘Narcotic drugs and illicit set [sic] are like fish and water—inseparable’.<sup>156</sup> It appears throughout my data that drug use is pervasive on every side of the sex industry of Monrovia. However, the concern of this research is not whether there is rampant drug use among sex workers and their clients, but how this ‘inseparable’ connection reflects on sex workers’ labor. For one, their connection to drug dealers tends to exemplify another facet of manipulation, as the executive director of Voice of the Future International described it:

He said most of these teenagers, mostly girls, are also involved with drugs which are sold to them by owners of these jammed social entertainment centers.<sup>157</sup>

In these instances, drugs are referenced as a specific factor in introducing women to and keeping them in sex work. When referenced this way, it adds to the perception of sex workers as victims who are being exploited. This in turn could be used to promote strategies that seek to save rather than support sex workers.

In other cases, sex workers are portrayed as more active perpetrators of the drug trade. In one instance, the Drug Enforcement Agency draws a direct connection between the two:

According to him, there is a correlation between high prostitution levels, the use of illicit narcotics and the spread of STD/HIV within Monrovia and environs.<sup>158</sup>

Coming from law enforcement sources, it appears that sex workers are under suspicion for their involvement in the drug trade, implying they are active contributors to the crisis. When this type of reference occurs, we again begin to see a pattern in which sex workers, through their association to drug users, are depicted as a threat to Liberia’s stability, as illustrated in this opinion piece:

I see a misguided and idled generation whose future is predominantly knotted to alcohol abuse, drug addiction, shisha smoking, prostitution, gambling, beaching, begging and a very low appetite for education, innovation, and excellence.<sup>159</sup>

The author paints a stark image regarding the fears of Liberia’s future. Following an era of devastation, it is logical that Liberians would fear a return to chaos, disorder, and violence. But what is fascinating is this continuing association with sex work, an act with no innate ties to violence, is so explicitly tied to other social ills that do indeed present tangible threats to Liberia. The relationship

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<sup>156</sup> “Rising Sex Scandals,” *The Analyst*, April 8, 2010, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>157</sup> “Prostitution Leaves Teenager Dead— Child Rights Advocate Alarms,” *The Informer*, May 8, 2012, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>158</sup> J. Edwood Dennis, “Drug Dealers, Traffickers Roam Liberia,” *The Analyst*, June 27, 2006, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>159</sup> Martin Kollie, “The Futility of Unification Day: Hopeless Future— Misguided Generation— Unpatriotic Leaders,” *FrontPageAfrica*, May 15, 2018.

between sex work and drug use is viewed as so threatening, it is even brought up as an example of a political party's unfitness for office, based on their voters:

Of the 300,000 votes the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) received in the first round of voting, 217,000 of them were from Monrovia's shantytowns, the barracks of the unskilled and unemployed and likely violent youths prone to drugs, prostitution and crime.<sup>160</sup>

While the references above either implicitly or explicitly state a definitive, unbreakable connection between sex work and drug use, I was unable to find references that suggested *why* such a connection exists. The line of thought that sex work and drugs are inextricably tied inevitably leads to the conclusion that in order to end drug use, Monrovia must also abolish sex work.

### *SEX WORKERS & THE HIV+*

The spread of HIV/AIDS is a legitimate crisis affecting the health of hundreds of thousands of Liberians. The lack of widespread use of condoms coupled with a healthcare system inadequately equipped to treat HIV means the disease is a cause for serious concern. Like sex work, HIV has its own stigma attached to it:

Among health workers the estimates for HIV infection vary between 5 percent and 10 percent, but all agree that the stigma attached to AIDS will stoke the epidemic unless addressed.<sup>161</sup>

A positive HIV diagnosis has both physical and social repercussions for an individual and represents a potential loss of both life and livelihood. Like drugs, the association between HIV and sex work is not unfounded, as sex workers in Monrovia do stand to have a higher risk of HIV infection. Still, this research is examining this association's perception; and again, we see that sex workers are not viewed as victims of the HIV/AIDS crisis, but as perpetrators of it. The three examples below illustrate how heavily the interaction between sex workers and the HIV-+ is portrayed in Monrovia:

In order to survive, young girls are constrained to resort to prostitution. In brief, the socio-economic life of Liberia provides a favourable climate for the spread of HIV/AIDS.<sup>162</sup>

However, there is a general feeling that sexual intercourse/heterosexual behaviors contribute to most infections, especially from prostitutes who use sex trade as a means of employment and survival.<sup>163</sup>

...legalization [of sex work] could increase the spread of many sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, gonorrhoea and AIDS. This would be the case because more agents (sellers and buyers) would enter the market, and not all would practice safe sex...<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Tom Kamara, "Ellen's Headache," *The New Democrat*, November 15, 2011, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>161</sup> "Stigma Blunts AIDS Action," *The New Humanitarian*, November 10, 2006.

<sup>162</sup> World Council of Churches, "Liberia," Mapping of Resources, Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa (World Council of Churches, 2004), <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/ehaia-html/wa-liberia-e.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Samuel Zohnjaty Joe, "HIV/AIDS Epidemic in Liberia After the Civil War: Another Setback for Economic Development," *The Perspective*, March 30, 2005.

<sup>164</sup> "The Case against Legalizing Prostitution," *The New Dawn*, February 22, 2012.

Because sex workers are painted as the main contributor to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the onus is implied to be on them to prevent the spread of the disease— or they must be stopped from working. Very rarely did I find evidence supporting solutions to the real risk of HIV faced by sex workers, such as encouraging the use of condoms when purchasing sex; in fact, in Okigbo et. al.'s study, sex workers felt *discouraged* from using condoms because clients would refuse to pay them if they tried.<sup>165</sup>

Instead, we see more advocacy to end sex work as the safeguard to protect Liberian health and stability. Across the data, the crisis is framed as a physical battle that must be won, or as a more abstract, soul-infecting disease that must be cured, as described by Child Welfare Foundation International:

The city has become infested with all sorts of immoral attitudes which serve as a path for the contraction of STDs and HIV virus that lead to the deadly AIDS pandemic.<sup>166</sup>

In either case, sex work's deep association with HIV+ people suggests that the only way to stem the HIV/AIDS crisis is to remove sex work from Monrovia. As with drug use, it appears that the collective attitude towards sex work does not distinguish the profession from one of its potential risks, and instead chooses to perceive HIV+ status as an inherent trait of sex workers.

I would like to again emphasize that engaging in risky sexual behaviors does present a higher risk of contracting and/or transmitting HIV. However, sex work is not intrinsically connected to HIV+ status, and there are solutions that can be implemented to protect both clients and sex workers from infection. Monrovia sex workers themselves are well aware of this, as one stated to *FrontPageAfrica*:

When I go hustle, and any man says he wants to have me without condom, I can take my light walk and go away from them and not take their money, because I am not so jammed to add some kind of sickness to my life that is already risky.<sup>167</sup>

Overall, sex work's social taint in Monrovia, whether it be driven by perceptions of victimhood or associations with drug use and HIV, primarily paints sex work as contradictory to goals for the city's future and as a threat to Liberia's stability. However, social taint itself is a threat to sex workers' lives and livelihoods, as it pervades Monrovia's institutions and justifies perpetuating structural violence against them.

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE & SOCIAL TAIN

As with physical taint, social taint is more than an abstract discourse that surrounds sex work in the public consciousness. The associations detailed above influence institutions in Monrovia that have tangible effects on sex workers' lives. While, some of the issues discussed are faced by many citizens in Monrovia, the socially tainted nature of sex work either exacerbates these concerns for sex workers or disproportionately affects them. In particular, the effects of social taint are most visibly seen in sex workers' abilities to access healthcare and in threats to their familial security.

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<sup>165</sup> Okigbo et al., "Risk Factors for Transactional Sex Among Young Liberian Females in Post-Conflict Liberia," 140.

<sup>166</sup> "Teenage Prostitution on the Increase, Claims CWFI," *The Analyst*, February 16, 2005, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>167</sup> Azango, "Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base."



## ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

In 2008, the Sirleaf administration implemented the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), which was designed to concentrate government resources on providing for specific health concerns of increased importance in Monrovia, setting the expected service costs for maternal healthcare, reproductive healthcare, and treatment and prevention of STDs and other communicable diseases.<sup>168</sup> However, a lack of well-located health facilities, trained healthcare personnel, and government funding to fully subsidize treatment costs means that adequate healthcare is out of reach for many Liberians. Still, even if these issues were rectified, social taint would significantly impede sex workers' abilities to access healthcare in a number of ways.

For one, the violence-mental health-substance abuse cycle puts sex workers at a significant disadvantage when seeking healthcare. Sex workers are both associated with and can be drug users, and this connection is often perpetuated by stigma-driven violence. As ASWA states in their report:

Violence often has a negative impact on an individual's mental and emotional health and wellbeing. Violence is mostly directly linked to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but also to depressive, anxiety and substance abuse disorders.<sup>169</sup>

In Monrovia, even sex workers who are not drug users face physical and structural violence, in part as a result of their socially tainted association with drug users. This violence has a severe impact on their mental health, and many sex workers may turn to drug use in order to self-medicate. This only 'legitimizes' the public perception that 'sex workers are drug users', and fuels further violence driven by social taint. Additionally, while reviewing the BPHS, mental health treatment was placed as a low priority comparatively, most often with instructions to refer to sources outside the Monrovia healthcare system and with no substantive plans for substance abuse support.<sup>170</sup> This leaves few options for sex workers to receive care for health concerns they disproportionately face.

Stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and other STDs also creates significant difficulties for sex workers seeking healthcare, whether or not they are seeking treatment for these conditions or entirely unrelated concerns. Sex workers in Monrovia, more so than other populations, are at an increased risk for HIV infection due to the lack of condom use. Overall, the HIV infection rate among young Liberians was increasing 5.9% annually;<sup>171</sup> women generally represent rates of infection two to three times higher than men.<sup>172</sup> The stigma is so severe that it not only prevents HIV+ sex workers from seeking treatment, but it also keeps healthy sex workers from asking questions about living with HIV/AIDS out of fear of implying they are HIV+.<sup>173</sup> Sex workers who do attempt to seek out treatment for HIV/AIDS and other unrelated diseases often face violence, both physical and psychological, when they disclose their profession as sex workers to healthcare workers who stigmatize them for their

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<sup>168</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, "Basic Package of Health and Social Welfare Services for Liberia" (MOHSW, 2008), [https://extranet.who.int/countryplanningcycles/sites/default/files/country\\_docs/Liberia/ndp\\_liberia.pdf](https://extranet.who.int/countryplanningcycles/sites/default/files/country_docs/Liberia/ndp_liberia.pdf).

<sup>169</sup> African Sex Workers Alliance, "Violence Against Sex Workers in Africa," p. 29.

<sup>170</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, "Basic Package of Health and Social Welfare Services for Liberia."

<sup>171</sup> World Council of Churches, "Liberia."

<sup>172</sup> National AIDS Commission Republic of Liberia, "National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework II 2010-2015," 12.

<sup>173</sup> National AIDS Commission Republic of Liberia, 14.

condition.<sup>174</sup> One sex worker recounted to the media that she would not even seek treatment for a cut on her foot, and that she has witnessed sex workers die of infection and internal bleeding because they believe no one will help them.<sup>175</sup> In this situation, even when no physical violence has been enacted against them, sex workers have died as a result of structural violence perpetuated by the healthcare system.

HIV/AIDS treatment is not the only form of healthcare sex workers face difficulty accessing and have serious repercussions for not receiving. Overall, Liberia has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world at 715 per 100,000 in 2015.<sup>176</sup> Again, sex workers are disproportionately affected by maternal death, as their higher rate of sexual intercourse and low rate of condom usage equate to higher rates of pregnancy and higher risk for maternal mortality. Additionally, the options sex workers have for maternal healthcare and delivery are few; as established, healthcare workers often treat sex workers poorly, and traditional midwives will also discriminate against sex workers. Sex workers who do not want to risk the dangers associated with labor and delivery may opt for an abortion, but as those are also illegal in Monrovia, will be forced to go to unregulated providers. Unsafe abortions are also a leading cause of maternal death.<sup>177</sup> While post-abortion care services are available at clinics and health facilities, these are also subject to intense ‘stigma, coercion, discrimination and violence’, especially when the woman seeking treatment is outed as a sex worker.<sup>178</sup>

Thus, the health concerns that sex workers face most often as a result of their labor are also what place them at increased risk of violence and death due to social taint. As one supporter for legalizing sex work in Monrovia states, ‘prostitutes don’t really have control over their own bodies’;<sup>179</sup> structural violence has stripped that control away from them, and is largely driven by social taint.

### *FAMILIAL INSECURITY*

It may seem strange to list familial insecurity as a form of structural violence, as the institution of the family is usually more culturally shaped. However, the family unit and the value of family are highly regarded in Monrovia, and thus the ways in which social taint interferes with sex workers abilities to maintain family ties has tangible repercussions on their ability to achieve a substantial quality of life. Particularly, the ways in which sex workers are dehumanized and perceived as victims significantly affects their familial relationships.

Poverty affects many families in Monrovia, and options for survival are few and far between. Particularly in the period immediately following the conflict, more families encouraged their daughters, wives, and sisters to discretely engage in sex work so that the family as a whole could survive.<sup>180</sup> The key word here is ‘discretely’ as the preservation of a woman’s dignity is held to a high

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<sup>174</sup> African Sex Workers Alliance, “Violence Against Sex Workers in Africa.”

<sup>175</sup> Azango, “Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base.”

<sup>176</sup> United Nations Population Fund, “Worlds Apart: Reproductive Health and Rights in an Age of Inequality,” Annual report, State of World Population (New York: UNFPA, 2017), 120, <https://www.unfpa.org/swop-2017>.

<sup>177</sup> Secretariat of the National Population Commission, “Country Report: AADP+5/ICDP@25,” 40.

<sup>178</sup> Secretariat of the National Population Commission, 40.

<sup>179</sup> “The Stupidity of Illegalizing Prostitution,” *The New Dawn*, December 22, 2011, sec. Opinion.

<sup>180</sup> “Let’s Battle Teenage Prostitution,” *The News Monrovia*, June 4, 2004, AllAfrica.com.

priority, and too obvious an indiscretion would both damage the woman's reputation as well as bring shame upon her family. It is this reason that so many of the sex workers who come to Monrovia from more rural areas do so with 'no safety net or relatives to support them';<sup>181</sup> were their home communities to discover their indiscretions, not only would sex workers struggle to find other work, but their family would be disgraced. Without stability from a supportive familial network, sex workers may be more susceptible to exploitation or violence at the hands of those who would manipulate them, or may have a more difficult time leaving sex work if she chooses to do so. Some sex workers have described to media outlets that one of the primary reasons they became further engaged in sex work was 'family neglect', and as will be discussed in chapter 6, sex workers consistently blame and are the source of blame for the dissolution of traditional family structures and the perceived risks that brings about.<sup>182</sup>

Sex workers who have children often face additional hardships. Children are expensive to care for in Monrovia, with a child dependency rate of 80%, meaning parents must work extraordinarily hard to ensure the family's survival.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, sex workers are not only more likely to have children (due to a lack of general contraceptive use) but also to have more children. Sex workers in Monrovia tend to have lower levels of education than their non-sex worker peers;<sup>184</sup> additionally, women with little to no education had total fertility rates of 6 to 7.2, compared to the TFR of 3 for their university-educated counterparts.<sup>185</sup> While specific data regarding the TFR of sex workers could not be located, it is possible to make the assumption that sex workers fall into the camp of higher TFR.

Like most mothers, many sex workers have a vested interest in providing and caring for their children, whether or not those children were born out of their engagement in sex work. This is one of the primary reasons sex workers may choose not to report violence that is committed against them, as the discovery of their status as sex workers could prompt government services to remove their children from their care.<sup>186</sup> Sex work does not make one unfit for motherhood, but the stigmatized associations of sex work with drug users and the HIV+, as well as the perception that they fail to fulfill the proper female role model for their children, threaten a sex worker's ability to maintain her family as she desires. And this is nothing to say of the stigma that sex workers' children face themselves when it is known who their mother is. Leymah Gbowee spoke on her meeting with the child of a sex worker:

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<sup>181</sup> Mallah, "I Sleep with More than 20 Men a Night" – Teen Prostitution Grows in Monrovia."

<sup>182</sup> "Prostitutes Seek Gov't Assistance," *The Analyst*, March 6, 2007, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>183</sup> Secretariat of the National Population Commission, "Country Report: AADP+5/ICDP@25," 2.

<sup>184</sup> Okigbo et al., "Risk Factors for Transactional Sex Among Young Liberian Females in Post-Conflict Liberia," 136.

<sup>185</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "2008 Population and Housing Census: Analytical Report on Fertility and Marriage Patterns," Sub-report, 2008 Population and Housing Census (Monrovia: LISGIS, 2011), 24, [https://www.lisgis.net/pg\\_img/Fertility%20and%20Marriage%20final%20110512.pdf](https://www.lisgis.net/pg_img/Fertility%20and%20Marriage%20final%20110512.pdf).

<sup>186</sup> O'Diaji, "Violence against Women."

The women's chief of the village has this little girl, fair color like me, totally dirty. And all day she walked around nowhere... The meaning of her name is pig. Her mother died while giving birth to her. And no one had any idea who her father was.<sup>187</sup>

With her mother absent, the child now bears the indignity and consequences of her mother's profession. These consequences exist for no other reason than social taint, and this example goes to demonstrate the immense difficulties sex workers face in maintaining stability for their family.

In Monrovia, family is the marker of stability, and sex workers who have lost their face greater difficulty than most in obtaining another. This is largely due to the gendered expectations of a 'traditional' family, wherein a man capable of providing economically is matched with a respectable, 'pure' woman capable of providing him with children. Sex workers in Monrovia clearly do not fit that first requirement, and if a sex worker has children, it only becomes more difficult for her to find a husband willing to marry her. Again, while I could find no concrete data of the marriage rates for sex workers, this finding from the 2008 population census is potentially telling:

Majority of the [female] never married population (77 percent) were in other occupations while 7 percent for elementary and service worker shop and market sales workers occupation respectively...<sup>188</sup>

'Other occupations' in this study is left quite vague, but the listed occupations in the survey run the gamut of formal and informal job sectors; suffice to say, there is a large possibility that sex workers make up a significant portion of that 77 percent. The socially tainted nature of sex work in Monrovia's public discourse presents sex work and familial security as inherently mutually exclusive without recognizing that social taint itself makes it thus.

Within the dynamics of social taint, we can once again see the cyclical, self-perpetuating nature of structural violence and dirty work stigma. The exact issues institutions claim to be resolving are instead enforced and exacerbated by continuing to stigmatize sex work as a form of labor and by tying it inextricably with the social ills of substance abuse, HIV+ infection rates, and GBV. But as we will see in the next chapter, moral taint potentially has a greater effect on the harms faced by sex workers as a result of their dirty work.

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<sup>187</sup> Leymah Gbowee, "Unlock the Intelligence, Passion, Greatness of Girls" (TED Talk, TED2012, Long Beach, March 2, 2012), [https://www.ted.com/talks/leymah\\_gbowee\\_unlock\\_the\\_intelligence\\_passion\\_greatness\\_of\\_girls/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/leymah_gbowee_unlock_the_intelligence_passion_greatness_of_girls/transcript).

<sup>188</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "2008 Population and Housing Census: Analytical Report on Fertility and Marriage Patterns," 35.

## CHAPTER 6: SEX WORK AS MORALLY TAINTED

Ashforth and Kreiner define moral taint as that which utilizes behavior that is seen as uncivil, and/or is believed to be contrary to ideas of virtue or goodness.<sup>189</sup> Throughout my research, I discovered data that suggested sex work in Monrovia somewhat fulfilled the first criteria, but I did not find sufficient evidence to suggest that this dimension of moral taint had a significant effect on perpetuating structural violence against sex workers. However, sex work in Monrovia is morally tainted through the second criteria in its opposition to religious values, its connection to other ‘corrupting influences’, its perceived threat to traditional family structures, and its perception as unproductive and meaningless work. Sex work’s moral taint impacts sex workers’ economic (in)security, access to labor rights and education, and their potential misrepresentation and silencing in wider culture, all forms of structural violence.

### CONTRARY TO VIRTUE AND GOODNESS

I analyzed 98 documents containing one or more references to sex work as operating contrary to ideas of virtue and goodness in the Monrovia context. The four patterns discussed below possessed at least 50 references each.

#### *RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO SEX WORK*

Liberia is a majority Christian country that confers high social status on visibly practicing Christians. As such, Christian beliefs drive a large portion of the religious opposition to sex work. While general references describing sex work as ‘sinful’ or ‘demonic’ are common, the more specific Biblical references made when discussing sex work demonstrate the danger it supposedly presents to Liberian society. Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities destroyed by God in the Old Testament for their sexual immorality, are frequently referenced, with one source stating, ‘God will have to apologize to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah if he does not punish Liberian pedophiles and porn stars’.<sup>190</sup> The image of fire and brimstone raining down upon the infamous cities is drastic, and provides keen insight into the threat that sex work is perceived as. Another Liberian commentator also references the prophet Jeremiah regarding sex work:

When I see more prostitution and indecencies, then I know the wall is destroyed. When I see corruption of our children and young people, then I know the wall is destroyed.<sup>191</sup>

Jeremiah prophesized the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem and the fall of Babylon, featuring prominently throughout the book of Revelation. These references paint sex work as an apocalyptic threat to Monrovia. This extreme view then has the potential to be a strong influence on policies that target sex workers.

When the church or the government fails to address the issue of sex work, the prevailing perception is that these institutions are ‘failing the country’. There appears to be some back and forth

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<sup>189</sup> Ashforth and Kreiner, “‘How Can You Do It?’: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity,” 415.

<sup>190</sup> “Rising Sex Scandals.”

<sup>191</sup> Stanley Seakor, “God Searches for a Leader,” *The Analyst*, August 29, 2005, sec. Opinion, AllAfrica.com.

between the government and prominent religious figures as to who is responsible for ending sex work. The government, for example, places the onus on the church:

The church is failing the nation because it is not working enough to change attitudes even among Christians who continue to indulge in adultery, dress indecently and frequent the night clubs.<sup>192</sup>

In their view, if the moral failings of the population can be redressed by the church, sex work will begin to die out as more Liberians see it as forbidden by their faith. The church, on the other hand, believes the government can play a larger role in addressing the nation's moral compass by explicitly declaring Liberia a Christian nation:

'Deviant and anti-cultural behaviours like gay and lesbianism, rape, prostitution and corruption' continue to permeate the country simply because the country is not 'Christianized'.<sup>193</sup>

Ultimately the conclusion is the same: a lack of God contributes to complicity with sex work and the threat it presents. It appears that generally in Monrovia, Christian values and sex work are fundamentally incompatible.

At the same time, Christianity is also one of the few possible redeemers for sex workers. In 2016, two films well-received films featured the stories of sex workers who turn to God in order to save their lives. One reviewer of 'What is Wrong with God?' specifically describes the characters who continued engaging in sex work as bad people, and the protagonist as the one who 'chose to be good in the midst of her struggles and kept her faith in God...'.<sup>194</sup> This biblically-influenced form of thought enforces a rigid dichotomy of good and evil that is pervasive in discussions around sex work; those who engage in it are deemed categorically 'bad' with little room for nuance, creating a false choice between abolishing sex work or destroying Liberia. One article interviewing a former sex worker featured this stark quotation:

There is no benefit in prostitution. The end of prostitution is bitterness and sorrow. I advise youth - if you are in the same situation I was in, let me be an example in your eyes. Drop that lifestyle immediately and seek the face of God.<sup>195</sup>

In the public's view, the only way those involved in sex work can find redemption is through faith. The other option is to risk not only one's own life and soul, but the life and soul of the nation. Any attempts to better integrate sex work into the social fabric of Liberia will have to contend with more than just overcoming concepts of sexual morality, but also a deep-seated belief that sex work is a path of destruction.

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<sup>192</sup> Executive Mansion of Liberia, "United Women Christian Fellowship Honors Vice President Bokai," Press release (Monrovia: Executive Mansion of Liberia, May 31, 2010), [https://www.emansion.gov.lr/2press.php?news\\_id=1556&related=20&pg=sp&sub=41](https://www.emansion.gov.lr/2press.php?news_id=1556&related=20&pg=sp&sub=41).

<sup>193</sup> "'Christianizing' Liberia— Is It Workable?," *Heritage*, March 22, 2013.

<sup>194</sup> Tete Bropleh, "New Film Aims to Inspire Trust in God," *The New Dawn*, September 15, 2016, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>195</sup> Selma Lomax, "'Infected over 20 Men'— Confessions of a Repentant Ex-Prostitute," *FrontPageAfrica*, July 18, 2014, AllAfrica.com.

### *CORRUPTING INFLUENCES*

Sex work is not the only vice treated with contempt in Monrovia; however, my data demonstrates that it is generally believed that sex work is often the source of other vices, all of which have a significant potential to ‘corrupt’ Monrovia’s youth. Most visibly, there appears to have been a change in the fashion sense of young Monrovia women, who are wearing shorter, more revealing clothing. The implications of this fashion choice is illustrated by this Liberian writer:

Imagine this scenario: on a Saturday, a lady wearing short pants, a crop top and a pair of flip-flops go out. Right there and then, the whispers about her being a sex worker/prostitute would start.<sup>196</sup>

Whether the women are actually sex workers seems to be beside the point; only sex workers would choose to reveal that much skin, ostensibly for the purpose of attracting clients, and no ‘good’ young women would dress that way absent the influence of sex workers. This reflects poorly on Liberia as a nation by not removing the corrupting influence from its streets and holds the assumption that if sex work was abolished, young women would dress more conservatively.

Additionally, as discussed in chapter 4, sex work often takes place in entertainment centers, and as discussed in chapter 5, sex work is also highly associated with drug and alcohol use. My data contained references to the growing popularity of all three amongst Monrovia youth, much to the worry of older Monrovia. Most worrying is the contact these young people might have with sex workers who frequent entertainment centers. One journalist described what a typical evening at an infamous entertainment center looks like:

At Talk of the Town, the young ladies in their early 20s, and late 30s, half-naked flood the place. While some did what they called solo soliciting men, some smoked and drank ceaselessly.<sup>197</sup>

There is potentially some truth to the idea that spending time in that environment could lead someone impressionable to fall into those habits. But again, these activities (drinking, smoking, etc.) are implied throughout the data as behaviors that *only* sex workers would engage in. Remove sex workers from the equation, supposedly, and these behaviors would cease.

It is also important to emphasize that these ‘corrupting influences’ are feared precisely because they are perceived as having a disproportionate effect on Monrovia’s youth. For a nation in the process of rebuilding, ensuring that young people have opportunities to contribute to their future and to the future of the nation is a significant concern. References were made to ‘protecting’ Monrovia’s youth, stopping potential ‘damage’ to their futures, and phrases that encouraged preventative care. The prevention aspect appears to be key, as many Liberians seem to feel that once a young person has slipped into the grasps of vice and sex work, it is difficult to pull them back out, as Mayor Broh described:

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<sup>196</sup> Levi Hamilton Martin, “Societal Judgement against Females in Liberia,” *Sleepless in Monrovia* (blog), May 13, 2018, <https://sleeplessinmonrovia.com/op-ed/societal-judgement-against-females/>.

<sup>197</sup> “‘Talk of Town’: Broad Day Prostitution Booming in Monrovia,” *FrontPageAfrica*, June 1, 2016.

I am just trying to help the young girl who even doesn't want to be helped because as we speak, she still goes there doing the same thing. They do go there the whole night for L\$20, L\$40 and the next morning she goes to a friend's house to sleep and get ready for the night.<sup>198</sup>

This connects to the idea discussed in chapter 5, that sex work is more than just an act but a consuming identity. Its influence is viewed as corrupting because it is perceived as permanently changing an aspect of someone's personhood. Thus, any other act that is associated with sex work also has the potential to corrupt those it comes in contact with and ruin an entire generation of Liberians— and by extension, the future of Liberia's stability.

### *THE DISSOLUTION OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY*

In a rapidly modernizing world, traditional values and contemporary trends will often come into conflict. For Monrovia, it appears that emphasis is still placed on the 'traditional' way of living one's life which is perhaps associated with beliefs regarding the prosperity of Monrovia prior to the conflicts. In that case, any perceived 'moral decadence' that is the result of new, shifting ideas of acceptability can easily be seen as a threat to Liberia's future.<sup>199</sup>

Sex work is one of those potential threats, particularly in how the intimate nature of the act may disrupt the traditional family. As Leymah Gbowee describes it:

I could not excel to any position of authority because I wasn't married. And you constantly hear things being badgered into your head that women who are not married and have children are the worst sinners. And you're fornicating and you're committing adultery and all of the different things.<sup>200</sup>

Gbowee is not a sex worker, and yet she is acutely aware that intimate acts outside the traditional confines of marriage are perceived as deeply undesirable. It is for this reason that a prominent Liberian religious figure, Bishop Isaac Winker, outright called for the disqualification of any unmarried presidential candidate for their inability 'to bring the country to its pre-war status' and because they are, in his words, 'prostitutes'.<sup>201</sup> For Monrovia who agree with Bishop Winker's line of thought, the increased presence of sex work in Monrovia (and the government's perceived complicity in its existence) is only a barrier to Liberia regaining its prosperity.

It's also fascinating to see how sex work and the dissolution of traditional families appears to be a cyclical issue in Monrovia, and how this may contribute to the perception of sex work's status as a threat if it is believed that such a cycle is permanent. On one hand, numerous references are made to how sex work is capable of tearing apart families: how men commit adultery, how sex workers mother children from different men, etc.. In one instance, it is described that 'the entire social fabric

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<sup>198</sup> Genoway Jr., "Mary Broh Defends Public Whipping of Girls amid Criticism."

<sup>199</sup> "Rising Sex Scandals."

<sup>200</sup> "The Journal: Leymah Gbowee & Abigail Disney," Transcript, *Bill Moyers' Journal* (PBS, June 19, 2009), <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/06192009/watch.html>.

<sup>201</sup> "Unmarried Pres. Aspirants Must Be Disqualified- Bishop Winker," *The Inquirer*, February 28, 2005, AllAfrica.com.



of the nation has been destroyed' as a result of sex work's prevalence.<sup>202</sup> At the same time, these supposedly broken families are also blamed for the rise of sex work. This belief is espoused by prominent politicians like current Vice President Jewel Taylor and President Sirleaf, as described in this article:

The President also expressed concern about lack of parental care which she said should claim the attention of all parents in instilling moral values in their children, adding "The lack of parental care has greatly led to prostitution."<sup>203</sup>

This is where the cycle becomes evident; sex work is perceived as contributing to broken homes and poor parental guidance, which in turn encourages more young women to engage in sex work, leading to more broken homes. As we have seen throughout the discussion, this issue associated with sex work is again connected to numerous other serious issues, like crime, illiteracy, and teen pregnancy.<sup>204</sup> Traditions are referred to repeatedly as foundational to Liberia's identity as a nation, and the importance of a traditional family unit is perhaps the most prominent of these traditions. As it stands, it appears that sex work is both a cause and effect of eroding these traditions, and an impediment to Liberia's future; with this view, efforts made to reduce the rate of sex work can be far more easily justified.

#### *UNPRODUCTIVE, MEANINGLESS, VALUELESS WORK*

More so than any other theme I uncovered, the belief that sex work is unproductive and meaningless work was the most persistent over the 15 year focus of this research. Much of this section of the discussion will exemplify the public discourse discussed in chapter 3, which categorized sex work as non-essential labor; recall that in Monrovia's post-conflict setting, a cultural shift occurred that placed high value on hard working, contributing women. In this case, the distaste for sex work is multiplied as a direct contradiction to the idealized gender roles developed in Monrovia's post-conflict period.

The idea that sex workers are not contributing to Liberian society whatsoever is pervasive. In some cases, it is stressed that women's participation in the recovery effort is of vital importance:

Women must use the time to rebuild the country, to provide opportunity for the unfortunate young women and children in order to develop their God given talents in a peaceful environment, without violence so that they can be productive.<sup>205</sup>

The source of the above example asserts that sex work does not occur in a 'peaceful environment', and therefore prevents women from achieving their full potential. This implies that a), the increased prevalence of sex work and its environments represents a violent threat to Liberia, and b), that when a woman engages in sex work, she is wasting her abilities. This Liberian citizen demonstrates the thought expressed in the second implication:

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<sup>202</sup> Eileen Samuels-Lablah, "Liberian Views: 'If I Were President,'" *BBC News*, November 8, 2005.

<sup>203</sup> "Ellen Challenges Women Organizations," *The News Monrovia*, May 13, 2014.

<sup>204</sup> Al-bakari Nyei, "Critical Issues of a National Concern (VII): Emphasizing the Reality of Bropleh's Alternative to Rapists."

<sup>205</sup> J. Nathaniel Daygbor, "'Women Must Face the Challenges' - WOLPNET Boss," *The Analyst*, April 10, 2006, AllAfrica.com.

I try to advise them, I counsel them that they are still useful in the society, that they should come out of the prostitution life and come into the society and it will be okay.<sup>206</sup>

If sex workers leave sex work, they can still be of use to the recovery effort; few mentions suggested ways in which sex work can be of use.<sup>207</sup> Instead, because sex work is stigmatized as valueless labor and ‘is not seen as a job and in certain quarters it is an abomination’, it is consistently denigrated and young women are warned not to waste their potential.<sup>208</sup>

Specifically, the word ‘meaningless’ was used often to describe sex work, as in ‘commercial sex is meaningless and unprofitable’, or in asking women to ‘engage in meaningful ventures rather than engaging in prostitution’.<sup>209</sup> This particular usage is fascinating when we examine the ways that other professions occupied by women have been given new purposes following the conflict. Take, for example, market women; their work was redefined as ‘community care’ and thus meaningful. Sex work experienced no such redefinition, despite its documented increase in the post-conflict era. Whereas market women can claim that their work feeds a nation, sex workers have a significantly more difficult time placing their labor in the context of its contributions to Liberia’s future.

The future is clearly a dominant topic, and throughout my research, sex workers are portrayed as representative of a failed future. Women’s rights leaders speak ‘of transforming the “lost hope future leaders” from ashes to beauty,’ as if sex workers carry with them the soul of their nation.<sup>210</sup> Sex workers become more than individual women seeking to survive, and instead collectively represent a misguided generation that could lead Liberia to failure. This observation is all the more striking when it is clear that engaging in sex work is viewed as indicative of moral failure. One Liberian blogger writes:

These women do not attain their full potential, they instead become undriven, complacent, and willing to settle for waiting on a man’s dime. The epitome of success is now marked by opening an entertainment spot.<sup>211</sup>

A single woman engaging in this kind of behavior is disappointing; a vast multitude, deeply troubling. This is why it is vital to understand that sex work is not simply stigmatized, but rather deeply entrenched in Monrovia’s public consciousness as both a cause of and a representation of a nation failing its people. Sex work as a collective identity represents unproductive, meaningless labor that threatens Liberia’s future, and thus the individual sex worker can be targeted for their participation in

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<sup>206</sup> Mallah, “‘I Sleep with More than 20 Men a Night’— Teen Prostitution Grows in Monrovia.”

<sup>207</sup> I will add, my personal favorite example of how sex work *can* contribute to Liberia’s future is how legalized sex work would allow sex workers to advertise, meaning they may put up billboards to beautify the city. Of all the associations tied to sex work, that sex workers are inherently great graphic designers is by far the best. The full list can be found in the article titled: “The Stupidity of Illegalizing Prostitution.” (see bibliography)

<sup>208</sup> Jimmy Shilue, “Cultural Cynicisms & Market Forces— Women Empowerment Struggle in Liberia and West African Countries,” *The Perspective*, September 29, 2003.

<sup>209</sup> “Prostitutes Seek Gov’t Assistance”; “‘We Breached No Ethics,’” *The Analyst*, May 21, 2007, sec. Editorial, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>210</sup> “Mother Esther Nyemah to Get Prostitutes Off,” *The Inquirer*, March 10, 2006, AllAfrica.com, <https://www.theinquirernewspaper.com/>.

<sup>211</sup> Girlchild, “LGIC: The Liberian Godpa Industry Complex.”

such employment. As my research discovered, moral taint in this form plays a significant role in perpetuating harm against sex workers.

## STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE & MORAL TAINT

With sex work in Monrovia so deeply associated with the nation's failure, and so closely intertwined with other perceived moral failings of society, sex workers face significant consequences as a result of their labor. Economic insecurity presents the most visible form of structural violence suffered by sex workers, but an inability to access labor protections and social welfare, few opportunities for education, and a pattern of misrepresentation and silencing are also deeply present in Monrovia sex workers' lives.

### *ECONOMIC INSECURITY*

In Montserrado county, where Monrovia is located, 89% of women who engaged in transactional sex received money; only 9% received some other resource or advantage.<sup>212</sup> Money is the predominant reason that many Monrovia women engaged in the sex trade, which is reflective of the general economic condition of the country; in 2017, Liberia ranked as the 4<sup>th</sup> poorest country on the globe according to the UNDP.<sup>213</sup> But if average Monrovia also face high rates of economic insecurity, why is sex work particularly more susceptible?

Simply put, moral taint brands sex work as illegitimate labor, and its status as such carries significant ramifications for sex workers' abilities to earn wages. Among one of the unique economic issues faced by sex workers is the dual currency system used in Liberia. Both US\$ and L\$ are accepted forms of currency throughout Monrovia, but generally only formal labor will be paid in higher-valued US\$. Sex work, as illegitimate labor, exists in the informal labor economy, meaning more often than not sex workers are paid in lower value L\$. And because sex work is criminalized, sex workers possess little bargaining power with their clients, often forcing them to work for increasingly lower rates. Eventually, sex workers began charging 'as little as five Liberian Dollars, the same price as a pouch of water'.<sup>214</sup> As sex workers charge rates that are barely enough for them to survive, the possibility of saving for the future, having funds for emergencies, or generally moving beyond their economic situation is slim.

When sex workers teeter on the edge of survival, they also become more vulnerable to exploitation. Take the situation of this sex worker who spoke with *FrontPageAfrica*:

Every night, we can go out to parties and sometimes we can get money but sometimes we can't get anything. Sometimes I can eat and sometimes, I cannot eat because nobody to give me money.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> FIH 360, "Assessment of HIV Risk Among Youth Ages 14-25 in Montserrado, Grand Gedeh, and Grand Bassa Counties in Liberia," Final report (FIH 360, December 3, 2012), 18, [https://www.lisgis.net/pg\\_img/MARYP%20Final%20Report.pdf](https://www.lisgis.net/pg_img/MARYP%20Final%20Report.pdf).

<sup>213</sup> Kollie, "The Futility of Unification Day: Hopeless Future— Misguided Generation— Unpatriotic Leaders."

<sup>214</sup> Mallah, "'I Sleep with More than 20 Men a Night'— Teen Prostitution Grows in Monrovia."

<sup>215</sup> Mae Azango, "'She Beat Me'— Victim of Broh's Whipping Narrates Ordeal," *FrontPageAfrica*, November 25, 2015, AllAfrica.com.

Whether or not she has food on any given night is entirely dependent on whether she is able to engage in sex work. In this desperate situation, sex workers do not have the ability to be 'choosey' about who they take as a client or what sexual acts they perform. By existing solely in the informal economy, sex workers have little protection or opportunities to screen clients who may harm them, and their desperation may mean they engage in sex acts they do not want to.<sup>216</sup> Furthermore, the dual currency system also advantages more powerful members of Monrovia society who have access to US\$; this is often why sex workers seek out opportunities with UNMIL peacekeepers. While these relationships can be mutually beneficial, a significant potential remains for sex workers to be abused within this power differential, as sex workers have reported from people like members of the World Food Programme or school teachers.<sup>217</sup>

The question then remains why sex workers choose to engage in such financially insecure, physically dangerous work, but the answer is simple: few other job opportunities exist. The labor force participation rate for Liberian women in urban centers stood at 53% in 2010, and 74% of all employed women in Liberia were employed in the informal sector.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore, obstructions exist for sex workers specifically to find other forms of employment in either the formal or informal sector. Many sex workers point to a lack of education as the predominant reason for not finding formal employment, but moral taint in particular makes it difficult for sex workers to find even informal work. One of most commonly used ways that Liberian women find work is through connections with friends and family;<sup>219</sup> consider, however, a sex worker whose reputation as such is known to her family and community, and sex work's moral taint paints her as unproductive and a corrupting influence. Even a sex worker looking to leave her line of work will face significant difficulty overcoming that stigma and is likely unable to rely on relationships to find additional opportunities. Additionally, this employment instability makes sex workers especially economically vulnerable to crises that make their work dangerous or impossible, such as the 2014 Ebola epidemic. That crisis prompted this response from sex workers when the government made an explicit call to end sex work during the outbreak:

The government is not providing job for us; we are trying to sustain ourselves through prostitution then they are saying having sex will also give you Ebola; does the government know how long we have been doing this?<sup>220</sup>

The willingness for sex workers to continue their work even during a crisis on that scale is representative of how dire a need this form of work is. In this case, moral taint has trapped sex workers into a cycle in which their work borders on untenable, but also prevents them from seeking any other form of work that could enable them to leave sex work.

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<sup>216</sup> C. Winnie Saywah, "Chief Justice Warns against Violating Women's Rights," *The Inquirer*, November 27, 2006, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>217</sup> "Rising Sex Scandals."

<sup>218</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "Report on the Labor Force Survey 2010," 49. (note: This report excluded sex work as a form of informal employment, so this percentage may be higher if sex work is taken into account.)

<sup>219</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 54.

<sup>220</sup> Jimmy C. Fahngon, "'Prostitutes' Threaten Hunger Strike," *The News Monrovia*, April 8, 2014.

On occasion, the government sponsored ‘rehabilitation’ programs, ostensibly in an effort to assist sex workers in leaving the industry. While sex workers usually have little choice in participating in these programs, theoretically these programs could offer useful skills education for women who have few other options for exiting the sex trade. President Sirleaf in particular advocated for these kinds of programs:

It also means creating opportunity; it means ensuring gender equity and the promotion of women; it means giving our young people the skills they need to prosper and create the lifestyle they choose.<sup>221</sup>

Usually, these programs say they offer counselling services of some kind as well training in a number of domestic and entrepreneurial skills. However, two problems emerged from these programs. Firstly, when these programs do successfully provide what they claim, they do not provide any additional resources or support when women leave the program. This means that sex workers, who have now spent anywhere from a few days to a month off of the streets where they earn money, are now expected to possess the capital to purchase the materials they need to use their newly-acquired skills. Other costs may also arise; women who decide to go into market work face market registration fees as high as L\$350 and monthly dues as high as L\$2000.<sup>222</sup> How women are supposed to be able to gather the money for these start-up costs without returning to sex work is not something the government of Liberia has yet to concern themselves with.

Secondly, the above situation assumes that the rehabilitation programs offer what they advertised; however, many sex workers report that they rarely do. One news outlet reports that after the large rehabilitation campaign touted by President Sirleaf in 2013, the women were only in the program for a few days before being returned to the streets with no change in behavior whatsoever.<sup>223</sup> A few years later, sex workers report similar results, having been kept for over a month before they were allowed to return home and begin engaging in sex work again.<sup>224</sup> Having stressed the day-to-day economic vulnerability sex workers face, physically removing them from their place of work with no compensation places their very survival at risk. When the rehabilitation campaigns disrupt what little stability sex workers have as a means to make money, it represents a concerted effort to make sex work as economically untenable as possible. Because sex work is morally tainted, these campaigns can be justified repeatedly under the guise of women’s empowerment and building a better future for Monrovia.

### *LABOR RIGHTS & SOCIAL WELFARE*

While the inability for sex workers to exercise their labor rights and access other social welfare programs is closely tied to economic insecurity, there is enough specificity within this sphere of structural violence to merit a separate discussion. Generally, the protection of fundamental labor rights, such as the right to unionize and freedom from discrimination in employment, is low

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<sup>221</sup> Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, “Annual Message to the Second Session of the 53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia” (Speech, A Time for Transformation, Monrovia, January 29, 2013), [https://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/2013o128\\_President\\_2013\\_Annual\\_Message\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.emansion.gov.lr/doc/2013o128_President_2013_Annual_Message_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>222</sup> Jerue, “Liberia: Cleared, but Not Clean.”

<sup>223</sup> Henry Karmo, “Fighting Prostitution— Police Raid Targets Liberian Women of the Night,” *FrontPageAfrica*, August 5, 2013, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>224</sup> Azango, “Living in Notoriety— Chilling Stories of Life on Infamous Turtle Base.”

throughout Liberian workplaces.<sup>225</sup> This is combined with the prevalence of informal labor in Monrovia, wherein it is difficult to regulate those kinds of workplaces. As with economic insecurity, much of the issues dealt with by sex workers stem from sex work's status as informal labor, a result of moral taint. The informal status of sex work thus presents a number of barriers for sex workers to obtaining specific forms of labor rights and welfare.

We have already discussed how sex workers face difficulties making a decent living; as informal workers, there is no institution to regulate minimum wage in their workplace, which at its lowest is set at L\$15 an hour for up to eight hours of work per day.<sup>226</sup> Sex workers are also unable to apply for injury compensation should they be injured during the course of their work,<sup>227</sup> and do not qualify for government sponsored sickness and maternity benefits.<sup>228</sup> Additionally, sex workers do not qualify to receive unemployment, as they must have been previously employed and can provide proof of their prior salary, something few sex workers can prove or provide.<sup>229</sup> All of this is a result of sex work's status as informal labor. In the one instance where informal employees *do* receive some form of government benefits, a social insurance scheme which covers disability, old age, and survivors of employees, sex workers are still not eligible to receive this insurance because their labor is institutionally unrecognized as a form of legitimate work.<sup>230</sup>

It is important to re-emphasize that sex workers are not the only informal laborers who face difficulties accessing and exercising their rights to labor protection and welfare. What differentiates the plight of sex workers from others in the informal sector is the attention that is paid to their situation, and the recognition (or lack thereof) of this flaw in the system. Market women, for example, are considered informally employed, but a number of government initiatives have been undertaken to secure their rights and support their labor. When studies have been conducted on the labor market in Monrovia and Liberia as a whole, sex work is rarely, if ever, mentioned. Take, for example, this list of 'economic activities' that LIGIS used to identify those participating in Liberia's labor force:

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<sup>225</sup> Secretariat of the National Population Commission, "Country Report: AADP+5/ICDP@25," 81.

<sup>226</sup> US Department of State, "Liberia," Country Report on Human Rights Practices (Washington, DC: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2015), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm>.

<sup>227</sup> National Legislature of Liberia, "Labor Law," Title 18 § (1980), [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/acc\\_e/lbr\\_e/wtacclbr15\\_leg\\_21.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/lbr_e/wtacclbr15_leg_21.pdf).

<sup>228</sup> National Legislature of Republic of Liberia, "Decent Work Act" (2015), [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p\\_lang=en&p\\_isn=100329](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=100329).

<sup>229</sup> National Legislature of Republic of Liberia.

<sup>230</sup> National Legislature of Liberia, Labor Law.

Figure 1.

Table 1.3 List of economic and non-economic activities

<i>Economic activities</i>
<p><b>These activities were covered in Section D</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working in wage jobs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Full time or part time</li> <li>- Permanent or temporary</li> <li>- Casual or piecework</li> <li>- Including paid child minding and other paid domestic work</li> <li>- Paid in cash or kind (e.g. food/accommodation)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Having business activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Large or small, agricultural or non-agricultural</li> <li>- Small shop/kiosk/street stall</li> <li>- Preparation/selling of juice, soft drinks</li> <li>- Taxi operator</li> <li>- Shoe cleaning/sewing business</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Any activities on own or family farms for the purpose of production for sale including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weeding and planting crops</li> <li>- Harvesting crops</li> <li>- Keeping birds and other pests off crops</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Transport of goods from the fields for storage or for sale</li> <li>• Fetching water and collecting firewood for sale</li> <li>• Fishing, collecting shells or seaweed for sale</li> <li>• Processing goods for sale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mats, hats from natural or grown fibres</li> <li>- Furniture from natural timber</li> <li>- Butter/cheese and other products from milk</li> <li>- Oil from oil seeds/fruit</li> <li>- Preparation of charcoal</li> <li>- Dressmaking</li> </ul> </li> <li>• House or farm building/construction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fence/enclosure/storage construction</li> <li>- Road/irrigation construction</li> <li>- House construction/additions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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A number of activities defined as informal labor are included in this list, precisely because stakeholders are aware of their complex position in the economy and are interested in understanding it to better tailor support programs. Sex work is not included, because the mainstream narrative surrounding sex work is that it should not receive support due to its moral taint.

The governments of Monrovia and Liberia at large do present a public interest in the social protection of its citizens, and furthermore, recognize the importance of bottom-up initiatives in building welfare programs. In its 2009 Social Welfare Policy, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW) stated these three goals:

1. Voice and influence over decisions, with most decisions made at the community level.
2. As rights holders, vulnerable populations take ownership of interventions.
3. Enhanced social capital and social organization.<sup>232</sup>

In that same document, the MOHSW lists ‘adults and children subject to trafficking’ as among its ‘especially vulnerable’ populations.<sup>233</sup> This is the closest mention to consensual, adult sex work in the entire policy. On one hand, we might believe that the government simply doesn’t find consenting adult sex workers as particularly vulnerable, and thus are not targets for this kind of social welfare policy. However, as demonstrated, sex workers are especially vulnerable because the issues that they face go unrecognized by government policies. Recognizing sex workers as vulnerable would mean the

<sup>231</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, “Report on the Labor Force Survey 2010.”, 7.

<sup>232</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, “Social Welfare Policy” (MOHSW, 2009), <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Social%20Welfare%20Policy.pdf>. p. xiii.

<sup>233</sup> Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, 6.

government and other institutions would be required provide sex workers with the same rights, goals, protections, capital, and agency they promise to provide to other vulnerable groups. As long as sex work is morally tainted the way it is in Monrovia, sex workers will not have such access.

### *ACCESS TO EDUCATION*

At the root of a number of the economic concerns discussed above lies a difficulty in accessing education. Numerous sex workers reported to media outlets as being either uneducated or partially educated, and many found it difficult to both engage in sex work and go to school. Their concerns are part of a larger flaw in Monrovia's educational system; in 2010, only 57% of the country was literate, and Liberian women possessed a literacy rate of 49% compared to 66% of their male peers.<sup>234</sup> However, there are specific factors caused by sex work's moral taint that hold troubling consequences for sex workers' access to education in particular.

Cost presents a large hurdle for many sex workers who wish to continue their education. Public school in Monrovia is free, but often comes with associated 'school fees' for supplies, textbooks, and uniforms that make education unaffordable. In Monrovia, these fees can range between L\$6,000 and L\$10,000 per student.<sup>235</sup> As discussed in the previous two sections, this amount can be difficult for sex workers to obtain. Simultaneously, the costs of these school fees are a large reason that many sex workers become sex workers. However, the amount of time these women have to spend engaging in sex work in order to make the money they need to attend school often means they have little time to actually attend school, and end up dropping out.<sup>236</sup> But with no education, these women have few other alternatives for work other than sex work. As one sex worker informed *The Analyst*:

...it was the sex trade that at most time help her to continue her education and if she did not engage in the act, she stands the risk to suffer to the highest degree and may not even have the finance to go to school.<sup>237</sup>

Here are sex workers caught in another vicious cycle: one of the few avenues to continue education is illegitimate and difficult to practice; the need to engage in sex work to afford school ironically ends up forcing women out of school; without school, women cannot find other job opportunities other than sex work, which prevents them from going back to school and leaving sex work. Government officials recognize the lack of education among sex workers, often pointing to 'no skills training' as the reason women choose to engage in sex work at all.<sup>238</sup> However, this fact is often used to bolster the belief that sex work is meaningless work and justify attempts to make it less tenable as a profession.

Furthermore, institutional practices common in schools disproportionately bar sex workers from accessing their education. Until at least 2013, a policy enforced by the Ministry of Education

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<sup>234</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "Report on the Labor Force Survey 2010," 16.

<sup>235</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2014," Statistical abstract (Monrovia: LISGIS, 2016), 37, [https://www.lisgis.net/pg\\_img/Liberia%20Statistical%20Abstract%20FINAL.pdf](https://www.lisgis.net/pg_img/Liberia%20Statistical%20Abstract%20FINAL.pdf).

<sup>236</sup> Mensiegar Karnaga Jr., "WHAT Frowns on Teenage Prostitution," *The Analyst*, April 19, 2006, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>237</sup> "Prostitution on the Rise," *The Analyst*, December 10, 2010, AllAfrica.com.

<sup>238</sup> "Gender & Development Min. Attributes Increase in Prostitution to Poverty."



banned pregnant girls and women of all ages, regardless of marital status, from attending school.<sup>239</sup> As discussed earlier, sex workers have higher pregnancy rates, and are disproportionately affected by this policy, hampering their efforts to access an education that nudged them toward sex work to begin with. Lack of family planning is directly correlated with illiteracy rates in Monrovia;<sup>240</sup> the two factors appear to influence one another when it pertains to sex workers, as their illiteracy is both a result and a cause of their lack of full control over their reproductive decisions, revealing another cycle of structural violence and moral taint.

### *MISREPRESENTATION & SILENCING*

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the numerous ways Monrovia's sex workers are portrayed in the public discourse— they are considered physically dirty, criminal, drug-addicted, degraded, sinful, corrupting, unproductive, and ultimately a threat to Liberia's fragile stability and potentially prosperous future. I included sex workers' voices when they were made available through their decisions to speak to journalists, but we must recognize that journalists decide what makes it to print and how willing they are to combat the prevailing discourse. The continued misrepresentation and silencing of Monrovia sex workers is itself a form of structural violence, and may even serve as a catalyst for the other forms of violence discussed previously.

For example, many outlets emphasize sex workers' supposed greed and desire for money. It's fascinating to examine how these stories are reported, as they often mention legitimate, concerning reasons someone may begin doing sex work and then immediately offer ill-sought monetary gain as a dismissive reason. One article noted that women may enter the sex trade due to 'peer pressure', which could be a real concern regarding manipulation or exploitation, but then suggests that it's equally likely they choose to do it out of 'an inordinate desire for material things'.<sup>241</sup> Another described the reasons a sex worker gave the journalist for entering sex work as 'hardship, poverty, family neglect', and then, 'greed for instant cash to buy material things'.<sup>242</sup> Instead of acknowledging some of the dire situations sex workers experienced that prompted their involvement in the trade, it is easier to suggest that these women are somehow easily corrupted by the promise of money. The simplicity of this belief also allows for sex work to be more easily portrayed as a threat, as greed could affect any woman. This emphasis on material greed also corroborates the belief that sex workers are ultimately unproductive and do not contribute to Liberia's future.

This kind of misrepresentation denies sex workers the ability to advocate for themselves and makes it easier for those in power to dismiss their concerns. When decisions about the lives of sex workers are made without the input of sex workers, more often than not, those decisions result in harm. One prominent example is President Sirleaf's touting of the first female Inspector General of the LNP, who specifically promised to increase focus on GBV.<sup>243</sup> There are two issues with this perceived 'accomplishment' as it pertains to sex workers. Firstly, the act of sex work itself is often

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<sup>239</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, "2008 Population and Housing Census: Analytical Report on Gender Dimensions," Sub-report, 2008 Population and Housing Census (Monrovia: LISGIS, 2011), 29, [https://www.lisgis.net/pg\\_img/Gender%20Demension%20final%20210512.pdf](https://www.lisgis.net/pg_img/Gender%20Demension%20final%20210512.pdf).

<sup>240</sup> Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services, 29.

<sup>241</sup> "Let's Battle Teenage Prostitution."

<sup>242</sup> "Prostitutes Seek Gov't Assistance."

<sup>243</sup> Sirleaf, "Annual Message to the Second Session of the 53rd National Legislature of the Republic of Liberia."

considered a form of GBV in Monrovia, as sex workers exist within a perpetual criminal/victim duality that demands they must be both punished and rescued. Secondly, the assumption that the a woman in position is itself a solution to violence is not only reductionist, but fails to take into account that the police themselves commit numerous acts of violence against sex workers, regardless of the gender of their supervisor. Sex workers are often seen as ‘less-than women’, so the faux-feminist appointment of a woman to a position of violent power does little to protect sex workers. On the flip side, police officers now have greater motivation to target sex workers under a ‘feminist’ banner, in the name of either rescuing them or punishing them,

Even with a large number of women in prominent positions of power, there still remains a significant issue of gender inequality in Monrovia; it simply has taken on a less blatant form. Instead of the default of ‘men are greater than women’, the culture has switched to ‘men are equal to women– of the right kind’. Women who abide by religious standards of morality, who uphold the values of motherhood and community, who work hard to progress Liberia– these women are accepted as empowered.<sup>244</sup> Women who do not live up to these standards are punished in some way, justified by a veneer of ‘female empowerment’ policies. As one Liberian commentator puts it:

laws and rules are made by men who often choose, deliberately or otherwise, to use women as the symbols of their beliefs and policies.<sup>245</sup>

Sex workers fall into this category as women who oppose the gender-forward goals of a new Monrovia. Their perceived opposition is what allows them to be so easily silenced when they attempt to advocate for better conditions for their future, while at the same time providing a platform for those in power to tout their dedication to gender equality. The hypocrisy can sometimes be glaringly obvious, as in the case of Edwin Snowe’s sex scandal. Many of his opponents voiced their outrage at how he comfortable he was degrading a woman, but as one journalist noted:

Interestingly, none of the groups asked for prove of nudity, proof of payment, or corroboration of claims. More so, none expressed any interest in the whereabouts of the suspected victim or her wellbeing.<sup>246</sup>

There is no concern for the sex worker in this situation other than for her use as a symbol, which those in power use to express their dedication to women’s empowerment. But again, because sex workers are not seen as the ‘right kind of women’, they are barely considered women at all, and thus are not considered beneficiaries of the gender-equal world Monrovia is attempting to build.

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<sup>244</sup> It would be remiss of me not to at least mention the role Western organizations have played in implementing this kind of feminist, ‘gender empowerment’ thought in not only Liberia, but in many other cultures of the Global South. While perhaps well-intended, this line of thought tends to benefit the preservation of a status quo that still advantages a wealthy, often-male, often-white elite. More culturally and contextually organic forms of feminism stand to benefit the liberation of these women far better; the works of Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí, Ifi Amadiume, Gwendolyn Mikell, and Joelle Cruz provide great insight into differences between African feminism and Western (white) feminism.

<sup>245</sup> Shilue, “Cultural Cynicisms & Market Forces– Women Empowerment Struggle in Liberia and West African Countries.”

<sup>246</sup> “Bachelor’s Eve Brouhaha,” *The Analyst*, January 13, 2012, AllAfrica.com, <https://www.analystliberiaonline.com>.

This misrepresentation of sex workers— as victims and criminals, as women who must be rescued and not women at all, as the corrupted weak women and a corrupting force against progress— is at the root of much of the structural violence Monrovia’s sex workers face. How sex workers are portrayed impacts their existence, feeding the stigma against them and further impacting their existence. Sex workers do not wish to work in dangerous areas, but are forced to and become associated with them. Sex workers would rather prevent themselves from falling sick, but the image of ‘disease-ridden’ sex workers makes it difficult to find non-discriminatory healthcare, increasing their vulnerability to disease. Sex workers want to be able to earn money and have an education so that they can contribute to their families, communities, and country, but because their work is deemed immoral and unproductive, they are unable to earn a livable wage. As one Liberian attorney stated to *New Narratives*:

It’s a shameful trade. If they don’t see themselves as being accepted by an institution, I don’t think they’ll want to come.<sup>247</sup>

Using stigma to systematically exclude sex workers from the societal institutions that are supposed to support members of their community only drives them into increasingly harmful situations. The misrepresentation of sex workers as engaging in a form of labor that is physically, socially, and morally tainted makes Monrovia’s sex workers more vulnerable to violence from the very institutions who should be protecting them. The violence they suffer only increases the stigma against them, which is used to further justify their exclusion. Thus is the cycle of dirty work stigma and structural violence against Monrovia’s sex workers perpetuated.

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<sup>247</sup> Mallah, “I Sleep with More than 20 Men a Night”— Teen Prostitution Grows in Monrovia.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The issues surrounding sex work in Monrovia are difficult to sum up succinctly. My hope is that this research has shed light on an under-studied community and made more concrete the abstract dynamics that affect sex workers in the intersection of structural violence and dirty work stigma in Liberia's reconstruction.

To review what has been covered in the preceding pages: Sex work in Monrovia lies in the tension between privately essential and publicly condemnable, which is why the stigma-violence cycle against sex work continues and why true abolition isn't the goal for powerful stakeholders; too many Monroviaans rely on the sex economy to survive. However, sex work has also come to be associated with many of the real issues that persist in Monrovia following the conflicts, such as unsanitary living conditions, poor healthcare, and lack of education. The associations between sex work and these concerns have caused a prevailing belief that sex work itself has caused these issues, and has become a threat to Liberia's stability and future. This is in conjunction with the overarching goals of gender equality as part of the reconstruction effort, which sex work is also viewed as opposing. In this way, 'women's empowerment' is used as an excuse to justify the harms committed against sex workers, either as a form of 'rescue' or as the removal of a threat to Monrovia's progress.

Sex workers are thus the most frequent victims of institutional efforts to reform and 'clean up' Monrovia as visible representations of the city's ills. But instead of solving these ills, the efforts to abolish sex work simply make it more difficult, dangerous, and further associated with the very issues they are blamed for. This creates the positive feedback loop wherein stigma feeds structural violence against sex workers, sex workers become identified with the harms perpetuated by structural violence, and stigma is reinforced. If abolishing sex work is truly the goal, the more effective route would lie in tackling the root concerns that prompted women to engage in sex work in the first place. But these are complicated issues to resolve, and results are often slow and abstract. The highly visible, human nature of sex work makes it ripe for the embodiment of physically, socially, and morally tainted nature of its surroundings, becoming the perfect manifestation of structural failures for institutional power holders to 'resolve' without truly fixing the underlying issue. The only result, however, is violence against sex workers.

## LOOKING FORWARD: SEX WORK-INCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO REBUILDING

One goal of this paper was simply to lay out the harm faced by a marginalized population underrepresented in academic literature. But this research drew heavily from three theoretical schools, and I believe offers significant contributions to each.

Firstly, the nature of sex work in Monrovia problematizes part of the definition of dirty work, which argues that dirty work stigma lies in the tension between the work's tainted nature and its societal necessity. However, Monrovia's sex workers demonstrate that sex work can be considered privately essential while being publicly deemed frivolous and harmful; in fact, a large part of the moral taint of sex work is that it is considered non-essential. This raises two questions for the field of dirty work that should widen opportunities for its application: first, how do we decide upon the definition of 'essential labor'?; and second, how can labor's non-essential status be a part of the dirty work stigma against itself?

In the field of structural violence, stigma's influence is not a novel innovation. However, stigma-induced structural violence is usually tied to an identity group of some kind, such as race, sexuality, etc.. A specific form of *labor* is rarely considered a vulnerable population that faces active harm, unless it is heavily associated with another identity group.<sup>248</sup> Globally, sex workers represent the full diversity of human experience, and yet face structural violence precisely because the labor they perform is stigmatized. Furthermore, while theories of structural violence tend to minimize the individual agency in perpetuating said violence, the case of Monrovia's sex workers demonstrates the important role individuals play in promoting and spreading stigmatizing discourse against a population. Because the individuals with the biggest platform tend to have the most power within institutions, their beliefs have an effect on the structural decisions made to enact violence. Embracing the complicated nature of individual and structural agency when perpetuating violence against stigmatized people allows us to gain a more complete picture of violence.

In regards to sex work, I believe this paper confirms the complex relationship of gender and labor as it pertains to sex workers' lives. In Monrovia's case, it is not wholly a gendered issue, as so much of the stigma against sex work revolves around the labor's existence as a potential threat to the country's future. But it is not either a wholly labor-focused issue, as sex work receives vitriol in Monrovia specifically because of the gender equality platforms of the city's reconstruction. In many instances, the threat of sex work is used to justify the violence committed against women, while simultaneously the guise of 'women's rights' is used to justify violence against sex workers. This dual-nature of dirty work stigma Monrovia sex workers' lives particularly violent, and the harm they face more difficult to resolve.

Additionally, this research has outlined a clear case study describing the effects of *excluding* sex workers from post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This raises a significant question for the field of conflict and peacebuilding: what happens when we *include* sex workers in reconstruction efforts? There is substantial evidence to suggest that the sex trade is a feature, not a bug, of the post-conflict recovery landscape. By acknowledging the reality of sex work, could progress be made in protecting sex workers' human rights? And how would that acknowledgment affect other facets of rebuilding plans, for better or for worse? This thesis cannot answer these questions, but I firmly believe they are worth including in discussions of modern peacebuilding efforts.

## GAPS & AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I would support a project of similar nature to this that is able to interview sex workers in Monrovia and directly hear their perspectives on their experiences. The accounts of sex workers throughout this paper were taken from news outlets that have the ability to selectively report what they feel is necessary for their narratives.<sup>249</sup> Interviews with sex workers could shed light on populations underrepresented in the popular discourse (i.e., male or trans sex workers) and lend more specificity through personal anecdotes. I would be further be interested in discovering if this

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<sup>248</sup> For example, one could argue that undocumented farmers in the US are a stigmatized group, but one might ask if they are stigmatized because they are farmers, or because they are undocumented immigrants or often of Latinx origin?

<sup>249</sup> It is for this reason I suspect that many of the articles I found on sex work in Monrovia presented extreme situations and/or focused on child prostitution. Child prostitution is absolutely a real and serious issue, but it is highly doubtful that it is representative of Monrovia sex work on the whole.

method would reveal more about a potential dimension of emotional taint, which I was not able to ascertain given my methods and sources. Interviewing both sex workers and clients on their interactions could lend insight into a more personal, relationship-driven facet of dirty work.

Furthermore, I believe this research could be expanded upon to determine whether or not Monrovia is a 'unique' case in regards to its attitudes towards sex work. Its rebuilding process started some time ago, and since then a number of the stakeholders originally involved in Liberia's reconstruction have shifted their views on sex work in the intervening 15 years.<sup>250</sup> A similar study conducted on a newer post-conflict context might reveal valuable insight into the integration of sex work into post-conflict reconstruction. I would also be interested in comparing Liberia's case to other countries. Uganda, South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria built robust sex worker advocacy movements and made significant progress advancing the rights of sex workers within their communities; comparing the complexities of their contexts to Liberia's may be fruitful in understanding what prevents a significant pro-sex work movement in Liberia country despite the prevalence of the trade.

I end this thesis on an activist note. In all of the research I conducted, in all of the readings I absorbed from sex workers and their allies, in all of the time I spent ensuring I wrote something sensitively and accurately depicted the violence sex workers face with deference to their experience above all else, I am left with a rather simple impression of what sex workers desire. Sex workers of all backgrounds want the ability to perform their labor in peace, safety, and dignity, and to be given the same human rights as their fellow community members. Continuing to stigmatize sex work would mean remaining complicit in the violence that is committed against them every day. The first step to breaking down systems that harm sex workers is embracing the belief that sex work is simply that—work, as dirty as it may be.

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<sup>250</sup> Most notably among them, the UN Human Rights Commission.

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