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SEX WORKERS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: ECHOES FROM SELECTED LAGOS NIGHTLIFE REDLIGHT DISTRICTS.

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Abstract

This ethnographic study delves into the intricate world of Lagos nightlife, focusing on the experiences of Sissy Eko, a colloquial term for sex workers navigating the city's underground queer scene. Against the backdrop of Nigeria's stringent laws and societal norms, this study investigates how Sissy Eko negotiates survival, identity, community, and resilience in the face of adversity. The study explores the Consequential theory to analyze how Sissy Eko subverts traditional notions of identity, gender, and sexuality and the Resilience Theory to understand the adaptive strategies employed by Sissy Eko to cope with adversity. The methodology adopted is the ethnographic research through which in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted between 2023 and 2024, to explore the complex strategies employed by Sissy Eko to survive and thrive amidst inflation, pervasive social stigma, discrimination and insecurity. The findings reveal the creative coping mechanisms, solidarity networks, and extreme measures adopted that enable sex workers to subvert and resist hardship and marginalization. By exploring the voices, conversations and narratives of Sissy Eko, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on queer African experiences, challenging dominant discourses and shedding light on the intricate dynamics of survival and self-expression in one of Africa's largest urban centers Lagos. Ultimately, this study advocates for acceptance and policy reforms to safeguard the human rights and dignity of sex workers in Lagos Nigeria. This study contributes to Gender, African studies, and Sociology, offering new insights into the complex dynamics of queer survival and resilience in Africa's largest urban city.

Keywords: Sex worker, Sissy Eko, Queer Africa, Nightlife, Identity, Resilience, Marginalization, Ethnography.

INTRODUCTION.

Lagos, Africa's largest urban city, located at the western corridor of Nigeria is a state with multiple facets and activities. The metropolis encapsulates various ethnicity and creed, making it the most populated city in Africa and fifth most populated city in the world. Lagos is believed by many to be a prolific place for survival because of its affluence and spotlight amongst other states; this has contributed immensely to the population of this metropolis and of course, overpowered the available resources the state could provide for her citizens. Due to the limited available resources allocated for the state, unemployment comes into existence because of poor citizens who believe that they have a share in shaping their destinies in Lagos, benefitting from the largesse that Lagos offers. Throwing more light to this, Peterclaver states that:

Lagos State is widely believed to be a land of abundant opportunities and as such, the state receives a deluge of migrants daily, ranging from business man and women who come to ply their trade, artisans and young university graduates who are job-hunting amongst others... (Para 2)

And when the resources available are not enough to cater for the huge population settling in the state, everyone would have to opt for various means of survival to escape the trials of hunger and penury. This triggers the people sometimes to "transmogrify into what they've sworn not to become." (P. 3). Hence, for survival purposes, the cases of internet fraud amongst the masculine individuals and prostitution for the ladies trends and Lagos serves as a promise land to perpetrate their atrocities. Peterclaver further proclaims "... The "women of easy virtues" are not left out too. Everyone wants to benefit from the opportunities in Lagos. Why not: after all, life is about taking chances" (Para. 3).

The trend of prostitution/sex trade is a controversial, yet well known phenomenon that has become increasingly prevalent, especially amongst Nigerian Youths as a means of survival in the absence of unemployment. However, sex trade doesn't lie on the female angle only for we have men who are into this trade underground but it weighs much at the feminine part as they're most common as the participants of this trend. For many young women in Lagos, prostitution has represented more than a means of livelihood or a survival strategy rather than viewing it from the lens of promiscuousness. It is evident that sex workers are driven into the profession as a result of economic hardship, lack of job opportunities, and the desire for a better life. No one would intentionally nurture the intention of becoming a sex worker because of the societal stigmatization, inhumane treatment meted on sex workers and the dangers that comes with the profession. But certain circumstances propelled this move, hence letting us have people who work as sex workers to survive. If they were better options, we would see that the trend of sex trade would reduce drastically or probably be eradicated.

Sex trade in Lagos however has become a profession for some ladies and even men. It is linked to an extensive range of activities that encompasses lap dancing, striptease, nude dancing, etc and this trade thrives in places like clubs, hotels, and brothels and even on the streets depending on the metropolis. It has even become digital with the rise of social media and dating apps, and in recent times internet and live cam sex, causing a transformation in the sex industry with many sex workers operating online to attract clients discreetly. The presence of technology and communication have

impacted the organization of the sex trade, and enabled diversity of indoor sex work.

Centering on the Lagos cosmology, the sex industry operates at different levels; visibly, and most commonly, at the underground levels. Sex workers are addressed or called certain names depending on the context in which it's used. Aside Ashawo which is a general colloquial term for sex workers, they are other names ascribed to them such as Sissy Eko (Lagos maiden- in Yoruba translation), Olosho, Runs Girl, and Gigolo (for men) amongst others. The spotlight on sex industry in Nigeria focused mainly on human trafficking, migrant prostitution down to this technological era where independent sex workers are able to market themselves and solicit for clients on the internet and beyond it without intermediary. In contemporary Lagos, strip clubs, brothels and nude bars needs no stress to be found in different parts of Lagos including Allen Avenue, Ikoyi, Ikeja, Mainland, etc. Despite the recognition of the trade in these areas, live sex is prohibited before faces. Hence, the sex workers or dancers involved are allowed to go to any hotel, brothel or secluded place to execute their sexual transactions.

The attempts to document domestic prostitution, as well as its development over the years, in addition to operational and regulatory mechanisms have so far been the preoccupation of but a few scholars. It is on this annotation the researcher deems it fit to explore the voices and narratives of sex workers in the sex industry, with this research, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on queer African experiences, while challenging dominant discourses.

For many sex traders, their involvement in the industry started as coercion coupled with physical force until they succumbed to the line of business. They are often deceived with lofty promises from certain individuals until they realized they are being trafficked and employed into the profession of prostitution. Oladele (2025) corroborated this by quoting Saheed Aderinto:

Entry into the sex industry in Lagos was not always voluntary but involved forms of coercion and trafficking, especially in cases of underage girls. Evidence from the 1920s shows that a large number of young girls from rural areas engaged in prostitution in Lagos.

The researcher seeks to address the life, struggle, identity and survival of sex workers in the storm of societal norms and values and also to reveal the creative coping mechanisms, solidarity networks, and extreme measures adopted that enable sex workers to subvert and resist hardship and marginalization. The research wielded community theatre and interviews as a tool and engaged respondents to generate factual data for the study. To analyze the research, the theoretical framework of Judith Jack Halberstam's Queer Art of Failure and Resilience Theory by Holling is employed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.

The Theoretical backings employed for this research is the Consequential Theory or Consequentialism propounded by Jeremy Bentham (1789), John Stuart Mill (1861), and Henry Sidgwick (1907) and Resilience Theory propounded by Dr. Norman Garmezy.

Consequentialism, as its name suggests, is simply the view that normative properties depend only on consequences. This historically important and still popular theory embodies the basic

intuition that what is best or right is whatever makes the world best in the future, because we cannot change the past, so worrying about the past is no more useful than crying over spilled milk. (Walter Sinnott Armstrong, 2023).

Consequentialism for this research serves as backing to analyze how *Sissy Eko* or Sex workers subvert traditional notions of identity, gender, and sexuality. Consequentialism or Consequential Theory holds that the consequences of someone's conduct or laws are the decisive foundation for judgments in relation to the right or wrongness of a specific conduct or provision. Hence, the consequentialist stance is that a morally right act will produce an outcome the society would describe as good. With consequentialism backing, one could tell that certain factors propel Lagos sex workers into what they've transmogrified and yet, the society still wants them to be morally upright when there are no ameliorations to their predicaments.

Consequentialism dives into the realm of representatives of holistic understandings of societies who claim that human beings are intrinsically social beings. Thus, due to the fact that people form complex, inseparable relationships with other members within their societies, their individual actions will automatically have an effect on the other members of their society or even on the entire society as a whole. In the Nigerian society, one is expected to conform to societal rules from cradle and whatever you do that is not of the societal standards would be treated with scorn. Such is the issue of the *Sissy Eko* syndrome, it is believed that their trade of these sex workers would corrupt and influence the society negatively. Truly, the antics of the sex worker does not align with the societal standards but what measure has the society taken to influence positively, the intrinsic motivations of the persons in question? In terms of consequentialism thoughts, ethical considerations play an important role. This is based on the assumptions that certain behaviours may have negative effects on society such as the sex trade. Consequentialist ideas on sex trade are thoughts to include concerns such as prostitution aiding the spread of STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases). A hypothetical consideration of consequentialism in this respect does not really legalize sex trade but removing these kinds of adverse effects by including safety checkups and provisions for regular health.

Resilience Theory, propounded by Norman Garmezy has triggered scholars to also give definitions of resilience from their own lenses. Luthans defines resilience as "The developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict, and failure or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility". Masten also defines resilience as "the capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development" (Cited in Catherine, M. (2025)).

Resilience Theory on the other hand helps to understand the adaptive strategies employed by *Sissy Eko*/Sex traders to cope with adversity in the eyes of the societal storm. Resilience theory argues that it's not the nature of adversity that is most important, but how we deal with it. The manner at which the sex traders handle the societal adversity is the core essence of establishing this theory in this research. Some sex traders' strengths can also be significant predictors of resilience, with particular correlations between resilience and emotional, intellectual, and restraint-related strengths.

Resilience theory emphasizes the ability to adapt and thrive despite adversity. In the case of the sex traders, developing

resilience has helped fostering optimism, mental support and problem solving skills which has helped them device certain means to carry out their trade away from the eyes of the society.

TRIALS, SURVIVAL AND IDENTITY OF LAGOS SEX WORKERS.

Sex workers have been discriminated against and stigmatized by the government, church communities, neighbours and family. Nigerians are religious people and adultery and fornication are sins in both major religions. The society views Prostitution and other related trades in the Sex Industry as a taboo, this is because it's believed to erase a woman's dignity and lowers her value. A sex worker could be accessed by anybody, irrespective of his disabilities, as far as he could pay the bill. This lowers the worker's dignity and makes her no better than an inanimate object. Oladele (2025) citing Irma L. Shenk states that "The act of prostitution degrades the natural use of a woman's body and allowing men to use a woman's body as a means to an end thus violating the deontological ethics of duty-based morality of correct action over good consequences". In the Lagos cosmology and Nigeria as a whole, prostitution is unethical and immorally wrong and unacceptable in the society despite how prominent it has become. This is to elucidate how unacceptable sex workers are in the society and also, to showcase the trials of Lagos sex workers.

Looking at the act of prostitution and looking at the person then one may be able to see courage and strength. Prostitutes don't derive pleasures in their trade; it's mostly for survival purpose. The moral and ethical aspect does not judge the act as well as the actor. Borcoman defines virtue as what is in the heart of a person, not the reason behind the act (Cited by Oladele (2025)). Stated earlier, one of the prime reasons why we have lots of *Sissy Eko* on the streets of Lagos is as a result of unemployment. However, some of them are into other professions that can barely foot their bills, hence, opt for prostitution. Many sex workers in Lagos now, to avoid stigmatization and the societal accusing shameful gaze device several means to get their job done. Temi Iwalaiye (2022) corroborates this by giving instances of the Ikeja City mall in Ikeja, Lagos State capital. "... By the stairs, young ladies in skimpy attires stand pressing their iPhones. You might wonder if they are waiting for someone and will soon leave the stairs, but they might stand there for a while unless a stranger comes and propositions them, and then they'll walk to his/her car". This shows how 'coded' sex workers have transmogrified their profession so they could be safe from accusing fingers. Sometimes nobody goes to meet those standing by the stairs in order not to propose a wrong motive and end up embarrassed in the end, hence, revealing the trials that come with sex workers getting clients for their trade. Giving instances of some sex workers in the streets of Lagos and in other commercial cities like Owerri, Port Harcourt, Asaba etc you might see ladies with amazing bodies strolling up and down as far as the parking lot as if they are looking for something to buy. After seeing them walking up and down empty-handed for a while you might realize that they have nothing to buy and just roaming the metropolis so they could be beckoned upon by willing clients.

To the sector of Law and morality, the plight of Sex workers in Lagos is understood to a certain degree because of those who understand the predicaments of these sex workers. Many human rights activists have criticized this Lagos state law and the law on prostitution by saying that it's an unfair law that seeks to punish the poor and that their activities do not hurt anyone. They are trying to earn a living and in some countries, prostitution is not

even a crime (Temi Iwalaiye, 2022). The fact might be that societal and religion's norms frown against prostitution but this is means in which many people survive on as a result of the rate on unemployment in Lagos and Nigeria as a whole.

COMMUNITY THEATRE AND INTERVIEWS WITH SEX WORKERS ON SEX TRADE.

The use of the arts to examine social issues has always existed, but in recent years, theatre has become increasingly employed to assess audience perception and comprehension of significant social issues (Campbell et al., 2021) Community theatre serves as a unique form of socio-political expression, where the voices of those directly affected by societal prejudices or challenges take centre stage. The central objective is to engage in a community-based dialogue, eliciting perspectives from a diverse range of participants, including audience members, women with experience of sex work, users of addiction services, and expert commentators, in response to the themes explored in the old English play *Madame Geneva: A Tale of Gin and Prostitution* by Jane Lane. An illustration of this transformative method can be observed in the compelling community play *Madame Geneva: A Tale of Gin and Prostitution*.

Also, the researcher, for the purpose of validating this research and gathering raw facts from primary sources had interviews with some ladies who are into the sex industry. However, for the purpose of discretion, only the fictional name and area of the sex workers would be elucidated in this research, in the absence of pictures. This is to help protect the identity of the lady in question.

At exactly 8:21pm on the 21st of September, 2024, the researcher approached two sex workers at Allen Avenue in Lagos and interacted with them, seeking their consent to grant her audience. After several persuasions, they obliged with the condition that their pictures shouldn't be taken, neither should their names appear on any newspaper nor research publication. The Sissy Ekos (let's take Linda and Betty as their names) narrated what had propelled them into the sex industry.

In the words of Linda, she graduated from Tai Solarin University of Education, Ogun State in 2016 with a second class lower division in Accounting Education. She served in Enugu State and has been jobless since then. She worked as a teacher in several schools in Lagos for a short period but none of these jobs could cater for her accommodation only, talk more of feeding and other miscellaneous. Also, she had a little brother who schools at Ondo State and happens to be her responsibility since their parents are no more. It took Linda to gather courage, coupled with the whips of penury to succumb to a street friend's advice to join the sex industry. She started as a striper, putting on masks to cover her face because of shame. Her body attracted clients to her who are willing to pay her bills and she became willing to let them in between her legs too. Though, she's quitted at the strip club and now works from the convenience of her home. All she has to do is to go online, get messages, make negotiations and travel to wherever territory her trade takes her to. When asked about her regrets, she replied by asserting that it was never her intention to become a sex worker and her first ever client whom she barely know then was the first person to have slept with her in her entire life. She admits that sex trade pays her well than any job her academic qualification would get her.

As for Betty, she was holding back from talking too much but admits to have been in the industry since she was sixteen years of age. She was a product of a broken home and had to rely on the

streets for survival. No one coerced her into the trade; she joined willingly after suffering several molestations on the street. Her survival depends on it and she doesn't see herself stopping.

For a woman to become a prostitute, she has summoned courage, inner strength and bravery to do what she never imagined she would do. It's evident she does it for survival and taking such decision is not easy considering the moral, ethical and religious background. But she has chosen to go against her principles because her survival and even certain responsibilities depend on it. If the social standards would change, it would help the woman with the mental and physical pressures of being a prostitute. She knows it's morally wrong and deems it fit to damn the consequences and risks that come with the trade. If the society would stop to judge the act of sex trade and consider the attribute of the sex worker, it may see the trials, pains and inner strength of the person.

Due to the absence of complete social acceptance of sex work in society, the reality that sex workers endure discrimination and stigma, as well as the ongoing threat of such stigma, a community theatre strategy was chosen for the current study. Community theatre can be employed as a vehicle for individual empowerment, societal advancement and the promotion of concepts like gender equality, human rights, and democracy (Campbell et al., 2021) Society needs to look at not only the act of sex trade but also the sex worker. This is where one can justify the prostitute by looking at the circumstances or the situation in which caused the person to become a prostitute. Society today has judged the sex worker and sex trade as immoral and unethical. This judgment has caused pain and suffering in the lives of those who have no choice but to venture into the sex industry as a means of survival and curbing poverty.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

Based on the research carried out on sex workers and their struggle for survival in Lagos amidst the societal and moral storms, the following recommendations are made to ease the affairs, safeguard the human rights and dignity of the sex workers in Lagos Nigeria.

- Employment opportunities and Entrepreneurship empowerment should be considered and implemented; this is to prevent those who have been nursing the intention to go into the sex trade. They could channel their energies positively into other profession.
- The issue of prostitution in Lagos should be addressed and support and rehabilitation services should be provided to sex workers. Also, awareness should be made about the risks and consequences of engaging in the trade.
- Also, agencies such as National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in persons (NAPTIP) should combat human trafficking and provide support to victims, including those who have been trafficked for the purpose of prostitution.

CONCLUSION.

This study delved into the concept, survival, and struggles of sex workers in Lagos. It elucidates the causes and things that must have propelled and triggered these persons to venture into the sex industry. Using the consequential and resilience theory as its backing, the research analyzes how *Sissy Eko* or Sex workers subvert traditional notions of identity, gender, and sexuality and how they are able to survive and thrive in

their profession amidst all societal and moral odds. The study concludes by advocating for acceptance and policy reforms to safeguard the human rights and dignity of sex workers in Lagos, Nigeria.

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