

# Research on social governance strategies related to public health risks of sex trading

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**Abstract.** This paper addresses the global public health risks associated with sex work, focusing on both physical and mental health challenges faced by sex workers. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), particularly HIV/AIDS, is a major health risk in many regions due to the failure of sex workers and clients to consistently adhere to safety measures such as condom use. Additionally, mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common among sex workers, exacerbated by social stigma, discrimination, and occupational stress. The paper explores various governance models from countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden, highlighting successful strategies in managing the health risks of sex work. It emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive governance model that combines regulation with support, offering both health and mental health services, legal protections, and social security for sex workers. The paper concludes by recommending policy adjustments and international cooperation to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for sex workers, ultimately improving their health and social outcomes.

**Keywords:** Sex Work, Public Health, Governance Models, Mental Health, Sexually Transmitted Diseases.

## 1. Introduction

As a global issue, sex work not only poses health risks, particularly the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, but also has a profound impact on the mental health of those involved. Despite various regulatory measures implemented by many countries and regions to reduce the health risks associated with sex work, it remains a significant challenge for global public health. The complexity of the issue is further compounded by globalization and socio-economic factors, leading to varying effectiveness in the implementation of governance and public health policies.

The threat of sexual transactions to physical health, particularly the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), is a major concern in many countries and regions. Studies show that participants in sexual transactions, including both providers and clients, often fail to strictly adhere to safe sex practices, especially when it comes to using condoms and other preventive measures. This directly contributes to the spread of diseases such as AIDS and syphilis[1]. The spread of these diseases not only affects the individuals involved but also poses health risks to the general public, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries, where sexual transactions are often intertwined with issues like poverty, social exclusion, and crime[2].

The impact of sex work on mental health has gained increasing attention in recent years. Sex workers often face social stigma, occupational discrimination, and physical and mental exhaustion, which can lead to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Research indicates that negative societal attitudes toward sex work and the stigmatization of its practitioners are among the primary causes of psychological distress [3]. Over their long careers, sex workers frequently experience psychological pressure, isolation, and emotional distress, which not only affect their mental health but also potentially impact their physical health and job performance. Therefore, in addition to physical health concerns, mental health issues have become a critical area for international efforts to address the risks associated with sex work [4].

Despite being illegal in many countries and regions, sex work persists due to socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic factors. Therefore, many countries and regions have adopted various governance models to address this issue. Based on their political systems, cultural backgrounds, and levels of social development, these countries have implemented a range of governance models for sex work, including criminalization, decriminalization, enhanced regulation, and social support. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden have gained valuable experience and achieved significant results in managing sex work [5]. In Australia, some states enforce mandatory health checks and sex education, aiming to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases through health measures; New Zealand, on the other hand, adopts a decriminalization approach to protect the rights of sex workers while enhancing public health measures to minimize the negative impact of sex work on society [6].

International experience also shows that a single governance model cannot effectively address the complex health risks associated with sex work. Sex workers face dual challenges to their physical and mental health, making a comprehensive governance model, particularly one that combines 'regulation + support' strategies, especially important. This model not only focuses on legal and policy oversight to prevent the excessive spread of sex work but also provides psychological support, health check-ups, and social assistance to protect the basic rights of sex workers and reduce their physical and mental burdens[7].

The aim of this article is to analyze the governance models of multiple countries internationally, explore the successful experiences and lessons learned in reducing public health risks associated with sex work abroad, and provide a reference for other countries to develop more effective social governance strategies. Through literature review and data analysis, the article will explore how to balance regulation with social support, establish an effective public health governance framework, and provide theoretical support and policy recommendations to address public health risks related to sex work.

## 2. Health Risk Analysis

The primary health risks associated with sex work are the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. The lack of adherence to safety measures, such as condoms, among sex workers and clients significantly increases the risk of STD transmission. Despite regulations and regular health checks in many countries and regions, STDs remain prevalent.

A study in Thailand found that despite widespread STD education, about 50% of sex workers do not use condoms consistently, resulting in an HIV transmission rate of 30%[8]. Similarly, research in Australia indicates that even with health check-ups and education, the HIV transmission rate remains high, particularly among street sex workers.

Data shows that while Australia has relatively comprehensive health measures in the sex industry, low compliance among street workers leads to a HIV transmission rate of 12%[9]. These figures highlight that even in resource-rich countries, insufficient compliance remains a significant public health issue. Table 1 summarizes the condom usage rates and HIV transmission rates among sex workers in different regions, highlighting the varying effectiveness of health measures in different settings.

**Table 1.** HIV prevalence and condom use in areas of sex trading

Study area	HIV prevalence	The proportion of condom use
Thailand	30%	50%
Australia, Aussie	12%	85%
South Africa	45%	60%
Brazil	25%	70%
India	15%	60%
Columbia	20%	75%
America	18%	80%

In addition to physical health risks, the mental health issues of sex workers are receiving increasing attention. Social stigma is one of the primary mental health challenges faced by sex workers, leading to anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. According to Tam et al. (2022), sex workers often face intense social stigma due to their profession, which significantly impacts their mental health. The negative societal perception often makes these workers feel unaccepted, exacerbating their psychological distress. A survey of 1,000 sex workers in the UK found that about 40% reported experiencing various levels of mental health issues during their careers, primarily characterized by depression, anxiety, and loneliness, which further affect their physical health [10]. These mental health issues are often linked to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, as psychological distress can lead to unsafe sexual practices at work. Additionally, the violent environment in the sex industry exacerbates the psychological distress of workers, further impacting their overall health. Sex workers are at a higher risk of violence, which is a significant factor contributing to the worsening of their mental health issues. Research indicates that violence and oppressive law enforcement can intensify the anxiety and depression of sex workers and increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases [11].

**Table 2.** Survey data on mental health problems of sex workers in the UK

mental health problems	percentage
depression	20%
anxiety neurosis	15%
Loneliness	5%
suicidal tendency	2%

According to Platt et al. (2020), the mental health issues of sex workers are often closely linked to their work environment, particularly the impact of violence and social exclusion on their mental health. Violence can increase anxiety and depression among sex workers, leading them to engage in higher-risk behaviors, which not only exacerbate their mental health issues but also increase the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Work pressure, income instability, and a lack of social support systems are also significant factors contributing to the mental health challenges faced by sex workers. Table 3 illustrates the extent to which different work environment factors affect the mental health of sex workers.

**Table 3.** Survey results on the impact of sexual work environment on mental health

Work environment factors	Extent of impact
Customer violence	high
Social exclusion	high
working pressure	middle
Lack of social support	high

These data highlight the health challenges faced by sex workers, which encompass not only physical risks but also significant mental health issues. The negative impacts of violence, social exclusion, and lack of social support on their mental health require greater attention in policies governing the sex trade. By improving support for the mental health of sex workers, reducing social stigma, and enhancing legal and social security measures, these health risks can be mitigated.

### 3. International Governance Models

The governance of sex work has garnered significant global attention. Different countries have adopted various models based on their unique social, cultural, and legal contexts. Although sex work is illegal in most countries, many have implemented a range of legal and social support measures to

protect the health and rights of sex workers and reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. This article will focus on analyzing the governance models of sex work in several representative countries.

### **3.1. Australia's regulatory model**

Some Australian states, such as New South Wales, have adopted a comprehensive regulatory model for sex work, implementing a 'legalization' policy. This model allows sex workers to operate within a legally protected framework while requiring all sex workers to undergo health checks, regular safety training, and registration management. The focus of this model is on reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases through health checks and providing basic labor rights protection for sex workers. However, this model has also revealed some issues, particularly in its inadequate coverage of street sex workers and its failure to fully address social exclusion and violence. Many sex workers still face discrimination from society and clients, which affects the effectiveness of health checks and legal protections.

### **3.2. New Zealand's decriminalisation model**

In 2003, New Zealand introduced a decriminalization policy for sex work, which legalized the practice and allowed sex workers to operate within the legal framework. This decriminalization not only protected the legal rights of sex workers but also reduced the risk of sexually transmitted diseases through workplace safety standards, health checks, and psychological support. Additionally, New Zealand's policy emphasized protecting sex workers from violence and discrimination, thereby enhancing social acceptance of this group. Based on New Zealand's experience, decriminalization policies have helped improve working conditions for sex workers and reduce criminal behavior, particularly in environments lacking social support.

### **3.3. The criminalization of purchasing sex services in Sweden**

Since 1999, Sweden has implemented a policy of 'criminalizing the purchase of sexual services,' which targets customers rather than sex workers. The primary goal is to reduce the demand for sex workers, thereby decreasing the prevalence of commercial sex. This model has gained significant attention and been adopted by several European countries. However, the policy has faced criticism, with concerns that it overlooks the rights of sex workers, particularly those who voluntarily engage in sex work, who lack necessary legal support and health protection. Sex workers often feel further marginalized and face greater risks, especially in terms of mental health and violence.

### **3.4. The Dutch model of legalization and regulation**

The Netherlands is another country that has legalized and regulated sex work. In the Netherlands, after sex work was legalized, sex workers are required to register and meet certain health standards. The Dutch government has reduced the spread of sexually transmitted diseases by establishing legalized sex work zones and conducting regular health checks for sex workers. Additionally, the laws governing sex work in the Netherlands provide social security and legal protection for sex workers, significantly reducing exploitation and violence. However, the Dutch experience shows that despite legal protections for sex workers, the rights of street sex workers and those who operate illegally are not fully safeguarded.

### **3.5. Germany's model of legalizing sex work**

Since 2002, Germany has implemented a policy to legalize sex work, allowing sex workers to operate within the legal framework. Under German law, registered sex workers are entitled to health check-ups, social insurance, and labor protection. While this policy has achieved some success in reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and protecting the rights of sex workers, issues such as illegal sex work and exploitation persist. Some studies suggest that the legalization of sex work has

not fully addressed the issues of violence and discrimination faced by sex workers, particularly among those in low-income and illegal sectors.

#### **4. Governance Strategies and Risk Mitigation**

The governance of sex work faces numerous challenges, particularly in balancing the reduction of sexually transmitted diseases, protecting the rights of sex workers, and providing necessary social support. Different countries and regions have adopted various governance strategies to address these challenges. By integrating the experiences of different countries, we can summarize several effective governance strategies and analyze their effectiveness and limitations.

##### **4.1. Health check and safety training**

Health check-ups and safety training are central components of the governance models for sex work in most countries. Regular health check-ups help sex workers detect and treat sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) early, which significantly reduces the risk of spreading STDs like AIDS. For instance, New Zealand has implemented mandatory health check-ups and STD education through decriminalization policies, requiring sex workers to undergo regular health checks to ensure workplace safety. Additionally, health training enhances the adherence to contraceptive measures and self-protection awareness among sex workers, thereby reducing the incidence of STDs. However, while health check-ups can greatly reduce the spread of STDs, adherence remains a significant challenge. In Thailand and other low-income countries, sex workers often avoid health check-ups or public healthcare services due to a lack of legal protection, economic pressure, or social stigma, increasing their health risks. Therefore, improving the adherence of sex workers to health check-ups, especially in unsafe working environments, remains a key challenge in health prevention and control.

##### **4.2. Legal support and social security**

Legal support and social security systems are a critical component of the governance of sex work. Many countries adopt models of legalization or decriminalization to ensure that sex workers can enjoy labor rights, social insurance, and legal protection. These measures help protect sex workers from violence, exploitation, and unfair treatment. For example, in the Netherlands and Australia, sex workers are legally protected and can seek legal assistance and wage guarantees through official channels. However, despite the legal framework in some countries providing legal support and social security for sex workers, implementation challenges and limitations remain. Firstly, the scope and depth of legal protections for sex workers are insufficient, particularly in informal work settings, where the coverage of legal and social security measures is very limited. Secondly, although some countries have protected the rights of sex workers through legalization policies, issues of social stigma and violence persist, especially in conservative countries, where sex workers often face social exclusion and workplace violence. Therefore, legal support and social security need to be further expanded, especially for informal sex workers and marginalized groups.

##### **4.3. Mental health services**

The mental health issues of sex workers are increasingly drawing attention. Sex workers often face discrimination and violence from society, and their long-term careers can lead to psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many countries' governance strategies now emphasize providing mental health services to sex workers, including counseling and emotional support. In New Zealand, sex workers can receive mental health support and professional therapy in the workplace to address the psychological pressures of their work. However, while mental health services can effectively alleviate the psychological distress of sex workers, their implementation faces several challenges. Firstly, sex workers may refuse psychological treatment due to social stigma or cultural differences. Secondly, the availability of mental health services remains limited, especially in resource-poor areas, where many sex workers struggle to

access professional psychological support. To address these issues, it is essential to increase investment in mental health services, improving their accessibility and acceptance.

#### **4.4. Graded governance and differentiated management**

Graded governance and differentiated management are crucial strategies for addressing the diversity of the sex worker community. Sex workers can be categorized into two groups: those who participate voluntarily and those who are coerced. Effective governance strategies should tailor measures to the characteristics of these groups. For example, voluntary sex workers should receive legal support, health check-ups, and psychological counseling; whereas for those forced into sex work, especially those victims of human trafficking, priority should be given to rescue, legal aid, and social support. Through this tiered governance approach, the risks faced by exploited individuals can be more effectively mitigated, ensuring they receive the necessary protection.

#### **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the situation of sex workers' health is complex and severe. Both physical and mental health risks are intertwined and have a significant impact on the well-being of sex workers. The high HIV transmission rate, despite existing health measures, and the prevalent mental health issues caused by social stigma, violence, and poor work conditions call for a comprehensive and effective governance approach.

To address these problems, international cooperation is essential. Different countries can share their experiences and best practices in governing the sex trade. For example, countries with relatively successful models in protecting sex workers' health can provide guidance to others. At the domestic level, governments should formulate more targeted policies. This includes improving the legal status of sex workers to ensure they have better social security and protection from violence.

Moreover, public education campaigns are necessary to reduce social stigma towards sex workers. By raising public awareness about the real situation of sex workers and the importance of their health, a more inclusive social environment can be created. At the same time, more professional mental health services should be provided to sex workers. This can be achieved through government-funded programs or partnerships with non-profit organizations.

In addition, continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of governance strategies are crucial. By regularly assessing the effectiveness of policies and measures, timely adjustments can be made to better mitigate the health risks faced by sex workers. Only through such comprehensive and multi-faceted efforts can we hope to improve the health situation of sex workers and promote a more just and healthy social environment.

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