

Social Construction Analysis of the Phenomenon of Prostitution in Makassar City

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Abstract. *This study aims to analyze and understand the in-depth reasons why people in Makassar City tolerate the presence of commercial sex workers. Researchers seek to understand the meaning and connections of this social phenomenon from the perspective of those who interact with commercial sex workers (CSWs) daily. This research approach employs a phenomenological approach with qualitative analysis. The focus of this study is on the community living side by side with sex workers who work individually and are spread across several locations (segregation). The research locus specifically includes Jalan Veteran, Jalan Sungai Saddang, Jalan Nusantara, and Jalan Topaz, which are identified as segregated areas whose impacts are deeply felt by the surrounding community. The results significantly indicate that widespread apathy and moral decadence in society are the main factors creating a space for tolerance towards the presence of commercial sex workers. This tolerance is not merely passive acceptance, but rather a social construct shaped through various interactions and understandings of dynamic social realities.*

Keywords: *Social construction, Apathy, Moral Decadence, Prostitution*

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Indonesia is a long-standing social issue and an inseparable part of the social landscape. Their existence, whether openly accepted or ignored, reflects the complexity of the social and economic structure. According to Natalis et al. (2023); Isnawan (2024); Askew & Cohen, (2024) Various media reports indicate that prostitution is widespread throughout Indonesia, from major cities to small villages, indicating that this problem is not merely a local phenomenon but a national issue with social, economic, and cultural dimensions.

As the capital of South Sulawesi Province, Makassar City has experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization. While this development has brought positive progress, it has also left negative consequences in the form of increasing social problems, one of which is the social pathology of prostitution. Prostitution in Makassar, as in many other large cities, has become a social phenomenon that is constantly debated and a moral burden on society. Euchner & Zeegers (2022) said that, various efforts, from moral appeals to health threats, appear ineffective in steering individuals away from the cycle of prostitution. This phenomenon grows and develops alongside modernization, creating new challenges for efforts to address it.

Sociological studies often reveal that efforts to eliminate prostitution tend to focus on discrimination against women, positioning them as the primary cause of the problem. This stereotype ignores the power structures and lucrative economic networks behind prostitution.

Therefore, an effective approach should not focus solely on rigid regulations, but rather on a deeper understanding of the factors underlying such behavior (Yeung, 2008). Economic factors are often the dominant reason why someone falls into the world of prostitution (Priandika et al., 2020). Urgent living expenses, difficulty finding decent work, and the pitfalls of poverty often compel individuals to choose this path, despite their awareness of the social and moral stigmas attached. Prostitution is a complex social problem due to the difficulty of eradicating this practice, which constantly clashes with the demands of life, religious norms, and positive law (Gowravajhula, 2022; Jones, 2023; Aantjes et al., 2022; Anderson, 2021).

Conventionally, prostitution is viewed as a moral issue and a violation of religious and social norms. However, this practice persists and is even tolerated by the surrounding community. Makassar, as a significant center of economic and social growth in Eastern Indonesia, provides an interesting context for examining this phenomenon. Amidst rapid modernization and globalization, the existence of sex workers, both organized and segregated, has become an integral and unavoidable part of social reality (Noori, 2023). The dynamics of rapid urbanization have fostered the formation of a more individualistic and pragmatic societal structure, where traditional values often conflict with new economic demands and social realities.

Previous studies on prostitution tended to focus on economic factors as a driving force for individuals to enter this profession (Darmasari & Gusnita, 2024). Meanwhile, Belina & Helms (2003); Bannister & Kearns (2013); Jefferson (2015) highlighted the role of local governments in creating zones of tolerance. *This* is exacerbated by indecisive policies, which ultimately normalize the presence of sex workers in certain areas. The lack of consistent enforcement or effective rehabilitation sends a message to the public that this phenomenon is "allowed" or at least "not strictly prohibited" by the authorities (Guzmen-Carmeli, 2024). Several other studies have also analyzed the health implications, particularly the spread of HIV/AIDS, as well as the effectiveness of government enforcement and rehabilitation programs (Lehman et al., 2014; Berkman et al., 2005; Harsono et al., 2017).

However, there is a gap in the literature that attempts to explore the reasons why people tend to be apathetic or even tolerant of the presence of sex workers in their environment from the perspective of the community itself. This attitude of tolerance is often assumed to be inevitable without any systematic effort to unravel the underlying social processes. However, tolerance is not a spontaneous attitude, but rather a social construct built and maintained through daily social interactions (Hulu et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2024). This research gap underscores the urgency of a more holistic approach, one that not only considers sex workers as problematic objects but also positions the community as active subjects in constructing meaning and the social reality around them.

This study is based on the premise that apathy and moral decadence are not merely negative labels attached to society, but rather a product of dynamic social construction. Prostitution, in this context, is understood not only as an individual problem, but as a social institution integrated into the structure of society (Asia, 2022). In the city of Makassar, local cultural values such as *siri' na pacce* interact with modernity, and the existence of sex workers reflects broader social shifts. Therefore, this research is highly relevant. The researcher feels compelled to examine in depth the profession of sex workers in Makassar City through the lens of social construction theory in answering the question, "How do shifts in social values affect the existence of sex workers in Makassar City?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Construction and the Reality of Prostitution

According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their work *The Social Construction of Reality* (2016), social reality is not something ready-made, but rather a process of meaning that is continuously constructed by each individual through social interaction. This process involves three interrelated dialectical moments: externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

Externalization is the process by which individuals project or adapt to the sociocultural world as a product of human activity. Objectivation is the stage in which the results of this externalization interact with the intersubjective world, are institutionalized, and are considered as a stand-alone reality (Sudrajat et al., 2020; Budi, 2022). Finally, internalization is the process by which individuals identify with and reabsorb the institutionalized objective reality into their subjective consciousness.

Shifting moral values also play a crucial role. Most people, especially the younger generation, now have a more pragmatic and open view of sexuality (Prastiyo, 2018; Bernasconi, 2010). This openness allows people to develop themselves not based on instinct, but through a wide variety of activities, connected to specific social and cultural structures through the intermediary of those closest to them (*significant others*). Therefore, human development is largely determined by the social context. The adaptive nature of humans in facing their social environment shows that human nature is formed from anthropological constants that both limit and enable socio-cultural formations (Daly, 2012; Shakun, 2022; Kulenko et al., 2022). Social order is a continuous human product, not a biological product or natural law. Because humans need stability, the openness of the world must be transformed into a relatively closed social order.

Various studies have applied this theory to analyze social phenomena. Firdaus (2025), in his study in Jakarta, for example, found that tolerance of sex workers in urban areas is a consequence of the objectification of sex workers' roles as part of the local economic ecosystem, where they are viewed as a source of income for traders or housing owners. Meanwhile, Ritaudin (2019) observed that the internalization of new norms, which view sex workers' work as a rational economic choice amidst hardship, also shapes public perception. This internalization process often blurs the line between immoral acts and pragmatic choices.

Understanding Berger's Dialectic: Externalization, Objectivation, and Internalization

Social reality is dual: subjective and objective. Objective reality is the reality outside the individual, while subjective reality is the reality within the individual's consciousness. Using Hegel's dialectical concept (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), Berger and Luckmann connect the two through externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The rules and laws that guide social institutions are products of human externalization to maintain social order (Etzioni, 2000; Cooter, 2000). When individuals fail to conform to these rules, a "violation" occurs, caused by the instability of the externalization process. In this regard, the function of legitimacy is crucial for society as an objective reality. Legitimacy makes institutionalized objectification objectively plausible. For example, ideology or mythology serves not only to legitimize behavior but also to ensure that behavior is understood and carried out. Internalization, meanwhile, is the process by which individuals in society accept and understand this objectified reality as part of their cognitive framework and worldview.

Berger and Luckmann's theory attempts to synthesize social phenomena through three dialectical moments. Society is considered a simultaneously objective and subjective reality. As an objective reality, society appears to exist outside the individual, while as a subjective reality, the individual is an inseparable part of society. In other words, individuals shape society, and society shapes individuals. Society, as a subjective reality, requires socialization to maintain and transform itself. This socialization takes place within a specific social structure, and its success depends on that context. Analysis of the phenomenon of internalization must always be informed by a macro-social understanding of its structural aspects. Each individual absorbs a limited interpretation of social reality, like a mirror of the objective world.

Thus, the relationship between individuals and their institutions is a dialectic expressed in three moments: society is a human product, society is an objective reality, and humans are social products. This dialectic is mediated by knowledge based on experience and the roles that represent individuals within the institutional order (Chin et al., 2025; Lee & Roth, 2007). Methodologically, this approach requires a liberation from subjectivity, hypotheses, and traditional doctrines, so that truth is derived from direct experience.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. According to Bungin & Moleong (2007), phenomenology aims to understand the meaning of events and their connections from the perspective of ordinary people in certain situations. The researcher chose this approach because social phenomena, especially tolerance towards sex workers, are holistic and cannot be separated, so the research is not based on research variables. This study not only measures variables but also understands the entire social situation, including the aspects of place, actors, and activities that interact with each other. The ultimate goal of this study is to understand the subject in the world of his experience, moving from the dynamics of experience to the meaning of that experience. Phenomenology allows researchers to describe the meaning of the subject's experience in depth, so that they can capture the essence of the reasons underlying this attitude of tolerance.

Thus, this study seeks to explore "what people think and feel" in the research location, not just "what they do." This study focuses on commercial sex workers who operate individually and are scattered across segregated areas. The specific locations of the study are Jalan Veteran Selatan, Jalan Nusantara, Jalan Sungai Saddang, and Jalan Topaz in Makassar City. These areas were chosen because they are considered centers of prostitution segregation that have a real impact on the lives of the surrounding community. Observations at these locations allow researchers to collect data from daily interactions between the community and sex workers. This research was conducted for approximately one year because the researchers wanted to observe the dynamics of the lives of CSWs and the views of the community itself, which took time to develop. Informants were determined using the snowball sampling technique. This method began with the identification of several key informants, namely several long-time and new sex workers, as well as members of the community who could provide information about other relevant individuals and locations that could be the subject of research. This process continued in a chain, from one informant to the next, until the required data was sufficient. This technique is very effective in research involving populations that are difficult to reach or sensitive, as in this case.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study significantly confirm that the social tolerance of Makassarese toward sex workers in the study area is not passive acceptance, but rather a complex social construct. This tolerance is formed from a combination of widespread social apathy and moral decadence, a real social phenomenon in urban areas. This discussion will further elaborate on how these three elements interact.

Tolerance as a Dynamic Social Construction

Public tolerance of commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Makassar is not a single phenomenon, but rather the result of a complex interaction of social, economic, and cultural factors. One of the most prominent reasons is that the existence of *apathy* and *moral* tolerance shown by society is the result of a process of objectification, in which sex workers are positioned as an unchangeable "reality" (Firdaus, 2025). Some people are also influenced by the currents of modernization and changing times, tending to view prostitution as inevitable, even "normal" in urban society. This view creates a tolerance that leads to rampant prostitution, as social control becomes weak. Instead of resisting, people tend to create new meanings to justify their existence. In interviews, informants often use narratives such as "it's been around for a long time" or "they also have to meet their living needs." These statements are a form of internalization that rationalizes the situation (Ritaudin, 2019).

This tolerance is also strengthened by mutually beneficial economic relations (*mutualistic symbiosis*) between sex workers and traders around the red-light district. The presence of sex workers creates a market for food, beverage, and other necessities vendors, which indirectly benefits the surrounding community, especially the vendors. Public apathy further opens up opportunities for prostitution to flourish unhindered. They tend to feel "pity" for sex workers and

allow them to seek a living, arguing that this profession is the only option to meet life's needs, including family needs. This view reflects a moral relativism, where ethical standards are confronted with harsh economic realities.

This tolerance then developed into an *asocial contract*. Unwritten rules govern the relationship between society and sex workers. For example, there is an informal agreement that sex workers are not allowed to disturb public order or practice during the day. As long as these unwritten rules are adhered to, tolerance is maintained (Sukmana et al., 2025). This tolerance creates a gray area where formal norms of morality are ignored in favor of maintaining pragmatic social harmony. Prostitution can be categorized as a *manifest social problem* and a *latent social problem*. In the beginning, prostitution *manifests social problems* because society considers it a deviant act that disrupts order. However, over time, when society becomes fed up, resigned, and powerless in the face of this phenomenon, prostitution turns into a *latent social problem*. Society no longer seems to view prostitution as a pressing problem to be addressed, but rather as a social reality that is difficult to eradicate. This shift in perception is extremely dangerous because if left unaddressed, prostitution will be seen as normal and natural, ultimately permanently damaging social morality and ethics. Prostitution is no longer seen as a problem to be eradicated, but rather as part of the social landscape that must be managed.

This phenomenon of tolerance can also be seen in the weakening of social control and moral values in society. Low public awareness has led to the rise of prostitution in various parts of Makassar. Although Makassar is known as a "Civil City," the reality on the ground shows widespread indifference, with people tending to turn a blind eye to the immoral practices occurring around them. This weak social control has also led to the formation of a culture of permissiveness. Traditional and religious values, which should serve as a bulwark of societal morality, have been marginalized, even completely eroded. Moral boundaries have faded, leading society to become highly permissive towards various forms of deviance, including prostitution. The concept of sacred sexuality, which should only occur within the bonds of marriage, has been degraded into a commodity that can be bought and sold.

Social Apathy: When Resignation Becomes a Choice

Social apathy refers to a lack of public involvement and indifference to social issues surrounding them (Saputro, 2020). In this context, apathy toward prostitution can be interpreted as a public response that feels powerless to change the established social system (Maulana et al., 2022). Research conducted by Adisiswanto (2018) in Banyuwangi shows that apathy often arises as a result of the failure of government intervention to address social problems effectively and sustainably. Repeated, but only temporary, enforcement actions and the lack of long-term solutions foster a feeling that efforts to combat prostitution are futile, ultimately leading to resignation.

In Makassar, this apathy is evident in the lack of demonstrations or public opposition to the presence of sex workers, even in residential areas. They tend to view this phenomenon as an existing problem and not their responsibility to resolve (Sukmana et al., 2025). This apathy is exacerbated by the phenomenon of anomie, where individuals feel alienated from community norms and values, a common characteristic of dense and anonymous urban communities (Arianto, 2024). When individuals feel disconnected from a strong sense of community, the drive to act collectively to resolve social problems is also weakened. Therefore, apathy functions as a defense mechanism, where people choose not to get involved to maintain stability and avoid conflicts they believe they cannot win.

The apathy identified in this study stems not only from indifference but also from a sense of collective powerlessness. Communities feel that the problem of prostitution is too large to be solved alone. They have observed that enforcement efforts by authorities are often ineffective and government policies unsustainable (Adisiswanto, 2018). Consequently, they choose to resign themselves to the situation and allow it to continue. This apathy is exacerbated by the

individualistic dynamics of urban life, where each individual is preoccupied with their affairs (Maulana et al., 2022).

On Jalan Nusantara, residents prefer to focus on their economic activities rather than devoting energy to "dealing" with sex workers, who are not perceived as directly detrimental. Furthermore, apathy is also reinforced by distrust of formal institutions. The lack of an effective response from local governments and law enforcement creates social anomie, where people feel that norms and laws no longer serve to protect them or maintain social order (Arianto, 2024). At this point, people take a pragmatic approach, ignoring problems perceived as beyond their control and focusing on things they can control, such as personal economic well-being. This attitude, while appearing to be indifference, is a manifestation of collective despair.

Moral Decadence: Pragmatism Displaces Traditional Values

The concept of moral decadence refers to a shift or decline in ethical and moral values previously held by a society. In highly pragmatic urban societies, traditional values often shift, replaced by new values oriented more toward materialism, individualism, and utilitarianism (Putri, 2022). This shift does not necessarily imply a total moral breakdown, but rather a re-evaluation in which "good" and "bad" are judged based on practical consequences, rather than solely on religious doctrine or rigid social norms. For example, the presence of sex workers may be viewed as "bad," but if they do not cause unrest or even provide economic benefits, then moral judgment becomes more flexible. For example, a boarding house owner on Topaz Street initially refused to rent rooms to sex workers on moral and religious grounds. However, after several months of vacancy, he finally accepted sex workers as tenants on the condition that they "do not cause problems." This decision reflects a shift in values from rigid morality to economic pragmatism. The emerging tolerance is a result of this new perspective, where economic values often trump traditional moral values in competitive urban societies (Bybee, 2020; Lewis, 2015).

Western technology and culture also play a significant role in this process of moral decadence. Technological advances, particularly the internet, have facilitated access to pornography and a promiscuous lifestyle (*free lifestyle*), which indirectly erodes Eastern cultural and religious values. Media, both print and electronic, also contribute to the spread of permissive lifestyles, which ironically are often packaged in programs that claim to be entertainment. This has an impact on the moral decay of the younger generation, who fall into promiscuity and underestimate traditional values. Women, in this context, are often the target of exploitation under the guise of freedom of expression, where their bodies are used as commodities for profit.

This is reinforced by Prastiyo's (2018) study, which showed that social media and exposure to popular culture have eroded society's conservative views on sexuality and moral norms, creating space for broader acceptance of phenomena previously considered taboo. In the Makassar context, this moral decadence can be interpreted as the result of a blending of local culture with global influences, creating space for broader acceptance of controversial social phenomena (Kusumaningrum et al., 2021). This shift in values is society's adaptive response to the complexities of urban life, where economic demands and individualism are the primary drivers. The profession of sex workers is no longer seen solely as an immoral act, but rather as an economic choice forced upon individuals amidst the pressures of life (Abrory, 2025). At the research site, this moral decadence should not be interpreted as a total moral breakdown, but rather as a re-evaluation of traditional values. Society now tends to view such actions from a functional and economic perspective, rather than just from a rigid moral point of view (Putri, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public tolerance of the existence of commercial sex workers in Makassar City is a product of social constructs formed from apathy and moral decadence. This begins with a stage of externalization, in which the community creates new ideas, actions, rules, or meanings regarding the presence of commercial sex workers. The next stage is objectification,

when the advanced phase of externalization leads to the presence of sex workers in society being considered normal because sex work is a profession that stands apart from the culture and norms of Makassar society itself. The final stage is internalization, where the people of Makassar finally accept the social reality of the presence of sex workers around them. Therefore, it is recommended that the government and society take a more proactive and coordinated role in addressing this issue. The government must be more aggressive in implementing preventive, persuasive, and rehabilitative programs. Preventive programs can take the form of moral education and socialization of the dangers of prostitution, persuasive programs in the form of a humanistic approach to sex workers and their clients, and rehabilitative programs in the form of skills training and social reintegration for sex workers. On the other hand, the community is expected to reaffirm moral values and social control. An attitude of tolerance needs to be developed, not in the sense of allowing prostitution, but in the sense of understanding the complexity of the issue from a more humanistic perspective and striving to find constructive and sustainable solutions.

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