

PROSTITUTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: A MULTIFACETED EXAMINATION OF LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Prostitution is a debatable issue in diverse academic discourses. While prostitution has existed in the world for many centuries, this issue continues to receive a strong stigma and is considered taboo among diverse cultures. This paper explores various prostitution phenomena in four Southeast Asian countries, namely, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This paper utilizes a case study approach by reviewing literature, reports, and statistics related to the issue of prostitution in these four countries. The findings of this study revealed a significant trend in prostitution phenomena across countries based on different contexts, cultures, and environments. Theoretically, Thailand does not officially legalize prostitution, but in practice, certain legal loopholes allow the practice to occur. Hence, the sex industry is recognized as one of the jobs in their country, and this has contributed significantly to the country's economy. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, prostitution is also illegal but tolerated. However, in Malaysia and Indonesia, where the majority of the Muslim population never legalizes nor allows prostitution, this issue continues to be debated due to strong stigma and taboo culture. Regardless of any form of enforcement taken by the countries, the presence of individuals engaging in sex work persists; thus, discussion surrounding this phenomenon continues to revolve. Thus, prostitution is perceived differently based on the country's response in terms of cultural and societal factors as well as the existing policies and laws regarding this issue. Despite allowing prostitution in the countries (i.e., Thailand and the Philippines), the stigma surrounding sex workers or prostitutes remains significant. Their rights, in some cases, are still being denied, and they also continue to be discriminated against by society. By exploring these complex patterns, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of prostitution as a multifaceted phenomenon. It informs efforts to develop targeted interventions and policies aimed at addressing its root causes or at least minimizing the issues effectively and mitigating its adverse effects on individuals and communities.

Keywords: Prostitution, Southeast Asia, policy, law, social, cultural

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution has existed for many years around the world. This phenomenon is a complex and debatable area of study since it is solidly rooted in historical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. Notably, prostitution is a kind of sexual activity that is conducted for the exchange of money and sexual services with a customer that is indiscriminately chosen (Tahiru-Swallah, 2021). As their conduct deviates from or even goes against the moral standards that are prevalent in society, sex workers are viewed as prostitutes (Jatmikowati, 2015). This system works with three components: the prostitute, the pimp, and the client. In particular, today, prostitution is made up of many pimp connections; it is a truly global sex industry. However, it is considered to be against the morals that have been set for society because of its consequences, which are linked to numerous other social issues such as drugs, baby dumping, and the deterioration of family institutions. Many possible factors lead someone to become a prostitute, rebellion from family, income purposes, an agreement or attachment to a pimp, and the cycle around themselves that influences them to do such things as well. Some say predictive factors of sexual experiences are gender, employment, and sexual attitudes (Zulkifli & Low, 2000). The truth is that there are many debates about sex workers, but few address the root causes of the problem or the sex workers themselves, who are frequently victims of violence.

Nonetheless, acceptance of prostitution differed across countries. Some may legalize prostitution as one of the occupations; others may criminalize it due to certain negative consequences. Predominantly, prostitution is legal across European countries where there are regulated brothels with compliance to certain rules. The number of prostitutes across the European Union's 28 member states is estimated to be between 700,000 and 1.2 million. Based on Germany's Federal Statistics Office, in Germany alone, the sex industry is estimated to be worth \$16.3 billion, with 400,000 prostitutes (Business Insider, 2019). In fact, together with health

insurance and paying taxes, the prostitutes also receive social benefits like pensions. The number is believed to be higher nowadays, yet there are no reliable statistics due to the underground nature of work in most countries globally.

Schulze et al. (2014) discussed two perspectives on beliefs, which state that many people, particularly those with conservative religious beliefs, perceive that prostitution is immoral because it involves sex for monetary gain. They see it as a sign of society's moral degradation. Another one is regarding feminists' beliefs, which contend that prostitution degrades women and creates a setting where they might be raped and abused. These two standpoints show that both beliefs have strong negative views about prostitution. Many religious organizations and feminist activist organizations consider prostitution to be a major issue. Some feminists feel that prostitution damages and abuses women while reinforcing stereotypes about women as sexual objects. Other feminists believe that for women who want to engage in prostitution, it is a viable option (World Population Review, 2022). Therefore, most people think that prostitution should remain illegal. However, in reality, some people see prostitution from different points of view, and thus, acceptance and approval may be different.

Despite the sideways view towards this issue, the scenario of prostitutes can still be found in many places and on many platforms. What about countries that legalize prostitution? Several aspects could be looked into in the importance of addressing this issue such as in terms of, the first one is human rights and dignity. Human rights have always been emphasized in most countries in order to keep the welfare of the nation. Prostitution and the activities associated with it are frequently linked to basic human rights and dignity problems since those involved in prostitution are vulnerable and often excluded. Undeniably, prostitutes wanted the same rights as ordinary people, but their immoral behaviour resulted in discrimination and mistreatment. For instance, in India, prostitution is viewed as an immoral lifestyle that threatens the "innocent" public rather than a legitimate profession. The prostitutes and their families experience denial of basic rights due to stigma, including limited access to healthcare, abuse, assault and exploitation by law enforcement, and harassment in schools and workplaces (Narayan, 2023). Despite India having a large number of sex workers and multiple red-light districts, sex workers continue to face preconception and are not recognized by society. They undoubtedly face the most stigma and discrimination regarding fundamental human rights.

Next is in terms of public health and safety. Public health and safety aspects pertaining to the prostitution issue include various interconnected challenges that influence both persons involved in sex work and the larger community. Prostitution activity is related to promiscuous sex, in which the clients could be anyone, and the prostitutes accept them regardless of the background of the person and the continuous activity may cause a critical disease, which is HIV-AIDS. The prevalence number of prostitution is threatening society's health and welfare of individuals. Other than that, CAASE (2023) revealed that, in the United States, 68% of those who were involved in prostitution experienced feelings of hopelessness, while 55% reported signs of anxiety. Another study in Canada discovered that they had higher rates of PTSD than the general population, with nearly one-third of individuals showing symptoms consistent with PTSD diagnosis. According to a study, selling sex exposes people to stress, thus it frequently happens to prostitutes more than a military. who have been in military combat. Here, it can be seen that sex work is marginalized and stigmatized, and individuals may have limited access to essential support services such as healthcare, counselling, and legal assistance. This lack of support can lead to increased risks to health and safety to sex-workers and the whole nation.

Finally, in terms of the legal and regulatory aspect, compared to the countries that legalize prostitution, the rights, policies, and all related to it are clearly stated and understood by the society. However, the countries which do not legalize prostitution, such as Thailand and the Philippines where they still tolerate it; it shows that the law and policy regarding the activity are unclear and unaware by the society, and it cause the number keep rising as well the consequences. Diverse legal frameworks among jurisdictions hinder effective regulation and enforcement of prostitution. Legal ambiguity surrounding sex work contributes to a lack of protection for the prostitutes and interferes with the implementation of comprehensive harm reduction strategies and support services. Hence, the country should focus to its stated rule or policy, and the enforcement to address this issue should function accordingly in order to protect the nation's welfare by giving the best economic alternatives despite being a prostitute.

Those research gaps lay the foundation for this research, creating solutions, and advocating for governmental changes to address the numerous and complicated concerns surrounding prostitution by exploring the phenomena of prostitution across four Southeast Asian countries which are Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Generally, these four countries have different or similar shared cultures; thus, the phenomenon regarding this issue is perceived differently. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of prostitution in different countries, this study seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding policy responses, social aspects, and cultural views and foster a more informed and compassionate discussion on this challenging subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prostitution has existed in within societies across the world for centuries, and still a sensitive issue within various societies globally. In recent decades, there has been a growing body of literature on various aspects of prostitution, such as its social, economic, legal, health-related, and cultural features. The complexity of the issue remains a huge challenge for countries. Hence, by exploring and analyzing the current state of knowledge on prostitution, this study seeks to add to ongoing conversations and debates around the subject.

Evolution of Prostitution

As Ringdal (2004) highlighted, prostitution is referred to as the oldest occupation in the world since it has been practiced widely since ancient times. The sex business began to grow quickly in the early 1970s, and it soon became apparent that women were being recruited from underdeveloped nations to serve as prostitutes for men in wealthy Western nations. Since then, there has been a notable global increase in migration and people trafficking, partly due to improved communication and transportation infrastructure. Due to this, the structure of the Western sex labour market has changed, and there is now more interest in hiring

women who have been trafficked from less developed countries to perform these services. By the mid-1980s, trafficking and prostitution were back on the political agenda of many states and supranational institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) (Outshoorn, 2005). Despite that, the phenomena of prostitution continue to exist where status of economic becomes the main challenge for individuals to survive these days and take the easiest way to gain income. As revealed by Williamson and Baker (2009) prostitution is prevalent in many cities across the world. Prostitutes frequently operate in regions that stay hidden from public view or on the outskirts of cities, away from major roads and shopping districts. These sites could be dark streets, alleys, industrial regions, or areas with abandoned buildings or poor visibility (Williamson & Baker, 2009).

As time passes, the world is experiencing rapid growth in terms of globalization and digitalization, and there is a shifting landscape of prostitution whereby the demand and supply of services can also be found through online platforms such as dark web and online dating applications. Dharma et al. (2023) state that prostitutes are not found lingering on the street pursuing for clients; instead wait at their homes and set appointments with the clients by phone, or else sell their services through online and get paid based on services. The authors further highlighted that the aim of most online prostitutes is social-economic, and it relates to a specific lifestyle since it follows a growing trend in popular culture in terms of fashion and entertainment. They are also separated from local cultural norms due to a lack of interpersonal communication with their families and a positive social environment.

Prostitution Occurrence

It should be noted that obtaining accurate and reliable statistics on prostitution can be difficult due to the illicit nature of the practice, underreporting, as well as variations in legal frameworks and classifications among regions. No exact data is produced as other job categories since this kind of activity is often hidden in the nature of job. It occurs in underground settings, such as brothels, massage parlours, or online platforms, thus making it difficult to track and monitor. Things are getting challenging, especially for countries that do not legalize or tolerate this issue at all. However, some publications have revealed the approximate number of prostitutes based on studies conducted.

For instance, based on Gitnux Marketdata Report 2024, Lindner (2023) revealed that, globally, around 14 and 16 million women are estimated to be prostitutes, which generates \$186 billion in revenue. Among the numbers, women represent around 68%, followed by men at 13% and transgender people at 20%. Based on countries stated in this report, there are around one million people in the United States who have worked as prostitutes, and Russia is reported to have over 3 million prostitutes. Meanwhile, the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) highlighted that it is estimated that there are around 4.5 million sex workers in Asia. Sex work and all associated activities are also considered illegal in most Asian and Pacific countries, except New Zealand and New South Wales in Australia (NSWP, 2020).

The United Nations, as mentioned by Graveris (2024), also produced the prostitute data by country. Among the countries such as Brazil has around 1.4 million prostitutes as of 2013, Bangladesh had around 140,000 as of 2015, India had between 657,800 prostitutes in 2016, New Zealand had only around 3,500 in 2018, 240,000 prostitutes in Mexico as of 2019, Vietnam had 86,000 in 2019, Islamic Republic of Iran has around 138,000 in 2018, New Zealand has only around 3,500 in 2018, and others. Moreover, it also displays the data of countries which this study intended to explore which are Malaysia had around 22,000 prostitutes in 2018, Indonesia had around 278,000 prostitutes in 2019, Thailand had 43,000 in 2017, and the Philippines had around 229,400 sex workers in 2021.

The years of the data produced differ by considering the hidden nature of prostitution complicates efforts to gather reliable data each year until the recent ones. Despite that, knowingly prostitution is illegal or heavily regulated in many jurisdictions, individuals involved in illegal activities may be hesitant to participate in surveys or disclose information to researchers or law enforcement, which can hinder data collection efforts.

Above all, it is a huge figure of prostitutes, which does not include the figures that cannot be discovered. Also, this study believes that the number become higher in recent times, even in countries where it is illegal due to the underlying factors, especially money to survive in these days. By that, perhaps it enables deeper discussions regarding policies, social consequences, legality issues, and the need for support services, resulting in an engaging overview of the problem, and later assisting in reducing this social problem.

Underlying Factor

A variety of reasons drive prostitutes to get involved in this kind of “job,” as well as others who explore their own career paths. Reasonably, everyone needs to survive in this life, and every coin matters.

Poverty — Through studies reviewed, many scholars found that the main reason for prostitution is poverty and the needs for income. Karkov (2012) found that the main reason for prostitution among these individuals is their high income, while Namey et al. (2018) also revealed that many women’s decisions about whether and how to participate in sex work are driven by financial considerations. Solong et al. (2020) also mentioned that poverty is a driving factor that leads someone to engage in prostitution as a survival strategy. For example, a woman confessed that she was forced to continue working in the sex trade because she needs to support her sick parents with a large sum of money every month (Hassandarvish, 2021). That reason is supported by a study conducted by Duff et al. (2015) whereby most women enter prostitution to fund their families. Besides that, money is important to provide individuals with whatever he or she needs. To get money, everyone has their struggles and ways, even if being a prostitute.

Syndicate — Prostitutes may be victims of syndicates or organized crime groups that engage in human trafficking or sexual abuse. Based on a study conducted by Mukhtar (2016), these criminal organizations transport women and children from underprivileged countries with false promises of finding work in wealthy ones, such as European countries. Until these days, the issues still exist

since there were many platforms to trap and manipulate people, as they are lured for financial gain. Attoh (2021) indicated that most prostitutes in his study seek employment but, unfortunately, were trapped into criminal syndicates that force individuals to engage in commercial sex work in order to maximize profits. As a result, human trafficking and sexual exploitation are critical issues that should be focused on to protect vulnerable people and combat inhumanity.

Family problem — Individuals consider family to be home, but some who have broken families describe it as hell. A study conducted on young women prostitutes, revealed that most of them come from broken families where they were experiencing situations such as being separated with one of the parents, parental emotional and physical neglect, parental substance abuse, unstable relationships with family and domestic violence (Lukman et al., 2011). Similar stories by Collinson and Ash (2015) include childhood physical and sexual abuse, terrible parenting, and poor impulse control. Suryani (2016) also revealed that prostitutes were involved in that red street due to family dysfunction. Moreover, a recent study also found that this kind of factor still contributes to major causes of prostitution. The findings by Zamardian and Akbari (2022) highlighted the critical role of familial dysfunction in the development of prostitution. Parental addiction, divorce, financial and cultural poverty within the family, lack of social support and affection, physical and psychological violence, parental prejudice and restrictions, as well as the existence and impact of external relatives, all contributed to the emergence of various deviations, including prostitution. Hence, when families encounter dysfunction, dispute, or disintegration, it can have major negative effects on people's lives.

Among other factors, those three underlying factors are the major ones. Based on the review, other reasons that drove someone to be a prostitute include an individual's desire for excitement (Kontuka, 2008), lifestyle demands (Ananda, 2020) and neighbourhood and peer influence (Oyafunke-Omoniyi & Adewusi (2022). Accordingly, many factors of prostitution were found during literature reviews, and this study believes that among all, income or money is the leading cause of prostitution as it is also considered as a 'business' and someone would do anything to sustain their life with any sources of income.

Consequences

This social issue has had numerous consequences, either for the prostitutes themselves or for society as a whole. In the legal context, the prostitute may face punishment, especially in those countries that have strict enforcement laws criminalizing this activity. Since prostitution is often related to promiscuous sex, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and other health problems are more common among sex workers (Benoit et al., 2019). These risks may be increased by limited access to healthcare and an unwillingness to seek medical attention because of social stigma. This social issue brought tough challenges to the nation when it directly caused other problems, such as human trafficking and baby abortion. For this reason, the country is facing difficulties in developing a quality generation due to the emergence of immoral practices. Particularly in some places, the existence of a prominent sex business may have greater consequences for the community, including local economies, property values, and societal attitudes.

Overall, the evolution of prostitution reflects societal changes and demonstrates the challenges of dealing with a situation that is deeply intertwined with issues of gender, power, inequality, and human rights. Understanding its historical roots and current forms is critical for implementing effective policies and interventions to address the complexity of the issues.

Measures to Prevent Prostitution

Every social problem needs to be addressed. Some would be very easy and effective, while some need a major relook and thorough mechanism to deal with. In this context, preventing prostitution involves a holistic strategy that addresses the underlying issues driving individuals into the sex trade as well as the demand for commercial sex. However, those can contribute to various positive outcomes for individuals, communities, and societies as a whole.

Firstly, is legal enforcement. Legal enforcement here means that by relooking and reforming the existing laws regarding human trafficking could somehow help the country in terms of exploitation and protect the rights of the victims. It is not necessary for a country to legalize prostitution yet somehow make the laws stricter on one of the factors of the rising issue – sexual exploitation. By that, it could reduce the number of people who involve in the sex trade due to the illicit syndicate. Few measures must be undertaken, such as regulatory approaches that prioritize health, safety, and well-being as well as addressing the harms that caused prostitutes.

The second mechanism is the government's interventions to the community. A study done by Hung (2023) where it highlighted how additional on-the-job and vocational training options have been provided by the government sector through economic empowerment programs to the sex workers, allowing them to upskill and reskill to find jobs in the normal job market by quitting the sex business. However, the author further stated that, it is difficult for sex workers to sustain themselves in such programs due to stigmatization and judgement. Therefore, destigmatization should be focused as well in order to curb this issue for a better generation.

Other than that, programs involving the community could help as well. For instance, Malaysia introduced The Harm Reduction Program in 2006, designated to address the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic among injecting drug users (IDUs) in Malaysia (Goh, 2018). During that time, the Malaysian government aimed to achieve a drug-free society by 2015, aligning with the Drug-Free ASEAN initiative. Hence, harm reduction aims to prevent the negative effects linked to drug use rather than stopping drug use completely. The program has included two strategies: methadone maintenance therapy and the needle syringe exchange program. While there have been successes in reducing HIV transmission and improving health outcomes among IDUs, numerous challenges

still exist. These approaches were seen as conflicting with Islamic prohibitions and encountered resistance from certain religious leaders and groups.

Additionally, the public often held negative perceptions of individuals who inject drugs (IDUs), leading to significant conflicts between law enforcement and public health initiatives. The difficulties in expanding the harm reduction approach had broader consequences for the treatment and recovery of drug addicts in Malaysia. Nevertheless, The European WHO highlighted the importance of harm reduction in preventing HIV transmission among individuals who inject drugs (IDUs). Countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Spain have effectively implemented harm-reduction strategies since the 1990s. However, Malaysia implemented its initial harm reduction program two decades after the first HIV case was reported. Overall, it shows that when it comes to public health concerns, the approaches towards combating the issue can be the impactful ones with continuous efforts by all bodies.

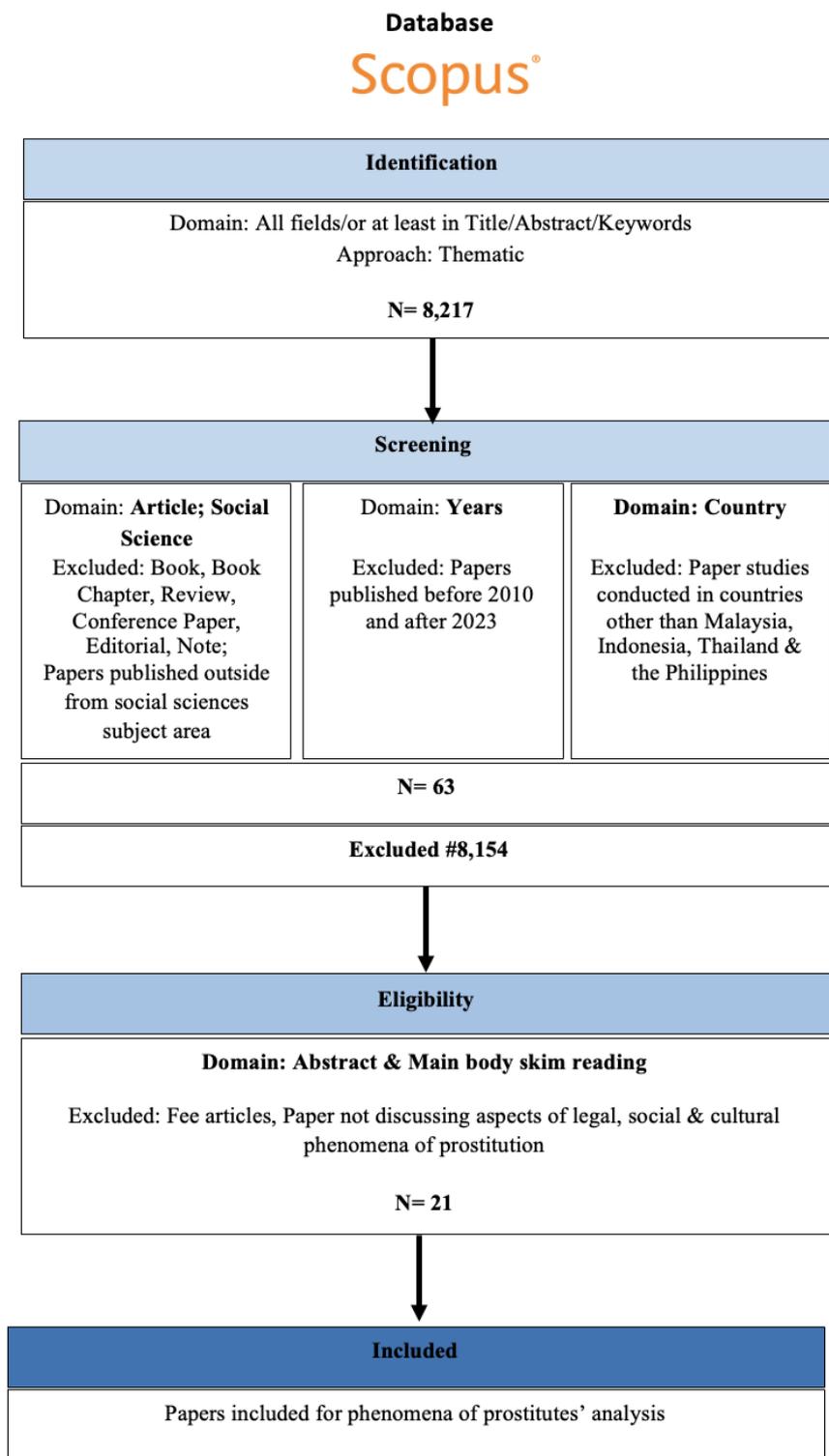
Finally, community-based organization of intervention also becomes one of the strategies in addressing this issue. By engaging community-based organizations with prostitutes or sex workers, it develops a trustful relationship and a supportive environment (Fisher, 2017). This is because they would never have the sideways towards the people that they are helping and somehow could show to the particular vulnerable groups that everyone can change and have the opportunity to change. Therefore, it encourages prostitutes to exit from the sex trade and live the best life. Furthermore, community-based organization often run research studies which address the root causes of prostitution through the process of engagement. Thus, it can assist the country to demolish the causes and provide a better life to all people.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative approach through a case study involving four countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. A case study is defined as an empirical investigation that looks at a phenomenon in the setting of real-world occurrences (Yin, 2009). The author further highlighted the advantages of the case study approach: it enables researchers to investigate into the details of specific events, providing meaningful insights or real-life events, such as individual or small group behaviour, or particular processes, that would not be achievable with other research strategies. Priya (2021) stated that one of the most common approaches in qualitative social science research is the case study. Hence, it provides a deeper understanding of the events studied by researchers.

In the context of this study, the case study was developed based on Systematic Literature Review (SLR). One form of review that gives researchers a systematic knowledge map before conducting a study is nSLR. Unlike past reviews, which followed a transparent, scientific, and repeatable process, this review method is different (Mengist, 2019). In conducting this method, there are four steps to be taken, which are: (1) Identification; (2) Screening; (3) Eligibility; (4) Inclusion. Each phase describes a continuous procedure that will continue until the review has accurately included all studies. This study has conducted SLR using the Scopus database. According to Perevochtchikova et al. (2019), Scopus is a global database containing peer-reviewed articles from many countries. As a result, it might include the majority of possible research publications worldwide. Figure 1 indicates a summary of the systematic review process that has been modified from Moher et al. (2010) and Mengist et al. (2019).

Figure 1: The flow diagram for the database search of publications for systematic reviews



Step 1: Identification

In identification steps, this paper identified to use the main word string “prostitution OR prostitutes” and looks at the contexts of “legal”, “social”, and “cultural”. The first result of searching each word string displayed thousands of articles related to the issue. Notably, each of the articles has its main subject studied as well as what the researchers searched. The process of determining the word string to be used is direct, as this study straightly intended to explore legal, social and cultural aspects with prostitution phenomena. Therefore, the word strings used are as indicated in Table 1. Mengist et al. (2019) proposed that the number of available publications and their acquisition date should be stated. This allows researchers to see how many studies have been completed on that specific topic. Table 1 displays the total number of publications based on searched word strings.

Table 1: The search terms used and the total number of publications from each database

Searching string and searching terms	No. of articles	Date of acquisition
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “legal”	1,600	31 January 2024
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “culture”	1,037	
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “social”	5,580	
Total	8,317	

From thousands of publications, the total was decreased after reviewing the study's purpose, and a list of inclusion and exclusion criteria was constructed to ensure it was within the scope of the study. Undeniably, numerous studies on the prostitute issue have been conducted in the past, including in the 1990s. However, not all papers fulfil all aspects of this study's intended search, therefore, inclusion and exclusion criteria are important while reviewing the related area of study. The purpose of setting inclusion and exclusion criteria prior to completing the actual review is to reduce the number of irrelevant documents or papers that contradict the study's aims. This would reduce the overall number of articles available. Table 2 lists a few inclusions and exclusions that were used during the literature search.

Table 2: List of inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Decision
When the predefined keywords exist as a whole or at least in the title, keywords or abstract section of the paper.	Inclusion
The paper was published in a social science field of study	Inclusion
The paper should be written in the English language	Inclusion
The paper studies were conducted in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.	Inclusion
The paper covered the aspects of legal, social & and cultural phenomena of prostitution	Inclusion
Papers that are not accessible	Exclusion
Papers that were published before 2020 and after 2023	Exclusion

Step 2: Screening

To ensure the reviewed articles are relevant to the study, documents that are not article types, such as books, book chapters, reviews, conference papers, editorials, and notes, are excluded. Following that, in order to review the current phenomena of prostitution, publications published prior to 2020 were excluded due to the possibility of a significant gap. Thus, this study intended to review the phenomena only within the years 2010 and 2023. Exclusions also apply to publications that are not in the area of social science studies. Next, the process of selection included research that only addressed prostitution issues in four Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The total number of articles listed after screening based on inclusion and exclusion criteria is 63, as displayed in Table 3.

Table 3: Total number of articles after the screening process

Word strings	No. of articles	Social science/ Article/English (No. of articles)	Years 2010-2023 (No. of articles)	Country	Total of Publication Selected for Analysis
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “legal”	1,600	487	327	Malaysia	1
				Indonesia	9
				Thailand	4
				The Philippines	0
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “culture”	1,037	277	158	Malaysia	1
				Indonesia	3
				Thailand	5
				The Philippines	2
	5,580	1,582	933	Malaysia	8

“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “social”	Indonesia	15
	Thailand	13
	The Philippines	2
Total		63

Step 3: Eligibility

A few extra inclusion criteria were used to verify that the papers to be looked at were eligible including whether the papers were accessible. Then, this part is really crucial where the process of skimming the abstract and main body was done to identify the desired articles and actually discuss the legal, social and cultural aspects. The number of studies that met the requirements is 21 from 63 articles. The remaining 50 articles have been excluded as some need the fees to access, duplicated articles, and the discussions are not within the scope of study.

Step 4: Included

Next, 21 papers remained to be reviewed because they met all of the inclusion criteria, including criteria that were systematically set. At this point, the papers chosen were further analyzed in accordance with the study's specified objectives. However, this study has excluded studies that have been duplicated and are unrelated to three aspects studied among prostitution. Furthermore, this stage could assist reviewers in reviewing the intended publications while avoiding unnecessary aspects of the study, which can speed up the literature review and eventually reach the real research gap and existing knowledge of the study. Table 5 shows the total publications that met all the criteria and the study's objective.

Table 5: Total number of papers that met the criteria of addressing the phenomena of prostitution within legal, social and cultural aspects

Word strings	Country	Total of Publication Selected for Analysis
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “legal”	Malaysia	1
	Indonesia	1
	Thailand	1
	The Philippines	1
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “social”	Malaysia	3
	Indonesia	7
	Thailand	1
	The Philippines	1
“Prostitution OR prostitutes” AND “culture”	Malaysia	1
	Indonesia	2
	Thailand	1
	The Philippines	1
Total		21

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

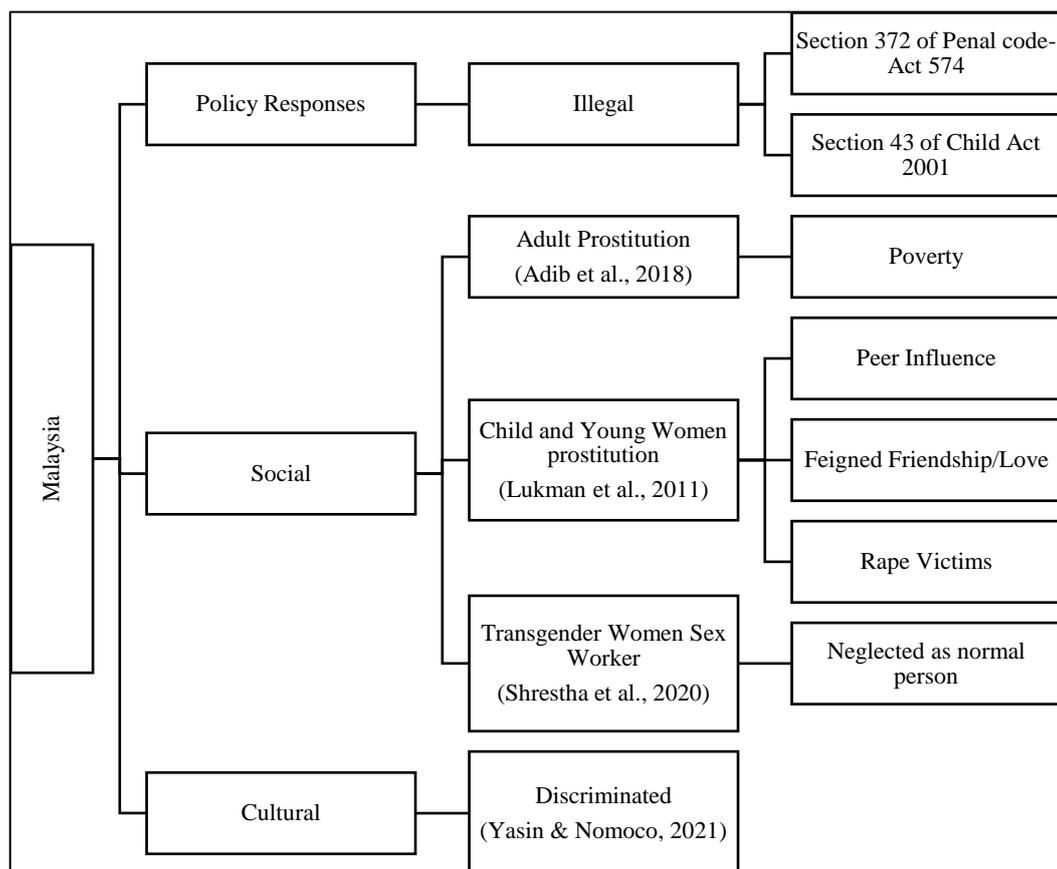
Case Study 1: Malaysia

Malaysia has been shaped by various influences from the eras of colonization until independence. Throughout the years until this modern Malaysia, the country has experienced rapid growth, a blend of cultures, and has transformed into a major player in the global economy. The existence of Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities make Malaysia a multiethnic country. Thus, Malaysia is recognized as a unique country with a variety of cultures. With a majority of adherents, Islam is acknowledged as the state's official religion, and 63% of the nation practices it. Nonetheless, the population of the country has increased over the years, reaching 33.4 million in 2023 as compared to 32.7 million in 2022 and currently standing at around 34 million.

Despite the country's development, social issues persist as enduring challenges. As in Malaysia, social issues existed throughout the years and became more diverse with the increased number of populations. Some of the issues that have existed from years ago until nowadays are migration and refugees (Mohd Ali et al., 2021), street children (Ahmad et al., 2021), drug smuggling and addiction (Mustapha et al., 2023), and many others. Moving to the status of Malaysia in developing its nation, the advance of technology has always been emphasized and encouraged to be used in daily life; hence, the fun of using the Internet has been extremely experienced by the people. However, the fun may turn to sour feelings. The issues about this subject are face-to-face and online scammers (Abd Rahman, 2020), violent digital entertainment leading to aggressive behaviour (Abd Jamil et al., 2021), and cybersex addiction (Wan Maizon et al., 2022). Despite these social issues, many actions and enforcement measures have been taken by the country to curb them, but they are still happening. Numerous factors influence people to commit to such issues.

Prostitution is acknowledged as a societal concern that has endured for numerous centuries globally, including in Malaysia (Faudzi et al., 2022). Prostitution has become a complex issue due to its sensitivity and has remained taboo until recently. Furthermore, the effects of this social issue on society have been tremendous because prostitution involves sexual practices that contradict social norms and culture. Figure 2 shows a summary of prostitution phenomena within Malaysia from legal, social, and cultural perspectives.

Figure 2: Summary of prostitution phenomena in Malaysia



Policy Responses—Malaysia consists of the majority of Muslims, and the government has never legalized prostitution. Section 372 of the Penal Code, Law of Malaysia Act 574, sets down the country’s response to the prostitute issue. This section, however, explains that Malaysia zcriminalizes soliciting in any place or living on the earnings of prostitutes. Section 372, 372A, and 372B stipulate that whoever is involved in prostitution activity, either in terms of human exploitation for sexual purposes, knowingly lives wholly or in part on the earnings from the sexual activity of another person or anyone who approaches someone in public with the intent to procure them for prostitution or any other immoral activity in any place, all shall be punished with imprisonment, fine, or both. The Act later mentioned suppression of brothels in Section 373, where anyone who keeps, assists, or manages the brothels shall be punished. This kind of policy response shows that Malaysia takes this issue seriously by criminalizing any form of prostitution activity in order to safeguard the nation.

It is never allowed to do anything that encourages prostitution activity in Malaysia, as the consequences would be worse for society. Though Malaysia is not allowed to open brothels, the reality of the scene often appears on television or in the news—many prostitutes or sex workers are arrested during police raids, such as Ops Noda at their underground brothels. The issue of prostitution does not stop there; it also involves a child being a prostitute. This phenomenon was proven by child rights activists in Kuala Lumpur in 2011, where an average of 150 kids were forced into the industry as young as 13 years old, and were victims of human trafficking (Child Rights International Network, 2011). The policy response to this matter is declared under Section 43 of the Child Act 2001, which states that it is an offence to whoever is involved in any form of selling, letting, or hiring of a child with the purpose of being employed or used for prostitution.

Social—The phenomenon of prostitutes in Malaysia can be seen in various ways. Previous studies conducted over the years found that there are adult prostitution, child and young women prostitution, and transgender women prostitution. According to the studies, the most common reason for adult-age prostitution is poverty, which leads to a desire to earn more money through the activity (Adib et al., 2018). Undeniably, the urge of life forces people to take any action to survive. Where unemployment also leads to poverty, someone could choose this path as their job. Economically, prostitution gives a high income to the prostitute based on their services.

Malaysia also faces issues of child and young woman prostitutes, whereby the factors differ from adult prostitution. The study concluded that most of them were trapped in this activity because of peer influence, followed by feigned friendship or love, and the sad part is that they were rape victims and later continued to be prostitutes; as for them, they are no longer virgins (Lukman et al., 2011). Most of the younger children in that study were nine years old, and the average was 15 years old. Most of the young women in the study mentioned that the person they trusted the most influenced and introduced them to prostitution, including their friend, boyfriend, and even their mother. Nevertheless, half of the respondents were rape victims before continuing to be prostitutes.

The author further argued with social learning theory, in which children who have been exploited in this matter will degrade themselves as 'dirty', 'loss of dignity', or 'damaged goods' (Lukman et al., 2011). Here, it can be seen that adults may choose prostitution because they have decided that it is the best option for them; meanwhile, children only have a few options in their lives, so they do not choose such a path instead of being tricked by the person they trusted the most. These phenomena somehow breaks the heart where children should be poured with good nurture to have a good future, but rather are trapped in this dark alley. The episodes of prostitutes still exist, as a study in Malaysia discussed transgender women as sex workers. The findings of a study revealed that transgender sex workers are most likely to gain many clients per day in urban areas such as Kuala Lumpur (Shrestha et al., 2020). As reported by Asiamarvels (2020), Kuala Lumpur has long been known as a "famous place" where prostitutes and sex workers of all races can be found in the city's nightlife. The clients can also be from anywhere, local or foreign. Nonetheless, the study conducted by Yasin and Nomoco (2021) stated that some transgender sex workers found themselves being neglected at the workplace, thus choosing to be prostitutes to sustain their income.

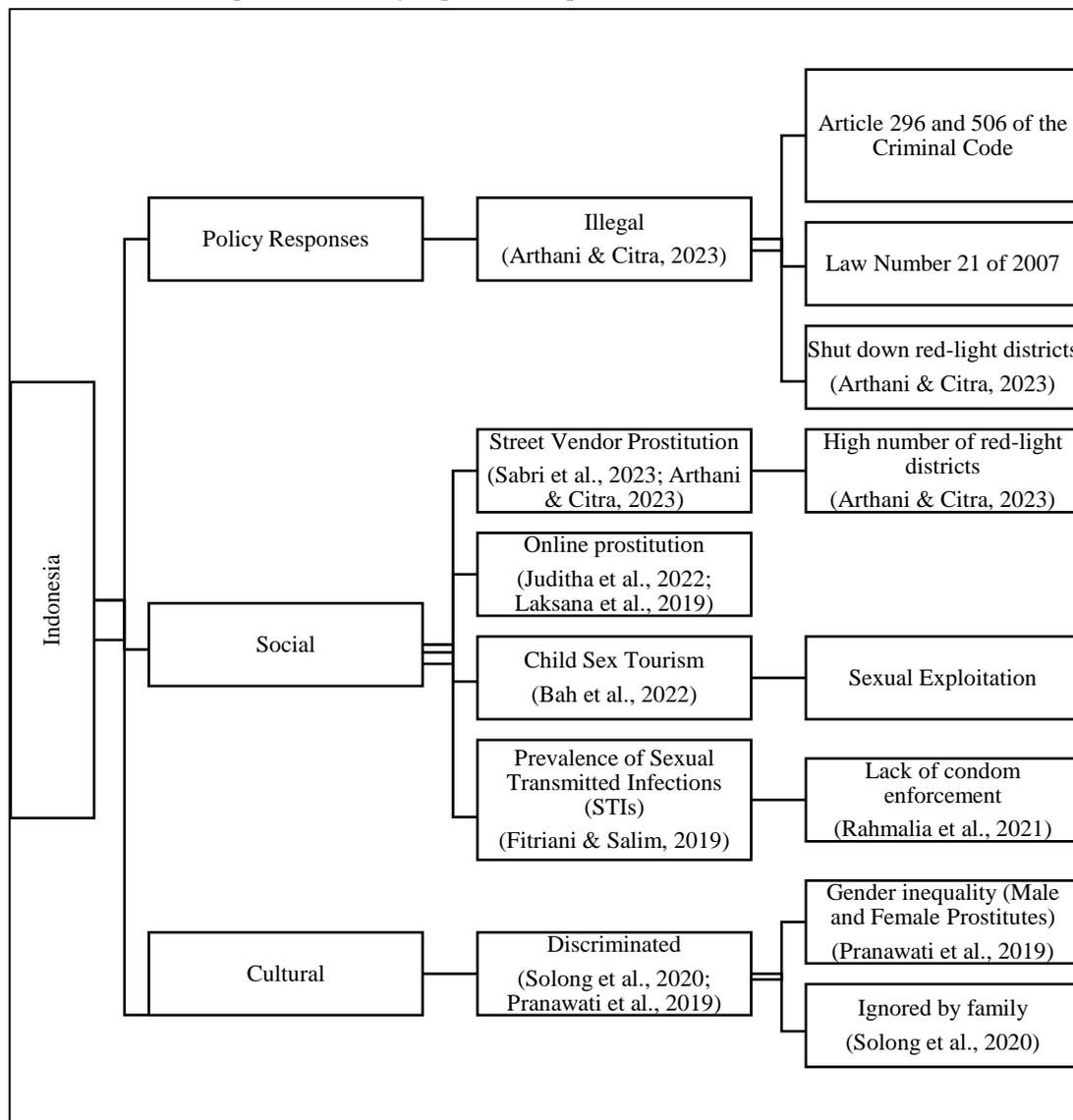
Cultural—Discussing cultural aspects within the context of a country, it depends on how society views them. The complex cultural views of Malaysian society towards people who work as prostitutes or engage in sex work are influenced by a number of factors, including socioeconomic, legal, and religious considerations. As mentioned, the majority of the population is Malay. Definitely, Muslims see prostitution as an activity that contradicts the norms and cultural beliefs and leads to the negative consequences of having premarital sex. Through the systematic literature review, one study has been conducted that discusses the dynamism of discrimination in prostitution (Yasin & Nomoco, 2021). The end of the discussion focused on the social implications for this group, such as prejudice, the spread of hatred, and attitudes of intolerance. Nevertheless, due to these beliefs, there are not many studies done on this group because the subject is sensitive and the culture has views towards them.

Case Study 2: Indonesia

Indonesia is known for its cultural diversity, with over 300 ethnic groups and numerous languages spoken. The country has a predominantly Muslim population, but it is also home to various religious and cultural practices. In fact, the population of Indonesia in 2023 is projected to be 278.8 million. It is the fourth most populous country in the world. Nevertheless, the Indonesian government declared its intention to relocate Jakarta's capital to East Kalimantan. This choice was taken in order to address problems in Jakarta with regard to environmental concerns, traffic congestion, and overpopulation. On the island of Borneo, the suggested location is in the East Kalimantan province. The plan to move the capital involves extensive infrastructure development to create a new, purpose-built city, grow the economy, and reduce the national gap. The decision was part of a broader initiative to promote more balanced development across the archipelago.

As a country with a greater population, there are many problems to be dealt. Among those are poverty, drug abuse, environmental issues, overpopulation, natural disasters, corruption, and education accessibility. According to Bah et al. (2022), in Indonesia, like most middle-income and developing nations, poverty is one of the longest-standing problems. As for that, it somehow contributes more to other social issues, namely prostitution. The phenomenon of prostitution is rampant in Indonesia, even though the majority of the population is Muslim. Figure 3 shows the summary of prostitution issues within Indonesia resulting from a systematic literature review that has been done within the inclusion years (2010-2023).

Figure 3: Summary of prostitution phenomena in Indonesia



Policy Responses—As in Malaysia, Indonesia also does not legalize prostitution. It is prohibited under Articles 296 and 506 of the Criminal Code and Law Number 21 of 2007. Article 296 mentions, "Anyone who intentionally causes or facilitates obscene conduct by another person with another and makes it a search or habit is threatened with imprisonment for a maximum of one year, four months, or a fine of at most fifteen thousand rupiah." Meanwhile, Article 506 states that "whoever benefits from the obscene conduct of a woman and makes it a search is threatened with a maximum of one-year imprisonment." The criminal code defines punishment as only being imposed on pimps or people who take prostitutes as their earnings sources. In order to curb this issue, despite regulating the laws, the government has enforced an order to shut down 168 red-light districts. A study found that Indonesia consists of a greater number of red-light areas, which reflects the thousands of prostitutes there (Arthani & Citra, 2023). Therefore, in 2016, the government shut down 68 red-light districts, while the other 100 were also in progress. This somehow shows Indonesia's policy response towards this issue, which comes with initiatives to minimize prostitution since their population keeps increasing and there are more challenges for the country to curb social issues.

Social— Based on the diagram above, it can be seen that the issue of prostitution in Indonesia is rampant, and many types of prostitution have been discovered and studied in the past years. In Jakarta specifically, many forms of street prostitution can be found (Sabri et al., 2023). Based on 2014 data provided by the AIDS Commission, there were at least 11,860 active female prostitutes in the city, and the total number of prostitutes is likely to be higher as the number of other gender prostitutes is not captured. Together with that, a study done by Juditha et al. (2022) revealed that Indonesia is also facing the issue of online prostitution. It is because of the advances in technology and social media nowadays that there is an "easy" platform for people to run any business, including prostitution. However, the authors further suppressed that Indonesian law still has limitations on accommodating the criminal liability of online prostitution perpetrators, so they suggested formulating it to protect the nation.

Other than that, in Indonesia, the phenomenon of prostitution arises within the child-age context as well. The issue of child prostitution requires high concern since the number of children involved in the industry is large, specifically in Surabaya. Based on the findings studied, the issue of child sex tourism in Indonesia (CST) is largely due to exploitation, such as debt bondage, emotional abuse, counterfeit love, drug addiction, physical abuse, gifts, favours, and fake promises (Bah et al., 2022). Surabaya has become the major area of CST as numerous brothels are situated there and thus encourage this abusive practice. The authors further mentioned that the precise number of victims is difficult to ascertain, but according to their informant testimonies, as of May 2021, over 70 children were receiving supervision and rehabilitation; of these, 30–40 was still actively participating in CST, and the remaining children (an undisclosed number) were gradually responding to some form of psychosocial support.

Additionally, this study also revealed that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) have become more prevalent, which is also contributed by prostitution in Indonesia (Fitriani & Salim, 2019). In the social context, this study presumes that poorly enforced sex education led to various stigmas, such as orthodox religious practices. This causes discussion about evolving reproductive systems, and gender is still considered taboo. There is also a lack of risk perception against unprotected sexual intercourse in Indonesia (e.g. premarital, extramarital, and prostitution). Furthermore, a power imbalance in condom negotiations exists, which could be dominated by clients who refuse condoms for experience. The previous studies done by Sarah et al. (2015) and Faini et al. (2020) also revealed that most prostitutes refused to take contraceptive measures during services as it affected their client satisfaction and the amount paid. Thus, it is linked with the prevalence of STIs in Indonesia, which is caused by the rising phenomenon of prostitution activity.

Cultural—Most societies refuse to see prostitution as something good due to its immoral behaviour, which goes against what has been set by societal norms, regardless of the excuses of prostitutes. As in Indonesia, the culture of society towards this issue is similar to that in Malaysia, in which whoever is involved in prostitution could be discriminated against, rejected, or even face violence. As per the review, a study conducted by Pranawati et al. (2019) revealed that there was gender inequality between male and female prostitutes. They perceived female prostitutes as more immoral, as women should protect their dignity. Meanwhile, a finding indicated that prostitutes have been ignored by their families and then mingle with the society that shares similar interests with them, as has happened in Warung Remang at the Trans-Sulawesi main road (Solong et al., 2020). The shop is commonly known as a coffee shop, yet it just covers the actual services that they are offering, which are sexual services. Most sex workers mentioned they were being treated badly by their ex-husband and rejected by their families, thus settling for prostitution. This paper postulated that prostitutes are often discriminated, hence continuing to prostitute themselves as they are no longer accepted by society.

Accordingly, in Malaysia and Indonesia, where the majority of the Muslim population never legalizes prostitution, this issue continues to be debated due to the strong stigma and taboo culture. Despite the stated policy responses to this issue, the phenomenon is still on the rise. Social perspectives also seem negative towards prostitutes in both countries, yet they can change over time.

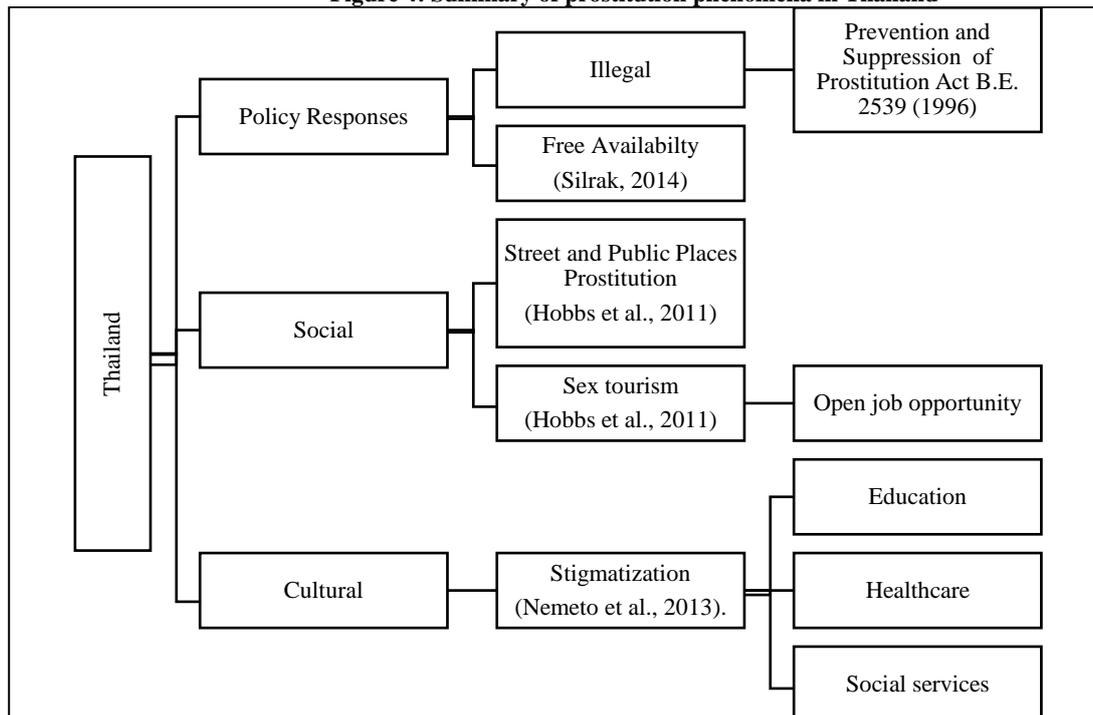
Case Study 3: Thailand

Thailand is a country with 66.09 million people. The majority of them are 25–54 years old, or 44.97% of the population. It is a country that has greatly evolved economically since decades ago. The country has undergone significant economic development over the decades, with rapid expansion, particularly in services and manufacturing, during the second half of the 20th century, as it aimed to transform into an upper-middle-income country (Asada, 2018). However, Thailand has faced various socio-political issues, including restrictions on fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression and assembly. It has prosecuted human rights and democracy activists, community advocates, environmental defenders, and critics of the monarchy (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Also, there have been problems with cannabis addiction in the country (Inoue, 2023).

Moreover, violence and abuse in the Southern Border Provinces still occur where the government has not prosecuted for violent acts against ethnic Malay Muslims. The government also showed no commitment to strengthening protection in the education sector from armed conflict. After nine years of military rule, the recent election—2023 was won by the opposition, indicating the Thai people's rejection of military influence (Pitidol, 2023).

Nonetheless, Thailand also has figures for prostitution, and as one of the most attractive countries to visit, the prostitution phenomenon makes Thailand one of the sex tourism countries. Figure 4 shows the phenomenon of prostitution in Thailand as a result of the systematic literature review conducted.

Figure 4: Summary of prostitution phenomena in Thailand



Policy responses—Knowingly, the issue of prostitution is alarming in Thailand. The greater number of tourists possibly contributes to the high demand for such services. Some would say prostitutes are easier to find since they are “selling” their service in public places. Is prostitution legal there? Technically, prostitution is illegal in Thailand. However, the enforcement of these laws varies. Since the policy response is still illegal, the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act (1996) was introduced to classify prostitution as illegal but decrease the penalties for a prostitute and penalize those supervising prostitutes (brothel owners and pimps, not clients). The sale of sex is widely practised in certain areas designated for entertainment, such as red-light districts. The figures of prostitutes can be seen in many places, especially in Bangkok, Walking Street in Pattaya, and Bangla Road in Phuket. In these areas, there is a concentration of bars, nightclubs, and other establishments where sex workers may operate (Silrak, 2014). Thus, it shows that despite the fact that legalization has not been made, there is still availability for sex services, which has contributed a huge amount of income to the country’s economy.

Social— As mentioned, the phenomenon of prostitution in Thailand can be seen in many places. Based on the literature review studied, they could be on the street in public places and even in the middle of the public, such as at restaurants. Since they are frequently seen on the streets, it is easier for prospective clients to approach sex workers. Before going to private areas, service agreements may be negotiated on the street. In other social contexts, Thailand has been a popular destination for tourism, including sex tourism. Some areas are known for attracting tourists seeking sexual services, leading to a complex interplay between the sex industry and tourism. A study was done and concluded that males in a city such as Phuket live their fantasies of being men by treating Thai bar girls without the need to be talked to or understood (Hobbs et al., 2011). Despite that, sex tourism in Thailand also becomes an opportunity for individuals searching for a job, which is to be prostitutes. Therefore, this study posits that economic considerations, including poverty and limited job opportunities, drive someone to be a prostitute, especially in a country that has no strict enforcement of this activity.

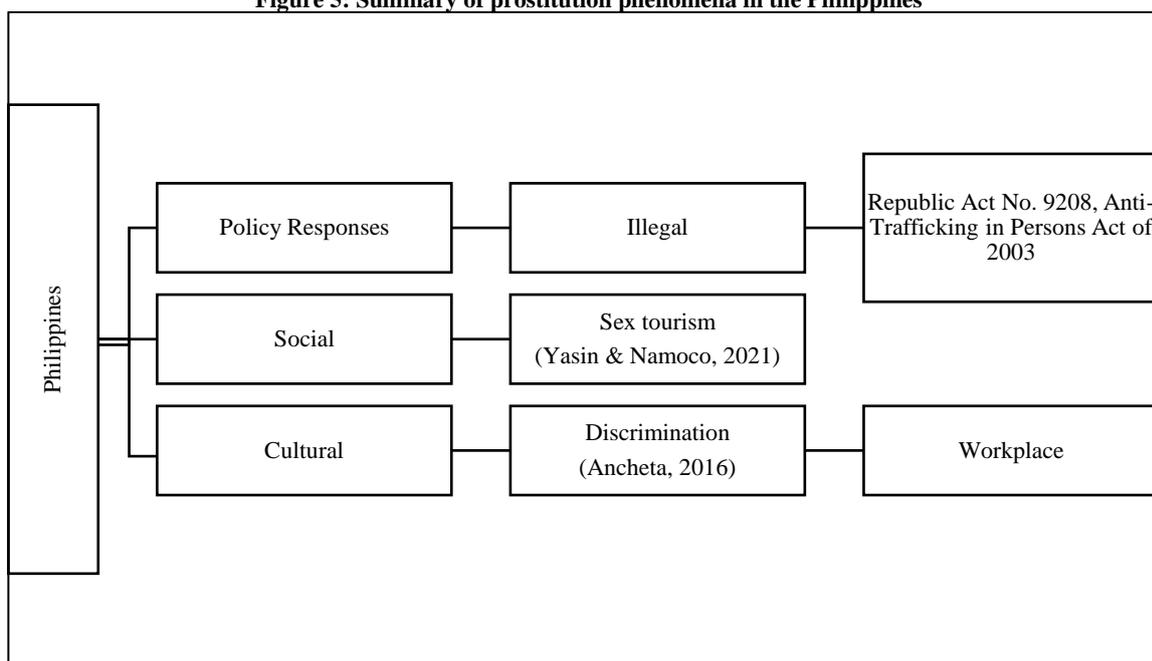
Cultural— Although the scenarios of prostitution exist in Thailand, societal views are not favorable to them. Studies found that prostitutes have been stigmatized for their status, and therefore, some of them were neglected from having social services such as healthcare and education (Nemeto et al., 2013). Through a systematic literature review, there were scarce studies exposed regarding the cultural view towards prostitutes. This study presumes the phenomenon is so widespread that the activity somehow contributes to the income of many people, thus leading to most societies allowing the activity to be present within the society.

Case Study 4: The Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines is one of the ASEAN countries located between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Manila is the capital of this country and consists of 7641 islands with a total area of 115,831 square miles. As of 2022, the Philippines reported a population of 100,972,303, whereby the largest ethnic group is Tagalog, and the majority of Filipinos speak Tagalog or Filipino, which is based on Tagalog. The country also has significant populations of other ethnic groups, such as Cebuano, Ilocano, Bisaya, and others. Additionally, historical influences, including Spanish colonization, have contributed to the cultural diversity of the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the two most significant socioeconomic challenges are underemployment and unemployment. 17% of individuals in employment are underemployed, while 12% of the labour force is jobless (Orbeta, 2011). A major development concern is poverty, as 27.6 million Filipinos live below the poverty line. This somehow leads to another social phenomenon, which is prostitution, in which people take a job in order to earn money to survive. A systematic literature review was done to explore a case study of prostitution phenomena in the context of the Philippines from 2010 to 2023. However, there are only a few studies conducted within the aspects searched—the summary of findings is presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Summary of prostitution phenomena in the Philippines



Policy Responses—Thailand and the Philippines have been reported as Southeast Asian countries with a high number of prostitutes. The phrase prostitute is also known as prostitute women (WTS), strumpets, sluts, and female sex workers (Jamikowati, 2015). In the Java community, they are frequently referred to as balons or sundel. As has been analyzed within three countries previously, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, the Philippines does not legalize prostitution as well, which is stipulated under Republic Act No. 9208, the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003. Nevertheless, the phenomenon still exists. This is due to the fact that the enforcement regarding prostitution is not as strict as in Malaysia. This means the country still allows the activity since it is also contributing to the country’s economy. Therefore, while the activity continues to benefit economically, there may be a lack of strict enforcement in order to sustain the business. Thus, society becomes unaware of the consequences of the issue, and this will slowly affect the quality of future generations. In this case, the country should truly relook the policy responses, either to enforce the criminalization or legalization, so that the issues could be addressed significantly.

Social—In the social aspect, prostitution phenomena in the Philippines have been recognized as sex tourism in that country. As mentioned, the issue of prostitution still exists, even though not many studies have been done on it. This prevalence number led the country to become a sex tourism industry. Cities like Manila, Angeles, and Cebu may have areas known for the presence of commercial sex establishments (Yasin & Namoco, 2021). The presence of tourists also contributes to the demand for prostitution, and thus, the country is facing challenges in order to curb the issue. At the same time, various initiatives and enforcement are taken.

Cultural—Prostitution is generally stigmatized in many societies, including the Philippines. Individuals engaged in sex work often face discrimination, marginalization, and social stigma (Ancheta, 2016). For instance, prostitutes often being discriminated against at their workplace during the day. Therefore, they may choose to continue as full-time prostitutes as they may encounter prejudice when applying for jobs unrelated to the sex industry. Nevertheless, they may also face violent treatment, yet due to the illegal status of prostitution, they may fear facing legal consequences, and they might be reluctant to report abuse or ask for assistance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, this study has examined the multifaceted and diverse phenomenon of prostitution, examining its historical background, socioeconomic determinants, and the wide variety of problems linked to it. This study shows that prostitution is a social construct that is deeply associated with gender inequities, economic disparities, and larger societal dynamics rather than just a moral or legal concern. It requires a comprehensive approach that considers the socioeconomic factors that frequently lead people to choose this line of work, in addition to punitive measures. Perhaps, by understanding the prostitution phenomena within countries, this issue could be addressed before it becomes a big wound to the nation and degrades the future generation.

There are a few recommendations proposed. Firstly, in terms of legal reform and strict enforcement. Each country has its own laws and policies regarding particular cases. The laws and policies that are gazette have public attention, and most citizens know the consequences of the laws. However, in certain cases, the law was there, yet the enforcement was not too strict until individuals took it easily and continued to conduct such prohibited things. In this context, the law or rules should be relooked, and autonomous bodies may enforce the laws efficiently, for instance, in sexual trafficking cases, the pimps of the prostitutes or the prostitutes themselves. Perhaps it could notify people that prostitution is something that is against the law and should be punished.

Secondly, this study recommends that community-based organizations should also prioritize support for this vulnerable group. Their intervention should not be interpreted as encouraging individuals to continue in the sex trade but rather as an effort to create a positive and supportive environment while working towards establishing exit strategies. For instance, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Sanyuka in Uganda has significantly improved the lives of many individuals engaged in prostitution by empowering them to enhance their skills through various classes, including cooking, weaving, tailoring, and hair braiding (Fisher, 2017). Despite that, there is also another example of an NGO in Malaysia, namely Pertubuhan Kesihatan Dan Kebajikan Umum Malaysia (PKKUM), where they offer support for vulnerable groups, including prostitutes. They assist in terms of health initiatives and events to foster a community that prioritizes health and well-being (PKKUM, 2020). Hence, it shows that creating a positive environment may help these groups in aligning their way to better choices and practicing good life.

Thirdly, raising awareness through educational efforts, such as awareness campaigns, media literacy programs, and community discussions, can change perceptions and attitudes towards prostitution, leading to greater understanding about the impacts on individuals, families, and communities. Sex education is a vital process for people to understand promiscuous sex, which can lead to AIDS. Contraceptive measures also need to be widely communicated to people to ensure that prostitutes may prioritize their health and well-being. A study among sex workers by Mohammadi Gharehghani et al. (2020) revealed that most of them lack knowledge about AIDS and the use of condom. The authors further suggested that a comprehensive intervention program aimed at promoting the use of condom should operate at multiple levels. At the individual level, it is essential to provide education to female sex workers to enhance their understanding of HIV prevention. At the societal level, efforts should focus on education and awareness campaigns to challenge taboos and incorrect cultural beliefs surrounding condom use. Thus, it somehow could combat the transmission of diseases, besides reducing the number of prostitutes rapidly.

This study only focuses on the phenomena in four Southeast Asian countries by looking at legal, societal, and cultural aspects. Hence, this study suggests further research to explore more countries and broader examination to better understand the phenomena together with effective recommendations in addressing this issue. Various phenomena studied could reduce the knowledge gap pertaining to prostitution issues across countries. To conclude, the phenomenon of prostitution is perceived differently based on the country's response in terms of cultural and societal factors as well as the existing policies and laws regarding this issue. Despite allowing prostitution in some countries (i.e., Thailand and the Philippines), the stigma surrounding sex workers or prostitutes remains significant, and in some cases, their rights are still being denied. They also continue to be discriminated against by society. With the laws or regulations made and the societal stigma surrounding them, prostitution continues to exist because people need to survive by doing what they have chosen to do. Notably, stigma is crucial to be demolished. Perhaps numerous studies and understanding of the root causes may indirectly help in decreasing the stigmatization towards prostitution and later provide the best support for them to exit the tunnel.

As society continues to evolve, so too must our approaches to addressing prostitution. A country may strive towards a more compassionate and inclusive society where the root causes of prostitution are addressed, and those who are involved have options for other lives by recognizing the complex nature of the problem. Prostitution is on rise. This "business" would not close if there was constant supply and demand; instead, it remains a social challenge within a country.

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