

Structural Exclusion and the Human Rights Crisis of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize

Avekadive Parasramsingh Mano¹

Abstract

Migrant sex workers in Belize face multiple vulnerabilities arising from criminalisation, migration status, inequality, and social stigma. Despite regional attention to sex work, Belize-specific research on undocumented migrant women remains scarce. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing secondary data from government documents, NGO reports, and regional and international literature. It applies a modified thematic network analysis to integrate insights from texts, policy documents, and regional research, ensuring a systematic and triangulated approach. Using a theoretical framework combining intersectionality, structural violence, and international human rights law, the paper identifies three key themes: legal ambiguity, structural marginalization, and systemic invisibility. Findings show that risks are systemic rather than individual, and current protections are insufficient. The study provides actionable, rights-focused recommendations that integrate legal, economic, and social reforms, offering a framework for both local and regional interventions. These interventions include decriminalisation, recognition of labour rights, inclusive access to health and social services, and enhanced monitoring and research.

Keywords: migrant sex workers; Belize; human rights; intersectionality; structural violence

¹ University of Belize

Corresponding Author: Avekadive Parasramsingh Mano, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, University of Belize, Hummingbird Ave, Belmopan, Belize. email: avekadavie.mano@ub.edu.bz.

Introduction

Belize is situated along key migratory routes and serves as both a destination and a transit country for migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and other Central American countries. These patterns reflect broader trends in trafficking and migration noted in international reports (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023). Economic instability in their home countries, along with comparably higher wages and steady demand for informal labour in Belize, drives migrants to urban areas. Belize City, San Pedro, and several municipalities in the south depend on tourism and informal economies, pushing migrant women toward transactional sex when other support options are scarce. However, official statistics are limited, making it hard to gauge the full scale of migrant sex work and revealing a critical gap in evidence.

For many migrant women, engaging in transactional sex becomes one of the few effective ways to cope with overlapping challenges, like gender-based marginalization, migration issues, and economic hardship. Even with its visibility, the scope and effects of migrant sex work in Belize are not fully documented. The fear of legal consequences, social stigma, and lack of institutional support hinder data collection, leading to uncertain estimates of migrant women involved in informal sexual labour (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).

Belize's legal framework adds to these vulnerabilities. Although consensual adult sex work is not directly criminalised, provisions under the *Summary Jurisdiction (Offenses) Act* (Cap. 98) including offences related to public solicitation and loitering for the purposes of prostitution and the *Criminal Code* (Cap. 101) which prohibits operating brothels and benefiting from another person's earnings create indirect pathways to criminalisation (Belize, 1981; U.S. Department of State, 2024).

In practice, this legal uncertainty puts migrant sex workers at risk of arrest, harassment, and deportation, with undocumented women being particularly vulnerable. Belize has also been included in broader regional analyses that examine migration, exploitation, and sexual economies. For example, Guinn (2003) and Kempadoo (2006) identify how Belize's legal and social environment has long been shaped by regional migration pressures and anti-trafficking discourses. Although the report focuses on trafficking, its analysis of legal precarity, immigration enforcement, and policing practices offers important context for understanding why undocumented migrant women engaged in consensual sex work face heightened risk of detention, harassment, and social exclusion in Belize. Similar patterns of legal ambiguity and selective enforcement have been documented internationally, with Nordic countries showing how policies framed as protective can still create vulnerabilities for migrant sex workers (Vuolajärvi, 2019).

While research across the Caribbean has documented the challenges faced by sex workers, studies focusing specifically on undocumented migrant women in Belize remain scarce. This paper aims to fill that gap by exploring the structural, legal, and social challenges that shape the lives of migrant sex workers in Belize. Structurally, economic precarity and limited access to social services affect health outcomes and overall well-being (Yang et al., 2025; Mano, 2018b). Legally, indirect criminalisation through laws on solicitation and brothel-keeping, as well as selective policing, increases exposure to exploitation and harassment (Graham, 2017). Socially, stigmatization, discrimination, and exposure to violence further marginalize sex workers and restrict their ability to seek protection or social services (Argento et al., 2021; Kempadoo, 2004). The paper leverages secondary data from government publications, NGO reports, and regional and international research to place Belize within a broader Caribbean and Central American context.

The study revolves around three research questions:

1. How do Belize's legal and policy frameworks create vulnerability for migrant sex workers?
2. How do criminalisation, structural inequality, and migration status interact to limit their human rights?
3. What would a rights-based approach to protecting and including migrant sex workers in Belize look like, considering regional experiences and existing challenges?

By answering these questions, this research addresses a significant gap in Caribbean scholarship, where discussions about migrant sex work often lack connection to national legal and institutional frameworks (Kempadoo, 2004; Platt et al., 2018; Argento et al., 2021).

Context of Sex Work and Migration in Belize

Sex work in Belize is mainly found in urban areas, coastal tourist zones, and informal settlements. Demand in these areas is influenced by tourism, temporary labour populations, and local economic instability (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Pan American Health Organization, 2023). Many migrants come to the country through informal jobs, such as domestic work, agriculture, and tourism support. These roles often provide unreliable income, limited protections, and little chance for advancement. Informal work is common across the Caribbean and Latin America due to structural labour market constraints, leaving migrant women vulnerable to exploitation and limited social protections (Freije, 2002; Sassen, 1998). For many women facing restricted job options, transactional sex becomes a practical way to survive in a difficult economic situation. Regional migration patterns documented by Guinn (2003) show that many women migrate to Belize due to economic precarity, limited opportunities, and demand for service-sector and sexual-economy labour. These structural pressures help explain why some migrant women enter consensual transactional sex as a livelihood strategy rather than through coercion.

Undocumented migrant sex workers face increased risks, including economic exploitation, unsafe living conditions, and difficulties accessing healthcare. Sex workers globally face disproportionate health risks, including limited access to HIV prevention and sexual health services, highlighting the need for targeted interventions in Belize (UNAIDS, 2014). The literature indicates that sex workers experience elevated risks of violence, sexually transmitted infections, and other health vulnerabilities due to criminalisation and structural inequalities (Shannon et al., 2015; Platt et al., 2018; Decker et al., 2015). Reports from NGOs and international organizations frequently document incidents of police harassment, arbitrary detention, immigration raids, and limited access to essential services (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022). Although exact statistics are hard to come by, estimates indicate that numerous migrant women work in informal sex roles in Belize's main urban and coastal areas. This highlights the importance of this group, despite the scarcity of official data (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Mano's (2018b) qualitative research offers rare insights into these realities. Using interviews with migrant sex workers and other persons involved with the industry from Belize City and coastal towns, the study sheds light on the complex challenges tied to informal work, legal uncertainty, and social stigma. It highlights how undocumented migrant women navigate selective law enforcement, fear of deportation, and social exclusion, often relying on informal networks for support and survival. These detailed accounts reveal the day-to-day realities behind statistical and policy reports, providing a nuanced understanding of systemic vulnerabilities that are frequently overlooked in government or NGO documentation. Such insights are essential for informing context-specific interventions and shaping a conceptual model that captures the interplay of legal, economic, and social risks faced by migrant sex workers in Belize. While many migrant women engage in transactional sex voluntarily, structural vulnerabilities increase the risk of exploitation and trafficking, a dynamic documented in modern slavery research (Bales, 2012).

Belize's legal system exacerbates this situation. The 1981 Criminal Code and the Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Act make solicitation, managing a brothel, and profiting from someone else's sexual labour illegal (Belize, 1981). As a result, migrant sex workers find themselves caught between criminal and immigration laws. This makes them highly vulnerable to strict enforcement, threats of deportation, and limited access to legal assistance. Their social invisibility adds to their marginalization. Undocumented migrants tend to avoid authorities and public services due to fear of deportation, and their exclusion from national labour registries leaves policymakers with little data, which in turn strengthens systemic risk.

Evidence from the Caribbean region highlights similar issues, including legal uncertainty, police abuses, and unequal access to healthcare. Structural challenges, such as economic instability and limited access to social services, constrain sex workers' well-being and agency (Mano, 2018b; Yang et al., 2025). Legal vulnerabilities, including indirect criminalisation through laws on solicitation and brothel-keeping, and selective policing, increase exposure to harassment and exploitation (Platt et al., 2018). Social marginalization, manifested in stigma, discrimination, and exposure to violence, further limits access to protection and health services (Kempadoo, 2004; Argento et al., 2021). In the Dominican Republic, for example, economic precarity and informal employment constrain migrant women's agency and access to protections (Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Migrant sex workers across the region, therefore, face systemic risks shaped by legal, economic, and social factors. Examining Belize within these contexts helps to situate its struggles, as selective policing, reliance on informal work, and limited access to social protections are common challenges (Mano, 2018b; Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

Literature Review

Research on sex work in the Caribbean shows that structural inequalities, shaped by history, economics, and societal norms, significantly affect women's experiences in sexual labour (Kempadoo, 2004; Kempadoo, 2006; Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005). Migration, informal labour, and broader social exclusion combine to increase vulnerability, particularly for women with limited education or undocumented status. These women often enter informal sex work due to a lack of safe or adequate formal employment options. Gendered labour markets, economies driven by tourism, and ongoing stigma add to these risks. For many, sex work is less a choice and more a survival strategy.

A central focus in the literature examines how migration status interacts with legal and economic vulnerability. Law enforcement practices often exacerbate risks for sex workers, particularly undocumented migrants, through inconsistent enforcement and harassment (Shannon et al., 2015; Mano, 2018a; Graham, 2017). Migrant sex workers face unclear laws, selective policing, and limited access to healthcare and labour protections (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2023). For example, Belizean laws on solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981) are applied inconsistently, often targeting undocumented migrant women while local sex workers comparably face minimal enforcement (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022). This illustrates how legal frameworks can blur the line between consensual sex work and trafficking, creating disproportionate risks for migrants. Evidence from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic reveals similar patterns, underscoring the regional significance of these vulnerabilities (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

Guinn's regional assessment shows that Belize's prostitution-related laws mirror broader Central American patterns where anti-trafficking and prostitution laws operate interchangeably. This legal overlap, highlighted by Guinn (2003), helps explain the punitive environment migrant sex workers continue to face today. Even though Guinn's focus is on trafficking, the documented conflation of consensual sex work with

exploitation demonstrates how undocumented adult women can be targeted under enforcement strategies not originally designed for them.

Increasingly, these vulnerabilities are recognized as systemic rather than individual in nature. While informal peer networks may provide temporary support or protection, meaningful change requires structural reforms that address the root causes, including legal reform, labour protections, and social inclusion (Standing, 2011; UNDP, 2023). The concept of structural violence, as described by Farmer et al. (2006), elucidates these dynamics: social systems and entrenched inequalities limit life opportunities and exacerbate suffering. Evidence from the literature further indicates that migrant women experience compounded vulnerabilities at the intersection of gender, migration status, and social inequality (Cho et al., 2013; Farmer, 2004; Goldenberg et al., 2021; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023). When applied to migrant sex work, this framework illustrates how legal marginalization, economic precarity, selective policing, and social stigma collectively restrict access to healthcare, labour protections, and justice.

The debate between criminalisation and decriminalisation further highlights these systemic risks. Criminal laws can create conditions for violence, harassment, and exploitation, while informal networks sometimes provide protective support. Comparative research from Sweden suggests that criminalizing the purchase of sex may reduce demand but can push sex work underground, increasing risks for workers (Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Comparative evidence from Asia and the Pacific demonstrates that punitive legal frameworks exacerbate vulnerabilities for migrant sex workers, highlighting the need for rights-based and decriminalized approaches (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). Scholars argue that effective policy should combine legal reform with targeted protections to reduce systemic vulnerability (Kempadoo, 2004; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). This is especially critical for migrants; whose undocumented status exacerbates the effects of selective law enforcement and social exclusion.

Another important issue is visibility in research and policy. Many studies treat sex workers as a single group, overlooking the distinct challenges faced by migrants (Argento et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2015). Belize-specific research is limited, resulting in gaps in understanding how legal, economic, and social factors intersect to shape the risks faced by migrant women (Mano, 2018b). While regional studies provide valuable insights into the structural vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers, they do not fully account for Belize's distinctive legal, economic, and social environment. Belize's small population of approximately 397,483 people (Statistical Institute of Belize [SIB], 2024), concentrated urban centers, and reliance on tourism and informal labour create localized dynamics that differ from larger Caribbean nations. For instance, Tikkun Olam Belize (2022) documents that targeted police raids in Belize City disproportionately affect undocumented migrant women, often resulting in temporary detention, confiscation of personal belongings, and heightened fear of engaging with authorities. These enforcement patterns, coupled with limited social protections and small informal networks, illustrate risks that are amplified by Belize's unique socio-economic and regulatory context. Such localized trends emphasize the necessity of Belize-specific research to accurately capture the lived experiences of migrant sex workers and to inform tailored interventions and policies.

Belize's small population, concentrated urban and coastal job markets, and specific migration flows create localized risk patterns that may differ from those documented in Jamaica, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic. The scarcity of Belize-specific, migrant-focused research limits understanding of how undocumented women navigate these risks, the strategies they employ to survive, and the impacts of selective law enforcement. This gap underscores the novelty and necessity of the present study, which synthesizes available Belizean sources alongside regional evidence to generate contextually relevant

insights and inform rights-based interventions. This study addresses that gap by explicitly focusing on undocumented migrants and connecting structural vulnerabilities to rights-based frameworks.

Critical engagement with sources further shows how regional research highlights both patterns and gaps. While Caribbean studies document economic precarity, social marginalization, and ambiguous legislation, few studies disaggregate the experiences of migrants from those of local populations. Comparisons across the region reveal that selective enforcement, informal labour networks, and lack of access to health and justice services are recurrent themes. Yet, there is little evidence on how these factors interact specifically in Belize, reinforcing the need for localized, evidence-informed policy and advocacy (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2024).

Rights-based approaches are increasingly emphasized, underscoring the importance of labour recognition, access to health services, and participatory governance (Laing, Pilcher, & Smith, 2015; Wijers, 2024). Integrating intersectionality clarifies how vulnerabilities are compounded by gender, migration status, and socioeconomic position, while structural violence theory explains why systemic, rather than individual, factors perpetuate risk. Together, these frameworks provide a foundation for comprehensive interventions that combine community support, legal reform, and policy changes.

Significant gaps remain. Limited Belize-specific research on migrant sex workers, aggregation of migrant and local populations, and an under exploration of the links between legal ambiguity, economic instability, and social invisibility all constrain policy and practice. Few studies explicitly connect these structural vulnerabilities to human rights initiatives. This paper attempts to address these gaps by applying a rights-focused framework, grounded in both Belize-specific and regional evidence, to inform policy, advocacy, and service provision.

Theoretical Framework

Building on Kempadoo's analysis of Caribbean migrant sex work, this study uses intersectionality, structural violence, and human rights frameworks to understand the vulnerabilities of migrant sex workers within social, legal, and economic systems that vary across the region (see Figure 1).

Intersectionality enables us to understand how overlapping social identities, such as gender, migration status, socioeconomic class, and occupation, interact to create distinct forms of marginalization (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007). In Belize, migrant sex workers face multiple vulnerabilities. Undocumented status limits their access to legal protection and formal jobs, and gender norms affect the risks associated with their work. Moreover, economic instability restricts their mobility and bargaining power. By focusing on these interconnected factors, intersectionality shows how systemic inequalities increase individual risks.

Structural violence adds context to these vulnerabilities. It highlights how harm is rooted in social structures rather than stemming only from individual behavior (Farmer et al., 2006). Guinn's (2003) findings also align with a structural-violence analysis of Belize's context. His regional overview shows how

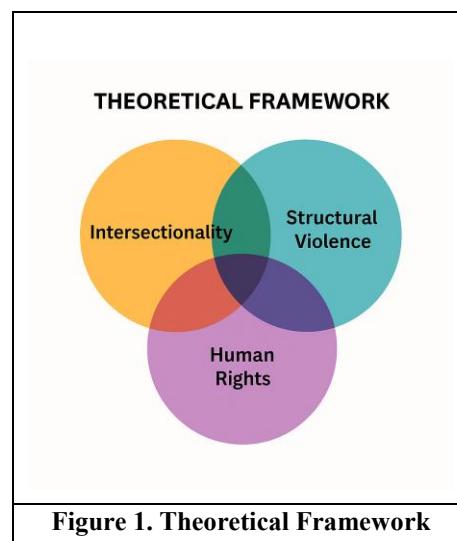


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

broad anti-trafficking frameworks can institutionalize vulnerability by exposing undocumented women to policing and immigration detention regardless of consent (Guinn, 2003). When migrant women engaged in consensual sex work must avoid authorities due to fear of deportation, this reflects systematic harm generated by the state rather than individual actors.

Laws that criminalize solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from sex work create indirect legal threats, increase exposure to violence, and create barriers to health and social services (Abel et al., 2009; Dodillet & Östergren, 2011; Krüsi et al., 2021). Selective law enforcement and immigration practices deepen this instability. Structural violence underscores how the state and institutions perpetuate inequality through neglect or punitive measures, such as limited access to health, social, and legal services.

International human rights law offers standards to evaluate protection gaps for migrant sex workers (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022; Wijers, 2024). Rights frameworks assert that everyone, regardless of their occupation, migration status, or documentation, has the right to safety, health, labour protections, and freedom from discrimination. This perspective puts Belize in the context of global standards and highlights the gaps between legal obligations and real-life circumstances.

Methodology

Migrant sex workers, especially those without documentation, face risks of detention, deportation, police harassment, and social stigma. To address these issues, this study employs a qualitative secondary data approach, involving the synthesis of publicly available materials. Figure 2 illustrates the process. Secondary data analysis allows for a systematic examination of existing information while maintaining confidentiality, triangulating government, NGO, and academic sources to construct a reliable understanding of structural vulnerabilities.

Sources were selected based on relevance to sex work, migration, labour rights, or human rights in Belize and the wider Caribbean. Priority was given to publications from 2004 onward to reflect contemporary legal, social, and economic contexts. Comparative regional studies were included to situate Belize within broader Caribbean patterns, while foundational texts on structural inequalities (e.g., Kempadoo, 2004; Farmer, 2004) informed the theoretical framing. Materials that only focused on trafficking, coercion, or contexts outside the Caribbean were excluded unless they provided relevant comparative insights.

Data were analyzed using a modified version of Attridge-Stirling's thematic network analysis (Attridge-Stirling, 2001), adjusted for a supra-regional context (Mano, 2018a). Textual data were coded to identify recurring concepts related to legal grey zones, economic precarity, and social invisibility. These codes were clustered into four themes: basic, organizing, global, and supra-global, forming a hierarchical network that illustrated the interplay of legal, social, and economic vulnerabilities.

This approach allowed the research to systematically address the three research questions, linking structural factors to human rights implications.

Differences in the literature, such as varying reports on informal peer support networks or law enforcement practices, were noted to highlight the diversity in migrant sex workers' experiences (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Triangulation across legal texts, policy reports, and regional case studies enhanced analytical rigor, placing Belize's realities within the wider Caribbean and Latin American context (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Pan American Health Organization, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

This study prioritized ethical responsibility by avoiding primary data collection that could place participants at risk. Instead, secondary data were carefully selected to ensure the protection of privacy, confidentiality, and safety. The analysis focused on human rights, legal frameworks, and social factors that shape vulnerability, particularly for undocumented migrant sex workers. By relying on publicly available government, NGO, and academic sources, the study generated insights into structural risks while upholding the ethical principle of minimizing harm (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023).

Limitations

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources, which may not fully reflect the experiences of migrant sex workers, especially undocumented individuals who are often overlooked in official records. Although triangulation and thematic analysis help address some gaps, the findings are restricted by the quality and range of the available materials. Future research that incorporates primary data could enhance the understanding of local experiences and inform targeted interventions.

Findings

Analysis of secondary data shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face overlapping structural vulnerabilities. These can be grouped into legal uncertainty, economic instability, and social invisibility. These challenges are systemic and made worse by undocumented status, gender norms, and restrictions of informal work.

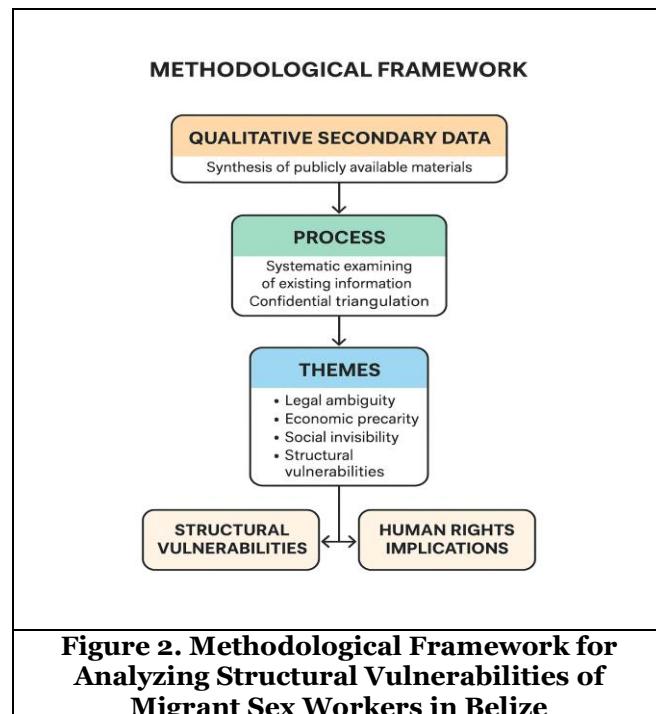


Figure 2. Methodological Framework for Analyzing Structural Vulnerabilities of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize

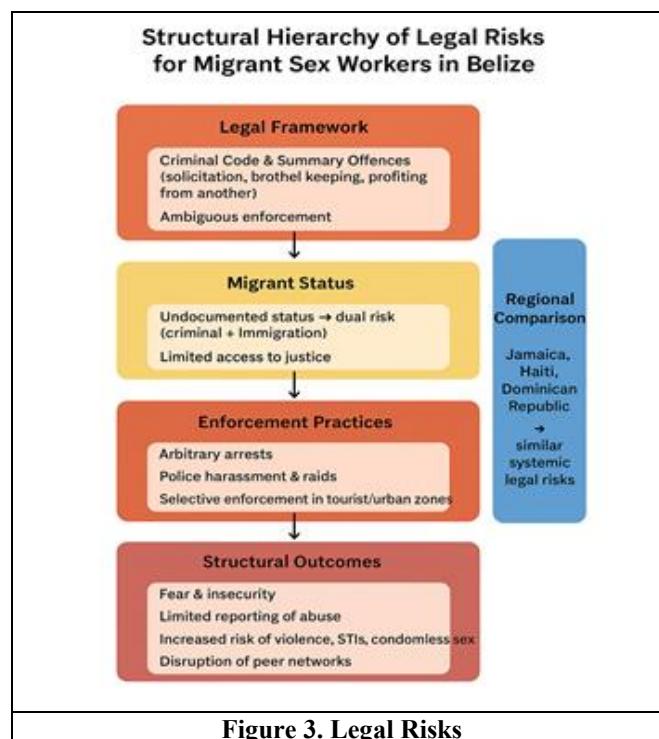


Figure 3. Legal Risks

Legal Ambiguity

Although adult consensual sex work is not explicitly illegal, laws on solicitation, running a brothel, and profiting from someone else's earnings put migrant sex workers at risk under criminal and immigration law (Belize, 1981). Undocumented migrant women are hit hardest; they face selective enforcement, arbitrary arrests, police harassment, and threats of deportation (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022).

Reports from NGOs and the government indicate that enforcement is inconsistent. Raids in urban and tourist areas often target undocumented women, while documented local sex workers are frequently ignored. Figure 3 further demonstrates the structural hierarchy of these legal risks for migrant sex workers in Belize. These patterns create ongoing insecurity, limit access to justice, and discourage reporting of abuse (see figure 4). In Belize City, Tikkun Olam Belize (2022) reports that undocumented migrant women were disproportionately targeted during police raids in 2021, with multiple cases of temporary detention and confiscation of personal belongings. Similarly, Amnesty International (2022) documents instances where migrant sex workers were threatened with deportation following complaints of abuse, illustrating the practical consequences of ambiguous legal frameworks. These concrete events highlight how selective enforcement compounds vulnerability, beyond theoretical legal risk. These incidents exemplify structural violence, showing how institutional arrangements, rather than individual behavior, produce harm and constrain agency (Farmer et al., 2006).

Economic Precarity

Limited formal employment, lack of social protections, and migration barriers force migrant women into informal sex work for survival. Their earnings are uneven, their negotiating power is limited, and middlemen often take a big cut of their income (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). Informal work setups limit access to health services, social insurance, and legal support, which deepens economic dependence and structural vulnerability. The link to theory here is clear: Evidence suggests that financial instability is exacerbated by unclear laws and social exclusion, resulting in systemic risks rather than personal choices (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016).

Social Invisibility

Migrant sex workers face multiple layers of stigma linked to their gender, occupation, and migration status. This stigma often discourages them from interacting with authorities, health services, and support networks (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). They fear deportation and social exclusion, which increases their invisibility and restricts access to healthcare, legal aid, and social services. Reports show that these overlapping vulnerabilities create added risks, further marginalizing migrant sex workers and making them underrepresented in data and policy efforts. From a theoretical perspective, social invisibility illustrates intersectionality in practice: overlapping stigmatized identities compound risk and reduce access to rights protections (Hancock, 2007; Crenshaw, 2013). Informal networks help mitigate harassment and financial uncertainty, but structural and legal protections remain lacking.

Conceptual Model of Structural Vulnerabilities of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize

Drawing on evidence from Belize and regional research, this study proposes a conceptual model that synthesizes the structural determinants of vulnerability for migrant sex workers. The model identifies three interrelated dimensions: legal ambiguity, economic precarity, and social invisibility, and articulates how their interaction produces compounded risk (Figure 5). Conceptually, the model explicitly links empirical

evidence to structural violence theory (Farmer et al., 2006), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007), and human rights frameworks (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022; World Health Organization, 2019).

The model conceptualizes vulnerability as systemic and cumulative rather than additive. Legal ambiguity constrains access to formal employment, reinforces economic precarity, and discourages engagement with institutions due to fear of arrest or deportation (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Belize, 1981). This demonstrates structural violence in practice, as legal frameworks systematically limit agency. Economic precarity limits bargaining power and access to social protections, which in turn amplifies social invisibility and dependence on informal networks (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Social invisibility, manifested through stigma, exclusion, and marginalization, operationalizes intersectional theory, showing how overlapping identities produce compounded risk (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007). These dimensions interact multiplicatively, producing compounded risks that extend beyond individual choices to reflect systemic and institutional constraints.

By mapping these interactions, the model provides a theoretically grounded, empirically informed framework for understanding migrant sex workers' structural vulnerability in Belize. It highlights how legal, economic, and social forces intersect to produce cumulative harm, offering a lens for both scholarly analysis and practical intervention. The evidence-theory link ensures that each observed phenomenon is situated within established frameworks of structural violence, intersectionality, and human rights, making the analysis both robust and explanatory. The model can inform rights-based policy responses, target legal reform, economic support, and social inclusion, while also provide measurable constructs to guide future research on structural vulnerability in Belize and comparable regional contexts.

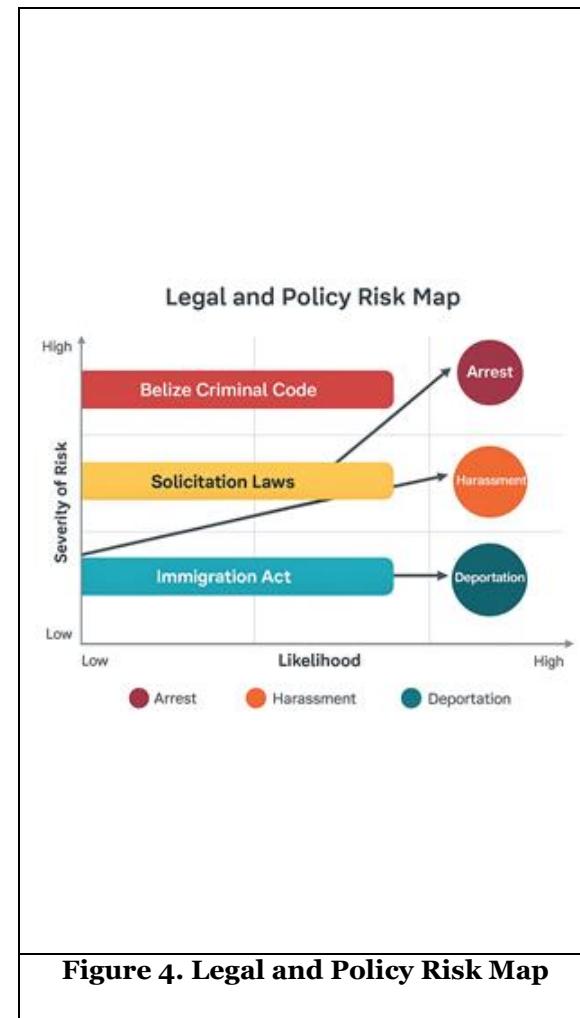


Figure 4. Legal and Policy Risk Map

Policy and Research Implications

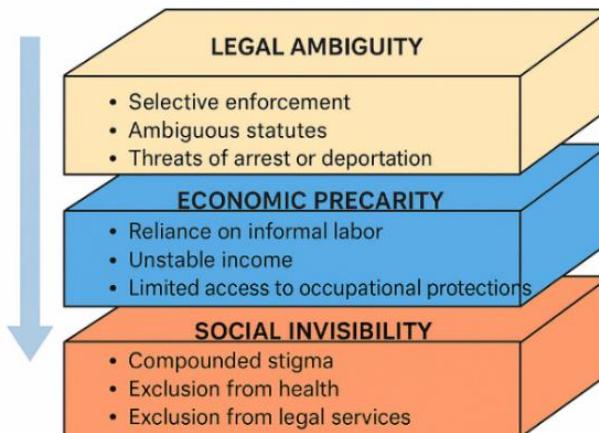
Table 1. Policy/Research Implications

Dimension	Policy/Research Implications
Legal Ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reform laws to clarify legal status of sex work Ensure consistent enforcement Create safe reporting channels
Economic Precarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize sex work as formal labor Enforce minimum protections Improve access to banking, credit, and social security
Social Invisibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce stigma Expand access to health and social services Include migrant sex workers in policymaking and advocacy

The conceptual model provides a structured framework for interventions and future research. Each dimension points to specific areas for action, as summarized in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 5.

By grounding the model in Belize-specific evidence, regional literature, and theoretical frameworks, this study offers a rights-based approach to understanding vulnerability. It bridges the gap between empirical data, policy relevance, and structural theory, providing a foundation for both scholarly analysis and practical interventions.

Conceptual Model of Structural Vulnerabilities of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize, Drawing on Intersectionality, Structural Violence, and Human Rights



This model illustrates how systemic factors converge to heighten risk for migrant sex workers in Belize

Figure 5. A Conceptual Model of Structural Vulnerabilities of Migrant Sex Workers in Belize

Discussion

The analysis shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face structural vulnerabilities linked to legal uncertainty, economic insecurity, and social exclusion. These risks are systemic, reflecting structural violence, gendered job markets, and migration-related marginalization rather than individual choices. Legal uncertainty, evident in laws around solicitation, brothel keeping, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981), disproportionately affects undocumented migrant women, creating fear, limiting reports of abuse, and restricting access to health and social services. Reports from NGOs and government sources indicate that enforcement is inconsistent: raids often target undocumented women while documented local sex workers may face minimal scrutiny (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; Amnesty International, 2022).

Guinn's regional overview suggests that Belize's situation aligns with broader Central American trends. Across the region, selective enforcement, blurred legal boundaries, and migration-related precarity create similar conditions of surveillance and marginalization for migrant women in the sex trade (2003). Comparative analysis with Jamaica and Haiti suggests that Belize's selective enforcement patterns are not isolated but part of a broader Caribbean trend where undocumented migrants face disproportionate policing (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Unlike these larger countries, however, Belize's small urban centers magnify the visibility of migrant sex workers, intensifying the effects of legal uncertainty. Evidence from New Zealand shows that decriminalisation of sex work can improve safety, labour protections, and access to health services for sex workers (Abel, Fitzgerald, & Brunton, 2009), offering potential lessons for Belize.

From the perspective of structural violence (Farmer et al., 2006), these vulnerabilities are embedded in institutional practices and legal systems, illustrating how state structures actively shape the distribution of risk. Intersectionality further explains how overlapping identities such as gender, migration status, occupation, and socioeconomic position compound marginalization, resulting in distinct patterns of exclusion for migrant sex workers (Crenshaw, 2013; Hancock, 2007).

Economic insecurity intensifies these structural risks. Informal sex work emerges as a survival strategy amid limited job opportunities, unstable income, and weak labour protections (Standing, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 2023). Intermediaries and exploitative networks reduce financial independence, and a lack of formal recognition hinders access to social security, banking, and credit. Evidence from Belize aligns with findings in Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, where undocumented sex workers face similar economic vulnerabilities (Platt et al., 2018; Rocha-Jiménez et al., 2016). Community networks and peer support offer some temporary relief but cannot replace structural reforms, highlighting the need for interventions that address legal, economic, and social factors collectively. The reliance on informal labour networks in Belize demonstrates how economic precarity intersects with legal risk; unlike Jamaica or the Dominican Republic, where migrant sex workers may access larger informal support networks, Belizean migrants often face concentrated markets with limited negotiating power, exacerbating exploitation (United Nations Development Programme, 2023; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).

Social invisibility and stigma further increase risk by limiting access to healthcare, justice, and public services. Fear of deportation and social marginalization discourages interaction with authorities and health services (Amnesty International, 2022; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024). This aligns with regional evidence, where undocumented migrant sex workers experience compounded vulnerabilities due to legal precarity, gender norms, and occupational stigma (Platt et al., 2018). The Belizean context, characterized by its small size, concentrated urban and coastal job markets, and specific migration flows,

underscores the importance of localized interventions informed by regional trends. The avoidance of public services in Belize reflects a calculated response to potential deportation, reinforcing systemic invisibility. Regional comparisons suggest that migrant sex workers' invisibility is both a survival strategy and a structural outcome of incomplete labour protections and selective law enforcement (Argento et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2015).

Comparative analysis of the literature reveals gaps in both scholarship and practice. While studies in the Caribbean often address sex work broadly, few focus specifically on migrant populations in Belize, creating an evidence gap that this paper addresses. Legal frameworks often blur the line between consensual sex work and trafficking (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024), but local studies documenting this ambiguity are scarce. By linking findings to intersectionality and structural violence frameworks, the paper highlights how Ambiguous legal protections, precarious livelihoods, and social exclusion interact to produce systemic vulnerability.

Policy and practice implications are clear. Legal reform is essential to clarify laws that indirectly criminalize consensual adult sex work, ensuring consistent and fair enforcement. Recognizing sex work in labour protections and improving access to financial services could reduce economic insecurity. Interventions to address stigma, enhance visibility, and expand access to health and social services are vital to reducing cumulative vulnerability. Rights-based approaches, rooted in international human rights standards (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2023; Wijers, 2024), provide a framework for these interventions, emphasizing universal protection regardless of occupation or migration status.

Finally, the study identifies significant gaps for future research. Data on migrant sex workers in Belize, particularly regarding lived experiences, coping strategies, and health and labour outcomes, remain limited. Longitudinal studies could evaluate the impact of interventions over time, while analyses of legal and policy reforms would clarify ways to reduce structural vulnerability. Comparative Caribbean research can further guide context-specific strategies, ensuring interventions respond to both regional trends and local realities.

These findings directly address the study's research questions. Belize's legal and policy frameworks create vulnerability by leaving sex work in a grey area, allowing selective enforcement and placing undocumented migrant women at risk of arrest, harassment, and deportation (RQ1). The interaction of criminalisation, structural inequality, and migration status exacerbates these risks, underscoring how systemic factors influence vulnerability (RQ2). The evidence suggests a rights-based approach that combines legal reform, labour recognition, inclusive health and social services, stigma reduction, and systematic monitoring, informed by both Belize-specific and regional experiences (RQ3).

By making these connections explicit, the study situates its findings within broader theoretical and policy frameworks while demonstrating clear pathways for practical, rights-focused interventions.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The analysis shows that migrant sex workers in Belize face structural vulnerabilities caused by unclear laws, unstable economies, and social invisibility. These issues reflect systemic risks rather than individual ones. Unclear laws about solicitation, brothel operation, and profiting from another's earnings (Belize, 1981) particularly impact undocumented migrant women. This creates fear, discourages abuse reporting, and limits access to health and social services. Understanding intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities, such as gender, migration status, occupation, and socioeconomic position, contribute to marginalization. Structural violence demonstrates how institutional practices and legal frameworks continue to perpetuate inequality (Crenshaw, 2013; Farmer et al., 2006; Hancock, 2007).

To address these risks, this study proposes six interconnected, evidence-based recommendations (see Figure 6). First, legal reform and decriminalisation are crucial for reducing systemic vulnerability. Laws that indirectly make consensual adult sex work illegal should be clarified or changed. New accountability measures should be established to ensure fair enforcement. These changes would enable migrant sex workers to seek justice, safely report abuse, and access formal support services without the fear of detention or deportation. Second, economic inclusion and labour recognition should take priority. Bringing sex work into official labour laws, with minimum wage protections, safety standards, and enforcement of labour rights, would improve financial independence. Access to banking, credit, and social security, along with the regulation of intermediaries, could lessen exploitation and create sustainable jobs. Third, creating pathways for migrant regularization is vital to reducing the vulnerabilities linked to undocumented status. Temporary work permits or official recognition of informal work, along with safe reporting channels, would strengthen protections and ensure access to health, legal, and social services.

Fourth, access to health and social services needs to be broadened. Providing targeted sexual and reproductive healthcare, mental health support, and harm-reduction programs is essential, especially for individuals who may fear formal institutions. Mobile outreach, peer-led programs, and connections between health services and legal assistance would offer comprehensive support, minimizing cumulative risks. Fifth, addressing stigma and increasing visibility is crucial. Training for law enforcement, healthcare providers, and social workers, along with public awareness campaigns and including migrant sex workers in policy discussions, can help reduce discrimination and make interventions more relevant to their experiences. Sixth, strong monitoring, data collection, and research are necessary to guide evidence-based policy. Ethical methods for documenting the experiences of migrant sex workers, including undocumented individuals, along with comprehensive regional studies, will help clarify the impact of interventions and aid in developing suitable local and regional strategies.

Future research could operationalize the conceptual model by collecting Belize-specific, primary data on each dimension of vulnerability. For instance, studies could systematically document legal encounters, economic precarity metrics, and experiences of social invisibility among migrant sex workers. Longitudinal designs would allow evaluation of interventions targeting decriminalisation, labour inclusion, and social support. By linking these dimensions to measurable outcomes, the framework provides a roadmap for both scholarly inquiry and evidence-informed policy development (Mano, 2018b; Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2024).



Together, these recommendations incorporate intersectionality, structural violence, and human rights principles, forming a solid foundation for reform. By addressing legal, economic, and social factors that affect vulnerability simultaneously, Belize can pursue rights-based, evidence-informed actions that mitigate systemic risks while promoting inclusion. This study addresses a specific gap in the literature related to Belize and presents a framework that links interconnected structural vulnerabilities to practical policy and action steps. The integrated approach not only aligns Belize with wider Caribbean trends but also highlights the need for locally developed, rights-centered strategies to effectively protect and empower migrant sex workers.

References

Abel, G., Fitzgerald, L., & Brunton, C. (2009). The impact of decriminalisation on the number of sex workers in New Zealand. *Journal of Social Policy*, 38(3), 515–531.
[https://www.nzpc.org.nz/pdfs/Abel,-Fitzgerald-and-Brunton,-\(2009\),-The-impact-of-decriminalisation-on-the-number-of-sex-workers-in-New-Zealand,-J-Soc-Pol-38\(3\)-515-31.pdf](https://www.nzpc.org.nz/pdfs/Abel,-Fitzgerald-and-Brunton,-(2009),-The-impact-of-decriminalisation-on-the-number-of-sex-workers-in-New-Zealand,-J-Soc-Pol-38(3)-515-31.pdf)

Amnesty International. (2022). *The human rights of sex workers*. Amnesty USA.
<https://www.amnestyusa.org/issues/gender-sexuality/sex-work-rights/>

Argento, E., Win, K. T., McBride, B., & Shannon, K. (2021). Global burden of violence and other human rights violations against sex workers. In S. M. Goldenberg & S. G. Sherman (Eds.), *Sex work, health, and human rights: Global inequities, challenges, and opportunities for action* (pp. 41–59). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64171-9_3

Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>

Bales, K. (2012). *Disposable people: New slavery in the global economy* (Updated ed.). University of California Press.

Belize. (1981). *Criminal Code, Chapter 101*. Government of Belize.
<https://www.belizelaw.org/web/lawadmin/index3.html>

Belize. (1981). *Summary Jurisdiction (Offences) Act, Chapter 98*. Government of Belize.
<https://www.belizelaw.org>

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>

Crenshaw, K. (2013). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

Decker, M. R., Crago, A.-L., Chu, S. K. H., Sherman, S. G., Seshu, M., Buthelezi, K., & Beyer, C. (2015). Human rights violations against sex workers: Burden and effect on HIV. *The Lancet*, 385(9963), 186–199. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)60800-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60800-X)

Dodillet, S., & Östergren, P. (2011). *The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Claimed success and documented effects* [Conference paper]. International Workshop on Decriminalizing Prostitution. <https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Dodillet-Oestergren%202011%20-%20Swedish%20sex%20purchase%20act.pdf>

Farmer, P. (2004). *Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.

Farmer, P., Nizeye, B., Stulac, S., & Keshavjee, S. (2006). Structural violence and clinical medicine. *PLoS Medicine*, 3(10), e449. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0030449>

Freije, S. (2002). *Informal employment in Latin America and the Caribbean: Causes, consequences and policy recommendations*. Inter-American Development Bank. <https://doi.org/10.18235/0008407>

Global Network of Sex Work Projects. (2023). *Migrant sex workers' rights: Policy brief*. <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-policy-brief-migrant-sex-workers-rights>

Global Network of Sex Work Projects. (2024). *Global findings on sex workers' access to social protection and sexual and reproductive health and rights*. <https://www.nswp.org/resource/nswp-global-and-regional-reports/global-findings-sex-workers-access-social-protection-and>

Goldenberg, S. M., & Sherman, S. G. (Eds.). (2021). *Sex work, health, and human rights: Global inequities, challenges, and opportunities for action*. Springer.

Graham, L. (2017). Governing sex work through crime: Creating the context for violence and exploitation. *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 81(3), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022018317702802>

Guinn, D. (2003). *In modern bondage: Sex trafficking in the Americas – National and regional overview of Central America and the Caribbean* [Report].

Hancock, A.-M. (2007). Intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 248–254. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X07000062>

International Labour Organization. (2024). *Migrant and informal workers: Labour protection gaps*. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

Kempadoo, K. (2004). *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, race, and sexual labour*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203338087>

Kempadoo, K. (2006). Sex work, migration and human trafficking: Problems and possibilities. In *Intra-Caribbean migration and the conflict nexus* (pp. 167–205). International Organization for Migration.

Kempadoo, K., Sanghera, J., & Pattanaik, B. (Eds.). (2005). *Trafficking and prostitution reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*. Paradigm Publishers.

Krüsi, A., D'Adamo, K., & Sernick, A. (2021). Criminalised interactions with law enforcement and impacts on health and safety in the context of different legislative frameworks

governing sex work globally. In S. M. Goldenberg & S. G. Sherman (Eds.), *Sex work, health, and human rights* (pp. 121–140). Springer.

Laing, M., Pilcher, K., & Smith, N. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Sex work now*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315885313>

Mano, A. P. (2018a). An innovative approach to sex trafficking research: The methodological advancement of Attride-Stirling's thematic network analysis. *International Annals of Criminology*, 55, 40–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cri.2018.5>

Mano, A. P. (2018b). *Migrant sex work in Belize: Experiences and vulnerabilities* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine).

Pan American Health Organization. (2023). *Health of migrants and displaced populations in Latin America and the Caribbean*. <https://www.paho.org/en/migrant-health>

Platt, L., Grenfell, P., Meiksin, R., Elmes, J., Sherman, S. G., Sanders, T., Mwangi, P., Crago, A.-L., & Beyer, C. (2018). Associations between sex work laws and sex workers' health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS Medicine*, 15(12), e1002680.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>

Rocha-Jiménez, T., Brouwer, K. C., Silverman, J. G., Morales-Miranda, S., & Goldenberg, S. M. (2016). Migration, violence, and safety among migrant sex workers: A qualitative study in two Guatemalan communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 18(9), 965–979.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1122229>

Sassen, S. (1998). *Globalization and its discontents*. The New Press.

Shannon, K., Strathdee, S. A., Goldenberg, S. M., Duff, P., Mwangi, P., Rusakova, M., Reza-Paul, S., et al. (2015). Global epidemiology of HIV among female sex workers: Influence of structural determinants. *The Lancet*, 385(9962), 55–71. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)60931-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60931-4)

Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Statistical Institute of Belize. (2024, April 8). *Statistical Institute of Belize presents key findings of the 2022 Population and Housing Census*. https://sib.org.bz/press-release_census-launch/

Tikkun Olam Belize. (2022). *Advocacy report on migrant sex workers*.
<https://www.nswp.org/members/north-america-and-the-caribbean/tikkun-olam-belize>

UNAIDS. (2014). *The gap report: Sex workers*. Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.
https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2014/20140716_UNAIDS_gap_report

United Nations Development Programme. (2023). *Human development report: Belize*.
<https://www.undp.org/belize>

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2023). *Human rights and migrants: Reports on protection gaps*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5481-report-human-rights-migrants>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2014). *Global report on trafficking in persons*.
<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/glotip.html>

United Nations Population Fund. (2020). *Sex work and the law in Asia and the Pacific*.
<https://www.unfpa.org/publications/sex-work-and-law-asia-and-pacific>

U.S. Department of State. (2024). *Trafficking in persons report: Belize*.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/belize/>

Vuolajärvi, N. (2019). Governing in the name of caring: Nordic prostitution policies and the making of migrant sex workers' vulnerability. *The Sociological Review*, 67(3), 578–595.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119831621>

Wijers, M. (2024). *Sex worker rights and human rights: A double-edged sword: Rights, resistance and mobilisations* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Essex).
<https://repository.essex.ac.uk/38493/>

World Health Organization. (2019). *Consolidated guidelines on HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care for key populations*.
<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241511124>

Yang, R., Orellana, G., Wentz, C., Mesbah, H., & Mackey, J. M. (2025). *Perceptions of and barriers to equitable healthcare access for undocumented populations in Belize: A qualitative study* [Preprint]. Research Square. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-7502686/v1>