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# Hanging in or backing out; occupational hazards and coping strategies of commercial sex workers in Dome-St. John's, Accra-Ghana

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## Abstract

Commercial sex work is one profession which is highly criminalized in Africa including Ghana. In spite of the criminalization of commercial sex work in Ghana, there exist pockets of commercial sex joints in Accra. The research objectives are; to ascertain the hazards of commercial sex work, to find out how commercial sex workers cope with the hazards of their profession and finally, to find out why commercial sex workers hang on to their work in spite of the hazards involved. The researcher conducted this study through qualitative research methodology by recruiting two commercial sex workers through personal acquaintances at Dome St. John's in the Ga East Municipality of Accra. The data collection procedure was through in-depth interviews. The researcher found that occupational hazards of commercial sex workers include; sexually transmitted diseases, stress, cheating, abuse, robberies, violence, and unusual sexual demands amongst others. Through these hazards that commercial sex workers face in their daily work, they have resorted to coping strategies including; the use of condoms, in kind and in cash service to police officers and bouncers, working in and around bars, working in and around brothels and hotels owned by people connected to power such as ex-security officers and politicians amongst others. In spite of these hazards and coping strategies, commercial sex workers continually hang in on their work without backing out through the love for money, swearing of oaths and death threats from traffickers and bouncers, the sense of belonging to a networked group and engaging in legal work to solicit for clients. The researcher recommended sexual education and counselling to be given to commercial sex workers as well as protecting the human rights of commercial sex workers and amending the laws that criminalizes commercial sex work in Ghana.

**Keywords:** Clients, Commercial Sex Work, Coping Strategies, Hazards, Hanging-in

## Introduction

Commercial sex work popularly known as Prostitution is said to be one of the social vices that most countries frowned upon. Many nations, societies and communities criminalized commercial sex work centuries ago based on religious and societal values. Though many countries and societies frowned upon commercial sex work centuries ago, it is still believed to be one of the oldest professions dating several centuries ago (Fiasorgbor, 2020; Weitzer, 2014 Weitzer et al., 2015)[12, 26, 27]. In contemporary times, commercial sex work has become a major ethical issue as many countries continually criminalize commercial sex work as happening in Africa and parts of Asia, whereas some global North countries especially in Western

Europe also have laws that control and regulate commercial sex work in countries such as France, Denmark, Netherlands and many others (Barnett et al., 2014) [4].

Commercial sex work, which is also known as prostitution in some circles, is defined as the process of a person offering the body for sexual, romantic or erotic purposes with a premeditated intention of receiving monetary compensation in return. A commercial sex worker is any person that lives or earn a living at the expense of money made from offering one's body for sexual pleasure or other activities in return for monetary compensation. The definition of commercial sex work is all-encompassing in that, it embraces people who superintend over commercial sex activities and earn a liv-



ing from it. Prostitution or commercial sex work is one profession that those involved engage in a clandestine mode even in countries where it is legalized, controlled and regulated, such as in the Netherlands, France, Australia, Germany, New Zealand and others. Commercial sex workers are faced with fierce and strong stigma, stereotype and prejudice in the sight of the public in most countries of their operations.

In Africa, commercial sex work or prostitution is highly criminalized in many countries including Ghana with only a handful of countries legalizing prostitution including Senegal. In spite of the high level at which prostitution is criminalized in Africa, most countries have an appreciable population involved in all forms of prostitution or commercial sex work ranging from a well-organized prostitution ring to a low-level street soliciting prostitution. Ghana has criminalized prostitution but in spite of the laws against prostitution, commercial sex workers or prostitutes operate in clandestine manner in the country. More than 90% of the Ghanaian population (GSS, 2021)[13] belong to one of the three main religions namely Christianity, Islam or Traditional Religion which are all against prostitution or commercial sex work. These three religions also do not give space for the adherents to involve themselves in commercial sex work as is against the body or the soul per their teachings. In spite of the opposition against prostitution or commercial sex work in Ghana, it is lately becoming more visible in the country. The barriers to prostitution in Ghana are so high at the societal, religious and national levels. In all the barriers against prostitution in Ghana, prostitution is gradually becoming an adaptation strategy for many young women of different ages. Commercial sex work is found in most of the cities in Ghana, such as Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi, Tema, Tamale, etcetera. For the purpose of this study, the researcher concentrated on prostitution or commercial sex work in Accra, which is the capital of Ghana. Accra is gradually becoming a notorious destination for commercial sex workers from all walks of life from outside Ghana and those from Ghana. Commercial sex work is gaining grounds in Accra in municipalities and metropolitan areas such as Ga East municipal area with popular destinations such as St. Johns-Dome, Just Torch at Musuuku junction, Pokuase in Ayawaso municipality, Madina in La-Nkwantana Municipal Area, Circle in Accra Metropolitan Area and many other places. Most of these commercial sex workers found in these mentioned areas are not only Ghanaians but with a significant population of foreigners, especially Nigerians, Liberians and Ivoirians.

The nature of prostitution in Ghana comprises almost all the forms of prostitution identified by literature, such as Escort prostitution, brothel prostitution, street soliciting, Private prostitution, as well as other forms which cannot fit into one form of prostitution as mentioned amongst the four listed but categorized into direct and indirect sex work (Harcourt and Donovan 2005)[15]. Sometimes, prostitutes in all the forms or categories mentioned may be found in more than one of these identified forms depending on the situation at hand. Literature posits that one of the causes of prostitution is economic hardship or unemployment. With the increasing global economic hardships compounded by COVID-19 and the Russo- Ukrainian conflicts, there has been an exacerbated and exasperated economic crisis in the global south especially in Africa (UNAIDS, 2020)[24] which is likely to push more people into prostitution. Global economic crises and unemployment are major push factors for people to enter into commercial sex work, this means more and more people especially women will involve themselves in commercial sex work in Ghana. The alarming rate at which people are getting into commercial sex work calls the researcher to research into this topic.

### Objectives of the study

There are three objectives of this study. These objectives are as follows;

- Firstly, to ascertain the hazards commercial sex workers en-

counter in the course of their work.

- Secondly, to find out how commercial sex workers are able to manage or cope with the hazards of their work.
- To find out why commercial sex workers continue their profession in spite of the hazards they encounter.

### The research location and methodology of the study

This study was carried out in the Ga East Municipality in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The Ga East Municipality shares boundaries with Akuapem South District which is also located in the South Eastern part of the Eastern region. The Ga East Municipality covers an area of 85.7 square kilometers. The Ga East municipality is one of the smallest local government areas in Ghana but its constituency which is the Dome-Kwabinya, is one of the most populous constituencies in Ghana (GSS, 2021)[13]. The suburbs of the Ga East municipality include Kwabinya, Ashongman, Musuku, Taifa, Dome, Haatso, Aborkobi etcetera with Aborkobi as the Municipal capital. The settlement and population of the Ga East municipality is urban and quite cosmopolitan (GSS, 2021). The Ga East municipality have basic schools which are both government and private owned as well as second-cycle schools which are both private and government owned. For instance, within the Ga East municipality, there exist the Kwabinya community Day secondary school as well as private secondary schools in Haatso, and Dome Pillar Two. There are also tertiary institutions such as the Wisconsin University and the University for Nuclear and Allied Science which is part of the University of Ghana in the Ga East Municipality. The Ghana Atomic Energy Commission is also located in the Ga East Municipality.

The researcher employed phenomenology as the research (van Manen, 2016)[25] philosophy for this study (Crotty, 1998)[8]. Through phenomenology, the researcher decided to conduct this study from the perspectives and lived experiences of two commercial sex workers in the Ga East Municipal Area of Accra, Ghana (Holly & Lousley, 2014)[16]. These two commercial sex workers were a Ghanaian and a Nigerian. The researcher recruited these two commercial sex workers from personal acquaintances at a roadside near St John's on the Achimota Mall- Dome Road, where commercial sex workers solicit for clients in the evenings and the other near a brothel in Dome. The researcher approached these two commercial sex workers while they were soliciting for clients and informed them of this research he wanted to undertake concerning commercial sex workers with respect to the hazards of their work, how they manage or cope with these hazards and finally why commercial sex workers hang in on their profession irrespective of the hazards involved. Upon the researcher informing the two commercial sex workers of his research intentions, they both became interested and gave out their contacts to the researcher for further discussions since they were at work. Before the researcher got in touch with these two commercial sex workers, the researcher had tried on countless occasions to recruit many other commercial sex workers for this study but the efforts of the researcher yielded no positive results. After taking the phone numbers of the two commercial sex workers, the researcher later called the two commercial sex workers and continued the discussions on the intended research with them. The two commercial sex workers, after series of discussions, informed the researcher of their consent to participate in the study.

The brothel commercial sex worker, who is a Nigerian, decided to meet the researcher at her residence in Dome Pillar 2 during the daytime for interviews. The street soliciting commercial sex worker also informed the researcher to meet her at a guest house she lodges for only residential purposes at Kwabinya Estate Down in the Ga East Municipality. After these arrangements with the commercial sex workers, different days in the same week were scheduled to meet these research participants. The data collection was done by using in-depth interviews with the two participants to express their experiences, emotions and thoughts in a naturalistic way (Creswell, 2013)[6]. Before the interviews, the researcher informed the com-

mercial sex workers of their rights to withdraw their participation in the research at any point in time that they felt to do so. The two research participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the information they were giving out to the researcher. After informing the two commercial sex workers of the confidentiality of their information and identity and their right to withdraw at any point they wish to stop participating in the study, they both agreed to participate. The researcher collected the participants information from the interviews with a tape recorder and also took some notes during the interviews. The recorded interviews were transcribed and grouped into themes. For the purpose of this research and to protect the identity of the research participants, the Ghanaian commercial sex worker is identified as Jemima, while the Nigerian is also called Amanda.

### Analysis of data

The analysis of data and the discussion of findings are organized under themes based on the lived experiences of the research participants (Braun et al., 2006 Miles et al., 1994)[5, 17]. Based on the lived experiences and narrations from the two research participants, the findings are discussed as below.

### Discussion of findings

The discussion of findings are to answer the research questions relating to the three objectives of the researcher in a thematic analysis format. With respect to the first objective of the researcher, the findings are as follows.

#### Sexually transmitted diseases and infections

Sexually transmitted diseases and infections are one of the hazards which commercial sex workers in the Ga East municipality faces in Accra as part of their daily routine work through the services they render to various clients. Sometimes in trying to make ends meet commercial sex workers are forced to have unprotected sex with clients who offer the best payments. Clients to commercial sex workers sometimes even gang rape commercial sex workers in an unprotected manner hence exposing commercial sex workers to sexually transmitted diseases and infections such as HIV/AIDS, genital herpes, syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia and others. This finding confirms(UNAIDS, 2014)[23] where it is reported that commercial sex workers in Ghana and Nigeria are 8-fold more likely to have HIV/AIDS than the rest of the population. This finding is confirmed by the two research participants as follows;

According to Jemima, "This work is not easy oooh, sometimes I see smelly discharge from my private part (Vagina) especially when I have unprotected sex continuously with clients who give me the best price and gifts for my services".

This is what Amanda had to say "Hmmm, most of my friends including myself are always sick but we have a private doctor who has been giving us medication. He is a gynecologist, sometimes I see sperm mixed with blood after having unprotected sex with some of my clients coming out of my private part (vagina)".

**Stress** is a major hazard complained by the two research participants as they encounter in their daily commercial sex lives. The stress is both emotional and physical stress. The physical stress emanates from the routine nature of their work which involves standing at certain specific places soliciting for clients. With emotional stress, the two commercial sex workers reported that, in their daily lives they think about their children as per the nature of their work, they do not live with their children as they entrust the caring of their children to their mothers and other relatives. Also, the two participants revealed that, they are always watching out to ensure that friends and families who do not know they are commercial sex workers do not see or call them while soliciting for clients. As they think about all these things, they are also always on the alert to ensure that the police do not bump in to arrest them as they solicit for clients on the roadside or at the brothel upon a tip-off. This finding rests well with (Farley, 2004)[11].

Amanda who is 37 years has this to say "I am now ageing; I cannot stand every day but the nature of this work is that you need to stand to spot a potential client. If you sit down no one will see you. The standing is too much to bear".

In the words of Jemima, she said "is not easy in this work oooh, I'm always thinking not to see people I know at the same time thinking if the police will come and arrest me. Every moment I stand here am thinking about these two things and they make me sick".

### Cheating

Cheating is a major challenge and hazard both research participants complained about in the course of their profession. Cheating against commercial sex workers usually come from clients and sometimes the lords of the commercial sex work such as pimps, human traffickers, hotel owners, brothel managers, owners of drinking bars, places of soliciting for clients and bouncers or guys who protect these commercial sex workers. The hazard of cheating against commercial sex workers spans from extortion by traffickers, hoteliers, places of soliciting, security officials and clients. Cheating against commercial sex workers sometimes makes them lose money or valuable time for serving or servicing other clients. For instance, sometimes, commercial sex workers do not receive the money they work for but rather the money is received by pimps or the trafficker(s) who ushered the commercial sex worker(s) into this business. In some instances, clients to commercial sex workers also take drugs to have longer sex with commercial sex workers than agreed, or sometimes clients gang rape these commercial sex workers.

Jemima had these to say, "hmmm, if you are a sex worker you are treated less of a human being. Sometimes some of our customers will come here for short which is less than 30 minutes but will fuck you more than two hours as if you are a dog and when you complain will threaten your life".

"Sometimes some of our clients after agreeing on the price refuse to pay after providing them with our sexual services".

"The police are our major cheats, they will come and arrest us, detain us and even lock us up for days. After all, they will demand money like 100-250 Ghana cedis and will also have sex with us for free after they have detained us and taken money from us".

Amanda also had these to say "I am a migrant so I live in a hostel as my residence and work in another brothel for business. Both places are located in Dome in the Ga East Municipality. At the brothel, I pay 120 Ghana cedis every night and at the hostel, a very small room with one student bed and a wardrobe, I pay 500 cedis a month while some of my friends are even paying 700 cedis a month".

"Sometimes some of the clients use certain drugs and that delays their orgasm when providing them with sexual services but will refuse to pay me the money due me and promise to send me money later through mobile money transfer which will not come and because they do not send me the money will dawg(abandon me as their client) and go for another commercial sex worker the next time".

### Abuse

Abuse is a major hazard found in commercial sex work, as women who are engaged in commercial sex work are usually abused by their clients and other individuals who are involved in the commercial sex business. Abuse against commercial sex workers include; physical abuse, psychological abuse and oral abuse. Commercial sex workers are one marginalized group globally, and once they are abused, they find it difficult to report to any state institution for justice as they are highly stigmatized, stereotyped and prejudiced by individuals as well as state institutions such as the police and healthcare providers in Ghana. The abuse commercial sex workers go through include calling them names, police raids and brutalities, the beating of commercial sex migrant workers by indigene commercial sex workers and also the denial of their fundamental human rights especially in instances where some of these commercial sex workers are trafficked victims. This finding complements

the findings of (UNAIDS, 2014; Nyblade et al., 2017 and Scorgie et al., 2014)[18, 21, 22] where commercial sex workers in countries which criminalizes prostitution including China, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Swaziland have their human rights abused.

In the words of Amanda, "Everyday people shout at us in front of my brothel, ashawo (prostitute) go and sleep, ashawo (prostitute) go and find a good job, ashawo, (prostitute) will you not go to Nigeria?" "The boys who protect us from bad clients, brothel and hostel owners, have sex with us and do not pay us, but they take money from us for the rooms we use or the protection they give us. When we refuse to offer free sex to hotel and brothel owners or the bouncers', it then means our work has come to an abrupt end as commercial sex workers," there are police officers who sometimes just come to our joints to beat us and demand all the money we have worked for. Jemima had these to say "The police always come around to raid us and when we do not have money to settle them, the best they do is to beat us, look at scares around my hands. When you have long braids, you are dead they will pull it for you to feel the pain and tell you Ashawo (prostitute)".

### Robberies and violence

Robberies and violence are hazards, that commercial sex workers sometimes come across in their quest to provide sexual and erotic services to their customers or clients. Sometimes, commercial sex workers are robbed by their clients and attempts to resist these robberies result in beatings, knifing or death on the side of sex workers. Clients or customers of commercial sex workers know how state institutions and society treat commercial sex workers so these clients sometimes inflict wounds on commercial sex workers, knowing they (clients of commercial sex workers) cannot be reported to the police or be taken to court by these commercial sex workers. Sometimes some clients or customers after satisfying their sexual desires with commercial sex workers ask the commercial sex workers to hand over all their money, they have made from work to them or pull a gun or knife to demand money from these commercial sex workers. Attempts by commercial sex workers to resist ends up with wounds or sometimes death. These finding complements (WHO, 2010)[1] where it was found that commercial sex workers globally experience various forms of violence from different criminal groups. In the interviews with the two research participants; these are what they said;

Amanda "Some of our clients are also engaged in illegal works such as drugs or robberies and are criminals who have gone to jail several times. If you are not lucky and a criminal client, takes you to sleep you will be robbed, wounded or killed. Me, when a client asks me for my money, I give and promise even to offer more sex for free and walk out peacefully".

Jemima "Some of the criminal clients know what we are doing is not permissible under the laws of Ghana so this is their robbing trick. They can organize themselves like five and come for maybe ten sex workers to give us more money when we have not served them. Once we get to their house, they will pull a gun on us, have scores or rounds of sex with us, put or sorts of objects in our vagina then demand we give them all the money on us or will kill us". "We know colleagues in this profession who have been murdered so I do not want to fall a victim of this situation".

### Unusual demands by clients

Unusual demands by clients of commercial sex workers are also major hazards some commercial sex workers encounter in their everyday work. Some money-fetching clients who usually pay well use commercial sex workers to experiment with different forms of sexual acts which usually threatens the health security of commercial sex workers and exposes them to certain occupational dangers and unhealthy sexual lifestyles. Once the offers from such clients are good and bigger, commercial sex workers are tempted to relax their protectionist stands and do everything to satisfy such clients. This finding is in line with the findings of (Hands Off, 2017)[14] in

Botswana where many commercial sex workers are forced to provide unprotected sex against their will for bigger money offered by clients.

In the words of Amanda, "I sometimes do not use condoms when my medical doctor clients and other well-paying ones want unprotected sex. These are people who pay well and are my regular clients, I cannot lose them. If I do not allow them to have unprotected sex with me other sex workers are prepared to do so. So, I always comply since I do not want to lose them as clients".

From Jemima "sometimes some of my clients want anal sex, they do not want my vagina. When this happens, all I do is to offer them anal sex though I am not comfortable with anal sex. A client can give me money for a short anal sex of less than five minutes than what I get from clients who want vaginal sex for a week".

### Unhygienic conditions and unhealthy practices

Unhygienic conditions and unhealthy practices are major occupational hazards that commercial sex workers encounter in their work. Due to the stigma attached to commercial sex work, sometimes where they stand to solicit for clients is not neat coupled with mosquito bites. Also, to cope with the work, commercial sex workers resort to excessive use of medications, drugs and alcohol which are not good for their health. These substances they use for coping with the hazards of their work include tramadol, energy drinks, alcohol, cocaine, cigarettes, Indian hemp and etcetera. These drugs mostly in the end deteriorate the health of commercial sex workers hence impacting negatively on their lives. Also, sometimes some of the clients of commercial sex workers are people who are less concerned about reproductive health and do not observe good personal hygiene.

According to both Amanda and Jemima "the unhygienic conditions and practices they experience in their everyday performance of work, force them to spend so much at the hospital since they mostly experience reproductive and other health challenges such as malaria, sores around their vagina, poor menstruation, headaches, smelly vaginal discharges and etcetera".

In the face of the data analyzed and discussed, the following are the coping strategies commercial sex workers have adopted against their occupational hazards;

### The use of special private medical facilities

The use of special private medical facilities as treatment centres by commercial sex workers due to the act of offering unprotected sex to some of their clients is a major coping strategy. For instance, commercial sex workers make higher earnings through unprotected sex than using condoms. Hence, some commercial sex workers are aware of their vulnerabilities to sexually transmitted diseases and infections, so they take early precautionary measures from private medical practitioners against sexually transmitted diseases and infections such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, genital herpes as well as HIV/AIDS. In the responses of the participants of this research for better treatment, some commercial sex workers offer free sex to medical and health practitioners in exchange for good medical care. Below are quotations from the research participants; Amanda "We have doctors who take care of our infections and ailments. They are private doctors but we patronize them and they also patronize us. So, we are all in the business together".

Jemima "I have a private doctor who takes care of me. He is a customer boyfriend because I service him as a client and a boyfriend and also give him more customers who are also commercial sex workers to take care of".

### Condom usage

Condom usage is one major way most commercial sex workers try to cope with the hazards of their profession. Due to the different clients these commercial sex workers service, condom is mostly used to prevent them from contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, genital herpes as well

as HIV/AIDS.

From my participants "condom is the only saviour to them against sexually transmitted diseases as most average clients want protection. According to Amanda and Jemima, if not condoms like all commercial sex workers will get HIV/AIDS as sometimes some of their clients' releases blood into the condoms after orgasm and ejaculation. From the two research participants, sperms from some of their clients are sometimes mixed with blood and if it enters their bodies... is HIV/AIDS".

### Working outside their immediate environs

Working outside their immediate environs is a coping strategy most commercial sex workers have adopted. In working outside their immediate environs, commercial sex workers travel far away to ply their trade in places where they are not easily identified by their clients or places where their families and relatives do not live. Also, sometimes commercial sex workers rotate according to the joints they solicit for clients through a network operated by the commercial sex workers. For instance, in changing locations sometimes, commercial sex workers in Just Torch will move to St. John's after six months of operation and vice versa. Working far away from their immediate environment also explains why a lot of foreign commercial sex workers are found in most commercial sex joints in places like St. John's-Dome, Pokuase, Lapaz, Just Torch and other places in Accra. This finding corroborates the findings of (Aveling et al., 2009)[3] in their study of commercial sex workers in Kolkata where most commercial sex workers use distancing from their immediate communities as a strategy for protecting their social identity especially their families.

From Amanda "I cannot work in Nigeria, that's why am in Ghana. I do not want people who are closer to me like family, friends, my children and my ex-husband to see me as a commercial sex worker. If they see me as a commercial sex worker, am dead as I will be the talk of town in my community back in Nigeria".

Jemima had this to say "This is not a good job, that is why am here. I come from Akyem and was formerly living in Kasoa but over there, people know me. That is the reason why I do my work at Dome-St. John's and live at estate Kwabenya".

### In-kind and in-cash service

In-kind and in-cash services are also means through which commercial sex workers cope with the hazards of their work. In-Cash coping strategies include offering cash to police personnel when they are raided or arrested while soliciting for clients in brothels and roadsides. Individual bouncers who provide protection or security service(s) to commercial sex workers against violent clients are also paid by commercial sex workers at the joints they operate so to deter male clients from cheating these commercial sex workers. In other instances, commercial sex workers provide free sexual services to their bouncers and even police officers so that they are not harassed during working hours. This finding is in line with (Erasquin et al., 2014 and Decker et al., 2014)[9, 10] where police brutality and human rights violations against commercial sex workers are making commercial sex workers adopt strategies leading to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

From both Amanda and Jemima, "Every Sunday, commercial sex workers operating at certain joints in the Ga East municipality offer free sex and money to some of the top officials in both the police service and the bouncer groups to enable these commercial sex workers to operate with no obstructions to their work".

### Use of drugs

The use of drugs is a major coping strategy adopted by commercial sex workers against stress and the emotional challenges they go through at the hands of their clients, traffickers, state institutions and the society. In coping through drugs, commercial sex workers use drugs including stimulants, hallucinogens and etcetera including alcohol, cigarettes, cocaine, cocaine ice, tramadol and different

kinds of energy drinks with high caffeine concentrations. This finding is in line with (Home Office, 2004)[19] where it was found that 95% of street prostitutes in London resort to drug usage.

In corroborating the use of drugs by commercial sex workers, the research participants had these to say; Amanda: "You cannot cope with this work with your naked eye if you do not have juju (spiritual backing), so my only helper is cigarette and alcohol. In Ghana, the market does not charge dollars, so I cannot buy cocaine ice. When I was in Turkey, Singapore and Dubai, I was making money, so I used to buy cocaine ice so I could not feel the stress".

According to Jemima "I cannot do this work without a helper, every-day men entering me like this. I always combine paracetamol and tramadol and take energy drink on top. When I do this am good to go". That's why in all our joints, drink sellers do not sleep and there are many junkies around us. These Junkies are all drug pushers and peddle drugs like tramadol, cocaine ice and cocaine as well as many energy drinks and others".

### Pregnancy

Pregnancy is one unusual coping strategy adopted by some commercial sex workers against the hazards of their profession. Commercial sex workers who are trafficked and are not happy with the nature of their work intentionally decide to have unprotected sex in order to be impregnated. Once they are impregnated, their traffickers ask them to leave and fend for themselves and these are mostly non-Ghanaian commercial sex workers.

According to Amanda "Most child prostitutes from Nigeria who are trafficked and trapped into prostitution resort to pregnancy as a means of coping which mostly leads to being thrown out by their masters or being in less demand by clients consequently leading to being freed by their traffickers or enslavers".

**Soliciting for clients and working in brothels and hotels owned by people connected to power** Most commercial sex workers operate around bars, brothels and hostels in Ghana owned by politicians, ex-security officials or certain influential people in leading political parties. Once they operate in such areas, police officials do not harass them while working or when they are arrested, just a call or peanut payments set them free from police custody.

According to Jemima "the bar around where I solicit for clients is for an ex-military official and the hostel in which I live also belongs to an ex-police officer with all tenants being commercial sex workers". Amanda "I was once arrested in my brothel by police officers while soliciting for clients at Dome but a call from the brothel owner to a friend forced the police officers to return the money, they have extorted from me". In spite of all the hazards and the difficult coping strategies of commercial sex workers, they continually hang in on their work without backing out. The reasons why commercial sex workers still hang in on their profession without backing out based on the research data and findings are as follows.

### The love and insatiable quest for money

The love and insatiable quest for money by commercial sex workers is one way most commercial sex workers are able to hang in on their profession without backing out. Commercial sex workers are easily able to make cheap non-taxable money through the services they provide hence are not prepared to stop their work in spite of the murder, violence, robberies and abuses meted out to them. Through the love for cheap money, most commercial sex workers continually hang in on their jobs. This finding rests well with (the Sociology of Prostitution Research, 2015 and Crime and Justice Research Centre, 2015)[2] where it was found that prostitution helps many unskilled women to make easy and cheap money.

According to Jemima "Some of us have made so much money that we have shops selling cosmetics, electronic and electrical appliances, textiles such as bags, dresses and other things giving us good money but the money in commercial sex work is cheap and paying so we cannot stop".

Amanda had this to say "because of the cheap money in prostitution,

there are some old ladies in our profession who have to retire but are still doing it because they failed to save money thinking they will always get money easy and cheap. They are spoiling the market as they offer cheaper sex as low as 10 Ghana cedis to some clients”.

### Swearing of oath, indebtedness and death threats

Swearing of oath, indebtedness and death threats from pimps, traffickers and the lords of the commercial sex work compels commercial sex workers to hang in on their work. In the interviews conducted by the researcher amongst the two research participants, the researcher found that commercial sex workers who are trafficked are mostly sent to fetish shrines to swear oaths not to run away so sometimes the best option is to hang in on the work if not they will die. Traffickers also sometimes promise some of these commercial sex workers of securing them good jobs in Ghana on arrival so the cost of migrating into Ghana is paid by these traffickers hence these females commercial sex workers are forced by their indebtedness to continue working in spite of the hazards they face as commercial sex workers. Some of the traffickers or pimps sometimes have bouncers and criminal gangs who monitor these commercial sex workers and their moves. Any attempt by these commercial sex workers to run away is met with death threats hence these commercial sex workers have no option than to hang in as sex slaves to their traffickers.

According to both Amanda and Jemima “In the commercial sex work, there are many eyes so you cannot run away. If you are working for a pimp or a trafficker and you are not making good sales or money, not treating clients well or planning to run away, your master can kill you. If you were trafficked, you need to work hard and pay your master or trafficker or you need to have a special protection to run away or to stop the commercial sex work, if not, your reward is death”.

### Engaging in legal business to operate as commercial sex workers

Engaging in legal business to operate as commercial sex workers is one of the means through which commercial sex workers are able to hang in on their profession. Due to the stigma, stereotype and prejudice against commercial sex workers from society, some commercial sex workers resort to legal businesses to hang in with their profession. Some commercial sex workers are into the selling of bags, dresses, hair pieces cosmetics and other life essentials through which these commercial sex workers solicit for clients. From Jemima “Our profession is changing due to the stigma from the society, so to solicit for clients some of our colleagues are selling men attires such as boxers, briefs and others to be able to continue the work so that people will not know they are prostitutes”.

### The sense of belonging to a networked group

The sense of belonging to a networked group helps commercial sex workers in the Ga East Municipality to hang in on their work in spite of the many challenges they face from society, state institutions, clients and criminal gangs. From the data collected from the two research participants, commercial sex workers feel alienated from the larger society so once they stop their work, they will still not be accepted by the larger society through the perception of their work but once they are still in the profession, members render solidarity, support, friendship, love and care for one another hence making individuals in the group to feel a sense of belonging which they may not have from the society or family once they leave the commercial sex work. Also, commercial sex workers are friends to other marginalized groups on the streets such as night hawkers, bartenders and food vendors at their usual joints of soliciting for clients hence drawing resilience and strength from all these groups found on the street to hang in on their commercial sex work. This finding is in line with the social identity theory of (Tajfel and Turner, 1979)[22] which states that in-group members always accept themselves as good while out-group members are seen as bad and

vice versa. So once, commercial sex workers continue to practice their profession, they stay together as a common group against the stigma from society (Crime and Justice Research Centre, 2015)[7]. This finding is supported by the research participants in the following quotations;

Amanda “In this work we are one because the state, society and our clients treat us the same. Once you are arrested as a commercial sex worker, your family members will not come and bail or fight for you but members of the group who are fellow commercial sex workers will come as the next arrest could be them”.

### Conclusions and recommendations

This research deals with an important yet understudied topic due to how society and states in Africa treat commercial sex work and commercial sex workers. In spite of the negative treatments from the states and societies in Africa towards commercial sex work, the researcher has assessed the hazards of one of the most marginalized professions globally which is commercial sex work. In this study, the researcher through the two research participants came across some major hazards of the commercial sex profession which include, stress, sexually transmitted diseases, robberies, violence, and human rights abuse amongst others.

In spite of these challenges or hazards commercial sex workers face in their daily professional lives, they have put up some resilience in the form of coping strategies which include, condom usage, working outside their local communities or country, in cash or in-kind service to police and other males (pimps, gangs and bouncers) involved in the commercial sex work for protection, pregnancy by trafficked commercial sex workers as a means of gaining their freedoms as well as the use of drugs. Above all the hazards faced by commercial sex workers and the difficult coping processes or strategies used by commercial sex workers, commercial sex workers hang in on their work through the easy money they make, threats of death by traffickers and pimps, swearing of oath and engaging in legal businesses in order to solicit for clients.

The researcher recommends that state institutions in Ghana make it a priority to ensure that the rights of commercial sex workers are respected as they are also human beings. Once state institutions are able to accord commercial sex workers respect and some protection, their clients and state officials such as the police will not abuse, cheat or extort money from them.

Commercial sex workers in Dome- St. John's and for this matter those in Accra need to be given counselling by state institutions, non- governmental organizations and other humanitarian bodies as well as specialized agencies of regional and international organizations. Once this is done, commercial sex workers who do not want to hang in on their profession can back out. Once counselling is given to these commercial sex workers, they can easily cope after backing out of commercial sex work. The state, society and communities must also be educated on the need not to stigmatize, stereotype and hold prejudice against commercial sex workers so that they can easily be integrated into the Ghanaian society once they decide to back out on commercial sex work.

Though the laws in Ghana criminalizes commercial sex work, the rate of participation in commercial sex work and the number of commercial sex joints in the Ga East municipality where Dome St. John's is located calls for state intervention through the Ghana AIDS Commission, pharmaceutical companies, Ghana Health Service and condom manufacturers to educate these commercial sex workers on the use of condoms and how to seek medical care and test for sexually transmitted diseases for early intervention and treatment. Some clients who pay well demand unprotected sex from commercial sex workers which they oblige due to the money involved as compared to protected sex. This act of offering unprotected sex for high prices is likely to be a vector of transmitting sexual diseases in the Ga East Municipality and even across Accra and its immediate environs.

The state must also amend the laws criminalizing commercial sex

work so that the police can even use commercial sex workers as informants to arrest criminals and other people who use commercial sex work as an avenue to perpetrate crimes such as peddling of drugs such as cocaine and cocaine ice, trafficking, robberies and dangerous gangs (Ofori et al., 2024)[20] who threaten prostitutes who decide to back out of the commercial sex profession with death.

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