



THE "COPING STRATEGY" PARADOX: AN INVESTIGATION INTO SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF FEMALE SEX COMMODIFICATION ON LOCAL POVERTY CYCLES AMONG INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS) IN LIMBE MUNICIPALITY, CAMEROON.

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Cite this article:

Elizabeth Ankiambom Chiatii (2026), The "Coping Strategy" Paradox: An Investigation into Socio-Economic Implications of Female Sex Commodification on Local Poverty Cycles Among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) In Limbe Municipality, Cameroon. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 9(3), 86-123. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-QH4HZ8LY

Manuscript History

Received: 4 Mar 2026

Accepted: 4 Apr 2026

Published: 4 May 2026

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates the "Coping Strategy Paradox" among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Limbe Municipality, Cameroon, examining how the commodification of female sexuality as a survival mechanism may paradoxically perpetuate long-term poverty cycles. Regarding methods, a cross-sectional survey of 200 internally displaced women was analyzed using descriptive statistics, probit regression, instrumental variables (2SLS) regression, and multiple regression. The results showed that sixty-nine percent of participants reported involvement in sex work. Probit regression revealed that sex commodification represents a "frustration-induced" reaction to labour market exclusion (socio-economic drivers' index: coef = 1.73, $p < 0.01$). Two-stage least squares regression disclosed that sex commodification significantly intensifies household poverty cycles (coef = 13.05, $p < 0.01$). Qualitatively, earnings address immediate needs like food and healthcare, displacing children's education expenditures, while stigma creates intergenerational barriers. At the meso-level, 75% of respondents indicated increased community tensions, and 80% expressed concerns about stigma's implications for their children's futures. University education was identified as protective against household poverty (coef = -0.16, $p < 0.05$). Newly displaced women, those with larger families, and divorced women emerged as most susceptible to entrenched poverty. In conclusion, sex commodification among IDPs is a rational survival response to systemic failures, not deviance, which worsens household poverty and erodes community cohesion. Policy must address displacement causes and provide economic support, healthcare, child-focused aid, and stigma reduction to break intergenerational poverty cycles.*

KEYWORDS: Sex Commodification, Internally Displaced Persons, Coping Strategy Paradox, Poverty Cycles, Cameroon, Instrumental Variables, Intergenerational Poverty, Stigma.



INTRODUCTION

In scenarios characterized by extended displacement and socio-economic vulnerability, survival strategies frequently arise that embody both human resilience and the disintegration of traditional social frameworks, especially among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who experience legal and social marginalization (Idris, 2020). The Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon has exacerbated this situation, compelling thousands from the Northwest and Southwest regions to seek asylum in coastal urban centers such as Limbe. For female IDPs, this transition engenders a total forfeiture of livelihoods and social safety nets, thereby creating a "coping strategy" paradox: while the commodification of sexual services offers immediate financial relief to avert starvation, it often perpetuates enduring cycles of poverty through social exclusion and health vulnerabilities (Neba & Fonchingong, 2023). Within the confines of Limbe Municipality, the commodification of sex thus functions as a double-edged sword—providing temporary alleviation from destitution while simultaneously undermining the human capital essential for community development.

Female IDPs encounter multifaceted vulnerabilities, inclusive of heightened risks of gender-based violence and limited access to stable income, which drives some individuals toward transactional or survival sex as an immediate adaptive strategy (Akinola et al., 2022). This phenomenon transcends mere individual choice, manifesting as a socio-economic reaction to systemic inadequacies, becoming entrenched in local economies and potentially distorting community dynamics, labor markets, and gender inequalities (Dankelman, 2022; Chant & Evans, 2020). For these women, engaging in sex work may finance basic necessities, housing, and educational opportunities for children; nevertheless, it concurrently introduces health risks, social stigma, and chronic precarity (Oppong & Agyei, 2021).

Notwithstanding this reality, a comprehensive empirical understanding of sex commodification among IDPs in Limbe remains insufficient. Pre-existing studies frequently contextualize this issue within frameworks of sexual violence or public health, neglecting its function as "frustration-induced entrepreneurship" (Oluwaniyi, 2021). Critical inquiries persist regarding the generation of income, its allocation, and whether this practice cultivates genuine resilience or merely facilitates day-to-day survival (Akinola, Olutola, & Ngeamu, 2022). The community-level repercussions—such as distortions in informal labor markets, social stigma, and evolving gender norms—remain inadequately investigated in Limbe (Chant & Evans, 2020). As a result, policy and humanitarian interventions continue to be fragmented and compartmentalized (Bavier, 2021), thereby jeopardizing efforts that eliminate a survival mechanism without presenting secure alternatives. This research void obstructs the understanding of how this strategy of last resort encapsulates both risks and adaptive capabilities. Addressing this gap is imperative to dismantle the coping paradox and forge sustainable pathways out of poverty (Tanyi et al., 2022; IOM, 2022; Fonchingong & Mbah, 2023). This brings to fore some research objectives for this study.

Research Objectives

This study aims at critically investigate the dualistic role of female sex commodification as both a survival mechanism and a potential catalyst for entrenched poverty among IDPs in Limbe Municipality. The following specific objectives will guide the investigation:



- To assess the socio-economic drivers and the micro-economic logics of female sex commodification as a "frustration-induced" entrepreneurial strategy among IDPs in Limbe.
- The Effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles among internally displaced households of female prostitutes in Limbe Municipality and
- To analyze the meso-level implications of sex commodification on the local socio-economic fabric of Limbe Municipality

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Prostitution and its forms

The term "prostitution" stems from the Latin word "prostitute", which originally meant "to display for sale" or "to put forward publicly." However, the initial meaning of the word did not inherently include the idea of sexual activity in exchange for money. It is defined as the act of performing sexual activities, often involving physical contact like intercourse, oral sex, or manual stimulation, in return for payment. This practice is categorized as a form of sex work and is sometimes viewed as gender-based violence. Worldwide, an estimated 42 million individuals are engaged in prostitution, contributing to an annual global revenue of more than \$100 billion.

Legal approaches to prostitution differ significantly across the globe. Some perspectives regard it as exploitation and violence, particularly towards women and children. This stance often supports models like the "Nordic model," which criminalizes the purchase of sexual services but not their sale, as implemented in nations such as Canada, France, and Sweden. In contrast, organizations like Amnesty International advocate for the complete decriminalization of prostitution, viewing it as a legitimate form of work. (Brewer et al., 2000)

Commercial sexual activity encompasses various forms, distinguished primarily by their social setting and physical location. One of the most conspicuous types is street-based prostitution, where individuals offering sexual services seek customers in public areas like street corners, parks, or along major roads. This form carries elevated dangers such as physical harm, legal repercussions, and health concerns, largely due to its open and frequently uncontrolled environment (Weitzer, 2018).

In contrast, indoor commercial sex includes several variations, such as brothel-based, escort, and window-display prostitution. Brothels are managed facilities housing multiple individuals who offer sexual services, often benefiting from security and organizational oversight, which can mitigate specific risks compared to street-based activities (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005). **Escort services** involve individuals who arrange appointments through agencies or independently, meeting customers in hotels or private homes. This type is generally seen as more exclusive and less detectable by law enforcement (Kempadoo, 2016).

A prevalent form is window-display prostitution, famously regulated in the Netherlands, where workers lease a brightly lit window to attract prospective customers. While this model offers some official safeguards, it may nonetheless include exploitative actions (Dalla, 2017).



Furthermore, types like bar or club prostitution are conducted within nightclubs, karaoke bars, or massage parlors, often creating ambiguity between lawful entertainment and commercial sexual acts (Weitzer, 2018).

Finally, survival sex is a form prompted by urgent financial necessity—frequently observed among homeless young people, individuals with substance dependency, or migrant populations—where commercial sex is exchanged for essential provisions like sustenance or accommodation, rather than being a deliberate career choice (Kempadoo, 2016). Although not consistently termed commercial sex, survival sex exhibits the fundamental characteristic of a transactional exchange and is common in situations of severe economic hardship.

The Paradox of sex commodification as a coping strategy among internally displaced women: push-pull dynamics, poverty cycles, and urban contextual drivers

The commodification of sexual services among internally displaced women constitutes a multifaceted humanitarian dilemma that is fundamentally anchored in the exigencies of survival rather than authentic agency. Within the context of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the disintegration of conventional support networks and the abrupt forfeiture of livelihoods render transactional sex an ostensibly obligatory recourse (Hanmer et al., 2015). To elucidate this intricate dynamic, scholars delineate between “push factors”—adverse circumstances that compel women to abandon legitimate economic pursuits—and “pull factors”—perceived advantages that draw them into the informal sex economy.

Push factors encompass complete asset depletion, wherein women lose their homes, agricultural lands, and social networks, thereby eliminating any collateral that would facilitate entry into formal economic markets (Che & Njong, 2020). Chronic food insecurity serves as a pivotal catalyst, compelling women to prioritize immediate caloric intake at the expense of long-term repercussions (Beseng, 2020). Institutional marginalization within host municipalities, characterized by the absence of legal documentation or social capital, precludes IDPs from even the most minimal remunerative legal employment opportunities (Tandou-Andapa, 2023). Displacement inherently results in the systematic dismantling of established economic safety nets (Boyd, 2006), and acute economic deprivation directly correlates with an increased propensity for engaging in transactional sex (Hanmer et al., 2015; MDPI, 2024).

Pull factors include the minimal barriers to entry—sex work necessitates no initial capital investment, rendering it accessible to women who have experienced total loss (Ngalim, 2021). The availability of daily cash liquidity affords immediate financial independence, a critical factor when urgent survival imperatives preclude delays in returns (Fongang & Anyam, 2022). Urban demand, propelled by tourism, military presence, and maritime commerce in cities such as Limbe, engenders a sustained market that lures vulnerable women into this economic sector (Ngalim, 2021). Regular clientele may additionally serve as informal insurance, providing monetary transfers in times of income volatility (Blattman, 2011). Deceptive assurances from exploitative entities further ensnare victims in progressively deteriorating conditions (MDPI, 2024).

This coping mechanism presents a paradox: while the commodification of sex facilitates immediate survival, it concurrently exacerbates and perpetuates a cycle of entrenched poverty. This cycle is initiated by asset depletion resulting from displacement, which propels women into high-risk survival strategies. Although income is generated through these means, vital



assets are forfeited—personal well-being declines due to violence and disease (ResearchGate, 2015); social ties are fractured by stigma (Fonchingong & Mbah, 2023); and legal protections are relinquished as a consequence of criminalization. These detrimental losses negate any earnings, thus thwarting opportunities for savings directed towards education or the acquisition of assets. The cycle perpetuates itself across generations: children, particularly girls, are compelled to abandon their educational pursuits to contribute economically, thereby inheriting the same constrained options and normalizing precarious economic behaviors.

In the urban milieu of Limbe, displacement necessitates integration into a competitive informal economy that is ill-suited for unskilled labor. IDPs encounter hostility from entrenched market participants and suffer social isolation due to the disruption of kinship ties (Fonchingong & Mbah, 2023; Oppong & Agyei, 2021). A localized internal market emerges wherein other displaced males become clients, thereby normalizing the practice within settlement communities. Family earnings remain precarious and are primarily allocated to urgent necessities, seldom permitting asset accumulation. At a community level, this practice may suppress wages in other informal female employment sectors and heighten tensions between IDPs and host populations. Humanitarian aid programs confront a significant dilemma: health-oriented interventions neglect the economic underpinnings of the issues at hand, while slow-yield income-generating initiatives are unable to compete with the immediacy of monetary returns from sex work (Hunter, 2022). concrete strategies demand a comprehensive set of actions that take poverty into account. These include direct financial assistance to ease extreme need; practical and stable ways for people to earn a living; local community-driven efforts to lessen social disapproval; and fair access to health services, legal assistance, and safety measures. Lasting freedom from poverty can only be achieved by tackling both its economic root causes and its unintended negative effects.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The research is explicitly situated within the construct of the "Coping Strategy Paradox," a notion derived from the literature concerning asset-based poverty traps (Carter & Barrett, 2006). This paradox suggests that a survival strategy employed to mitigate immediate deprivation may concurrently perpetuate entrenched cycles of poverty. The study utilizes this conceptual framework to elucidate the rationale behind the engagement of female Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Limbe in sex commodification as a calculated economic reaction to systemic dysfunctions, while simultaneously remaining ensnared in intergenerational poverty.

Multiple complementary theoretical frameworks substantiate the analysis. Initially, Oluwaniyi's (2021) theory of "frustration-induced entrepreneurship" reconceptualizes sex work not as a form of deviance but rather as an entrepreneurial reaction to exclusion from the labor market, wherein women utilize their corporeal assets as their final recourse when alternative economic opportunities are obstructed. Furthermore, the **asset-based poverty trap theory (Carter & Barrett, 2006)** elucidates how displacement precipitates the disintegration of the "asset pentagon" (comprising physical, financial, human, social, and political capital). Although sex work yields immediate financial returns, it systematically undermines health (human capital), erodes social networks (social capital), and compromises legal standing (political capital), engendering a net deficit that exacerbates poverty.



Moreover, Sen's (1999) **capability approach** is invoked to demonstrate that education broadens substantive freedoms and enhances navigational capacities; however, the presence of university-educated women in the sphere of sex work highlights a significant market failure in which even augmented capabilities fail to secure dignified employment. Additionally, the study draws upon Chant's (2008) examination of the feminization of poverty to underscore the distinct challenges faced by married and divorced women, wherein male partners may exert control over earnings or redirect resources, while widows might experience enhanced financial autonomy.

Lastly, Runciman's (1966) theory of relative deprivation provides an explanation for the counterintuitive observation that as women's incomes experience modest increases, their awareness of their deficiencies concurrently heightens, amplifying the perception of entrapment within poverty cycles.

Recent scholarly inquiries have continued to corroborate and extend Runciman's theoretical constructs. Koehler (2024) applied relative deprivation theory to the domain of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), illustrating its enduring relevance in elucidating how perceived disadvantage relative to others can forecast political violence. Empirical research conducted by Bellet and Colson-Sihra (2025) in India revealed that households exposed to inequality tend to reallocate resources away from fundamental nutrition toward "little luxuries" consumed by wealthier peers, thereby directly supporting Runciman's assertion that social comparison reconfigures hierarchies of need. Lilly and colleagues (2025), employing a longitudinal panel study over a 13-year period (N = 75,073), identified a "Deprived class" (comprising 9.5% of participants) that exhibited an escalation of group-based relative deprivation over time, thereby empirically validating Runciman's differentiation between individual and group-based deprivation. Prosser (2024) remarked that the theory of relative deprivation continues to stimulate research into the interplay of emotion, culture, and socio-economic transformations. Stronge et al. (2025) further established that intra-individual variations in psychological entitlement forecast subsequent shifts in both individual and group-based relative deprivation, thereby reinforcing the dynamic character of deprivation perceptions. Collectively, these contemporary studies affirm that Runciman's theoretical framework retains substantial relevance in explicating why modest income increments among IDP women—when juxtaposed with their non-displaced counterparts—may exacerbate dissatisfaction rather than alleviate poverty. In summary, these theoretical perspectives jointly elucidate the paradox: the very strategy that secures survival in the present systematically undermines the capital requisite for transcending poverty in the future.

We have the **relevance of the theories to the study:** This research examines a deep puzzle concerning displaced women in Limbe: how they engage in selling sex as a way to survive, yet remain caught in long-term poverty. To understand this complex situation, the study utilizes six different theoretical frameworks, each offering a distinct way of looking at the issue. First, the Coping Strategy Dilemma (Carter & Barrett, 2006) suggests that while engaging in sex work offers rapid financial relief, it erodes crucial resources like health, social connections, and legal standing, which are essential for lasting escape from poverty. Second, Oluwaniyi's (2021) concept of "frustration-driven enterprise" reframes sex work not as an individual failing, but as a logical economic response to being shut out of formal employment opportunities, thereby placing responsibility on societal obstacles rather than personal choices. Third, the asset-based poverty traps framework (Carter & Barrett, 2006) utilizes the "asset pentagon" model to



illustrate how forced relocation diminishes various forms of capital—physical, monetary, human, social, and political—and how sex work further damages one's health, public image, and legal status. Fourth, Sen's (1999) capability approach shifts attention from mere income to the actual opportunities and freedoms women possess, highlighting how societal barriers can prevent even those with higher education from obtaining respectable work. Fifth, Chant's (2008) framework on the feminization of poverty separates women by their marital status, demonstrating that married, divorced, and widowed women experience different forms of economic hardship, which allows for more specific aid efforts.

Empirical Review

This literature review explores the connections between forced displacement, financial hardship, and the practice of exchanging sex for money in Sub-Saharan African regions affected by conflict. It pays particular attention to the situation arising from Cameroon's Anglophone crisis (2017–present), which has led to women and girls being relocated to urban centers such as Limbe and Douala. The review is structured around three specific objectives of the study: the socio-economic drivers and micro-economic logics of sex commodification as a frustration-induced entrepreneurial strategy; the effect on ongoing cycles of poverty within households; and the wider consequences for local community structures and economies.

The socio-economic drivers and micro-economic logics of sex commodification as a frustration-induced entrepreneurial strategy: Research consistently identifies poverty, a lack of social support, and limited legitimate job opportunities as key motivators. A study by Pincock et al. (2026) in Ethiopia found that individuals often enter sex work due to an absence of supportive networks, with the associated stigma further deepening their pre-existing social isolation. This observation is particularly relevant for internally displaced persons (IDPs), as displacement inherently breaks down informal safety nets.

The idea of "entrepreneurship driven by desperation" is supported by studies showing that displaced women often see sex work as a deliberate economic strategy. For example, Ndeh (2019) documented that women in Cameroonian cities like Limbe, Douala, and Mutengene engage in contract sex during periods of economic boom, suggesting a rational decision-making process. Migration acts as a crucial connecting factor. Oxfam Policy and Practice (2026) noted that most rural-to-urban migrants in Ethiopia are female, facing limited formal employment, often moving from poor domestic work conditions to sex work. The Guardian Post Cameroon (2023) reported that displaced women from Cameroon's Anglophone regions exhaust all other work options, both formal and informal, before resorting to sex work, indicating it's a last resort rather than a first choice.

The age at which someone begins sex work significantly affects their welfare. Pincock et al. (2026) found that women who started sex work before age fifteen were more prone to moderate or severe depression and a higher risk of violence. Simonsson (2024) observed a similar pattern in Bangladesh, where adolescent girls as young as fourteen become primary family providers in contexts of climate-induced displacement, highlighting consistent age-related vulnerabilities across different displacement scenarios.

Secondly, we have the impact on family poverty cycles: The link between sex commodification and household poverty presents a paradox: while it provides immediate income to prevent destitution, structural conditions often prevent lasting poverty reduction. The Guardian Post



Cameroon (2023) reported that Cameroonian sex workers are required to pay 25,000 CFA francs after arrest, an informal fee that depletes their earnings. These "predation costs"—including police bribes, landlord extortion, and clients not paying—act as traps that perpetuate poverty.

Long-term evidence from India offers a comparative perspective. Sarkar and Das (2025) showed that organized sex workers in Kolkata earn higher wages and experience less violence, with the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee representing over 65,000 sex workers. The absence of similar collective groups among IDP sex workers in Cameroon likely worsens their financial instability.

Oxfam Policy and Practice (2026) found that although women turn to sex work due to prolonged economic strain, any economic empowerment gained occurs within an entrenched patriarchal system that reinforces disempowering inequalities. While income may enable short-term survival, it often strengthens the very structural inequalities that made women vulnerable to displacement-induced poverty.

Intergenerational effects also require attention. Simonsson (2024) documented that displaced sex workers with dependents often use their earnings (between \$120-\$180 per month) for rent and siblings' education, yet the family continues to live in cramped conditions. Sex work rarely generates enough surplus to truly escape poverty. Tsholwana (2025) provided a personal account from South Africa, revealing the psychological dimensions: leaving sex work required not only alternative income but also healing from trauma and rebuilding self-worth—factors frequently overlooked in poverty alleviation programs.

Thirdly, there is the broader effects on local communities: At the community level, displaced populations involved in sex work create complex effects. The News Minute (2025) documented tensions in Kerala, India, between local and migrant sex workers, where prejudice and exclusion led local workers to shun migrants due to fears of losing business. This is highly relevant to Limbe Municipality, where IDP sex workers might compete with local workers, potentially lowering prices and causing conflict between groups.

The criminalization of sex work also leads to broader governance issues. The Guardian Post Cameroon (2023) noted that sex work remains illegal under Cameroon's Penal Code. Police enforcement practices often involve demanding bribes and push sex workers into more isolated, dangerous environments. Pincock et al. (2026) recommended multi-stakeholder engagement involving police, social services, and legal systems—an approach absent in Cameroonian municipalities, which perpetuates criminalization, violence, and institutional alienation.

Historical research reveals patterns in policy responses. Vuolajärvi (2024) argued that current approaches resemble earlier "vagrancy" laws aimed at controlling poor, mobile populations disrupted by social upheaval. This perspective suggests that local responses to IDP sex workers in Limbe are shaped by deep-seated cultural beliefs about proper female mobility and labor.

Public health consequences are crucial. Doctors Without Borders (2025) demonstrated in Zimbabwe that peer-educator models successfully bridge the gap between marginalized sex workers and healthcare systems, conducting over 8,400 consultations in Mbare within a single year. The Guardian Post Cameroon (2023) provided anecdotal evidence that unwanted



pregnancies have increased among IDP host communities, suggesting that health impacts extend beyond sex workers themselves.

Positive outcomes are also possible. Sarkar and Das (2025) documented that collective organization among Kolkata sex workers led to positive results, including manufacturing essential goods and implementing literacy programs. While not yet observed among Cameroonian IDP sex workers, these examples suggest pathways for improving challenging situations.

Finally, Tsholwana (2025) contributed insight that stigma persists even after exiting sex work, creating barriers to housing, employment, and social integration that can push some women back into sex work. The broader community impacts extend beyond active participation; communities develop response patterns that shape the life chances of former sex workers long after they have stopped engaging in commercial sex.

Research Gaps and Contribution of the study to knowledge

The study highlights several important areas where current research is lacking, which justifies its investigation. Firstly, the author points out that previous research on sex work among displaced individuals in Cameroon has primarily focused on aspects of sexual violence or health concerns. This approach overlooks the possibility that sex work might function as a form of "frustration-induced entrepreneurship." This conceptual oversight has led to sex work being perceived mainly as a consequence of victimization, instead of an understandable economic strategy adopted due to difficulties in finding formal employment. Secondly, there is insufficient factual data concerning how earnings from sex work are acquired and utilized, and whether this activity truly fosters long-term resilience or simply helps individuals cope on a daily basis. Thirdly, the author observes that the broader community impacts in Limbe Municipality, such as changes in informal job markets, social disapproval, and shifting gender roles, have not been thoroughly examined. Fourthly, the paper underscores that existing policy responses and humanitarian aid have been disconnected and poorly coordinated, frequently removing a coping strategy without offering stable alternatives. Lastly, a methodological deficiency is identified: earlier studies have not sufficiently addressed the mutual influence between poverty and sex work, nor have they used advanced statistical methods to determine cause-and-effect relationships.

Contribution of the Study to Knowledge: This research offers several unique insights to the existing body of knowledge. Firstly, it presents the initial empirical examination of the "Coping Strategy Paradox" in a displacement setting in Cameroon. It quantitatively shows that engaging in sex work substantially worsens household poverty over time, instead of reducing it. This proof of causality, derived using Two-Stage Least Squares regression and validated by diagnostic tests for the instrumental variables method, marks a significant methodological improvement compared to earlier descriptive studies. Secondly, the research defines and applies the concept of "frustration-induced entrepreneurship" within the context of displaced populations. It reveals that 70% of participants cited the absence of formal employment as the main reason for engaging in sex work, with a socio-economic factors index being the strongest indicator of participation. Thirdly, the study offers new factual data on how poverty is passed down through generations. It found that 77.5% of women worried their children would be compelled into similar work, and 75% stated that healthcare costs often took priority over their children's education expenses. Fourthly, the research pinpoints particular groups most at risk



of prolonged poverty—namely, recently displaced women, those supporting larger families, and divorced women. This provides detailed information for directing policy efforts effectively. Lastly, by reporting that 85% of participants consider sex work a means of financial autonomy despite its future disadvantages, the study challenges both oversimplified portrayals of victims and judgmental viewpoints. It reinterprets sex work as a "sad but comprehensible reaction to significant failures in humanitarian assistance, job availability, and community support structures."

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilizes a concurrent mixed-methods approach, blending both qualitative and quantitative strategies, to thoroughly explore the socio-economic effects of sex commodification as a form of frustration-driven entrepreneurship. This method is chosen because the intricate and sensitive nature of the issue necessitates the in-depth insights provided by qualitative methods alongside the generalizable trends identified through quantitative approaches. The methodology is specifically designed to reach and ethically engage with a hidden and vulnerable demographic within the urban displacement setting of Limbe Municipality, Cameroon, in accordance with guidelines for researching hard-to-reach populations in humanitarian contexts (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007).

Sources of Data and Collection Methods

Data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The collection of primary information will utilize four key tools, managed by a group of female research assistants who are trained, culturally sensitive, and proficient in Pidgin English and regional dialects. The main group for this investigation comprises adult women, specifically those aged 18 and older, who are internally displaced persons (IDPs). These individuals must have resided in Limbe Municipality for at least six months and primarily or significantly depend on commercial sex as a means of earning a living. Additional participant groups include male IDPs, whose insights helps to understand the factors driving demand. Key community representatives, such as local leaders and members of the host community, will also be involved.

For primary data gathering, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were be carried out. The interview framework, developed from academic literature on survival economies and poverty cycles, investigated personal accounts of displacement, intricate paths for making a living, the small-scale financial handling of earnings and risks, encounters with discrimination and aggression, and expectations regarding future movement. These discussions occurred in private, safe settings to guarantee privacy and security.

Secondary data is obtained through the examination of documents. This involves analyzing Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to comprehend the population characteristics of displaced individuals in Limbe. It also includes reviewing policy papers from the Limbe City Council and pertinent national government departments, as well as operational reports from non-governmental organizations. If feasible, compiled and de-identified statistical patterns related to sexual health indicators from local medical facilities were sought for cross-referencing purposes.



Study Population, Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The **primary study population** comprises adult female internally displaced persons (IDPs) aged 18 years and older who have resided in Limbe Municipality for at least six months and primarily depend on commercial sex for their livelihood. Additional participant groups include male IDPs (to understand demand drivers), community representatives (local leaders and host community members), and organizational representatives (NGO staff, health and social service officials).

The sampling technique employed is a flexible, multi-stage approach. to ensure its methodological soundness, ethical conduct, and the production of reliable insights for both its qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative (numerical) parts. This method aligns with recognized best practices for studying vulnerable groups who are difficult to access, particularly those affected by displacement. (Eckman et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2023 & Surendran et al., 2025). Given the distinct goals of the qualitative and quantitative sections, separate yet interconnected sampling methods were used. Since the primary population is often concealed, faces social stigma, and is not distributed randomly, it is neither practical nor ethical to employ random sampling techniques. Therefore, the study used a multi-stage approach that combines targeted selection with Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS).

Quantitative Component Sampling: For the quantitative portion, which involved a household survey, the study utilized Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS; Heckathorn, 1997). **The process begins with a small number of initial participants, known as "seeds," who are purposefully** selected from the qualitative study group. These seeds then invite a limited number of individuals from their social circles using coded vouchers. This method creates recruitment networks that can reach deeply into social groups, yielding estimates that are more representative. (Salganik, 2006).

This recruitment was encouraged through a dual incentive system: one payment for participating in the survey and a second payment for successfully referring new participants (Wejnert & Heckathorn, 2008).

Qualitative Component Sampling For the qualitative portion, which included interviews and group discussions, researchers first intentionally selected a varied group of initial participants, ensuring differences in age, how long they had been displaced, their original location, marital status, and whether they had dependents. After this initial selection, a "snowball" method was used, where these participants referred others, creating several referral chains until no new information or themes were discovered.

Sample Size Determination: The sample size was computed using a formula that adjusts for the design effect (DEFF) typical of RDS studies, where clustering and homophily (the tendency of individuals to recruit others with similar characteristics) increase the required sample size compared to simple random sampling..

Step 1: Calculate initial sample size for simple random sampling (n_0)

The formula used is:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{d^2}$$



Where:

$Z = 1.96$ (for a 95% confidence interval)

$p = 0.5$ (anticipated population proportion for a key indicator, conservatively set to maximize sample size)

$d = 0.07$ (desired margin of error of $\pm 7\%$)

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{(0.07)^2}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{0.0049}$$

$$n_0 = \frac{0.9604}{0.0049} \approx 196$$

Step 2: Adjust for design effect (n_{adj})

The formula to incorporate the design effect is:

$$n_{adj} = n_0 \times DEFF$$

Where:

$n_0 = 196$

$DEFF = 2.0$ (estimated design effect based on previously published RDS studies with analogous populations, as cited in Salganik, 2006)

$$n_{adj} = 196 \times 2.0 = 392$$

Step 3: Final pragmatic target

In light of practical constraints and to facilitate comprehensive subgroup analyses (e.g., by age, household composition), the target sample size was pragmatically established at:

$$N = 200 \text{ completed surveys}$$

The author notes that while this figure is below the idealized DEFF-adjusted estimate of 392, it aligns with numerous field-based RDS studies focused on hidden populations and is regarded as adequate to identify significant associations and to furnish descriptive estimates with appropriate precision for critical variables, contingent upon recruitment achieving sufficient network breadth (Johnston, Chen, & Silva-Santisteban, 2016)

Summary of Formula

The primary formula used for sample size determination under RDS can be summarized as:

$$N = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{d^2} \times DEFF$$



With the specific values applied:

$$N = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5}{(0.07)^2} \times 2.0 \approx 200 \text{ (pragmatically adjusted)}$$

Ethical Considerations

Given the significantly vulnerable characteristics of the study cohort, internally displaced women engaged in sex work, a stigmatized and illicit practice in Cameroon, stringent ethical protections were essential. The research conformed to recognized protocols for conducting investigations involving hard-to-reach and marginalized populations within humanitarian frameworks (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007).

Institutional Approval and Informed Consent: The research protocol obtained formal endorsement from a recognized ethics committee, specifically the Institutional Review Board of the Catholic University of Cameroon (CATUC), Bamenda. The process of informed consent was conceptualized as a continuous and evolving interaction rather than a singular occurrence. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with comprehensive verbal and written descriptions of the study's aims, methodologies, risks, and advantages, communicated in Pidgin English and local dialects by trained female research facilitators. Participants were unequivocally apprised of their rights regarding voluntary participation, which included the autonomy to withdraw at any juncture without incurring penalties or forfeiting access to support services. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the potential for literacy challenges, consent was documented through verbal affirmation on a recorded ethics script, with participants retaining the discretion to refuse audio recording (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

Confidentiality and Anonymity: To safeguard participants against possible legal repercussions, social exclusion, or retaliatory violence, stringent confidentiality protocols were enacted. All identifying details (names, addresses, photographs) were systematically excluded from data collection instruments. Instead, unique identification codes were assigned to each respondent. Interviews were conducted in private, secure settings arranged in partnership with reputable local NGOs such as Reach Out Cameroon, ensuring that discussions remained confidential. All electronic data were secured on password-protected, encrypted devices, while paper records were stored in locked filing cabinets, accessible solely to the principal investigator.

Principle of Non-Maleficence (Do No Harm): The paramount ethical principle underpinning every interaction was the prohibition of harm. All interviews were conducted by female research assistants trained in trauma-informed and gender-sensitive methodologies. A referral pathway was established, providing participants with a written directory of nearby, complimentary support services, including gender-based violence hotlines, reproductive health clinics, and psychosocial counseling centers. Research assistants were instructed to promptly terminate interviews should a participant display signs of significant distress, and to provide suitable referrals.

Compensation and Avoidance of Coercion: Participants received a modest, unconditional reimbursement (mobile phone credit equivalent to approximately 1,500 CFA francs) to acknowledge their time and participation. This compensation was intentionally calibrated to express gratitude without constituting undue inducement that could coerce participation among individuals experiencing economic hardship (Mackenzie et al., 2007). The reimbursement was



dispensed regardless of whether a participant completed the entire interview or opted to withdraw prematurely.

Researcher Positionality and Safety: The research team recognized the intrinsic power disparity between investigators and a substantially marginalized population. Female interviewers were recruited from local communities whenever feasible to foster trust and diminish social distance. Safety protocols for researchers were also instituted, including check-in procedures and access to debriefing sessions aimed at alleviating vicarious trauma. Adherence to ethical guidelines ensured that the study produced reliable and accurate findings, while upholding the rights, self-determination, and welfare of women displaced from their homes who engage in commercial sex as a means of survival.

Model Specification and Estimation for Research Objectives

To investigate the "Coping Strategy" Paradox scientifically, we must translate these social phenomena into testable models. Below are the model specifications and estimation strategies for each of the three research objectives.

Model for Objective 1: socio economic drivers and Micro-economic Logics of Frustration-Induced Entrepreneurship

To identify the drivers of the "frustration-induced" strategy, we use a **Binary Logistic Regression Model**. This is appropriate because the dependent variable is a choice: whether or not an IDP woman adopts sex commodification ($Y = 1$ or $Y = 0$).

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AD_i + \beta_2 FI_i + \beta_3 UE_i + \beta_4 SC_i + \epsilon_i$$

Y_i : Probability of adopting sex commodification.

AD : Asset Depletion (loss of home/farm).

FI : Food Insecurity index.

UE : Unemployment duration.

SC : Social Capital (access to networks/NGOs).

Estimation Technique:

Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE). We analyze the **Odds Ratios** to determine which "frustration" factor most significantly increases the likelihood of entering the sex economy. Marginal effects will be calculated to show how changes in independent variables affect the probability of choosing sex commodification.

Model for Objective 2: The Effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles among internally displaced households of female prostitutes in Limbe Municipality

Conceptual Model: This objective investigates the cyclical effect on household welfare. We conceptualize a dynamic relationship where income from sex commodification affects current consumption and investment, which in turn influences future capital accumulation and child outcomes.



Model Specification 2a: Current Poverty Impact

A **Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS)** model addresses endogeneity (poverty may drive sex work, and sex work may affect poverty measures):

First stage: Instrumental variable estimation of engagement in sex commodification

$$S_i = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 Z_i + \gamma_2 W_i + v_i$$

where S_i is a dummy for primary livelihood being sex commodification, Z_i is an instrument (e.g., community-level sex ratio among IDPs, distance to nearest police station), and W_i are other controls.

Second stage: Impact on multidimensional poverty index (MPI)

$$MPI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \hat{S}_i + \beta_2 X_i + u_i$$

where \hat{S}_i is the predicted value from first stage, and X_i includes household characteristics.

Model Specification 2b: Intergenerational Effects

A Structural Equation Model (SEM) with latent variables:

Parental Engagement → Household Resources → Child Outcomes
Stigma → Social Exclusion → Child Outcomes

Where:

Child Outcomes (latent): Educational attainment, health status, psychological well-being

Mediators: School expenditure, nutritional diversity, healthcare access, social participation

Estimation:

The 2SLS will be estimated using `ivregress` in Stata with robust standard errors. The SEM will be estimated using maximum likelihood in Mplus or Stata's `sem` command, with bootstrapped standard errors (N=1000 replications). Model fit will be assessed using CFI (>0.90), RMSEA (<0.08), and SRMR (<0.08).

Objective 3: Meso-Level Implications on the Socio-Economic Fabric

Model Specification:

Since meso-level implications involve community-wide perceptions and social cohesion, this is best modeled using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or a Qualitative Thematic Coding Frequency Model.

$$SC_c = \delta_0 + \delta_1 V_c + \delta_2 T_c + \delta_3 L_c + \eta_c SC_c$$

SC_c : Social Cohesion Index in Limbe neighborhoods.

V_c : Visibility/Prevalence of sex commodification in the zone.

T_c : Level of Trust between IDPs and host communities.



L_c : Strain on local health/security services.

Estimation Technique:

Triangulation Analysis. Quantitative frequencies of "social strain" reports are correlated with qualitative themes from Key Informant Interviews. This estimates the degree of "Social Fragmentation" within the Limbe Municipality.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of data collected from 200 internally displaced women in the Limbe Municipality. It is divided into two main sections. The first section provides descriptive statistics summarizing the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the key indices of the study. The second section presents the empirical results, offering a detailed analysis of the findings structured according to the three specific objectives that guide this investigation.

Demographic Characteristics of Internally Displaced Women in Limbe Municipality: A Descriptive Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of the variables of interest

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Age of the Women IDPs	200	2.305	1.013	1	4
Educational level	200	2.495	1.107	1	5
Marital status	200	2.000	1.098	1	4
Household size	200	5.160	0.910	1	4
Duration of stay in Limbe as an IDP	200	2.470	0.935	1	4
Estimated monthly income (FCFA)	200	2.100	0.946	1	4
Sex work (1=sex work, 0=no sex work but other occupations)	200	0.590	0.493	0	1
Socio-economic drivers index	200	0.415	0.173	0	1
Meso-level implications/factors index	200	0.523	0.134	0	1
Household poverty cycles index	200	0.090	0.132	0	1

Source: *Researcher's survey (2026)*

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables central to this investigation. These statistics offer an initial overview of the 200 internally displaced women (IDPs) surveyed in Limbe, highlighting their demographic attributes through means and standard deviations. The analysis also details the central tendencies of the constructed indices, which are crucial for understanding the study's central theme: the "coping strategy" paradox. Overall, the demographic information reveals a population that is youthful, possesses a degree of education, yet remains financially precarious. We thereby present the demographic profile of respondents.

Age of the Women IDPs (Mean = 2.305): Coded on a 1-4 scale, the mean of 2.3 indicates a predominantly young cohort. Interpreting the scale (e.g., 1=18-24, 2=25-34), this mean suggests most respondents are in their late twenties to early thirties. This age range typically



represents peak productivity, yet their marginalization from legitimate employment opportunities exacerbates the economic distress outlined in Objective 1.

Educational Level (Mean = 2.495): With an average just below 2.5 on a 1-5 scale (where 1 signifies no formal education and 5 higher education), this indicates that the typical respondent possesses some secondary schooling. This significant finding underscores that their predicament is not due to a deficit in fundamental human capital. Instead, these women, despite their qualifications, are unable to secure respectable employment, reinforcing the perspective that their involvement in sex work stems from failures within the labor market, rather than a lack of their own capacity for work.

Marital Status (Mean = 2): A mean of exactly 2 on a scale (likely 1=Married, 2=Single/Separated/Widowed) suggests that the average woman is not in a current, stable marital partnership. This absence of a male partner's financial contribution means they bear sole responsibility for their own and their children's subsistence, increasing their susceptibility and urgent requirement for immediate earnings.

Household Size (Mean = 5.16): Coded on a scale, this indicates that these women typically support several children or other dependents. This represents a substantial burden of dependency, compelling them to generate income not just for themselves but for others, thereby intensifying the urgency to secure any form of livelihood, irrespective of the associated hazards.

Duration of Stay in Limbe (Mean = 2.47): With a mean just below 2.5 on a scaled measure, this implies that respondents have been displaced for a moderate period, likely between one and three years. This duration is critical, as it signifies that the "coping strategy" observed is not merely a temporary reaction to an immediate crisis, but rather an entrenched method of earning a living. The continued engagement in sex work over this extended period contributes to the "poverty cycles" that this study aims to explore.

Estimated Monthly Income (FCFA) (Mean = 2.1):** With a standard deviation of 0.946, indicating some variability, the mean of 2.1 on a low-income scale confirms that the typical IDP household subsists on an alarmingly low income, barely able to satisfy fundamental necessities.

Key Dependent Variable: It is Sex Work Participation (Mean = 0.59). Regarding the primary dependent variable, a mean of 0.59 (coded as 1=sex work, 0=other employment) indicates that 59% of the sample (118 out of 200 individuals) are presently involved in sex work, while the remaining 41% pursue other livelihoods. This considerable prevalence among the displaced community validates the study's emphasis and reinforces the understanding of sex work as a primary survival mechanism in Limbe.

Interpretation of the Core Indices (The "Paradox" Explained): The interpretation of the core indices clarifies the "paradox." These three indices are central to the analysis, providing a quantitative measure of the seemingly conflicting role of sex work: functioning as both a means of individual survival and a factor contributing to ongoing poverty.

Socio-economic Drivers Index (Mean = 0.415):** This index quantifies the micro-economic rationale compelling women into sex work, as investigated in Objective 1. With a range of 0 to 1, a mean of 0.415 indicates a moderate-to-high level of consensus that participation is



motivated by elements such as frustration with the labor market, insufficient capital, and the urgent need for immediate funds. It implies that for most respondents, sex work represents a "frustration-driven" reaction to unavailable economic prospects, rather than a chosen profession. The standard deviation of 0.173 suggests a relatively consistent agreement on this perspective.

Household Poverty Cycles Index (Mean = 0.09): This index recorded a notably low mean of 0.09. It assesses the enduring effects on families and the potential for intergenerational poverty, as explored in Objective 2. A mean of 0.09 signifies minimal explicit agreement with propositions such as "my earnings offer no escape from poverty" or "I worry my children will be compelled into this work." This finding is crucial and potentially surprising. It does not imply the absence of poverty. Rather, it vividly demonstrates the "Coping Strategy" Paradox: because these women allocate their earnings to immediate necessities like food and housing, they may not consciously link their daily hardships to the abstract notion of a protracted "poverty cycle." The low index reflects their singular focus on present-day survival, which ironically becomes the mechanism perpetuating their long-term impoverishment. This highlights a divergence between their immediate behaviors and the eventual outcomes the research investigates.

Meso-level Implications/Factors Index (Mean = 0.523): This index achieved the highest mean among the three at 0.523. It gauges the wider ramifications for the Limbe community, as addressed in Objective 4. The elevated mean signifies a strong belief that the prevalence of sex work among IDPs negatively influences the local social and economic environment. Respondents recognized that it generates conflict with the host community, contributes to their social ostracization, and erodes traditional norms. This high score illuminates the societal expenses associated with this "coping strategy," illustrating that while it enables individual survival, it concurrently fosters discord and further isolates the displaced population within the community.

These descriptive statistics establish the foundation for a nuanced account. The archetypal IDP in this investigation is a young, unpartnered mother with some educational attainment, residing in Limbe for several years, yet still experiencing profound destitution. The indices uncover the central dilemma of the research: Her engagement in sex work represents a logical, frustration-driven reaction to undeniable economic pressures (Socio-economic index = 0.415). Nevertheless, this approach incurs significant social repercussions, contributing to her marginalization from the community (Meso-level index = 0.523). The notably low score on the household poverty index (0.09) is particularly illuminating. It does not dispute the presence of poverty but rather demonstrates how the immediate act of coping—allocating all earnings for present survival—eclipses the protracted nature of their entrapment. The women's intense focus on "coping" within this paradox hinders their ability to perceive, or address, the "poverty cycle" it sustains. This initial data prepares the ground for more comprehensive analysis using the detailed frequency distributions.



PRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS BY OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Socio-economic Drivers and Micro-economic Logics of Sex Commodification

Table 2: Probit regression results of the Socio-economic Drivers and Micro-economic Logics

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Probit coefficients				Probit (Marginal effects)			
	Sex work				Sex work			
VARIABLES	coef	aster	se	pval	coef	aster	se	pval
Sex work (1=sex work & 1 if otherwise)	.		.	.	.		.	.
socio-economic drivers index	1.73	***	0.62	0.01	1.73	***	0.62	0.01
Pre-displacement occupation	0.12	**	0.05	0.02	0.12	**	0.05	0.02
Age	-0.05		0.09	0.61	-0.05		0.09	0.61
Educational level	-0.16	*	0.09	0.07	-0.16	*	0.09	0.07
Marital status	0.03		0.09	0.78	0.03		0.09	0.78
Household size	0.16	**	0.11	0.02	0.16	**	0.11	0.02
Duration of stay in limbe as an IDP	-0.23	**	0.11	0.03	-0.23	**	0.11	0.03
Monthly income	-0.03	*	0.10	0.09	-0.03	*	0.10	0.09
Constant	-0.03	***	0.56	0.00	-0.03	***	0.56	0.00
Observations	200				200			

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: *Researcher's survey (2026)*

Results of Table 2 shows the probit regression results of the socio-economic drivers and micro-economic logics. This objective investigates how socio-economic factors influence women's engagement in sex work, viewing it as a survival strategy driven by challenging circumstances among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Limbe, Cameroon. Using a probit regression model, the research investigates how a combined measure of socio-economic factors and important demographic traits affects the likelihood of an IDP woman participating in sex work. The outcome variable is a binary indicator, where 1 signifies involvement in sex work and 0 indicates no involvement. The analysis draws on data from 200 female IDPs. Both probit coefficients and marginal effects are presented to provide a detailed understanding of both the direction and the practical significance of these influences.

The findings are presented through two types of estimates. Probit coefficients show the direction and statistical importance of the link between an independent variable and the underlying tendency to engage in sex work. However, these coefficients do not directly represent probabilities. Consequently, marginal effects are vital for practical interpretation, as they illustrate how the probability of engaging in sex work changes with a one-unit alteration in an independent variable, assuming other variables remain constant.



The "socio-economic drivers index" is a combined variable created to reflect the survival-driven rationale for engaging in sex work. It comprises five qualitative statements that describe the specific economic challenges encountered by IDP women. These statements explain why sex work is viewed not just as a final option but as a deliberate, though challenging, "business" approach arising from particular structural difficulties: 1) deep frustration due to a total absence of formal employment chances in the host community. 2) the urgent need to cope with extremely high and unfamiliar living costs in an urban environment for which they were unprepared. 3) the belief that, compared to other accessible but low-paying or capital-intensive trades, this strategy offers the quickest access to funds to meet daily survival needs. 4) The reality that the lack of initial capital creates an impossible obstacle to starting conventional small businesses, effectively channeling them towards options with no capital requirements. 5) A perspective of sex work as a contradictory means of gaining some financial independence and control in a life otherwise marked by disarray and reliance on others.

The probit analysis strongly supports these qualitative accounts with quantitative data. The index shows a positive and statistically significant relationship at the 1% level (coefficient = 1.73, $p = 0.01$). The marginal effect suggests that a one-unit rise in this index—reflecting stronger agreement with the survival-driven rationale—is linked to a significant increase in the probability of participating in sex work. This outcome clearly shows that the choice to engage in sex work is deeply connected to the particular socio-economic pressures and limited options faced by IDPs in Limbe. It converts personal stories of difficulty and limited alternatives into a quantifiable, statistically important predictor of behavior.

The variable for a woman's main occupation prior to displacement is positive and statistically significant at the 5% level (coefficient = 0.12, $p = 0.02$). The marginal effect indicates that a one-unit shift in this categorical variable (from one occupation type to the next) raises the likelihood of engaging in sex work. Considering the distribution of previous occupations (48% subsistence farmers, 16% traders, 12% housewives), this suggests that women formerly in the informal sector, often with unstable earnings and easy entry, might view sex work more readily as a survival method. Their past experience in informal economies could offer a perspective, even if different, for considering sex work as a way to earn money when other options are exhausted. Conversely, the very small proportion of former professionals (3%) in the sample might suggest that women from more secure, formal work backgrounds have different types of social connections, professional contacts, or alternative ways of coping, which decrease the probability of this particular shift.

The demographic profiles of the female IDP participants are highly important in this study. The model incorporates several important demographic traits, providing insights into which IDP women are most susceptible to engaging in sex work.

Age: The coefficient for age is negative but lacks statistical significance ($p = 0.61$). This indicates that, within the sample, age itself is not a main factor influencing participation in sex work. The likelihood of engaging in sex work is spread across all age categories (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45+), implying that the severe economic strains of displacement impact women of all adult ages, making age less crucial than economic need as a distinguishing element.

Education Level: This variable is negative and shows marginal significance at the 10% level (coefficient = -0.16, $p = 0.07$). The marginal effect suggests that as a woman attains a higher educational category, her likelihood of participating in sex work declines. The educational



categories range from 'No formal education' to 'University Degree'. This finding offers an indication that education serves as a protective element. Women with greater educational achievement, like those with GCE A-Levels or a university degree, might have somewhat better access to information, distinct social circles, or a perceived (though not always actualized) benefit in securing other work in the formal or semi-formal economy. This human capital, even if limited within a constrained host economy, could make them slightly less prone to resorting to sex work compared to a woman with no formal schooling or only primary education (FSLC). (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

Marital Status: The coefficient for marital status is positive but not at all significant ($p = 0.78$). This implies that, in this particular displacement situation, conventional classifications such as 'single,' 'married,' 'widowed,' or 'divorced/separated' do not consistently forecast participation in sex work. The intense pressures of displacement might standardize risk across various marital circumstances. For example, a married woman whose husband is also jobless and affected by displacement may face similar or even higher pressure to earn money as a single woman. Likewise, a widow lacking a male provider might be compelled to take desperate steps, just as a single woman without family support would.

Household Size: In these results, household size is positive and now statistically significant at the 5% level (coefficient = 0.16, $p = 0.02$). The marginal effect suggests that as household size grows by one category (e.g., from '1-3 persons' to '4-6 persons'), the likelihood of engaging in sex work rises. This outcome is consistent with the reasonable assumption that larger households generate increased economic demands—more people to feed, clothe, and educate—thus intensifying the urgency for displaced women to secure immediate income, irrespective of personal sacrifices.

Duration of Stay in Limbe as an IDP: This variable is negative and statistically significant at the 5% level (coefficient = -0.23, $p = 0.03$). The marginal effect indicates that for each incremental increase in the duration of stay (e.g., from '1-3 years' to '4-6 years'), the likelihood of engaging in sex work diminishes. This is a key finding. It implies that the period immediately following displacement is when vulnerability is highest. Recently arrived IDPs (those staying 'Less than 1 year') probably encounter the most severe mix of shock, extreme poverty, limited social connections, and urgent survival requirements, making them more inclined towards 'survival-driven' approaches such as sex work. With time, women might develop alternative coping methods, establish supportive networks, or secure more consistent, though still uncertain, income sources, thereby decreasing their dependence on this specific high-risk approach. (Kunz, 1973).

Monthly Income: This variable exhibits a negative and statistically significant association at the 10% level in both the coefficients and marginal effects models (coef. = -0.03, $p = 0.09$). The marginal effect indicates that as monthly income increases by one category (e.g., from 'Below 30,000 CFA' to '30,000 – 60,000 CFA'), the probability of engaging in sex work decreases. This finding affirms the anticipated inverse relationship between income level and the likelihood of participating in sex work. Individuals who have secured any form of income, however modest, are less inclined to pursue this activity. It underscores that involvement in sex work primarily functions as a last resort for those experiencing absolute income poverty. A substantial proportion (59%) of the sample engaged in sex work is predominantly concentrated in the lowest income brackets, highlighting the severe financial difficulties that compel this decision.



Alignment of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings: The quantitative results consistently align with the qualitative accounts, offering a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of the paradoxical nature of this coping mechanism.

Validation of the Frustration Narrative: The pronounced statistical significance and positive marginal impact of the socio-economic drivers index directly substantiate the perspectives articulated by women who report resorting to transactional sex due to significant frustration stemming from the scarcity of formal employment opportunities. The index quantifies this "frustration" and establishes it not as an isolated or subjective justification, but as a principal, quantifiable determinant of behavior across the population.

Confirmation of the Micro-Economic Logic: The affirmative association between the index and sex commodification also reinforces the economic rationale presented in the other statements. It confirms that for many, this choice is perceived as a consequence of economic exigency and limited entrepreneurial options. It is regarded as a commercial tactic, despite its social stigma, to cope with the elevated living expenses in the city. It is selected because it is believed to offer more immediate financial returns compared to alternative occupations that are either inaccessible or demand capital beyond their means. This finding highlights that this choice is not arbitrary, but rather a logical, albeit unfortunate, reaction to particular market inefficiencies and systemic impediments. It is, in their own words, a critical effort to achieve financial autonomy in an environment where nearly all other avenues for financial management and security are obstructed by the systemic consequences of displacement.

Objective 2: The Effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles among internally displaced households of female prostitutes in Limbe Municipality

Table 3: Reduced Form Multiple regression estimates of the effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles among internally displaced households of female prostitutes in Limbe municipality

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
VARIABLES	Coef	aster	se	pval
Sex commodification (endogenous variable)	.		.	.
Sex work as main source of income (instrumental variable)	0.15	***	0.04	0.00
Age (base:18-24 years)				
25-34 years	0.01	*	0.09	0.06
35-44 years	0.14	*	0.10	0.04
45 and above years	-0.05		0.11	0.67
Educational level (base: no formal education)				
First school leaving certificate (primary school)	0.23	**	0.10	0.02
GCE Ordinary level certificate	-0.01	*	0.11	0.09
GCE Advanced level certificate	-0.02	**	0.12	0.05
University education	-0.16	**	0.17	0.04



Marital status (base: single)				
Married	-0.19	**	2.09	0.03
Widowed	-0.22	**	2.12	0.04
divorced	0.05	**	2.11	0.03
Household size (base: 1-3 persons)				
4-6 persons	0.10		0.09	0.27
7-9 persons	0.11	*	3.11	0.06
10 persons and above	0.18	*	3.13	0.07
Duration of stay in Limbe as IDP (base: < 1 year)				
1-3 years	0.16	***	2.01	0.04
4-6 years	0.07	***	2.11	0.03
6 years and above	-0.17		0.13	0.18
Monthly income (base:< 30,000FCFA)				
30.000-60.000FCFA	0.05	*	2.09	0.09
60.000-90.000FCFA	-0.05	**	2.10	0.03
90.000FCFA and above	-0.05	*	2.13	0.07
Constant	1.17	***	2.22	0.00
Observations	200			
R-squared	0.72			

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: *Researcher's survey (2026)*

Table 3 presents a detailed interpretation of the reduced-form regression results examining the effect of sex commodification on household poverty cycles among 200 internally displaced women in Limbe Municipality. This analysis utilizes a statistical model to examine the factors influencing ongoing household poverty. The outcome being measured, the dependent variable, is a combined score representing the persistence of poverty in families. This score was developed from five survey questions using a Likert scale, addressing issues like the inability to save money, worries about children's prospects, medical costs replacing school fees, income only covering basic survival, and concerns about poverty extending to future generations.

The main factor under investigation, the commercialization of sex, is considered to be interconnected with other aspects within the model, meaning its relationship with poverty is complex and not a simple one-way cause. To determine the direct impact of sex commercialization on poverty patterns, the model employs "sex work as the primary source of income" as an indirect measurement tool. The initial findings presented here serve to confirm the suitability of this indirect measure and how well the overall model explains the data. The model demonstrates significant explanatory power, with an R-squared value of 0.72. This indicates that 72% of the variations in the household poverty score among the displaced individuals studied can be accounted for by the variables included in the model, suggesting a reliable set of predictors.

The central factor of interest, sex commercialization, is indirectly assessed through the reliance on sex work as the main source of income. The reasoning behind this approach stems from the "Coping Strategy Paradox": although women resort to sex work as an immediate means of



survival when displaced and economically disadvantaged, its role as the primary income earner may paradoxically trap households in a cycle of poverty rather than facilitating long-term financial improvement. The statistical results strongly confirm this theory. The numerical impact for sex work as the main income source is 0.15, which is statistically significant at the 1% level ($p = 0.00$). This positive and meaningful coefficient in the preliminary equation provides strong evidence that this indirect measure is closely linked to the expected outcome. It confirms that for these 200 internally displaced women, depending on sex work as their main economic activity is associated with a 0.15-point increase in the household poverty score. This directly supports the idea that this survival tactic does not lead to stability but is instead a major contributor to sustained poverty, aligning with the core concept of the "Coping Strategy Paradox."

This quantitative discovery is strongly echoed by the personal accounts from the survey participants. For example, the statement, "My current income helps us survive today but does not provide a path out of poverty," directly reflects the statistical finding. Income from sex work covers immediate needs but fails to generate enough extra money for savings, investments, or education, thereby perpetuating the poverty cycle. Similarly, the statement, "Most of my earnings are used for daily food, leaving no money to save for my family's future," offers an individual perspective that helps explain the broader statistical result. The real-life experiences of these women, as captured in their statements, confirm the statistical finding that sex work as a primary income source reinforces, rather than resolves, household poverty.

The model delineates demographic cohorts that are most vulnerable to enduring poverty. In terms of age dynamics, when compared to the youngest cohort (18–24 years), individuals aged 25–34 years exhibit a marginally significant positive correlation with poverty (coefficient = 0.01, $p = 0.06$); individuals aged 35–44 years demonstrate a robust positive association (coefficient = 0.14, $p = 0.04$), which aligns with apprehensions regarding medical expenses undermining children's educational fees; and individuals aged 45 years and above present a negative yet statistically insignificant coefficient (coefficient = -0.05, $p = 0.67$).

In relation to educational attainment, in contrast to individuals possessing no formal education, women with primary education reveal a statistically significant positive correlation with household poverty (coefficient = 0.23, $p = 0.02$); secondary education (GCE O-Level: coefficient = -0.01, $p = 0.09$; GCE A-Level: coefficient = -0.02, $p = 0.05$) begins to provide a degree of protection; and tertiary education manifests the most substantial protective effect (coefficient = -0.16, $p = 0.04$).

With respect to marital status, married and widowed women exhibit a diminished likelihood of encountering cycles of poverty in comparison to single women, whereas divorced women demonstrate a significant increase in household poverty, positioning them as the most precarious demographic. Concerning household size and duration of residency, larger households (comprising 7 or more members) are correlated with elevated poverty rates, and prolonged residency in Limbe (ranging from 1 to 6 years) is markedly associated with heightened poverty, thereby challenging the presumption that conditions ameliorate over time.

The findings substantiate the "Coping Strategy Paradox," wherein engagement in sex work as an immediate survival mechanism precipitates deeper long-term financial entrapment, with divorced women, individuals with solely primary education, and members of larger families identified as the most profoundly impacted by the persistent cycle of poverty.



The Second Stage Regression Instrumental variables (2SLS) regression results of effect the effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles among internally displaced households of female prostitutes in Limbe municipality

Table 4: The Second Stage Regression Instrumental variables (2SLS) regression results of effect the effect of sex commodification on the household-level poverty cycles

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Instrumental variables (2SLS) regression				
	Household poverty index			
VARIABLES	coef	aster	se	pval
Household poverty index	.		.	.
Sex work (endogenous dependent variable)	13.05	***	3.26	0.00
Age of the respondents (base: 18-24 years)				
25-34 years	-0.74	*	0.53	0.07
35-44 years	-0.28	**	0.58	0.03
45 years and above	0.18		0.66	0.78
Educational level of respondents (base: no formal education or primary)				
First school leaving certificate (FSLC)	-1.01	*	0.58	0.08
G.CE Ordinary level certificate	-1.10	*	0.61	0.07
GCE Advanced level certificate	-0.39	*	0.74	0.06
higher education (university)	-0.12	*	1.02	0.09
Marital status (base: single)				
married	0.48	*	0.52	0.06
widowed	-0.13	**	0.65	0.04
divorced	0.79	**	0.67	0.04
Duration of stay in Limbe as IDP				
between 1-3 years	0.95	**	0.65	0.04
between 4-6 years	-0.27		0.72	0.70
6 years and above	0.80		0.77	0.30
Household size (base: 1-3 persons)				
4-6 persons	0.41	**	0.54	0.05
7-9 persons	0.67	*	0.64	0.09
10 persons and above	0.01	*	0.80	0.09
Estimated monthly income (base: less than 30.000FCFA)				
between 30.000-60.000 FCFA	0.18	***	0.52	0.03
between 60.000-90.000 FCFA	-0.66	***	0.65	0.01
above 90.000 FCFA	-1.31	***	0.80	0.00
Constant	22.00	***	1.22	0.00
Observations	200			
Wald chi2(20)	34.09			
Prob > chi2	0.0255			



R-squared	0.7200			
Root MSE	2.7533			
Tests of endogeneity				
Ho: variables are exogenous				
Durbin (score) $\chi^2(1) = 11.6819$ ($p = 0.0006$)				
Wu-Hausman $F(1,176) = 11.035$ ($p = 0.0011$)				

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: *Researcher's survey (2026)*

Table 4 presents a comprehensive interpretation of the Two-Stage Least Squares (2SLS) regression results examining the causal effect of sex commodification on household poverty cycles among 200 internally displaced women in Limbe Municipality, Cameroon. This analysis aimed to address the second objective of the research, set within the concept of the "Coping Strategy Paradox"—a situation where survival tactics adopted by vulnerable groups unintentionally worsen their poverty instead of alleviating it.

Before interpreting the specific results, the statistical appropriateness of the 2SLS method was established. Diagnostic tests (Durbin score and Wu-Hausman F-statistic) strongly indicated that transactional sex is not an independent factor, meaning standard statistical methods would yield inaccurate results. This confirmed that the 2SLS approach was the correct choice. Furthermore, the overall statistical model successfully explained a significant proportion (72%) of the variation in household poverty levels, demonstrating strong explanatory power.

The central finding of this analysis is the significant causal link between transactional sex and household poverty. A key result showed that for every one-unit increase in the index measuring engagement in transactional sex, there was a substantial 13.05-unit increase in the household poverty index. This finding strongly supports the "Coping Strategy Paradox," indicating that the very strategy used for survival—selling one's body—actively deepens and prolongs household poverty.

Qualitative reports from the women clarified the reasons behind this statistical relationship: earnings were immediately consumed by daily food needs, leaving no surplus for savings or future investments. This prevents the accumulation of capital necessary for economic improvement. Additionally, health-related expenses directly stemming from transactional sex, such as treating sexually transmitted infections, managing pregnancies, and injuries from violence, consistently diverted funds away from children's education, thus undermining investment in the human capital of the next generation and perpetuating poverty across generations.

Moreover, women expressed significant worry that the stigma associated with their work would create substantial obstacles for their children's social advancement. They believed that community prejudice and discrimination would affect their children, limiting their educational and employment opportunities regardless of their own efforts. Fundamentally, women acknowledged that their current income, while ensuring day-to-day survival, provided no means of escaping poverty—it maintained their existence but could not transform it. This illustrates the core of the paradox: survival today ensures poverty tomorrow. The most profound



concern articulated by women was the fear that their children, seeing no alternative economic pathways and facing similar systemic barriers, would be compelled to enter the same work, thus completing an intergenerational cycle of poverty and commodification.

The research investigates the demographic determinants affecting household poverty among internally displaced women engaged in sex work in Limbe, Cameroon.

Age: Women within the age range of 25–34 exhibit a marginally significant negative coefficient (coef = -0.74, $p = 0.07$), which implies a slight reduction in poverty levels compared to their 18–24 counterparts. Women aged 35–44 demonstrate a statistically significant negative coefficient (coef = -0.28, $p = 0.03$), signifying diminished poverty levels despite the challenges associated with aging. In contrast, women aged 45 and above present a positive yet statistically non-significant coefficient (coef = 0.18, $p = 0.78$), indicating a potential increase in vulnerability.

Education: Evident protective effects are observed across various educational levels: Primary (FSLC) (coef = -1.01, $p = 0.08$), GCE Ordinary Level (coef = -1.10, $p = 0.07$), GCE Advanced Level (coef = -0.39, $p = 0.06$), and Higher Education (coef = -0.12, $p = 0.09$). Higher educational attainment provides the most substantial protective effect according to Sen's (1999) capabilities framework; nevertheless, women continue to engage in sex work owing to exclusion from the labor market.

Marital status: Married women encounter heightened poverty levels (coef = 0.48, $p = 0.06$), consistent with Chant's (2008) perspectives on the feminization of poverty. Conversely, widowed women experience reduced poverty levels (coef = -0.13, $p = 0.04$). Notably, divorced women represent the category with the highest vulnerability (coef = 0.79, $p = 0.04$).

Duration of stay in Limbe: A non-linear correlation is observed, wherein a duration of 1–3 years is associated with increased poverty; a duration of 4–6 years reflects slight yet statistically non-significant improvement; and a duration exceeding 6 years correlates with heightened poverty levels.

Household size: Households comprising 4–6 individuals and 7–9 individuals demonstrate elevated poverty levels, whereas households with 10 or more individuals reveal a lesser positive association, potentially attributable to the presence of multiple income earners.

Income: In comparison to the lowest income bracket, those earning between 30,000–60,000 FCFA display a positive correlation with poverty; individuals earning between 60,000–90,000 FCFA exhibit a notable reduction in poverty; while those with incomes above 90,000 FCFA are associated with a strong negative correlation, albeit the escape from poverty is not assured without formal economic integration and adequate social protection.



Objective Three: The Meso-level Implications of Sex Commodification on the Socio-Economic Fabric

Table 5: Multiple regression results of the Meso-level Implications of Sex Commodification on the Socio-Economic Fabric

Local Socio-economic fabric	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
Sex work	-.032	.007	-4.40	0.00	-.046	-.018	***
age : base 18-24yrs	0	.	.	.	.	.
25-34 years	.004	.024	0.19	.85	-.042	.051	
35-44 years	-.02	.026	-0.76	.449	-.071	.031	
45 years and above	-.006	.03	-0.19	.848	-.064	.053	
education : base no formal education	0	.	.	.	.	.
FSCL (primary)	-.069	.026	-2.63	.009	-.121	-.017	***
GCE O/L	-.081	.028	-2.94	.004	-.135	-.027	***
GCE A/L school	-.012	.033	-2.37	.009	-.078	.053	*
university	.086	.046	-1.88	.061	-.176	.004	*
marital status : base: single	0	.	.	.	.	.
married	.046	.024	1.95	.053	-.001	.092	*
widowed	.029	.028	1.02	.309	-.027	.084	
divorced	-.018	.031	2.61	.046	-.042	.079	**
household size : base: 1-3 persons	0	.	.	.	.	.
4-6 persons	-.001	.024	-0.05	.958	-.049	.046	
7-9 persons	-.002	.029	-0.06	.953	-.058	.055	
10 persons & above	-.031	.035	-3.89	.077	-.101	.038	*
duration of stay: base: less than 1yr	0	.	.	.	.	.
1-3 years	-.009	.029	-0.32	.753	-.067	.049	*
4-6 years	-.074	.03	-2.48	.014	-.133	-.015	**
above 6 years	-.079	.035	-2.27	.024	-.147	-.01	**
Monthly income Base: less than	0	.	.	.	.	.



30.000							
30000-60000	-.07	.023	-3.04	.003	-.116	-.025	***
61000-90000	-.051	.028	-1.83	.069	-.106	.004	*
above 90000	-.038	.034	-3.13	.061	-.105	.029	*
Constant	.829	.06	13.78	0.00	.71	.948	***
Mean dependent var	0.523		SD dependent var	0.134			
R-squared	0.734		Number of obs	200			
F-test	2.739		Prob > F	0.000			
Akaike crit. (AIC)	-247.320		Bayesian crit. (BIC)	-178.056			
*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$							

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: *Researcher's survey (2026)*

Table 5 presents an analysis of the multiple regression (Ordinary Least Squares) results examining the factors associated with the perceived meso-level impact of female sex commodification on the local socio-economic fabric of Limbe municipality. The dependent variable, "Local Socio-economic Fabric," is a composite index derived from the five statements provided (e.g., community tension, exclusion from support groups, weakened social trust). A higher score on this index indicates a more negative perceived impact on the community's social and economic structures. The model, which includes 200 internally displaced persons (IDPs), is statistically significant (Prob > F = 0.000) and explains a substantial 73.4% of the variance in the dependent variable (R-squared = 0.734), indicating a strong model fit.

The core independent variable, "Sex work," which represents the respondent's level of engagement in or perception of sex commodification (based on the five statements provided), is a strong, negative, and statistically significant predictor of the socio-economic fabric index (Coef. = -0.032, $p < 0.01$). The negative coefficient is initially counterintuitive but becomes clear when considered alongside the qualitative statements. It suggests that as the *practice* or *acceptance* of sex commodification increases among the IDP respondents, their perception of the *community's socio-economic fabric* (as measured by statements like "tension with the local Limbe community" and "weakened traditional values") decreases. In essence, the women who are more deeply involved in this coping strategy are more acutely aware of the social degradation, exclusion, and tension it creates. This finding directly supports the meso-level hypothesis: the individual "coping strategy" of sex commodification paradoxically contributes to the erosion of the very social fabric that is essential for long-term community resilience and poverty alleviation. It aligns with the qualitative statement, "The increase in sex work among IDPs has created tension with the local Limbe community," quantifying this perceived tension.

The study investigates the demographic variables that affect the perceptions of internally displaced women (IDP) in Limbe regarding the implications of commercial sex on their communities.

Educational attainment emerges as a significant determinant. All tiers of formal education demonstrate a distinct negative correlation relative to the absence of formal schooling. Women possessing primary education (FSLC) exhibit a markedly more critical assessment of the



detrimental effects on community welfare. This critical perspective intensifies with the attainment of secondary education (GCE O Level); however, the impact is less pronounced among those with GCE A Levels, who may possess a more nuanced understanding. The most pronounced negative correlation is identified among women with tertiary education, suggesting that they recognize the most severe adverse consequences—such as cycles of poverty, diminished community trust, and social marginalization—consistent with social capital theories.

In relation to marital status, the condition of being married correlates with a slightly more favorable perception of the community's social and economic health when contrasted with single women, potentially due to the fact that marriage fosters alternative social connections and mitigates stigma. In contrast, the status of being divorced serves as a strong negative indicator. Divorced women perceive the community's well-being as significantly more compromised, experiencing heightened ostracism and instability, thereby representing the most socially stigmatized group, directly confronting the "tension" and "exclusion" articulated in qualitative narratives.

The duration of residency in Limbe is also a contributing factor. Extended stays (ranging from 4 to 6 years and beyond) are correlated with a markedly more critical viewpoint regarding the community's well-being. Prolonged displacement facilitates a gradual awareness of harmful ramifications, reinforcing the central contradiction of this research: an immediate survival strategy culminates in enduring social and economic deterioration.

In terms of monthly income, when compared to individuals earning below 30,000 CFA, all higher income categories reveal negative correlations. The most significant correlation is found within the 30,000–60,000 CFA income bracket, indicating that women who derive modest income through this strategy are the most cognizant of its societal drawbacks, contending with both financial benefits and the adverse effects of ostracism and weakened community ties.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings robustly confirm the "Coping Strategy Paradox" across the three research objectives, integrating quantitative regression results with qualitative Likert-scale responses.

Objective 1: Socio-Economic Drivers of Sex Commodification

The probit regression reveals that the socio-economic drivers index is the most powerful predictor of engagement in sex work (coef. = 1.73, $p < 0.01$), validating that sex commodification is a "frustration-induced" response to labor market exclusion. Descriptively, 70% of respondents agreed that frustration with the lack of formal jobs drove them to transactional sex, and 77.5% identified the absence of startup capital as making sex work their only option. These findings align with Hanmer et al. (2015), who identified economic deprivation as the primary driver of transactional sex in humanitarian contexts, and with Che and Njong (2020), who described "absolute asset depletion" as a key push factor. Household size was positive and significant (coef. = 0.16, $p < 0.05$), indicating that larger households increase economic pressure, while duration of stay was negative and significant (coef. = -0.23, $p < 0.05$), meaning newly arrived IDPs are most vulnerable—consistent with Kunz's (1973) observations on post-displacement shock.



Objective 2: Effect on Household Poverty Cycles

The 2SLS regression provides the study's most striking causal evidence: sex commodification significantly increases household poverty cycles (coef. = 13.05, $p < 0.01$). This quantitatively confirms that the coping strategy actively deepens poverty rather than alleviating it. The Durbin score ($\chi^2(1) = 11.68$, $p = 0.0006$) and Wu-Hausman test ($F(1,176) = 11.04$, $p = 0.0011$) reject exogeneity, validating the instrumental variables approach. Qualitative narratives illuminate the mechanisms: 90% of respondents affirmed that their income provides no path out of poverty, 75% reported that medical expenses displace children's school fees, and 77.5% feared their children would be forced into the same work. Education demonstrated protective effects, with university education associated with reduced household poverty (coef. = -0.12, $p = 0.09$), supporting Sen's (1999) capability framework. However, the continued presence of university graduates in sex work underscores severe labor market failure. Marital status emerged as a critical differentiator: divorced women were the most vulnerable (coef. = 0.79, $p = 0.04$), consistent with Chant's (2008) feminization of poverty thesis, while married (coef. = 0.48, $p = 0.06$) and widowed (coef. = -0.13, $p = 0.04$) women showed complex, contrasting patterns.

Objective 3: Meso-Level Implications

The multiple regression ($R^2 = 0.734$) shows that sex commodification negatively affects the local socio-economic fabric (coef. = -0.032, $p < 0.01$). A striking 87.5% of respondents believed the high rate of sex commodification has made it harder for all IDP women to find formal work, revealing stigmatization by association. Additionally, 85% perceived weakened traditional values and social trust, and 75% acknowledged community tension and exclusion from social support groups. These findings align with Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualization of stigma as a material barrier that deprives women of social capital, thereby reinforcing the poverty trap. The duration of stay was significant: women displaced for 4–6 years (coef. = -0.074, $p < 0.05$) and above 6 years (coef. = -0.079, $p < 0.05$) perceived increasingly negative community impacts, indicating that prolonged displacement leads to cumulative awareness of social decay.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Implications for Research

First, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of Respondent-Driven Sampling (RDS) and 2SLS instrumental variable approaches for researching hidden, stigmatized populations. Future research should adopt similar rigorous designs to address endogeneity in survival strategy studies. Second, the "coping strategy paradox" should be tested across other displacement contexts (e.g., conflict zones in the Sahel, refugee camps in the Horn of Africa) to assess generalizability. Third, the finding that 77.5% of women fear their children will be forced into sex work warrants longitudinal research tracking child outcomes over time, measuring educational attainment, early marriage, and entry into transactional sex. Fourth, comparative studies between IDP women in urban (Limbe) versus camp-based settings could reveal how local economic structures shape the paradox's severity.



Implications for Practice

First, given that 72.5% of women choose sex work for its immediate cash, interventions must match this immediacy. Unconditional cash transfers or daily-wage public works programs can reduce desperation-driven entry into sex work during the critical first year of displacement. Second, with 77.5% identifying lack of startup capital as decisive, policy must provide seed grants (not loans) for alternative livelihoods such as agro-processing, mobile money agencies, or tailoring cooperatives, as successfully piloted by Reach Out Cameroon (2022). Third, the meso-level findings (87.5% reporting employment discrimination) necessitate community sensitization campaigns, engagement with religious leaders, and school-based interventions to prevent bullying of sex workers' children. Fourth, as 75% of women report medical expenses displacing school fees, integrating free, non-stigmatizing reproductive health services with educational scholarships can interrupt intergenerational poverty transmission. Fifth, targeted support for vulnerable subgroups—divorced women (coef. = 0.79, $p < 0.05$) and newly arrived IDPs (1–3 years: coef. = 0.95, $p < 0.05$)—should include housing support, legal aid, and psychosocial programs. Finally, structural interventions addressing displacement root causes—peace-building and conflict resolution for the Anglophone crisis—are essential, as without them, all other interventions remain palliative.

Policy Implications or Recommendations

This study strongly suggests that women among internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Limbe engage in sex work as a necessary survival tactic driven by extreme circumstances, rather than due to moral shortcomings. This behavior stems from clear socio-economic pressures. Statistical analysis confirms that a combination of deep desperation and limited alternatives is the primary predictor of involvement in sex work. The most vulnerable individuals are those who have recently arrived, those supporting larger families, and those with the lowest earnings and educational attainment.

These findings challenge conventional moral judgments, instead presenting sex work as a rational response to failures in humanitarian aid and economic opportunities. Consequently, policy approaches must shift from punitive measures towards comprehensive, diverse interventions that tackle the root causes of this desperation, such as unemployment, lack of resources, and overwhelming poverty. **Specific policy recommendations include:**

Economic Support: Provide targeted financial aid to new arrivals through immediate, unrestricted cash payments, along with quick integration into livelihood programs. To overcome financial hurdles, policies should offer tangible startup funds or in-kind assistance (e.g., tools, materials) instead of just generic business training. Microfinance institutions should be encouraged to create financial products suitable for IDPs.

Education and Vocational Training: Education acts as a protective factor, with more educated women generally faring better. However, their continued involvement in sex work highlights a lack of alternative ways to earn a living. Therefore, educational initiatives must be combined with vocational training that leads to actual market employment.

Child-Focused Programs: These are vital to stop the cycle of poverty across generations. They should include full scholarships covering all school costs, school meal programs, after-school support, and mentorship.



Comprehensive Health Services: These services must be accessible, affordable, and free from stigma. They should cover STI testing, family planning, maternal care, responses to violence, and mental health support, all integrated with economic programs.

Support for Divorced Women: Identified as extremely vulnerable, divorced women need specific support including housing assistance, childcare, legal aid, psychosocial groups, and priority access to income-generating programs.

Community Engagement: To foster community dialogue and reduce stigma, initiatives should include awareness campaigns, local discussions, engagement with religious and traditional leaders, media campaigns, and school-based programs.

Savings and Asset Building: Programs designed to help individuals save and acquire assets (e.g., matched savings, financial literacy, informal savings groups, grants for assets) must ensure participants have sufficient income to save.

Structural Interventions: Addressing the fundamental causes of displacement requires broader actions like peace-building, conflict resolution, rebuilding original communities, and recognizing IDP rights within national legal frameworks.

Family-Centric Social Support: Aid should be adjusted based on household size. Community-based assistance networks can facilitate information sharing, mutual encouragement, and collective advocacy, especially for recent arrivals.

Trauma and Psychological Support: Mental health and trauma-informed care should be integrated into financial assistance programs to help women cope with prejudice, past suffering, and social isolation.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that internally displaced women in Limbe Municipality, Cameroon, engaging in sex work are not doing so due to individual failings. Instead, it is a pragmatic, desperation-driven attempt to earn income, triggered by widespread exclusion from employment opportunities and the depletion of their assets.

The study confirms a "coping strategy paradox": while sex work provides immediate funds for survival, it unfortunately deepens household poverty cycles (with a statistically significant correlation: coef. = 13.05, $p < 0.01$). Furthermore, it damages the local social and economic structure through stigma, social isolation, and disadvantages passed down through generations.

The findings indicate that recently displaced women, those supporting larger families, and divorced women are most susceptible to long-term poverty. Although education offers some protection, it is often insufficient; even women with university degrees remain in sex work, highlighting a profound systemic economic failure.

The study challenges simplistic moral judgments and narratives that solely portray these women as victims. Instead, it frames their engagement in sex work as a tragic but understandable response to fundamental breakdowns in humanitarian aid, access to jobs, and social support systems. Unless the root causes are addressed—such as the lack of formal



employment, absence of initial business capital, overwhelming household expenses, and community disapproval—this paradox will persist, perpetuating poverty for future generations.

Therefore, interventions must be comprehensive, implemented swiftly, and affirm the dignity of the individuals involved. They need to move beyond merely treating immediate symptoms to achieving transformative economic and social inclusion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Considering the study's findings and limitations, future research should explore several key areas.

First, long-term studies following the same group of internally displaced women over three to five years are essential. These studies would assess how involvement in sex work influences their health, accumulation of resources, children's schooling, and eventual departure from sex work. Such research would more clearly establish cause-and-effect relationships than the current snapshot approach.

Second, research should investigate how patterns are passed down across generations. This involves using various research methods with the children of displaced women engaged in sex work to understand their educational paths, mental and emotional health, and when they begin working. This would directly examine the concerns raised by respondents regarding future generations.

Third, comparative studies examining displaced populations in urban areas (like Limbe) versus those in rural communities or organized camps could reveal how local economies and social connections influence the complex dynamics of coping strategies.

Fourth, research focusing on the demand side is necessary to explore the clients of sex workers—their characteristics, reasons for seeking sex work, and economic contributions. This would help explain how demand supports the sex industry and identify effective ways to reduce it.

Fifth, evaluations of intervention effectiveness, using rigorous methods like randomized controlled trials, are needed. These could compare different types of support (e.g., small business grants, direct financial aid, job training, or combined approaches) to determine which best helps women leave sex work, especially by providing immediate financial stability comparable to what sex work offers.

Sixth, studies on policy and legal frameworks should investigate how criminalizing sex work in Cameroon impacts women's access to healthcare, experiences with police, and ability to seek legal protection. This analysis should include comparisons with nearby nations that have opted for decriminalization or legalization.

Finally, research on resilience and successful pathways out of sex work should focus on women who have managed to leave the industry and escape poverty. The goal would be to identify factors that protect them, conditions that enable their success, and reproducible strategies that can guide the design of future support programs.



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