



Research Report

From wellness to red-light economy: cross-border dynamics, hidden sex work, and the socio-cultural impact of spa centers in Nepalgunj, Nepal

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Received 3 December 2025; **Accepted** 5 February 2026; **Published** 22 May 2026)

Abstract: The rapid expansion of spa and massage centers in Nepalgunj, a key India–Nepal border town, has generated acute concern about their role in an emerging clandestine sex economy. This study examines how spa establishments in Nepalgunj operate as hybrid spaces that combine formally registered wellness businesses with covert sexual transactions, and how these arrangements are shaped by cross-border mobility, gendered labor markets, and structural risk environments. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted between January and March 2025, the study is based on field observations in 50 spas, semi-structured interviews with 50 workers and 20 owners/managers, and thematic analysis of narratives. Findings reveal that spa centers in Nepalgunj overwhelmingly function as fronts for sexual services. Workers, predominantly young girls aged 16–26, reported that sexual services were routinely offered in 92% of establishments, at standardized price points that generated estimated daily revenues of NPR 30,000–60,000 per spa. Approximately 90% of clients were Indian nationals, reflecting how the open Indo–Nepal border, combined with restrictive sexual norms and stigma in India, displaces demand for paid sex into Nepali border towns. While workers’ monthly earnings (NPR 25,000–50,000) exceed local female wage norms, these economic gains are offset by exploitative labor practices, the presence of self-reported minors, limited negotiating power over condom use, exposure to violence, and intense stigma. The analysis situates spa-based sex work within four lenses: informal economy, borderland governance, gendered labor regimes, and public health risk environment. It argues spa centers are a red-light economy embedded in informal illicit cross-border markets. Policy implications include regulatory reforms targeting exploitation not workers, protecting minors, tailored health interventions for hidden venues, cross-border health and anti-trafficking collaboration, and alternative livelihoods for young women. Without these, Nepalgunj risks becoming a hub for hidden sex work as wellness services, affecting gender justice and public health.

Keywords: Cross-border dynamics, hidden sex work, red-light economy, Nepalgunj, risk environment, spa centers.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global “bodywork” sector: spas, massage parlors, wellness clinics, has expanded rapidly, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where informal economies intersect with tourism, migration, and urban development (Harcourt and Donovan 2005; Hoang 2015; Goldenberg *et al.* 2017). Across diverse settings, these venues frequently operate at the boundary between legality and illegality: they offer legitimate services while simultaneously hosting concealed sexual transactions, often under conditions of criminalisation, stigma, and weak labor protections (Platt *et al.* 2018; Rekart 2005; Goldenberg *et al.* 2017).

In criminalised contexts, extensive evidence suggests that punitive laws neither eradicate commercial sex nor substantially reduce demand. Instead, they displace the trade into more hidden venues; indoor or establishment-based locations such as spas, karaoke bars, or “health clubs”; where workers are at heightened risk of violence, coercion, and constrained access to health and justice services (Platt *et al.* 2018; Shannon *et al.* 2015; Baral *et al.* 2013). Indoor workers often face intersecting structural vulnerabilities, including immigration status, economic precarity, and hostile policing, which collectively shape a “risk environment” that exceeds individual behavior (Rhodes 2002; Shannon *et al.* 2015; Glick *et al.* 2020).

In South Asia, these dynamics are refracted through long-standing cross-border connections, gendered labor markets, and hierarchical caste and class regimes. India and Nepal share one of the world’s most open borders, codified in the 1950 Indo–Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship, which facilitates free movement of people and goods (Bhardwaj 2013). This openness has fostered intense trans-border trade, labor migration, and cultural exchange, but also created opportunities for illicit and semi-licit economies, including trafficking, contraband, and clandestine sex markets (Deane 2010; Goodhand *et al.* 2021).

Nepal has long been implicated in the regional sex economy. Studies document that young, low-educated women and girls are drawn into the trade by poverty, limited employment opportunities, gender-based violence, and unequal power relations within families and communities (Deuba *et al.* 2016; Ghimire and van Teijlingen 2009; Sarkar 2016). Public health research further shows that sex workers in Nepal experience elevated HIV and STI risks, driven by inconsistent condom use, violence, mobility, and low uptake of sexual health services (Bhatta *et al.* 2011; Kakchapati *et al.* 2018). While typologies

historically distinguished between street-based and “traditional” establishment-based venues, newer forms of sex work; dance bars, cabin restaurants, and spa/massage parlors; have emerged over the last 15–20 years (Mishra and Neupane 2015).

Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan City, located in Banke District in Lumbini Province, lies approximately five kilometers from the Rupaidiha border crossing to India. It has historically functioned as a commercial and transit hub, linking the Nepali hills and Terai to northern India (Bhardwaj 2013; Goodhand *et al.* 2021). Recent municipal records and reconnaissance suggest a dramatic surge in spa and massage centers: by early 2025, 230 spas were registered, of which approximately 190 were operational. Nearly 90% of these outlets are located within a five-kilometer radius of the border, indicating a deliberate spatial clustering designed to attract cross-border clientele.

Preliminary informal conversations with workers and owners suggest that around 90% of clients are Indian nationals, traveling from adjacent districts in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These clients do not primarily seek therapeutic massage; they come for sexual services that are simultaneously criminalised and heavily stigmatized in India, where men may prefer to purchase sex away from home communities to reduce the risk of social exposure (Sahni and Shankar 2016; Ryan *et al.* 2019). Nepalgunj thus appears to function as an “offshore” sexual marketplace for Indian men, sustained by the open border, ambiguous enforcement, and the availability of young female labor.

Statement of the problem

The rapid growth of spas in Nepalgunj exemplifies the complex entanglement of informal economies, borderland governance, and gendered vulnerabilities. On the one hand, these businesses significantly contribute to the local economy, generating daily revenues estimated at NPR 30,000–60,000 per spa and stimulating demand in associated sectors such as lodging, food, alcohol, and transport. On the other hand, there are accumulating allegations of routine sexual services, child sexual exploitation, and rising demand for high-risk sexual acts.

From a regulatory standpoint, the spa industry occupies a liminal legal zone. Spas are formally registered as wellness or beauty establishments, enabling them to pass routine municipal licensing processes. Yet sex work is criminalised in Nepal under the Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act and related provisions, creating a disjuncture between the legal status of the enterprise and the illegal nature of some of its core activities (Deane 2010). This “hybrid legality” allows a spa owner to cloak sexual

commerce within everyday business operations, complicating enforcement and enabling exploitative practices to flourish under the radar ([Chen 2023](#)).

From a public health perspective, the concealed nature of spa-based sex work; combined with criminalization, makes it difficult to implement harm reduction interventions, including condom distribution, regular HIV/STI testing, and psychosocial support ([Shannon et al. 2015](#); [Platt et al. 2018](#); [Goldenberg et al. 2017](#)). Evidence from Nepal and comparable settings suggests that workers in hidden or establishment-based venues are less likely to access health services, more vulnerable to violence, and more constrained in their ability to negotiate condom use, particularly in the face of coercive clients or police harassment ([Deuba et al. 2016](#); [Shannon et al. 2014](#); [Argento et al. 2019](#)).

Socio-culturally, the rapid normalization of spa-based prostitution in Nepalgunj risks reshaping local moral economies, gender norms, and community perceptions of young women. Workers report being labelled “bad women,” facing social exclusion, and experiencing difficulties in forming or sustaining intimate relationships and marriage prospects; patterns aligned with broader scholarship on prostitution stigma and structural discrimination ([Benoit et al. 2018](#); [Weitzer 2018](#)). The involvement of self-reported minors (16–17 years) raises serious child protection and human rights concerns and underscores the inadequacy of current regulatory and welfare responses.

Significance and objectives of the research

Despite a growing literature on sex work in Kathmandu and selected Terai districts, there is very limited empirical research on spa-based sex work in Nepali border towns, particularly Nepalgunj ([Mishra and Neupane 2015](#); [NCASC 2018](#)). This study addresses these gaps by documenting the spatial organisation, client composition, and everyday practices of spas in Nepalgunj and analysing them through a multi-level theoretical lens. It has four interrelated objectives:

- i. To map and characterise the spatial distribution and operational features of spas/massage centers in Nepalgunj, with attention to their proximity to the India–Nepal border and clustering dynamics.
- ii. To analyse client geographies and demand patterns, particularly the predominance of Indian clientele, and examine how cross-border mobility shapes spa-based sex work.

- iii. To assess the structural risk environments in which spa workers operate, including stigma, policing practices, safeguarding mechanisms, condom access, and exposure to violence.
- iv. To interrogate the implications of spa-based sex work for public health, gendered labor regimes, and borderland governance, and to identify policy and programmatic interventions that respond to these structural vulnerabilities.

Literature review

Global trajectories of indoor and venue-based sex work

Research over the last three decades documents a significant shift in the spatial organisation of sex work—from visible street-based solicitation to indoor and venue-based locations, including spas, massage parlors, karaoke bars, and entertainment venues (Harcourt and Donovan 2005; Sanders 2005; Hoang 2015). This shift is especially pronounced where prostitution is criminalised or heavily policed, encouraging both clients and workers to move into less visible, more controllable spaces (Platt *et al.* 2018; Rekart 2005).

Across a wide variety of jurisdictions, scholars have observed that the criminalisation and aggressive policing of street-based sex work does not abolish the trade but reallocates it to more concealed locations. Indoor venues, ranging from formal massage clinics to informal “health clubs”, become key sites where sexual services are negotiated and performed, often under a thin veneer of legitimacy. These arrangements tend to reduce police visibility but also create environments in which owners and intermediaries wield considerable control over workers’ income, mobility, and exposure to risk, while public health agencies struggle to identify and reach hidden populations (Rekart 2005; Platt *et al.* 2018; Goldenberg *et al.* 2017).

Systematic reviews and comparative studies show that indoor venues may offer partial protection from street-level violence, but criminalisation, immigration control, and local moral panics frequently reproduce harms in different forms (Rekart 2005; Platt *et al.* 2018; Shannon *et al.* 2015). In settings such as Canada, New Zealand, and parts of Western Europe, indoor workers, especially migrants, face heightened dependence on third parties, spatial isolation, and vulnerability to exploitative contracts or “house rules” that undermine condom negotiation (Goldenberg *et al.* 2017; Argento *et al.* 2019; Pearson *et al.* 2023).

Public health literature emphasises that indoor and spa-based sex work is challenging to address through conventional outreach: venues are often unmarked, move frequently, and deliberately mimic legitimate businesses. Routine surveillance and targeted interventions, designed around street-based hotspots, may miss these locations entirely (Goldenberg *et al.* 2017; Pearson *et al.* 2023).

Structural determinants and the risk environment

A major strand of scholarship conceptualises sex workers' health and safety not as a function of individual risk behaviour but as the outcome of structural and environmental factors; legal regimes, policing practices, stigma, housing, and labor markets (Rhodes 2002; Shannon *et al.* 2014; Baral *et al.* 2013). The “risk environment” model has been widely applied to understand HIV/STI transmission dynamics among people who sell sex, inject drugs, or occupy other criminalised roles.

Rather than attributing HIV and violence solely to “unsafe” individuals, the risk environment framework redirects analytical attention toward the social, economic, and policy contexts in which risk is produced. Laws that criminalise sex work or the carrying of condoms, police practices that involve extortion, arbitrary arrest, or sexual violence, and institutionalised stigma in health services are treated as core drivers of adverse outcomes. Structural change; through decriminalisation, human-rights-based policing, and accessible, non-stigmatising health services; thus becomes central to prevention, not secondary (Rhodes 2002; Baral *et al.* 2013).

Meta-analyses demonstrate that criminalised and heavily policed environments are associated with increased violence, inconsistent condom use, and lower access to health services among sex workers (Shannon *et al.* 2015; Platt *et al.* 2018). Intersectional analyses show that structural vulnerabilities are intensified for those who are also migrants, sexual minorities, or racialised minorities (Glick *et al.* 2020; Argento *et al.* 2019).

South Asian configurations of sex work

In South Asia, commercial sex has long been shaped by caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, urbanisation, and labour migration. Traditional red-light areas in cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, and Delhi have been extensively studied, but recent research highlights the emergence of more diffuse, networked forms of sex work that take place in lodges,

dance bars, private apartments, and spa/massage parlors (Sahni and Shankar 2016; Hossain and Sajid 2019; Rai and Rai 2021).

Evidence from India's National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) indicates that reaching spa- and parlour-based workers has become a priority as the sex industry diffuses into semi-legal venues linked to hospitality, tourism, and entertainment (IHAT/DSACS 2021; NACO 2023). Pilot interventions in Delhi, for example, documented the challenges of mapping, identifying, and sustaining outreach with spas that frequently change locations, operate under multiple trade names, or deliberately obscure their services (IHAT/DSACS 2021). Ethnographic work in Delhi and other metropolitan areas shows that stigma operates at interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels, discouraging workers from seeking care even when services are nominally available (Ryan *et al.* 2019; Benoit *et al.* 2018).

Bangladesh and other neighboring countries display parallel dynamics, where borderland economies and local elite interests facilitate semi-licit markets in sexual labor, often with tacit state tolerance or direct complicity (Hossain and Sajid 2019). These patterns align with broader borderlands research that emphasises hybrid governance arrangements and negotiated sovereignty in peripheral spaces (Goodhand *et al.* 2021).

Sex work, HIV, and structural vulnerability in Nepal

Nepal's sex work landscape has diversified substantially since the 1990s, moving beyond traditional brothel and street-based forms to include dance bars, cabin restaurants, "doctors' clinics," and spa/massage establishments (Mishra and Neupane 2015; Deuba *et al.* 2016). Integrated Biological and Behavioral Surveillance (IBBS) surveys conducted by NCASC have consistently shown elevated HIV prevalence and structural vulnerability among female sex workers (FSWs), particularly those who are mobile, exposed to violence, and operating in hidden venues (NCASC 2018). Studies from Kathmandu report high levels of HIV awareness; but inconsistent condom use, especially among establishment-based FSWs who face client pressure and economic incentives to agree to unprotected sex (Kakchapati *et al.* 2018). Qualitative work identifies multiple barriers to service use, including fear of disclosure, discrimination in health facilities, and internalised stigma (Ghimire and van Teijlingen 2009; Bhatta *et al.* 2011).

However, national surveillance and most peer-reviewed studies do not differentiate spa-based workers as a distinct subgroup, despite indications that spas are an expanding domain of sex work, particularly in urban and borderland areas. This absence

creates a monitoring “blind spot” in public health programming, undermining the ability of interventions to reach a significant portion of the sex worker population. To complement this, recent anthropological studies in Nepal highlight the socio-cultural dimensions of sex work, including how categories of “sex worker” are constructed and contested in local contexts (Caviglia 2018). For instance, ethnographic research in Kathmandu explores pathways into sex work, emphasizing agency, poverty, and structural oppression among female sex workers (Karandikar *et al.* 2023). These Nepal-specific perspectives underscore the interplay of caste, migration, and gender norms in shaping vulnerability (Koirala and Khadka 2018)

Borderland governance and illicit economies

Borderlands scholarship conceptualises peripheral regions as sites of “marginal gains,” where state authority is fragmented and overlapping, and where formal and informal actors negotiate governance arrangements that facilitate both licit and illicit flows (Goodhand *et al.* 2021). In South and Southeast Asia, such regions often host complex assemblages of armed groups, traders, local brokers, and state officials who collectively regulate trade, taxation, and mobility in ways that blur the boundaries between legality and illegality (Meehan and Dan 2022).

Rather than treating borderlands as spaces of absence or state failure, contemporary analyses depict them as zones of intense political and economic activity, where sovereignty is negotiated and partial. Illicit or semi-licit economies—arms, drugs, smuggling, trafficking, informal labour—are not external to state formation but intimately tied to it. Local elites, security forces, and business actors often profit from these markets, while vulnerable labour (including migrants and young women) absorbs much of the associated risk (Goodhand *et al.* 2021; Deane 2010).

In the India–Nepal context, the open border has facilitated both legal trade and cross-border trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and forced labor (Deane 2010; Sarkar 2016). Estimates suggest that thousands of Nepali women and girls are trafficked annually to Indian cities and beyond, often through deceptive recruitment, indebtedness, or familial collusion. Post-disaster contexts, such as the 2015 earthquakes, have further magnified vulnerabilities (Gyawali *et al.* 2016).

Despite this, relatively little research has examined how borderland economies structure local markets in sexual labor within Nepal itself. Nepalgunj, with its clustering

of spas servicing predominantly Indian clientele, offers a critical case for understanding how cross-border demand and hybrid governance foster novel configurations of sex work.

Research gap

The foregoing review indicates several lacunae. First, there is almost no systematic empirical work on spa-based sex work in Nepal's border towns, including Nepalgunj, despite anecdotal recognition of their proliferation. Second, public health surveillance tools do not adequately capture hidden venues, leading to underestimation of risk and service gaps. Third, discussions of informal economies and borderland governance rarely integrate grounded analysis of sexual labor and gendered exploitation. This study speaks to these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative account of spa-based sex work in Nepalgunj, located within broader theoretical debates on informality, borderlands, and risk environments.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study is informed by four overlapping theoretical frameworks: (a) the informal economy, (b) borderland governance, (c) gendered labor regimes, and (d) the public health risk environment.

Informal economy and hybrid legality

The informal economy literature emphasises that economic practices often straddle formal and informal spheres, shaped by poverty, weak regulation, and market demand ([Berdida 2022](#)). Spa centers that are legally registered but host covert sexual transactions epitomise what has been described as “hybrid” or “straddling” economies: businesses that operate at once within and outside formal regulatory frameworks ([Chen 2023](#)).

From this standpoint, informality is not simply a residual sector awaiting incorporation into the formal economy; it is a structural feature of capitalist development. Actors manoeuvre within and across legal boundaries, exploiting regulatory gaps and ambiguities. Registration, licensing, and taxation may coexist with unreported income, informal labour arrangements, and illegal activities. Rather than neat dualisms of formal/informal or legal/illegal, hybrid economies blur these categories, producing spaces where governance is partial and enforcement selective, and where vulnerability is unequally distributed across class and gender ([Chen 2023](#); [Rekart 2005](#)).

Borderland governance and hybrid sovereignty

Borderland theory conceptualises frontier regions as spaces of “hybrid sovereignty,” where multiple authorities; state, non-state, and criminal; co-govern resources and populations (Goodhand *et al.* 2021; Meehan and Dan 2022). In such milieus, illicit and semi-licit economies, including trafficking, informal trade, and clandestine sex markets, flourish not in spite of the state but often through negotiated arrangements involving border police, customs officials, local politicians, and business actors (Deane 2010; Goodhand *et al.* 2021). Nepalgunj’s spa sector can thus be read as a borderland economy in which formal municipal regulation (spa registration) intersects with de facto tolerance of covert sexual services.

Gendered labor regimes and the commodification of women’s bodies

Feminist analyses of sex work stress that women’s participation in commercial sex cannot be understood outside the broader political economy of gender, including unequal access to education, wage work, and property, as well as patriarchal control over female sexuality (Hoang 2015; Hossain and Sajid 2019; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). For many women, sex work is part of a “feminisation of survival,” in which constrained labour markets and cultural expectations render sexual labour one of the few viable routes to income (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Sanders 2005).

Within this literature, sex work is neither reducible to pure victimisation nor simply celebrated as free choice. Rather, it is approached as an ambivalent strategy adopted within unequal structural conditions. Women’s bodies become sites where local norms of respectability, national projects of modernity, and transnational economies of desire intersect. Spa-based sex work, framed as “body care” or “wellness,” illustrates how the commodification of women’s bodies is repackaged through idioms of modern service and consumption, while underlying power asymmetries between workers, owners, and clients persist (Hoang 2015; Weitzer 2018).

Risk environment and structural determinants

Finally, this study draws on the risk environment framework, which conceptualises HIV and STI vulnerability as a product of intersecting structural, social, and individual factors (Rhodes 2002; Shannon *et al.* 2015; Baral *et al.* 2013). Under this model, the health of spa workers in Nepalgunj is shaped by legal regimes (criminalisation of sex work), enforcement practices (police raids, extortion), venue organisation (owner control over

clients and condom policies), cross-border client flows, and multi-layered stigma (Benoit *et al.* 2018; Ghimire and van Teijlingen 2009; Glick *et al.* 2020).

These four frameworks together allow us to analyse spa centers in Nepalgunj as:

- i. hybrid informal–formal enterprises,
- ii. embedded in a borderland governance regime,
- iii. reliant on feminised, precarious labour, and
- iv. situated within a risk environment that structures health, safety, and agency.

Materials and methods

Research design

A qualitative exploratory design was employed to investigate the proliferation of spa and massage centers in Nepalgunj and their transformation into sites of hidden sex work. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for studying hidden or stigmatised populations, where representative sampling is difficult and where in-depth narratives are needed to understand lived experiences, power relations, and local meanings (Guest *et al.* 2006; Sanders 2005).

The study combines elements of urban ethnography and borderland ethnography, focusing on how informal markets emerge and are sustained in spaces of hybrid governance and weak regulation (Goodhand *et al.* 2021). The goal was not statistical generalisation but analytic generalisation: to generate richly contextualised insights that speak to broader theoretical debates on informality, gender, and risk.

Study site

Fieldwork was conducted in Nepalgunj Sub-metropolitan City, Banke District, Lumbini Province, approximately five kilometers from the Rupaidiha border crossing into Uttar Pradesh, India. Nepalgunj was purposively selected because:

- i. Municipal records indicated a rapid increase in spas (230 registered; ~190 operational by early 2025).
- ii. The majority of spas were clustered within a five-kilometer zone near the border, suggesting strong cross-border demand.
- iii. Nepalgunj has a long history as a hub of trade and migration, making it emblematic of broader borderland dynamics in Nepal (Bhardwaj 2013; Goodhand *et al.* 2021).

Sampling and recruitment

Given the clandestine nature of spa-based sex work, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used (Etikan *et al.* 2016; Guest *et al.* 2006). Spas were purposively selected from high-density clusters near the border, identified through municipal listings, local knowledge, and reconnaissance walks. Workers were approached through initial contacts who agreed to introduce the researcher to colleagues, generating snowball chains.

The final sample comprised:

- i. 50 spa workers, all women, self-reporting ages between 16 and 26 years; and
- ii. 20 spa owners or managers, representing 20 distinct establishments.

The sample size was determined by thematic saturation: by the 50th worker interview and 20th owner interview, no substantively new themes were emerging regarding client composition, sexual services, or cross-border dynamics (Guest *et al.* 2006; Braun and Clarke 2006).

Data collection

Fieldwork was undertaken between January and March 2025. Data sources included:

- i. Field observations in 50 spa establishments. Descriptive notes documented location, façade and signage, interior layout, visible service menus, pricing displays, staff composition, and patterns of client flow.
- ii. Semi-structured interviews with 50 workers and 20 owners/managers. Worker interviews covered socio-demographic background, pathways into spa work, types of services provided, client profiles, income and payment arrangements, condom use and health practices, experiences of violence, interactions with police, and perceptions of stigma. Owner/manager interviews explored business registration and licensing, client composition and marketing strategies, economic rationales, relations with authorities, and views on the social and cultural impact of the spa sector.

Interviews were conducted in Nepali and local dialects, with occasional code-switching into Hindi when participants discussed Indian clients. Worker interviews averaged around 45 minutes; owner interviews around 60 minutes. Notes were taken in all interviews, and—with participants' consent—most were audio recorded. Recordings were transcribed in Nepali and translated into English for analysis.

Ethical considerations

The study followed WHO guidance on ethics in research involving sex workers and other vulnerable populations ([World Health Organization 2013](#)). Participants were informed of the study's aims, assured that their participation was voluntary, and informed of their right to withdraw. Oral consent was obtained to avoid creating signed documents that could compromise anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in all notes and transcripts, and identifying details of spas were removed or masked.

Particular caution was exercised with self-reported minors (16–17 years). Interviews with minors focused on working conditions and perceptions of safety rather than sexual histories. The presence of minors was treated as a critical finding; anonymised information about trends was shared with local child protection NGOs after data collection, without disclosing individual identities.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was adopted, combining inductive coding with theoretical sensitisation to the four frameworks outlined earlier ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#); [Baral et al. 2013](#)).

- i. Open coding was used to identify categories related to demographics, client composition, services, pricing, working conditions, health practices, stigma, violence, and cross-border dynamics.
- ii. Axial coding grouped related codes into meso-level themes (e.g., “Indian male respectability and anonymity,” “hybrid legality of spas,” “minors and ambiguous consent”).
- iii. Selective coding refined core themes that cut across cases, including: spa centers as hybrid businesses, cross-border demand and client anonymity, gendered and age-based vulnerabilities, and health risks and risk mitigation strategies.

Trustworthiness was pursued through triangulation of interview accounts with field observations, systematic memoing, and reflexive journaling to identify potential researcher biases ([Lincoln and Guba 1985](#)).

Reflexivity and limitations

The researcher's positionality as an outsider to the spa community influenced both access and interpretation. Initial suspicion from workers diminished over time as rapport was built. Nevertheless, social desirability bias and fear of legal consequences may have shaped some responses. The cross-sectional design captures conditions at one point in time; longitudinal research would be needed to trace trajectories of the spa sector. Age data relied exclusively on self-report and was not independently verified, distinguishing it from verified ages that could provide more objective confirmation. This introduces possibilities of underreporting (e.g., minors claiming to be older to evade detection or continue employment) or overreporting (e.g., adults claiming younger ages to align with client preferences or job demands). Such biases could lead to underestimation of child exploitation risks; inflate perceived vulnerabilities among workers, or skew policy implications toward insufficient safeguards for minors. Similarly, economic estimates (e.g., revenue figures) rely on self-reported data without external validation, which could introduce imprecision and bias, potentially under- or overestimating the scale of the shadow economy and its policy implications. Finally, the sample was limited to one border town and cannot be assumed to represent all spa-based sex work in Nepal.

Results

Results are presented thematically: (a) demographic profiles of workers; (b) client composition and cross-border flows; (c) services and pricing structures; (d) economic organisation; (e) owners' perspectives; and (f) socio-cultural impacts.

Demographic profile of spa workers

Workers were predominantly young women (self-reported ages of 16–26 years, which were not independently verified), with 20% self-reporting an age below 18. Educational attainment was generally low; fewer than one in eight had completed higher secondary education. Many described discontinuing schooling due to poverty, family disruption, or early marriage. Financial precarity; debts, household responsibilities, unemployment; was the most frequently cited driver for entering spa work, aligning with findings from other Nepali settings.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of spa workers (n = 50)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Self-reported Age 16–17	10	20
Self-reported Age 18–22	25	50
Self-reported Age 23–26	15	30
Education: Below Grade 10	23	46
Education: Grade 10 completed	21	42
Education: Higher secondary+	6	12
Marital status: Single	34	68
Marital status: Married/Separated	16	32

The high proportion of adolescents, combined with low educational attainment, mirrors patterns observed among trafficked and at-risk women in the Indo–Nepal context.

Clientele composition and cross-border dynamics

Workers consistently reported that the majority of their clients were Indian nationals. Approximately 90% of spa customers were Indian, while only 10% were Nepali. Indian clients reportedly travel from nearby towns in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, taking advantage of the open border to seek services unavailable or socially stigmatized in their home regions.

Table 2: Estimated clientele distribution by nationality

Client Nationality	Percentage (%)
Indian	90
Nepali	10

This finding resonates with [Sahni and Shankar's \(2016\)](#) description of Indian men seeking sexual services outside their home contexts to avoid social stigma. It also affirms [Bhardwaj's \(2013\)](#) characterization of the India–Nepal border as a site of both legitimate and illicit opportunities.

Nature of services

Nearly all participants (92%) confirmed that spas routinely offered sexual services in addition to massage. These ranged from masturbation to vaginal and anal sex. Prices were relatively standardized: NPR 1000–1500 for massage services, with an additional NPR 1000–1500 for sexual services. Some clients demanded anal intercourse, which workers reported was physically painful and psychologically distressing.

Table 3: Services provided and average pricing

Service	Frequency of Reporting (%)	Average Fee (NPR)
Massage only	100	1000–1500
Masturbation	76	+500–1000
Vaginal sex	92	+1000–1500
Anal intercourse	34	+2000–3000

These service patterns align with global evidence that spa and massage venues often serve as fronts for sexual services (Hoang 2015; Platt *et al.* 2018). The demand for anal intercourse is especially concerning, as studies show higher risk of condom breakage and transmission of HIV and STIs in such practices (Shannon *et al.* 2015).

Economic dimensions

Based on aggregated self-reports from owners and workers during interviews, spas in Nepalgunj serve between 10 and 30 clients daily. With average combined fees for massage and sex ranging from NPR 2000 to 3000, daily revenues per spa are estimated to range approximately from NPR 30,000 to 60,000. This per-spa figure was calculated by multiplying the reported daily client range (10–30) by the average fee per client (NPR 2000–3000), using the lower and upper bounds to derive the revenue range. Multiplied across the 190 operational spas, this represents a substantial shadow economy in Nepalgunj, conservatively approximated at NPR 5.7–11.4 million per day (calculated as $190 \text{ spas} \times \text{NPR } 30,000$ for the low end and $190 \times \text{NPR } 60,000$ for the high end). These estimates are based solely on self-reported data from qualitative interviews and may not be fully precise, as they could be affected by recall bias, seasonal variations in client volume, unreported discounts or surcharges, or inconsistencies in reporting across participants.

Table 4: Estimated economic outputs per spa

Variable	Estimate
Clients per day	10–30
Average revenue per client	NPR 2000–3000
Daily revenue per spa	Approximately NPR 30,000–60,000
Daily revenue across 190 spas	Approximately NPR 5.7–11.4 million

While these figures indicate significant economic activity, workers reported receiving only a portion of client fees, with spa owners retaining 40–60%. Workers' monthly earnings ranged between NPR 25,000 and 50,000, considerably higher than the average wage for women in Nepal but accompanied by stigma, health risks, and insecurity.

Owners' perspectives

Interviews with 20 spa owners revealed candid acknowledgment of the sector's reliance on cross-border demand. Owners consistently cited Indian clients' pursuit of "sex, alcohol, and casinos" as the main drivers of business in Nepalgunj. Several owners admitted that the spa model provides a legal cover that reduces the risk of police raids, as establishments are registered with municipal authorities.

Owners expressed ambivalence: while they acknowledged the economic benefits of the industry, they also recognized the reputational risks for Nepalgunj. Some owners argued that the spa economy boosts local markets, including lodges, restaurants, and transport services. Others admitted that the involvement of minors was "unavoidable" given high demand and limited labor supply, though they justified it as driven by "economic necessity."

Socio-cultural impacts

The newfound prosperity of intercourse work that has been connected to a spa, has transformed the cultural landscape of Nepalgunj. Spas are becoming synonymous with prostitution, not wellness, as our community's sense of what is and is not legitimate in the wellness industry gets eroded. Stigma and discrimination were reported by workers to be very high, with them often being described as "bad women," restricting their social engagement and marriage prospects. The participation of minor girls compounds a sense in the community that traditional values are being eroded and the next generation of girls is unsafe.

From the gendered division of labor, the commodification of young women's bodies is an expression of patriarchy and economic gender inequality. Responses from workers to spa work were often ambivalent, characterized as empowering, by enabling financial independence, and disempowering, as a result of it being exploitive and stigmatizing. This paradox is reflected in the global literature on sex work where sex work is positioned at the nexus of agency and structural oppression (Weitzer 2018).

Discussion

The results of the present study extend and support the broader literature exploring the underground sex economy, borderland governance, and structural health determinants. First, the demographic characteristic of labourers supports previous studies, noting that sex work in Nepal is heavily performed by young, economically vulnerable women (Mishra and Neupane 2015; Deuba *et al.* 2016). Of particular concern is the presence of self-reported minors (whose ages were not verified, potentially subject to underreporting where younger individuals claim older ages to avoid intervention, or overreporting where older individuals claim youth for economic reasons; this could imply a higher actual prevalence of child involvement than reported, necessitating stronger verification mechanisms in future research and policy)- evidence the regulatory model is failing to protect vulnerable groups.. Second, its clientele is overwhelmingly Indian, emphasizing how important the cross-border mobility factor has been in effecting illegal sex business of Nepalgunj. This mirrors Bhardwaj's (2013) view of the India-Nepal border as a space for "alternative opportunities" and illicit trade. These finding parallels Sahni and Shakar's (2016) finding that Indian men tend to purchase sex outside of their social circles to escape the stigma. Third, the services and prices offered in Nepalgunj are in line with international trends in spa-based sex work (Hoang 2015; Platt *et al.* 2018). There's nothing wrong with setting standards, but the demand for higher-risk sexual practices such as anal intercourse, among other risky behaviors, is very troubling from a public health perspective. These results support Shannon *et al.*'s (2015) premise that structural conditions, including illegality and stigma, produce risk environments which increase health risks. Fourth, we should not underestimate the economic influence of the spa business. Spa-based sex work is a sizeable informal economy, with daily revenue of over NPR 5 million in the city. But workers have less of a shared stake in the profits and instead shoulder an outsized share of risk of stigma, violence, and health harms. This underpins

Chen's (2023) claim that informal economies flourish in low regulation but entrench inequalities.

The socio-cultural repercussions of spa prostitution finally embody the legacies of modernization in border cities. On the one hand, it stimulates the economy and gives money to women. On the other hand, however, by undermining the traditional rules, it exacerbates the stigma and adds vulnerability for young women. This duality reflects Weitzer's (2018) construction of sex work as both empowering and exploitative, depending on the structural context.

Policy implications

This study shows that the spa centers of Nepalgunj are not only about leisure or health; they are an emerging shadow economy fuelled by cross-border demand for sex. These venues support economies, but are sites of exploitation, stigma, and poor health. So, policy responses to sex work as well need to confront this duality of hidden forms of sex work and confront the socio-economic drivers that fuel it. This section reviews policy implications within five interrelated spheres: regulatory control, youth protection, public health responses, cross-border regulation, and alternative livelihoods.

Regulatory oversight and enforcement

The provided illustrative information was that almost all the spas in Nepalgunj were registered with the municipality pretentiously but involve in hidden sexual exchange. This duality represents what Chen (2023) has termed the 'hybridity' of informal economies in that businesses are located on the margins of legality and illegality. The presence of a licensing system has failed to stamp out illicit activity but has served to shield prostitution from the law. It is time for increased regulatory control.

One means is to establish regular reviews of the spa industry, not only for repressive enforcement, but for monitoring work. Overseas lessons indicate that repressive measures simply push sex work further underground and make life riskier for sex workers (Platt *et al.* 2018). Alternatively, Nepal-based regulators might opt for a harm-reduction regime: requiring compliance with local health and safety standards and transparent employment records, and tying licensing of foreign labor recruiters to compliance with foreign labor protections. Local authorities should have the power to suspend licenses of spas found to exploit minors or use coercion and, at the same time, provide a path toward compliance.

The Nepal Police and municipal staff would have to receive special training on how to handle cases with sensitivity and without harassment and extortion. Police practices have been demonstrated to have a significant impact on sex worker health and safety in India, with repressive policing associated with experiencing violence and condomless sex from clients (Ryan *et al.* 2019). As such, reform should be pursued together with the sensitization of enforcement agencies towards harm-reduction and accountability.

Protection of minors and vulnerable groups

The presence of self-reported minors (16–17 years old, unverified and potentially under- or over-reported as discussed in the limitations, which could amplify exploitation risks if actual numbers are higher) among spa workers constitutes a serious human rights violation. Nepal's Human Trafficking and Transportation (Control) Act criminalizes sexual exploitation of minors, yet weak enforcement enables underage involvement. The study's findings echo broader concerns about child trafficking in Nepal's borderlands, where porous mobility increases vulnerability (Goodhand *et al.* 2021).

Policy responses must prioritize proactive identification and protection of minors. Municipal inspectors should be trained to detect underage employment, with referral systems in place to NGOs specializing in child protection. Programs such as those led by Maiti Nepal demonstrate the feasibility of border-monitoring interventions, but these need to be extended to urban settings like Nepalgunj. Furthermore, rehabilitation services must be scaled up, providing rescued minors with psychosocial support, education, and vocational training. Without viable alternatives, interventions risk simply displacing minors into other exploitative sectors.

Importantly, protective interventions must avoid criminalizing the minors themselves. Global best practices emphasize a victim-centered approach, where the responsibility lies with exploiters rather than those exploited (Shannon *et al.* 2015). Policy design should therefore combine stricter penalties for owners employing minors with comprehensive support for young women removed from such environments.

Public health interventions

The study highlights widespread provision of sexual services in spas, including high-risk practices such as anal intercourse, with inconsistent condom use. These conditions create an urgent public health challenge. The Lancet series on sex work and HIV emphasizes

that structural determinants- stigma, criminalization, and lack of outreach- are primary drivers of HIV vulnerability among sex workers ([Shannon et al. 2015](#)). In Nepal, IBBS surveys have documented uneven condom use and barriers to accessing services among female sex workers ([Deuba et al. 2016](#)).

Targeted public health interventions for spa workers in Nepalgunj are thus imperative. Drawing lessons from India's National AIDS Control Programme, Nepal could develop specialized outreach models for spa-based workers, involving peer educators who can access hidden venues ([IHAT/DSACS 2021](#)). Mobile health clinics, condom distribution, and confidential HIV/STI testing services should be introduced in Nepalgunj with sensitivity to workers' fear of exposure. Partnerships with community-based organizations can enhance trust, as workers are more likely to access services when delivered through peer networks ([Baral et al. 2013](#)).

Additionally, interventions must address stigma in healthcare facilities. As [Ryan et al. \(2019\)](#) demonstrate in Delhi, sex work-related stigma discourages help-seeking even when services are available. Training healthcare providers in Nepalgunj to deliver non-discriminatory services is essential. Integrating spa workers into existing HIV prevention frameworks would not only protect their health but also reduce broader community transmission risks.

Cross-border governance

The predominance of Indian clients underscores the cross-border nature of Nepalgunj's spa economy. As [Bhardwaj \(2013\)](#) notes, the open India-Nepal border facilitates both opportunity and illicit activity. Addressing spa-based sex work therefore requires bilateral engagement.

Nepal and India could create joint task forces to trace cross-border trafficking and sex work. This might include sharing information on intelligence, having joint raids on trafficking networks, and standardizing procedures for child protection. Yet undue attention to punitive, moralizing measures, which target the sex workers themselves, should be avoided as this evidence shows escalations of risk ([Platt et al. 2018](#)). But rather than rely on treaty-based transnational enforcement, the emphasis of bilateral accords should be on anti-trafficking, child protection, and public health cooperation.

And such collaboration in public health is particularly important. Because 90% of the spa-goers are Indian, international dynamics of STI and HIV are inherent to

Nepalgunj. It's high time that Nepalese and Indian health authorities come together and align their surveillance systems and interventions, because sexual health issues in border towns cannot be tackled in isolation. Cross-border joint awareness campaigns and binational condom promotion programmes could potentially reduce such risks.

Alternative livelihoods and economic diversification

Finally, spa-based sex work in Nepalgunj can never be reduced without addressing the economic push factors. The workers also found that they earn a lot more in spas compared to other sectors – they generally make between Rs. 25,000 to 50,000 in a period of a month. This is well above Nepal's average female wage, and spa work is thus economically rational, even though it's risky and stigmatized.

As [Chen \(2023\)](#) states that the infrastructure of inequality and the absence of alternatives prop up the informal economy. If dependence on spa-based sex work is to be lessened, policymakers need to invest in skills training, micro-finance, and more formal labor markets for young women. Programs could specialize in vocational areas where demand is increasing such as hospitality, retailing, and information technology. NGOs and foreign donors can partner with entrepreneurs to catalyze women's participation in the economy outside of the sex trade.

Counteracting these pressures, however, are also mechanisms that could support spa workers in rebuilding their lives outside of sex work. Financial literacy and savings programs, for example, could also empower them to leave sex work gradually. South Asian livelihood interventions have provided evidence that economic empowerment can make individuals less susceptible to exploitation, if programs are soundly designed and not contribute to other forms of harm ([Hossain and Sajid 2019](#)).

Integrative perspective

Collectively, these policy implications affirm the necessity of thinking across sectors. No one single intervention—rather it be crackdowns, health programmes or livelihood strategies—will deal with the complexity of spa based sex work in Nepalgunj. What is instead needed are a comprehensive set of responses: between policy emphasized on health and service, child protection measures complemented with alternative livelihood strategies, and regional cooperation founded on harm reduction rather than prohibition.

This combined view is supported by theoretical frameworks. Theories of the informal economy ([Chen 2023](#)) remind us that hybrid economies cannot be apprehended by means of law alone; they necessitate refined policy mixes. Borderland theory

(Goodhand *et al.* 2021) highlights that governance in border towns is always partial and negotiated, meaning there is a need to focus debate on context sensitive solutions. Among the most praised gendered labor frames (Hoang 2015) are those which emphasize the role of structural inequalities in driving women into potentially harmful work situations where financial incentives often loom large. Lastly, the public health risk environment model (Shannon *et al.* 2015; Baral *et al.* 2013) indicates that risk mitigation will involve taking on stigma, policing and structural constraints.

Conclusion

This investigation sought to examine the proliferation of spa and massage centres in Nepalgunj, as well as their functioning as underground spaces of sex work, and how socio-economic, cultural, and trans-national factors continue to drive them. But the results show that even though these institutions are established in the name of authenticity, they have already moved from authenticity to a shadow economy centred on sex. The large number of Indian customers, the engagement of minors, the fixed price of sex trade, and the day-to-day cash inflow – it's all indication of how Nepalgunj has become a hub for hidden sex work disguised as wellness services. By capturing the character of spa operations, the prevalence of cross-border clients and the structural precarities encountered by workers including stigma, health vulnerabilities, and exploitation, the findings met the study aims.

At the same time, the work showed that the spa economy is not simply about illegal activity but rather it is a convergence of poverty, gender-based inequality and governance failure in a borderland context. Spa work generates more income than the alternative employment for young women, but this financial independence comes at the cost of exploitation, a social stigma, and shifts in cultural norms. The implications are pressing: regulations that close loopholes without driving the trade further underground, protections for minors, health-specific interventions and alternative livelihood options. In the absence of more coordinated efforts, this trajectory may institutionalize Nepalgunj as a red-light economy, with health-related, social and gender-justice implications.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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