

Reconstructing Livelihood Change Under Constraint: A Reflexive Qualitative Account of Skills Training among Female Sex Workers in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: Purpose: This study examines how Female Sex Workers (FSWs) interpreted and navigated livelihood opportunities following participation in an NGO-led skills training programme in Nigeria. The study also examines what a reconstructive, practitioner-informed qualitative approach can reveal about livelihood change under constrained research conditions.

Design/methodology/approach:

Conventional data collection was restricted due to institutional confidentiality, ethical concerns, and the vulnerability of participants. The study therefore employed a reconstructive qualitative methodology drawing on practitioner recollections from prolonged engagement with the programme. Reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and informal consultation with former colleagues supported the development of interpretive thematic insights. The approach foregrounds positionality, interpretive limits, and methodological transparency.

Findings:

Livelihood trajectories were episodic, reversible, and shaped by the economics of immediacy. While skills training temporarily expanded participants' sense of possibility, structural constraints—including stigma, childcare pressures, capital limitations, and volatile informal markets—often prevented sustained livelihood conversion. Many women combined or alternated between newly acquired skills and sex work, reflecting pragmatic responses to uncertainty rather than lack of motivation. The training held symbolic and affective value, offering moments of recognition even when material transformation did not occur.

Originality/value:

The study contributes conceptually by challenging linear models of livelihood transition and highlighting the contextual, identity-based pressures shaping decision-making among marginalised women. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of reconstructive, practice-informed qualitative analysis when direct engagement with participants is ethically or institutionally infeasible. It offers a transparent account of how situated practitioner knowledge can generate insight while maintaining reflexive accountability.

KEYWORDS: Female Sex Workers (FSWs), Livelihoods, Skills training, Informal economy, Reconstructive qualitative methods, Practitioner research, Reflexivity, Vulnerability, Nigeria, Qualitative inquiry

1. INTRODUCTION

Female sex workers (FSWs) face multiple, intersecting vulnerabilities, including criminalisation, social stigma, precarious working conditions, and limited access to formal employment or social protection (Scorgie et al., 2013; Tun et al., 2022). Livelihood support programmes — often in the form of vocational or skills-training initiatives — are frequently promoted as pathways to alternative livelihoods, with the aim of reducing reliance on sex work (Ikuteyijo et al., 2022). Despite the proliferation of such programmes, little is known about how FSWs themselves experience and interpret livelihood change. Beyond conventional outcome metrics such as income, employment, or programme completion, it remains unclear how participants navigate, make sense of, and respond to livelihood opportunities in contexts of persistent social, economic, and structural constraints (Mworeko & Mbonye, 2025).

While research on sex work has grown in Africa and other Global South settings, most studies focus on health risks, HIV vulnerability, sexual and reproductive health, or entry into and exit from sex work (Kawuma et al., 2024; Tun et al., 2022). For instance, qualitative studies in Kampala documented how structural, interpersonal, and individual factors shape contexts of sex work and influence risk behaviours (Kawuma et al., 2024). Research in South Africa has shown how external and internalised stigma, exposure to violence, and economic deprivation shape mental health and well-being among sex workers (Mworeko & Mbonye, 2025). Other studies in Nigerian urban slums highlight widespread job-related violence and precarious work conditions, demonstrating the interplay of economic pressure, unsafe environments, and social marginalisation (Ikuteyijo et al., 2022).

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Despite these contributions, few qualitative studies examine how livelihood interventions, such as vocational skills training, are experienced by FSWs, or how such interventions influence their sense of economic possibility, identity, and agency (Scorgie et al., 2013). Moreover, methodological debates on researching highly stigmatised populations under constrained access or limited documentation remain limited. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a reconstructive, practitioner-informed approach, which allows careful qualitative analysis under conditions where conventional longitudinal or observational data are unavailable (Huysamen, 2022; Smuts, 2021).

Research Questions

The study is guided by three interrelated research questions, designed to capture both the **lived experiences of FSWs** and the **methodological implications** of a reconstructive approach:

1. **How do female sex workers interpret and experience livelihood possibilities after participating in a vocational skills-training programme?:** This question focuses on meaning-making, everyday decision-making, and subjective understandings of change, hope, continuity, or constraint (Scorgie et al., 2013; Ikuteyijo et al., 2022).
2. **In what ways do broader social, economic, and structural constraints — including stigma, economic pressure, gender and social norms, and the unpredictable nature of informal work — shape livelihood decisions among these women?:** This question situates individual experiences within wider structural and contextual realities of marginalisation and precarity (Tun et al., 2022; Mworeko & Mbonye, 2025).
3. **What does a reconstructive, practitioner-informed qualitative approach reveal about the possibilities and limits of generating trustworthy insight under conditions of limited access to formal data or documentation?:** This meta-methodological question reflects on reflexivity, interpretive authority, and epistemological implications of reconstructing lived experience through memory, exposure, and triangulated perspectives (Huysamen, 2022; Smuts, 2021).

The paper is organised as follows. First, relevant qualitative literature on vulnerability, informal livelihoods, sex work, and practitioner-informed research is reviewed. The methodology section then outlines the interpretive design, reconstructive approach, analytic process, and ethical considerations. The findings section presents key patterns and themes emerging from the reconstructed cases. The discussion considers implications for both FSW-focused livelihood programmes and qualitative research under constrained conditions. Finally, the conclusion highlights substantive and methodological insights and identifies directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL POSITIONING

This study sits at the intersection of livelihood research, qualitative inquiry into vulnerability, and practitioner-led interpretive methodologies. The review below provides a conceptual foundation for understanding livelihood change among Female Sex Workers (FSWs) and situates reconstructive qualitative analysis within broader epistemological and methodological debates. It also establishes the link between existing knowledge gaps and the study's research questions.

2.1 Livelihoods under Constraint: Beyond Linear Models of Change

Livelihood scholarship traditionally defines a livelihood as the capabilities, assets, and activities that enable people to make a living under conditions of risk and uncertainty (Chambers & Conway, 1992). This framework recognises both individual agency and resilience while acknowledging that livelihood strategies are shaped by structural forces—including poverty, social exclusion, stigma, and gender norms—that may constrain the effective conversion of skills into sustained income (Scoones, 2009; Osbahr, 2007).

Conventional livelihood programmes often operate on a linear logic: training produces skills, which generate income, which ultimately facilitates exit from vulnerability. However, research in contexts of marginalisation highlights that livelihood trajectories are rarely linear or permanent. Instead, livelihoods are adaptive, dynamic, and negotiated, involving movement between activities, combinations of income sources, and continual trade-offs between aspiration and constraint (Meagher, 2010; Scoones, 2009).

For FSWs, these dynamics are amplified by the intersection of economic need, gendered responsibilities, caregiving demands, exposure to violence, and the legal and social ambiguities surrounding sex work (Tun et al., 2022; Kawuma et al., 2024). This complexity underscores the need to examine livelihood change not as a fixed outcome but as a process of ongoing interpretation and negotiation in everyday life, aligning with the study's first research question on how FSWs experience and interpret livelihood possibilities.

2.2 Decision-Making, Identity, and the Realities of Informal Economies

Decision-making in informal economies occurs under uncertainty, fluctuating demand, and minimal institutional support (Hart, 1973; Meagher, 2010). Survival often prioritises immediacy, predictability, and risk mitigation over long-term planning, a logic particularly relevant to FSWs navigating precarious work conditions (Scorgie et al., 2013; Ikuteyijo et al., 2022).

FSWs' livelihood decisions are shaped by intersecting constraints: immediate economic pressures, relative predictability of sex work income, limited access to capital or markets, concerns about disclosure, stigma, and surveillance, and identity-based

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restrictions on where and how they can operate (Mworeko & Mbonye, 2025). These constraints render “choice” ambivalent, reversible, and highly context-dependent. Vocational training may expand skills, but without addressing structural and social barriers, it does not automatically translate into sustainable livelihood change.

This perspective directly informs the second research question, which examines how broader social, economic, and structural constraints shape livelihood decisions among FSWs. It highlights the need for a nuanced, qualitative lens that foregrounds lived experience, risk negotiation, and identity-informed decision-making.

2.3 Qualitative Inquiry with Vulnerable Populations

Research involving FSWs raises significant ethical and methodological challenges. Direct interviews, formal surveys, or participant observation can expose participants to risk, reinforce stigma, or conflict with organisational constraints (Liamputtong, 2007; Finlay, 2002). Scholars emphasise the need for methodological sensitivity, relational ethics, and acknowledgement of power asymmetries when working with marginalised groups (Denzin, 2017; Liamputtong, 2007).

Key considerations include:

1. Access often being mediated by NGOs, gatekeepers, or security concerns.
2. Limited documentation due to confidentiality protocols.
3. Vulnerability to misrepresentation when participant voices are filtered through institutional narratives.
4. Potential intrusiveness or social/emotional burdens from researcher presence.

Given these challenges, alternative qualitative approaches that minimise participant burden—such as retrospective, observational, or practitioner-informed methods—are increasingly recognised as legitimate when applied transparently and reflexively (Smuts, 2021; Huysamen, 2022). This methodological stance aligns with the third research question regarding what reconstructive, practitioner-informed approaches reveal about the possibilities and limits of understanding livelihood change under constrained conditions.

2.4 Practitioner Knowledge, Reflexivity, and Reconstructive Qualitative Methods

Practitioner-based or practice-informed research is increasingly legitimised in qualitative inquiry, particularly when conventional access to participants or formal data is limited (Schon, 1983; Fox, 2003). Practitioners often possess deep contextual understanding, long-term immersion, and insight into processes that short-term fieldwork may not capture.

However, such knowledge must be approached reflexively to avoid selective recall, interpretive bias, or uncritical authority. Scholars highlight that practitioner knowledge is valid when:

- Its partial and situated nature is acknowledged (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).
- Assumptions and biases are interrogated (Finlay, 2002).
- Interpretive authority is made transparent (Denzin, 2017).
- Claims remain modest and bounded by conditions of access (Smith & Deemer, 2000).

Reconstructive qualitative methods, where analytic accounts are built from practitioner recollection, key informant perspectives, or retrospective observation, are widely used in trauma research, social work, and studies with hard-to-reach populations (Smuts, 2021; Huysamen, 2022). These approaches prioritise interpretive coherence and ethical honesty rather than verbatim representation, making them suitable for researching FSWs under conditions of vulnerability, ethical sensitivity, and access limitations.

2.5 Conceptual Positioning of the Present Study

Guided by the literature reviewed above, this study adopts an interpretive, reflexive, and reconstructive approach to understanding livelihood change among FSWs following vocational skills training. Its conceptual positioning rests on four interrelated pillars:

1. **Adaptive, non-linear livelihoods:** Livelihoods are dynamic and shaped by uncertainty, stigma, and fluctuating opportunity structures.
2. **Decision-making under constraint:** Individuals prioritise immediacy, risk management, and situational pragmatism over linear or aspirational models.
3. **Relational, ethical qualitative inquiry:** Research must attend to vulnerability, power relations, and participant safety.
4. **Reconstructive, practitioner-informed analysis:** Practitioner knowledge, reflexivity, and bounded interpretive claims enable meaningful insights when direct data access is restricted.

These pillars collectively underpin the study’s research questions. They guide exploration of FSWs’ lived experiences (RQ1), the influence of social and structural constraints on livelihood decisions (RQ2), and the methodological possibilities and limits of reconstructive qualitative inquiry (RQ3). The positioning thus links conceptual insight, ethical rigor, and methodological transparency, providing a foundation for the study’s use of composite cases, reflexive thematic analysis, and ethically sensitive interpretation.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Qualitative Orientation

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative design with a practice-oriented orientation, aiming not to evaluate programme effectiveness or measure behavioural outcomes, but to understand how Female Sex Workers (FSWs) experienced and interpreted livelihood possibilities following participation in skills training. Knowledge is approached as socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by both participant experience and researcher positioning, reflecting the interpretivist tradition that emphasises meaning-making, process, and situated understanding over causality or prediction (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Given the ethical and institutional constraints surrounding data access, the study privileges analytic transparency and reflexivity over comprehensiveness. Rather than presenting findings as definitive representations of participant realities, the study offers situated interpretations grounded in prolonged field engagement and practitioner insight, aligning with QRJ's emphasis on ethically informed, reflexive qualitative inquiry.

3.2 Context and Field Setting

The study was situated within a vocational skills training initiative implemented by a non-governmental organisation in an urban Nigerian context during the early 2010s. The programme targeted FSWs with the aim of expanding livelihood options through basic vocational training and limited post-training support. The broader setting was characterised by economic instability, high levels of informal employment, and pervasive social stigma surrounding sex work. FSWs operated within intersecting pressures, including income insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, exposure to health risks, and restricted access to formal credit or markets. Understanding this social and economic context is crucial, as it shaped participants' engagement with training and the meanings they attributed to livelihood opportunities long after the formal sessions concluded.

3.3 Reconstructive Qualitative Methodology

Research with highly vulnerable populations often occurs under conditions where direct participant contact, formal interviews, or documentary access are ethically or institutionally constrained. In such contexts, alternative qualitative approaches are necessary to generate interpretive insight without compromising participant safety or violating organisational boundaries. This study adopts a reconstructive qualitative methodology, drawing on practitioner memory, extended field exposure, and key informant insight to create analytic accounts in the absence of conventional data collection.

The decision to employ a reconstructive approach was informed by three intersecting realities. Ethical constraints associated with re-contacting former participants posed significant risks to their safety, privacy, and potential for re-stigmatisation. Organisational access limitations prevented retrieval of detailed programme records, participant files, or monitoring data. Furthermore, the events under study occurred over a decade ago, making retrospective direct data collection both practically and ethically inappropriate. In this context, reconstructive methodology allows for ethically responsible, nuanced interpretation while acknowledging the partiality and situated nature of practitioner knowledge (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Denzin, 2017).

Interpretation was informed by three overlapping experiential sources. Practitioner recollection, drawn from the researcher's role in programme delivery and informal engagement with participants, provided insight into participant behaviour, interactions, aspirations, constraints, and post-training struggles. Extended field exposure, including involvement in related NGO programmes and community engagement, offered a contextual frame for understanding livelihood decisions amid structural pressures, shifting identities, and informal economic instability. Key informant perspectives, gathered through retrospective conversations with former programme staff and community actors, were used to validate recurring patterns, clarify contextual details, and challenge selective recall. These sources were treated as overlapping windows into lived experience, with analytic value residing in pattern recognition rather than factual precision.

Composite cases were used as the principal analytic device, synthesising recurring patterns, dilemmas, and trajectories across multiple participants while deliberately obscuring identifying details. This approach simultaneously protects confidentiality and enables analytic generalisation in conceptual terms, illustrating processes and dynamics rather than representing individuals. Memory-based interpretation was managed through cross-checking recall against programme timelines and modules, prioritising recurring patterns over singular anecdotes, and validating insights through key informant discussion. Memory was thus treated as an interpretive resource requiring disciplined reflexivity rather than as a neutral archive.

3.4 Analytic Procedure: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), appropriate for research where meaning-making, researcher subjectivity, and interpretive depth are central. Reflexive thematic analysis was adapted for the reconstructive environment, with emphasis on transparency, reflexive discipline, and pattern recognition across practitioner recollection, extended field exposure, and key informant insight.

The analytic process involved several overlapping stages. Initial familiarisation drew on reflective recall of programme interactions, mapping key events, recurring patterns, dilemmas, and emotional tones. Preliminary meaning units were identified based on patterns

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observed across recollections, highlighting contrasts between aspiration and constraint, recurring livelihood dilemmas, and tensions between skill acquisition and livelihood conversion. These meaning units were iteratively clustered into provisional thematic groups, exploring conceptual boundaries and shared experiential dynamics, including the fragility of new livelihood attempts, economic immediacy and risk management, identity negotiation, and the emotional labour of sustaining livelihood experimentation. Reflexive interrogation ensured that personal assumptions, selective recall, and practitioner identity were critically examined, and that emerging patterns were supported by key informant insight and alternative explanations.

Composite cases were integrated to illustrate recurrent patterns, tensions, trajectories, contradictions, and adaptive strategies. Final themes were developed based on recurrence, depth of interpretive insight, conceptual significance, alignment with research questions, and reflexive consideration of alternative interpretations. Themes were presented as interpretive narratives rather than empirical generalisations, capturing how livelihood change was navigated under constrained social, economic, and institutional conditions.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Reflexive Discipline

Trustworthiness was maintained through transparency and reflexive rigor rather than procedural replication. Credibility was supported by prolonged field engagement and emphasis on pattern repetition over singular episodes. Dependability was established by explicitly describing how insights were generated and how analytic boundaries were defined. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality, interpretive choices, and cross-validation with key informants. Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing methodological practice, attending to assumptions, social location, interpretive stance, and ethical responsibilities in reconstructing others' experiences (Finlay, 2002; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

3.6 Researcher Positionality

Positionality was central to the study's integrity, given the reliance on practitioner recollection and experiential insight. The researcher's dual role as programme facilitator and qualitative analyst provided intimate knowledge of programme processes, participant interactions, and contextual realities. This proximity offered access to informal insights often unavailable to external researchers, but also introduced risks of selective recall, interpretive loyalty, emotional investment, and over-identification with participants. Reflexive attention mitigated these risks, ensuring that analysis remained analytically disciplined, ethically sensitive, and accountable.

Gendered and power asymmetries were acknowledged, with the researcher reflecting on how his male identity and professional authority influenced interactions, perceptions, and interpretations. Ethical reflexivity guided the interrogation of memory, emotion, and interpretive authority, with cross-validation from former staff and community actors providing an external check on potential bias.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Formal institutional ethics approval could not be obtained retrospectively due to organisational access constraints. No new participant contact occurred, and no identifiable personal data are presented. Composite cases protected confidentiality and minimised the risk of re-identification. The study emphasised non-maleficence, respect for participant dignity, and avoidance of overgeneralisation or moralistic judgement, framing livelihood strategies as adaptive responses to constrained conditions.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

The reconstructive design limits the precision and verifiability of findings. The absence of participant quotations restricts depth of voice, and the study does not claim representativeness, causality, or statistical generalisability. These constraints are acknowledged as defining conditions of the research rather than weaknesses to be corrected post hoc.

4. FINDINGS: INTERPRETING LIVELIHOOD EXPERIENCES AFTER SKILLS TRAINING

This section presents interpretive findings drawn from reconstructed cases informed by practitioner recollection, prolonged field exposure, and key informant insight. The aim is not to evaluate programme "success" or "failure" but to understand how Female Sex Workers (FSWs) experienced, interpreted, and negotiated livelihood possibilities following skills training. The findings address the study's research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do FSWs experience and interpret livelihood possibilities following skills training?
- **RQ2:** How do structural, social, and identity factors influence the translation of skills into sustainable livelihood strategies?
- **RQ3:** How do FSWs navigate economic risk and opportunity within the constraints of informal work?

Analysis identified **four interrelated, conceptually grounded themes**, each illustrating the complex, non-linear, and contextually embedded nature of livelihood change.

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4.1 Entering Training with Hope, but Limited Clarity (RQ1)

A prevailing feature of participants' experiences was **hope as an emotional driver** rather than a concrete plan. Entry into skills training was often framed as a "pause" from daily pressures—a structured space offering recognition and temporary respite from marginalisation. One participant reflected:

"It felt like someone had opened a small window in a dark room."

While hope motivated engagement and sustained participation, it rarely translated into clear expectations or practical strategies for post-training livelihood conversion. Aspirations were expressed broadly—"something better" or "a new life"—without detailed plans for resource mobilisation, client acquisition, or timelines.

From an interpretive standpoint, this theme illustrates how **emotional readiness does not necessarily equate to practical preparedness** (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2009). In reflexive terms, my own recollection of participants' excitement had to be balanced against the likelihood that optimism often overshadowed awareness of structural constraints. The findings thus highlight the **affective dimensions of entering a training programme**, framing hope as both enabling and fragile.

4.2 Skills Acquisition without Stable Livelihood Conversion (RQ2)

While FSWs often successfully acquired new skills, **the translation of capability into sustained livelihood was limited**. Reconstructed accounts revealed that income from new activities was uncertain, delayed, and often insufficient to supplant earnings from sex work. One participant recounted:

"The skill was real, but the environment refused to cooperate."

Practical barriers—including limited access to capital, tools, workspace, and customers—constrained the viability of newly learned skills. Even technically competent participants could not consistently convert skills into income, echoing livelihood scholarship emphasising structural determinants of agency (Osborne, 2007; Hart, 1973).

This theme demonstrates that **skills acquisition alone is insufficient for livelihood transformation**, particularly under conditions of economic instability and social marginalisation. Reflexively, my dual role as practitioner and analyst informed these interpretations, helping contextualise participants' struggles while remaining aware of potential over-identification with their challenges.

4.3 Balancing Experimentation with Economic Survival (RQ2 & RQ3)

Participants frequently engaged in **iterative livelihood experimentation**, moving between new skills and sex work according to immediate needs. For example, one participant alternated between baking pastries during the day and seeing clients at night:

"The baking feeds my hope, the other feeds my rent."

This oscillation illustrates that livelihood change is **reversible and adaptive**, responding to immediate economic pressures rather than linear aspirations (Meagher, 2010; Scoones, 2009). Decisions were not moralised; instead, they were pragmatic responses to unstable conditions, showing how **risk management often outweighs long-term planning**.

Conceptually, this supports the study's positioning of **decision-making under constraint**, highlighting the interplay between aspiration and necessity. Reflexive awareness was crucial here: I noted where my empathy for participants' ingenuity could risk romanticising adaptive strategies, and I deliberately foregrounded the tension between agency and structural limits.

4.4 The Continued Pull of Immediacy and Predictability (RQ2 & RQ3)

Even where participants wished to reduce reliance on sex work, **the immediacy and predictability of earnings made alternative livelihoods challenging**. Short-term needs—rent, food, healthcare—often dictated decisions. One participant described:

"I could make something in one night that would take a week in the shop."

This theme aligns with literature on informal economies, where income reliability and immediacy often outweigh aspirational considerations (Hart, 1973; Meagher, 2010). Livelihood decisions are best understood as **trade-offs**, with new skills providing additional options rather than guaranteed alternatives.

4.5 Social Identity, Stigma, and Uneven Support (RQ2)

Participants' **social identity and stigma** shaped how they could operationalise skills. Attempts to pursue new livelihoods risked disclosure of sex work, leading some to avoid local markets and incur extra costs. One participant noted:

"The training did not give me a new identity—just a new hope; the old identity is still following me."

While training provided temporary spaces of legitimacy, post-programme support was uneven, reinforcing the relational dimension of livelihood change. This theme underscores that livelihood transitions are not purely economic but **embedded in social and moral landscapes** (Liamputtong, 2007; Denzin, 2017). Reflexively, I had to distinguish between my sense of programme intent and participants' lived realities, emphasising contextually grounded interpretation.

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4.6 Training as Recognition Rather than Transformation (RQ1 & RQ2)

Beyond skill acquisition, training offered **symbolic recognition**, affirming participants' capacity to envision alternative futures. A participant explained:

"The graduation ceremony was the only time someone called my name with respect."

Recognition contributed to **psychological and social capital**, even when material transformation was limited. This finding aligns with the conceptual framing that livelihoods are **adaptive, socially situated processes** rather than linear achievements (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2009). Reflexively, acknowledging the symbolic significance of training prevented overemphasis on measurable outcomes.

4.7 Endurance Rather than Exit (RQ1 & RQ3)

Finally, findings suggest that interventions **support endurance rather than consistent exit from sex work**. Participants navigated vulnerability by combining available options, demonstrating flexibility and resilience. Skills training provided tools for reflection, temporary alternatives, and hope, but did not fundamentally alter structural pressures.

This framing emphasises **process over outcome**, recognising livelihood management as ongoing negotiation under constraint (Scoones, 2009). Reflexively, I positioned interpretive claims modestly, noting that these conclusions describe tendencies rather than universal truths.

Across themes, findings show that **livelihood change among FSWs is non-linear, adaptive, and socially embedded**. Skills training enhanced capability and offered symbolic recognition, but did not guarantee material transformation. Decisions were shaped by immediacy, predictability, identity, stigma, and structural constraints. Composite cases provide analytic coherence, illustrating processes rather than individual narratives, and highlighting the interplay of aspiration, constraint, and context.

Together, these findings address the study's research questions by illustrating:

- How FSWs interpreted and navigated livelihood possibilities (RQ1).
- How social, economic, and structural factors constrained or facilitated skill translation (RQ2).
- How participants managed risk, uncertainty, and opportunity in informal work (RQ3).

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how Female Sex Workers (FSWs) interpreted and navigated livelihood possibilities following participation in a skills training programme, and to examine the insights a reconstructive, practitioner-informed qualitative approach could provide under conditions of limited access. The findings demonstrate that livelihood trajectories among the women were neither linear nor uniformly transformative. Instead, they were characterised by episodic experimentation, ambivalent engagement with newly acquired skills, and a persistent pull toward the immediacy and predictability of sex work income. These patterns illuminate the dynamic negotiation between aspiration and constraint that shapes livelihood transitions in precarious contexts (RQ1, RQ2).

5.1 Livelihood Change as Episodic and Negotiated

Consistent with the first research question (RQ1), the findings reveal that livelihood experimentation was episodic and reversible. Participants often attempted to use new skills—tailoring, hair-braiding, baking, small trading—but these efforts rarely achieved stable or sustained income. This aligns with literature challenging linear models of transition, emphasizing livelihood as a fluid process of adaptation rather than a permanent shift (Scoones, 2009; Osbahr, 2007).

While skills training increased competence, competence alone was insufficient to generate reliable livelihoods. The women's decisions reflected what Chambers and Conway (1992) describe as "livelihood pragmatism," prioritizing what was immediately workable over theoretically desirable alternatives. In this sense, livelihood change emerged not as a singular event but as a series of temporally bounded experiments, shaped by fragile opportunity structures.

5.2 The Economics of Immediacy and Predictability

A central insight relates to the role of immediacy in economic decision-making (RQ2). Across reconstructed cases, participants consistently weighed the delayed and uncertain earnings from skill-based enterprises against the immediate and predictable returns of sex work. As one participant noted: "The baking feeds my hope, the other feeds my rent." This echoes research showing that in highly constrained informal economies, short-term predictability often outweighs longer-term potential (Meagher, 2010; Hart, 1973). From an interpretive perspective, sex work operated as a rational, risk-management strategy. Skills created hope and temporary diversification, but required capital, time, and networks that were frequently unavailable. These dynamics highlight that livelihood "exit" from sex work is rarely straightforward and must be understood within the interplay of economic necessity, household obligations, and market instability.

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5.3 Identity, Stigma, and Social Constraints

Beyond economics, social identity and stigma constrained participants' ability to operationalize new skills. Fear of recognition, judgement, or surveillance shaped where and how women pursued alternative livelihoods. For example, one participant avoided selling goods in her neighborhood to minimize disclosure risk, traveling across town to market items—a strategy that increased costs but protected anonymity. These observations affirm prior work indicating that social identity mediates access to opportunity, and that skills alone cannot confer social mobility (Liamputtong, 2007).

The findings suggest that skills training offers recognition and temporary legitimacy, but does not erase persistent identity-related constraints. This underscores the importance of considering social as well as economic dimensions in programme design and evaluation.

5.4 Affective and Symbolic Dimensions of Training

Although the programme did not yield consistent material transformation, it carried emotional and symbolic significance. Graduation ceremonies, moments of acknowledgement, and structured engagement fostered feelings of visibility and dignity. As one participant reflected: "The training did not give me a new identity—just a new hope; the old identity is still following me." These affective outcomes highlight that interventions may contribute meaningfully to self-perception and psychosocial resilience, even when livelihood conversion is limited.

This insight resonates with scholarship emphasising that empowerment encompasses relational and symbolic dimensions alongside material gains (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Consequently, programme evaluation frameworks that focus narrowly on income or exit metrics risk overlooking these subtler forms of change.

5.5 Methodological Insights: Reconstructive Inquiry

The study's methodological contribution lies in demonstrating how reconstructive, practitioner-informed qualitative analysis can illuminate livelihood processes where direct engagement is constrained (RQ3). Three key insights emerged:

1. Practitioner recollection can capture patterns and relational dynamics difficult to obtain through conventional short-term fieldwork.
2. Reconstructive methods, when applied reflexively, allow exploration of complexity without risking participant exposure or retraumatization.
3. The approach foregrounds interpretive challenges in working with vulnerable groups, emphasizing analytic transparency, positionality, and bounded claims.

While subjectivity and selective memory are inherent limitations, reflexive discipline and consultation with key informants strengthened analytic credibility, producing findings that represent interpretive tendencies rather than definitive accounts—consistent with QRJ's standards for situated knowledge.

5.6 Rethinking 'Change' in Livelihood Interventions

These findings challenge conventional programme logic that equates success with exit from sex work or establishment of stable enterprise. Instead, change may be better conceptualized as:

- Shifts in self-perception and aspiration
- Episodic engagement with alternative income sources
- Expansion of imagined possibilities
- Rebalancing of livelihood portfolios rather than total substitution
- Partial loosening of structural constraints that shape daily survival

Such an understanding emphasizes process, meaning-making, and contextual embeddedness, rather than relying solely on measurable outcomes.

5.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings carry several practical implications:

1. Skills alone are insufficient; interventions must address capital, market access, childcare, and safe operational spaces.
2. Training should be paired with long-term mentoring or follow-up support.
3. Programmes must recognize the rationality of returning to sex work under economic uncertainty.
4. Social protection mechanisms (e.g., savings schemes, emergency support) can buffer against shocks that drive reversions.
5. Monitoring frameworks should adopt nuanced metrics reflecting livelihood negotiation, resilience, and episodic experimentation rather than binary exit criteria.

Together, these insights highlight the multidimensional nature of livelihood strategies among marginalised women, emphasizing that programme design and evaluation must account for economic, social, and affective dimensions simultaneously.

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6. CONCLUSION

This study explored how Female Sex Workers (FSWs) interpreted and navigated livelihood possibilities following participation in a skills-training programme delivered through an NGO initiative. Employing a reconstructive, practitioner-informed qualitative approach, the analysis revealed that livelihood change was neither linear nor consistently transformative. Rather, women's trajectories were characterised by ambivalence, episodic experimentation, and continual negotiation between aspiration and constraint. Skills training generated temporary openings, renewed emotional energy, and symbolic recognition, yet structural and identity-based barriers frequently limited the ability to convert new competencies into stable, independent income (RQ1, RQ2).

Rather than framing change as a unidirectional transition away from sex work, the findings suggest that livelihood trajectories were episodic, reversible, and governed by the economics of immediacy. Returning to sex work emerged as a rational strategy in the face of volatile income streams, debt obligations, caregiving responsibilities, and fluctuating market conditions. These insights challenge conventional notions of programme "success" and underscore the complexity of everyday decision-making among marginalised women (RQ2).

Methodologically, this research contributes to qualitative scholarship by demonstrating the utility of reconstructive, reflexive analysis. When direct engagement is constrained by ethical, institutional, or practical considerations, practitioner recollection—contextualised, transparent, and critically interrogated—can generate analytically meaningful insights while safeguarding participant safety (RQ3). By foregrounding interpretive processes, positionality, and the limits of memory, the study exemplifies how situated knowledge can enrich understanding without overclaiming certainty.

6.1 Implications for Theory

The findings extend qualitative understandings of livelihoods in three key ways:

1. **Livelihoods as non-linear and contingent:** Women's strategies align with livelihood frameworks that emphasise movement across activities rather than permanent transitions, challenging linear intervention models and simplistic "exit" metrics (Scoones, 2009).
2. **Decision-making under constraint:** Economic behaviour was shaped by immediacy, risk, and predictability, highlighting the survival rationalities that govern informal livelihoods. These findings reinforce scholarship that situates choice within contextually bounded opportunity structures (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Meagher, 2010).
3. **Identity and stigma as structural forces:** Social identity, stigma, and surveillance emerged as persistent determinants of livelihood possibility. Skills training enhanced recognition and self-perception but could not remove structural or socio-cultural barriers, illustrating the intertwined nature of economic and social dimensions of marginalisation (Liamputtong, 2007).

6.2 Implications for Practice and Intervention Design

The study offers several actionable lessons for NGOs, social workers, development practitioners, and policymakers:

1. **Skills alone are necessary but insufficient:** Training must be paired with access to capital, markets, safe operating spaces, and childcare to enable viable enterprise development.
2. **Long-term accompaniment is essential:** Mentorship, follow-up visits, and gradual support frameworks are likely to produce more sustainable outcomes than one-off programmes.
3. **Risk mitigation must be embedded:** Emergency funds, savings schemes, or small cash buffers can help women manage shocks that otherwise compel a return to sex work.
4. **Monitoring should prioritise process over binary outcomes:** Evaluations should document experimentation, shifts in self-perception, and improved capacity to navigate uncertainty, rather than focusing solely on exit metrics.
5. **Recognise the rationality of continuation:** Persistence in sex work reflects broader structural and economic realities, not personal failure or programme inadequacy.

6.3 Implications for Qualitative Methodology

The study underscores the value of practitioner knowledge and reflexive reconstruction, particularly in contexts where direct engagement is restricted:

- Experiential and memory-based data, when contextualised, can illuminate patterns across time.
- Reflexivity must remain central, particularly in research involving vulnerable populations where the researcher holds relational or historical influence.
- Hybrid approaches combining reconstructive accounts with secondary data, participatory reflection, or field artefacts may further enrich qualitative inquiry.

6.4 Limitations and Future Directions

By design, the study represents interpretive tendencies rather than comprehensive participant narratives. Limited direct access and institutional constraints restricted real-time observation and documentation. Future research could explore participatory or collaborative approaches that integrate FSWs' voices more directly, where ethically feasible.

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Nevertheless, the study provides nuanced insight into how livelihood change is experienced, imagined, and negotiated under uncertainty and stigma. It offers a refined understanding of the limits and possibilities of skills-training interventions and demonstrates how qualitative inquiry can generate meaningful knowledge even when conventional access is constrained.

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