

# The Habitus of Covert Prostitution in the Songo Tourism Area

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## Abstract

This study is motivated by strong indications of the misuse of rental houses (villas) as sites for prostitution activities in the Songo Tourism Area (STA). The operations are so discreetly organized that they may be classified as covert prostitution. This raises two key questions: how is such prostitution continuously reproduced by its participants, and how are the underlying symbiotic relationships maintained among the involved parties? Utilizing the interactive analysis technique proposed by Huberman, Miles, and Sadana, supported by Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, this study identifies three major findings: (1) an adaptive social environment, an acculturative cultural setting, and a pragmatic economic context have collectively nurtured and shaped the accommodative attitudes of the Songo community toward covert prostitution practices in the tourism area; (2) the social constructions among the actors involved in covert prostitution serve as foundational capital for the continued reproduction of their enterprise; and (3) the positions held by each actor within the covert prostitution network determine the roles they assume and the opportunities afforded by the social, cultural, and economic environment to ensure the sustainability of their operations.

**Keywords:** Songo tourism area, covert prostitution, reproduction, symbiotic relations.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

Several European countries—such as Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, and Turkey—recognize prostitution as a legitimate profession (“7 Negara Eropa,” 2019). Consequently, prostitution operates legally in those countries. In contrast, while the Indonesian government does not recognize prostitution as lawful employment, the practice continues to persist. This endurance can be attributed to unresolved root causes, such as poverty and the lack of alternative, more dignified livelihoods for those involved. Furthermore, it is nearly impossible to eradicate prostitution as long as there remains consumer demand (Suud, 2015).

Historically, prostitution in the Indonesian archipelago dates back to the Javanese kingdoms, where women were treated as part of the feudal economy. It continued during the colonial period and remains prevalent in the post-independence era as an alternative form of employment. Despite ongoing efforts, prostitution remains a persistent and unresolved social issue, as evidenced by extensive documentation over time (Kartono, 2005: 59).

Broadly, prostitution in Indonesia can be categorized into two types: *formal prostitution*, which is localized and regulated by local authorities as part of social rehabilitation efforts, and *covert prostitution*, which is concealed through various fronts—one of the most common being the tourism industry. Both forms have significant social, economic, and cultural implications for surrounding communities. In Indonesia, female sex workers exhibit a wider and more prominent presence than their male counterparts (Suud, 2015). Therefore, this study specifically focuses on female sex workers as one segment of the actors involved in covert prostitution within the research area.

Although the majority of Indonesians adhere to religions that condemn immoral acts, including prostitution, the sex trade remains an appealing business venture for segments of society—whether through localized venues or covert arrangements as found in this study. Interestingly, this phenomenon often coexists with formal institutions such as schools, places of worship, and other public spaces. Recent years have seen several local governments shutting down prostitution complexes within their jurisdictions, yet this may inadvertently contribute to the reemergence of prostitution in subtler forms (Suud, 2015).

Before these closures took place, an official report identified 7,217 female commercial sex workers (CSWs)

spread across 44 recognized red-light districts in various cities and regencies in East Java (Meilani et al., 2009). The table below outlines the regional origins of these sex workers.

**Table 1.1. Percentage Distribution of CSW Origins**

No	Region of Origin	Percentage
1	Malang	29.13%
2	Jember	9.45%
3	Blitar	7.5%
4	Lumajang	3.9%
5	Outside East Java	20.9%

*Source: Genta Foundation, Surabaya (2012)*

This data reflects the prevalence and potential expansion of prostitution in several cities and regencies of East Java, where major tourist destinations serve as central hubs for the deployment of sex workers. Such conditions present opportunities for sex trade actors to expand their business networks.

Indonesia's tourism sector holds tremendous potential, supported by two key assets: the friendliness of its people and the beauty of its natural landscapes, as exemplified by the research site—the Songo Tourism Area (STA). Prostitution activities are often intertwined with tourism-related businesses. In STA, for instance, the cool mountainous landscape is dotted with affordable rental villas, which further facilitates such convergence.

Tourism is currently the world's most dominant and robust industry, playing a crucial role in the Indonesian economy through its contributions to foreign exchange, gross domestic product, and employment absorption ("Menjadikan Pariwisata sebagai Sektor Unggulan," 2015). The research site has grown and gained prominence due to the synergistic relationship between two observable facts: a thriving tourism landscape and the presence of highly organized commercial sex services.

The growing tourism industry in STA has motivated local residents to open relevant businesses—particularly in the form of rental accommodations (villas)—to supplement their incomes and meet daily living needs. Tourism operates within a broader social system that is interlinked with various dimensions including social, cultural, political, economic, and security aspects.

Separating tourism zones from prostitution activities—especially covert prostitution—is not an easy task. There are multiple motivations that underlie the existence of sex-related services. During a preliminary observation, a socially suggestive atmosphere was noticeable upon entering the area. The research team was approached by local motorcycle taxi drivers offering not only transportation services but also accommodations. "Sir, Ma'am... Villa?" they asked—an offer that has become almost ritualistic. Couples arriving in the area are often presumed to be seeking sexual services.

A local resident, identified as WT, who sells food near a villa, shared the following information (Interview, 19/09/2020):

"...every week I usually host university students as guests. I also have a regular customer, a government official, who comes weekly with a different partner for short stays. There are also older male guests—those in their 60s—and many young couples who stay as well."

Such accounts further substantiate the suspicion that covert prostitution is indeed practiced within the STA. This motivates the research team to delve deeper into understanding how covert prostitution is systematically reproduced by its actors. An integral aspect of this issue involves the misuse of villas by their owners, and the apparent indifference of local authorities. These dynamics suggest the presence of an informal, mutually beneficial understanding among stakeholders. Through this study, we aim to raise awareness among concerned parties—particularly local governments—so that they may adopt a more responsible stance in addressing the social consequences.

## 1.2 Research Problems

Based on the above background, this study investigates two main research problems:

1. How is covert prostitution in the STA reproduced by its actors?
2. How are the symbiotic relationships among the actors in the STA sustained?

## 1.3 Research Objectives

In accordance with the research problems, this study aims to:

1. Analyze and describe how covert prostitution in the STA is reproduced by its actors.
2. Analyze and describe how symbiotic relationships in the STA are maintained by those involved.

#### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This research offers both theoretical and practical significance.

1. Theoretically, it provides academic insight into the actors and contextual factors shaping covert prostitution practices within the research area.
2. Practically, it provides valuable information to: Local Government Officials, for evaluating the effectiveness of business licensing policies in the STA; the Social Services Office, for designing social rehabilitation programs and improving the surrounding social environment; and the Department of Tourism, for developing sustainable governance of the tourism sector in the STA without reliance on covert prostitution, which ultimately undermines the area's cultural and moral integrity.

#### 1.5 Scope of the Study

Based on the problem formulation and research objectives, the study focuses on two key areas:

1. The reproduction of covert prostitution by actors in the STA.
2. The maintenance of symbiotic relationships among actors involved in covert prostitution within the STA.

## 2. Literature Review

To better understand how covert prostitution is reproduced by its participants and how symbiotic relationships are sustained among them in the STA, the researcher adopts Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of *habitus* as a central conceptual tool.

### 2.1 Concept of Habitus

In his seminal work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977: 72–95) introduces the concept of *habitus* as a key theoretical construct to explain how social structures are internalized by individuals and subsequently reproduced through their actions. Bourdieu elaborates on how *habitus* functions within fields (structured social spaces such as education, politics, or the economy) and how it interacts with different forms of capital—namely, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital.

*Habitus* refers to the ingrained habits, dispositions, and worldviews that individuals develop through their social environment and lived experiences. It is a system of durable yet adaptable dispositions that shape how individuals think, behave, and engage with the surrounding world.

Four principal aspects of *habitus* can be highlighted: 1) *embodied social structure* – *habitus* is internalized through an individual's social conditions, especially through upbringing, education, and social interaction, it mirrors the structure of the society in which a person is raised; 2) *durable but flexible* – although *habitus* is relatively stable and predisposes individuals to reproduce existing social structures, it remains adaptable to new contexts and experiences over time; 3) *practical sense* – *habitus* functions as a form of tacit knowledge that guides behavior without the need for conscious deliberation, it allows individuals to navigate social fields (such as educational, political, or economic systems) intuitively; and 4) *reproduction of social inequality* – since *habitus* is shaped by one's social class and environment, it tends to reinforce existing power structures, individuals from differing social backgrounds develop different forms of *habitus*, which in turn affect their access to various types of capital—cultural, social, and economic.

In their work *Perempuan Kerja dan Perubahan Sosial: Sebuah Pengantar Studi Perempuan*, Saptari and Holzner (1997: 71) argue that reproduction is a process of replacing that which has disappeared or perished, in order to ensure the sustainability of a social system or structure. Reproduction encompasses not only activities within the household, such as childbirth, but also community-level social activities such as life-cycle rituals and communal events that serve to preserve the existing social order. Social reproduction, therefore, refers to the continuous process through which relations of production and social structures are maintained and perpetuated over time.

### 2.2 Definition of Prostitution

According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (2008: 210), prostitution is defined as the exchange of sexual services for money as a form of commercial transaction. In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, prostitution is conceptualized by Jenkins as “the exchange of money or valuable goods in return for sexual activities, typically

offered indiscriminately to individuals who are not one's partner or acquaintance." This definition is characterized by three core elements: payment, sexual interaction, and impersonality (Jenkins, 2014).

Suud (2018: 17–20), in his book *Taksnomi Spiritualitas Menjelajah Dunia Batin Pelacur Jalanan*, explores these three elements in detail—namely, financial exchange, sexual acts, and the absence of emotional intimacy. Drawing upon Simmel's (1984) theoretical perspective, these elements constitute essential characteristics of prostitution. Although such definitions may not be universally applicable across all contexts, they serve as a relevant conceptual framework for this study, particularly concerning covert prostitution in tourism areas such as the research site.

Given the centrality of financial compensation in prostitution, Davis (1993: 5-7) argues that the element of sexual intercourse should remain part of its definition, in order to distinguish prostitution from other types of gender relations—such as courtship or engagement—which may also involve forms of economic exchange.

However, this view is challenged by Polsky (1967: 41), who rejects the necessity of intercourse as a definitional criterion. His objection arises from the fact that in certain societies, official or public agents may refrain from classifying women as prostitutes even if they engage in multiple sexual partnerships. Conversely, in many other societies, women who have sex with multiple partners are labeled as prostitutes and may even face harsh legal or social penalties.

A less moralistic conception of prostitution is presented by Gagnon (1969: 592), who views it as the provision of relatively standardized sexual services in exchange for money or goods, depending on the complexity of the local economic system. In this view, payment is interpreted as compensation for a particular kind of sexual labor. Gagnon's approach distinguishes professional prostitutes from mistresses or other women who receive gifts in exchange for intimate relationships with multiple men. Thus, prostitutes are seen as workers engaged in the monetized exchange of sexual services.

In the Dictionary of Economics (Black, 1997: 419), prostitution is positioned as part of the tertiary sector, specifically under the category of sexual services. Lim (1998) further elaborates that as a distinct economic sector, prostitution includes components related to economic development, modernization, and rising materialism, as well as sociocultural factors such as gender inequality.

Two scholars, Rowbotham (1973: 117) and Barry (1979: 40), provide interpretations of prostitution from a patriarchal critique. Rowbotham conceptualizes prostitution as an expression of cultural hegemony exerted by men over women. Building upon this, Barry asserts that under patriarchal dominance, women form a vulnerable class, thereby creating ample opportunity for men to exploit and abuse them sexually.

From these various perspectives, two key points emerge: 1) prostitutes are rational agents who provide sexual services in exchange for money or goods deemed equivalent, which may contribute to upward social mobility for themselves and their families; and 2) the phenomenon of prostitution should be examined through two lenses: the individual motivational level and the structural relations between men and women, as well as broader class dynamics within society (Truong, 1985).

In relation to individual motivation, Sedyaningsih-Mamahit (1999: 86-87) identifies four characteristics commonly found among prostitutes: 1) engaging in prostitution due to economic hardship or external pressure; 2) entering prostitution by following prevailing trends or peer influence; 3) becoming a prostitute due to emotional frustration; and 4) engaging in prostitution as a deliberate effort to earn income.

These findings suggest that no singular factor leads individuals into prostitution; rather, it is the result of a constellation of personal and structural influences. What is particularly noteworthy is how individuals exist within the world of prostitution—not merely as a matter of *having a job*, but rather of *being their job* (Suud, 2017: 18).

### 2.3 Types of Prostitution

Prostitution can be classified in several ways. Two primary categorizations are based on operational methods and the number of individuals involved (Suud, 2018: 17-20). According to its operational mode, prostitution is typically distinguished as either registered or unregistered.

Registered prostitution refers to sex work conducted under the supervision of local authorities—such as municipal police (*Satpol PP*)—in cooperation with social and health agencies. This form of prostitution is usually localized within designated zones. Sex workers residing in these areas are required to undergo periodic health checkups, receive necessary vaccinations and treatments, and adhere to public health and safety regulations. The regulatory oversight aims to ensure both public hygiene and the well-being of the workers

involved.

In contrast, unregistered prostitution involves covert operations, either individually or in loosely formed groups. These practices are unregulated and typically lack organizational structure. The locations used are non-permanent and may change frequently to avoid detection. Individuals engaging in unregistered prostitution often do not report their identities to local authorities, resulting in concerns regarding their health status. Many may avoid medical checkups altogether, further increasing the public health risks associated with this practice.

Based on the number of sex workers involved, prostitution can also be categorized into individual and collective types. Individual prostitution refers to sex work performed independently, wherein the prostitute acts as a single operator without organizational backing. Collective prostitution, on the other hand, involves a group of sex workers operating under a coordinated system, often managed or facilitated by organized networks or syndicates. These operations are typically more structured, efficient, and expansive in nature.

These distinctions are crucial in understanding the dynamics of prostitution and its regulation, particularly in contexts such as the covert forms found in tourism areas, which often blur the lines between registered and unregistered, individual and collective operations.

### **3. Research Approach and Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a descriptive method. As explained by Bogdan and Taylor (in Moh. Nazir, 2014: 3), qualitative research is a methodological procedure that generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from observed research subjects. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for obtaining authentic, narrative data from participants, using systematic and purposeful procedures to minimize errors caused by individual subjectivity.

The descriptive method is employed to explore and delineate the specific social phenomenon of covert prostitution, aligning with the research objective of revealing and describing the actors involved in this practice within the research area.

#### **3.1 Research Site**

This study was conducted in the STA, located in the sub-district of Songo, in the city of BAMA (the actual name has been anonymized for ethical considerations). The selection of this site is based on several considerations: 1) the presence of numerous lodgings that potentially serve specific interests, enabling the formation of mutually beneficial social relationships; 2) its strategic location, in proximity to other tourist attractions, provides convenient access for travelers, making these accommodations a primary choice for visitors; 3) Preliminary observations and data from various sources, including mass media, suggest that covert prostitution practices are present in this area.

#### **3.2 Research Subjects**

The research subjects consist of individuals involved in covert prostitution practices within the STA. These participants are expected to provide firsthand narratives on how prostitution operates in the area. The following criteria were used to select research subjects: 1) individuals who provide accommodations used as venues for prostitution; 2) individuals who offer themselves as commercial sex workers in the area; 3) local residents with knowledge of the existence of covert prostitution in the tourist zone.

Key informants include: 1) villa owners or lodging caretakers; 2) tour guides or motorcycle taxi drivers (*ojek*); 3) local street vendors near lodging areas; 4) owners of billiards or karaoke establishments; 5) clients or users of the services; and 6) commercial sex workers who are active in the STA.

#### **3.4 Data Collection Techniques**

Data and information were collected through three primary techniques: observation, interviews, and document analysis.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the fieldwork was conducted using a situationally covert approach. The researchers did not disclose their presence or the study's purpose to the subjects, except in instances where inquiries were made. This approach was intended to obtain relatively authentic and unmanipulated data from both observed and interviewed subjects (Suud, 2018: 56-70).

Data obtained through observation included: 1) Interaction patterns between motorcycle taxi drivers, food vendors, and villa visitors; 2) the relational dynamics among actors involved in covert prostitution; 3) the daily behavior and roles assumed by these actors; and 4) the social, cultural, and economic impacts of villa development on the local community.

Data obtained through interviews included: 1) general social, cultural, and economic characteristics of the research site; 2) the history of the villas and the reproduction of prostitution practices; 3) the roles played by individuals involved in the covert sex trade; 4) symbiotic relationships among clients, villa owners/caretakers, sex workers, and transport/tourism service providers; and 5) contextual factors driving the emergence and persistence of covert prostitution in the STA.

Data obtained from documents included: 1) photographs of the environmental, social, cultural, and economic settings; 2) Photographs of informants; 3) photographs depicting interactions among actors in the covert prostitution network (note: due to ethical considerations, visual data is not displayed); and 4) archival sources such as books, journals, and newspapers to support analytical references. Document analysis was guided by a checklist format to align with the predefined research problem (Suharsimi Arikunto, 2010: 274).

### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

This study employed the interactive model of data analysis, consisting of four interconnected subprocesses: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Data collection was carried out continuously from the initial design phase through to the conclusion of the study. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and document reviews (Ezmir, 2010: 129–133). Analytical work commenced at the onset of the research process (Creswell in Heri Herdiansyah, 2010: 164).

During the data reduction phase, the researcher refined and focused the data by selecting and organizing relevant information to facilitate valid and accurate conclusions (Ezmir, 2010: 129). The next phase, data display, involved systematically presenting the information to support narrative-based interpretation (Ezmir, 2010: 131). The final step was drawing conclusions, in which data were synthesized to form meaningful interpretations of the studied phenomena, while also undergoing verification to ensure accuracy and reliability.

## 4. Research Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 The Songo Tourism Area

*History of Lodging Development.* According to archival records from the Songo Association (names anonymized for ethical reasons), documented in a compilation titled *Awal Mula Pembangunan Vila Songo 2005*, Songo has been recognized as a tourism destination since the 10th century due to the presence of Hindu temple relics and associated cultural heritage. In 1954, the area began to develop under the management of local residents. At the time, Songo offered four hot spring bath chambers, renowned for their reputed ability to cure skin and bone ailments.

In 1955, four additional rooms were constructed, bringing the total to eight. Operations were managed by one coordinator and four assistants appointed by the village authorities. In 1960, another extension added four guest rooms (*losmen*). An attempt was made in 1965 to convert the site into a hotel; however, the plan was thwarted due to the political turmoil of the 1965 G30/S PKI incident.

From 1960 to the 1970s, Songo Natural Hot Spring Hotel experienced significant growth. In 1971, management was assumed by the local government and placed under the supervision of a regional company referred to here as *JAYA Ltd.* Under this administration, the hotel rapidly expanded. In 1973, a new meeting hall was constructed in addition to the existing eight rooms. The *Mawar* guesthouse, initially four rooms, was expanded to twelve.

Between 1973 and 1976, the *YASA Corporation* (anonymized) added eight more hotel rooms under the name *Anggrek* and developed recreational infrastructure, including a dam/lake area in front of *Mawar* and *Anggrek*. Further developments from 1976 to 1979 included the construction of a recreation park, swimming pool, children's playground, a reception office, and twelve additional rooms called *Teratai*. From 1979 to 1991, expansion continued with the addition of eight rooms named *Kenanga* and another eight guesthouse units.

The proliferation of privately managed hotels during this time sparked competition between the local government and the private sector. On March 1, 1992, financial constraints led the local government to form a partnership with a private company identified as *BMS Ltd.* (name anonymized).

The increasing demand for lodging, especially from both domestic and international tourists unable to secure rooms in official hotels, prompted local residents to build rental houses as a supplementary source of income. Many funded these projects with loans from commercial banks. As residents became aware of the economic potential and profitability, they began establishing independently managed rental homes (villas). According to Mr. ITA, the Chairman of the Songo Association, by 2015 the number of villa rooms in the area had reached 650. In response to this rapid expansion, the association began formulating regulations and developing the area into a



more organized and marketable lodging zone.

*Population of Songo Subdistrict.* The population of Songo Subdistrict is predominantly female, with a difference of 51 individuals compared to the male population. Detailed demographic information is presented in the table below:

**Table 4.1. Population by Gender – Songo Subdistrict**

No.	Indicator	Total
1	Total Population	8,012
2	Male Population	3,979
3	Female Population	4,030
4	Number of Households	2,511 HH
5	Number of Foreign Nationals	3

*Source: Songo Subdistrict Records, 2021*

The types of occupations among the residents of Songo are highly diverse. According to administrative data recorded by the Songo Subdistrict Office, out of 600 heads of household residing in the Songo area, approximately 500 own rental villas, each comprising a minimum of two rooms and up to 5–15 rooms per unit. This shift reflects a significant transformation in the community's primary source of income—from agriculture, animal husbandry, and even formal employment—to the villa rental business. It is estimated that nearly 90% of residents have transitioned their main livelihood to this sector. The complete distribution of the local population's occupations is outlined in the table below:

**Table 4.2. Livelihood Distribution of Residents in Songo Subdistrict**

No.	Occupation Category	Number of Individuals
1	Agriculture	111
2	Agricultural Laborers	14
3	Small-scale Industry Artisans	27
4	Construction Workers	39
5	Merchants	39
6	Transportation Services	24
7	Civil Servants (PNS)	183
8	Military Personnel (TNI)	19
9	Retired Civil Servants/Military Personnel	55
10	Livestock Farmers	15
11	Tourism Services (Villa Brokers)	75
12	Lodging Businesses (Guesthouses/Villas/Hotels)	213

*Source: Songo Subdistrict Records, 2015*

#### 4.1 The Songo Subdistrict Environment

*Social Environment.* The social interactions of Songo residents are generally similar to those of other communities, with the exception that the area has become known as a hub for affordable villa accommodations accessible to various social groups. Within this context, the Songo Association serves as a forum for villa entrepreneurs, functioning to provide regulation, guidance, and oversight of villa business practices.

The community of Songo has undergone a challenging transformation—from a formerly passive and closed society to one that is increasingly proactive and open. This transition required a considerable period of adjustment as residents overcame social and psychological barriers in their journey toward becoming a cohesive and resilient community. The people of Songo have gradually adapted to the new social realities they now face. According to community members, the current conditions and demands are perceived as common and typical of tourism regions in general.

Each social unit within the community plays a role in constructing an interconnected social network. The *Paguyuban* (association) serves as a platform for channeling the aspirations of residents interested in developing

villa businesses. It also facilitates the process of applying for bank loans, guides the renovation of homes into marketable lodging properties, restricts external investors from entering the area, and serves as a protective body in situations that may pose risks or harm to the community.

This form of social construction enables the people of Songo to evaluate, monitor, and, when necessary, resist the emergence of practices deemed inappropriate. As previously mentioned, the intersection between prostitution and tourism is a reality that remains difficult to disentangle.

*Cultural Environment.* Tourism has had notable impacts on local arts, customs, and cultural practices. These cultural elements serve as foundational assets for the development of tourism in most destinations. The influence of tourism on culture can occur either directly—through the commodification of cultural expressions—or indirectly through long-term processes.

As noted by Urry (in Pitana & Gayatri, 2005: 137), culture is inherently adaptive. Therefore, the erosion of local culture under the influence of tourism does not necessarily imply the loss of its meaning or authenticity. Cultural contact often results in *acculturation*, a natural process when different cultures interact. Local Javanese traditions—such as *bantengan* (traditional masked dance), *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), village thanksgiving (*syukuran desa*), and village cleansing rituals (*bersih desa*)—continue to be preserved. The local arts association in the STA engages youth in artistic expression, providing a platform to maintain cultural heritage.

Despite concerns over the negative impact of covert prostitution in the STA, the people of Songo have maintained a strong cultural consciousness and commitment to preserving their local traditions. Moreover, this cultural awareness has fostered creativity across various artistic domains.

The people of Songo demonstrate resilience and adaptability in the face of changing circumstances. The development of villas in the STA has not replaced traditional social structures, but rather integrated with them in an additive, not substitutive, manner. The community remains vigilant, however, regarding the gradual influence of covert prostitution, which may ultimately alter the cultural character of Songo at the subdistrict level.

*Economic Environment.* The socio-economic landscape of Songo has changed significantly. Residents who once engaged in agriculture and livestock farming now supplement their incomes through villa rentals. This shift has opened up a wide range of employment opportunities, including motorcycle taxi drivers (*ojek*), tour guides, guesthouse operators, karaoke and café owners, food vendors, and souvenir merchants.

Recognizing the potential for improving their families' economic status, residents have collectively renovated their homes to be suitable for use as rental villas. Only around 10% of residents are not involved in this business sector.

Despite the rapid growth of tourism in the STA, the traditional market continues to function as a vital economic center. Most traders in the market are native to Songo, and they still engage in traditional commerce such as selling homemade goods, handicrafts, food, and other local products. These commercial activities are often conducted alongside their participation in the villa business. Many residents also maintain their original occupations as farmers and livestock breeders, as evidenced by the continued existence of agricultural land and animal husbandry facilities on their residential properties.

The residents of Songo maintain strong community cohesion and familial bonds as they collectively manage their businesses. A monthly communal contribution system is in place to support local harmony and equitable business practices in the STA. This spirit of unity contributes to the attractiveness of the area for tourists. It is within this interwoven social, cultural, and economic environment that the people of Songo have cultivated a unique, evolving cultural identity.

#### 4.2 The Reproduction of Covert Prostitution

This section presents two case studies involving men who utilized commercial sex services in the Songo tourism area, each accessing such services through different channels. Repeated encounters and prior acquaintance with both individuals enabled sustained communication via social media. The relationship deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an agreement to protect the anonymity and privacy of these users, ensuring they did not feel exploited or exposed. The personal nature of these conversations yielded substantial and relevant information regarding the existence of covert prostitution in the STA.

First Trajectory (Interview conducted on Saturday, March 27, 2021): the first subject, referred to as AB, is a 26-year-old private sector employee working in the same city where this research was conducted. According to AB, this visit to the Songo tourism area was not his first; in fact, it was approximately his seventh. Due to his familiarity with the area, AB felt confident in seeking and hiring a sex worker without hesitation.



His story began on the evening of Saturday, March 20, 2021, just before the Isha prayer. AB intended to stay overnight in the Songo area. Without seeking assistance from the local guides or motorcycle taxi drivers, he went directly to his usual villa and communicated his request to the villa owner. The following is a snippet of their conversation:

Villa Owner : "As usual, sir? Fair-skinned, pretty, voluptuous, smooth all over, right?"  
AB : "Yes, if possible a college student—if any are still available. Otherwise, someone around 25 years old is fine."

The villa owner then contacted a local tour guide operating in the Songo area, communicating the customer's specific preferences. The guide proceeded to two known locations—karaoke and billiards facilities—where sex workers are stationed. Upon finding one that matched the requested criteria, the guide escorted her to the designated villa. Once inside the villa room, AB did not immediately agree to the arrangement; he first examined whether the sex worker met his expectations. After expressing his approval, the guide departed, leaving AB alone with the sex worker.

Subsequently, AB negotiated the price directly with the villa owner, including the duration of service—whether for a single session or an overnight stay. A single session was priced at IDR 500,000 for 2.5 hours, while an overnight stay until 5:00 AM would cost IDR 1,500,000. AB opted for the single-session package.

AB was then introduced to the sex worker, using the pseudonym "Lina," a 23-year-old woman originally from Kalimantan. She was enrolled in her 11th semester in an Information Technology program at a public university in the same city as the research location. Before engaging in sexual activity, Lina stipulated that AB must use a condom—a condition to which he readily agreed, being familiar with such protocols. After the encounter, AB paid Lina in cash, directly and without intermediaries. Once the session concluded, Lina was picked up by the same motorcycle taxi driver who had brought her.

Second Trajectory (Interview conducted on Saturday, March 27, 2021): the second subject, referred to as AD, is a 20-year-old university student enrolled at a private institution in the same city. He reported that this was his first time visiting the Songo area for the purpose of hiring a sex worker. On Wednesday, March 24, 2021, he rode his motorcycle directly to Songo. His solitary arrival quickly drew attention from local motorcycle taxi drivers who approached him with offers: "Looking for a villa, sir?"

A local guide soon approached AD, who immediately requested a room. He reported that the room he rented was of grade-2 quality and cost IDR 200,000. Upon arrival at the villa, without hesitation, AD communicated his intention to the guide. The following is an excerpt from their direct exchange:

AD : "Mister, do you have any girls available?"  
Tour Guide : "Yes, of course. Just tell me what you're looking for."  
AD : "A high school girl, with long hair, not too chubby, and fragrant?"  
Tour Guide : "Oh, the high school girls are off by this hour. Their work limit is until 10 PM. Right now, the only ones available are 25 years old and above. Is that okay?"  
AD : "Alright, no problem!"

The local guide or motorcycle taxi driver departed and returned approximately fifteen minutes later accompanied by a sex worker. He escorted her to the villa owner, knocked on the door, and AD answered. Upon seeing the sex worker, AD expressed his approval. The villa owner then informed him: "*Sir, this is only for a single session, as she has already been booked by someone else. The fee for one session is IDR 500,000.*" AD acknowledged the information and brought the woman into the room.

AD later reported that the sex worker, referred to under the pseudonym *Mawar* (aged 28), had one child who was still in elementary school. She originated from a regency in East Java. AD felt at ease engaging with her, as they both came from the same region. According to her account, Mawar had initially entered sex work after being invited by a co-worker while she was employed at a karaoke establishment in the same city where this research took place. She began working in the Songo tourism area in July 2019 and has continued ever since. To avoid arousing suspicion from local residents, Mawar chose to reside outside the Songo area.

Before engaging in sexual activity, Mawar asked the standard question: "*Did you bring a condom, sir?*" Caught off guard, AD admitted he had not. He promptly contacted the villa owner regarding his unpreparedness. Shortly thereafter, the same guide who had escorted Mawar returned with a box of condoms of a specific brand. After the encounter, and upon receiving the agreed-upon payment, Mawar quickly departed.

From the two case studies above, a broader picture emerges of how relevant actors systematically reproduce covert prostitution in the Songo Tourism Area. Both experienced and first-time clients are able to access and hire

sex workers within the established network without fear for their personal safety. Certain government officials are also implicated in facilitating these operations by ensuring logistical ease and maintaining protection from external interference. These collaborations are conducted under a tacit understanding of the clients' needs during their stay in the STA.

Clients are typically allowed up to three opportunities to select a sex worker. If the first option is unsatisfactory, the client pays a fee of IDR 50,000 to the guide or motorcycle taxi driver—this applies to the second attempt as well. However, if by the third attempt the client is still dissatisfied, they are required to pay both the guide's fee and half the standard session fee for the sex worker. These rules serve to establish clear boundaries and limitations for clients. The identity of sex workers is kept strictly confidential, and they are not permitted to share personal contact information with their clients. Likewise, client communication with the sex workers is highly restricted.

The existence of both supportive and opposing attitudes within the Songo community toward commercial sex work has given rise to covert patterns of social relations and roles among its participants. Initially, these actors lacked established networks or defined roles. However, driven by shared economic needs, social status, and common goals, they formed a network that supports covert prostitution.

Over time, the local population has developed a more permissive attitude. Residents who once resisted the phenomenon have gradually become accepting and even adaptive. This shifting perspective has strengthened the underlying social relations and roles that sustain covert prostitution, leading the community to acquiesce to its presence as a social reality.

The social relations and roles described above constitute the foundation for the reproduction of covert prostitution in the STA. The various actors involved—both directly and indirectly—have constructed a social framework that facilitates the ongoing satisfaction of each party's needs. This evolving structure serves as a core resource in maintaining the continuity of covert prostitution in the area.

Two primary types of social networks underpin this practice: interest-based networks and sentiment-based networks. The structure of interest-based networks tends to be relatively stable and enduring, particularly when stakeholders share concrete and specific goals. This type of network corresponds to Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of the *durable but flexible* nature of habitus. On the other hand, sentiment-based networks reflect a shared socio-economic status among the residents of Songo. These emotional ties become both the rationale for and the mechanism through which social actions are carried out. As a result, a strong form of mutual emotional control emerges among the parties involved (R. Agusyanto, 1997: 26–28).

The roles of actors involved in the covert prostitution industry in the Songo Tourism Area reflect dynamic aspects of their respective social positions. In fulfilling their roles, these individuals often prioritize materialistic objectives, frequently at the expense of their ethical responsibilities. For instance, members of the local community, who should ideally monitor and report social activities that violate religious, social, or customary norms, instead choose to passively accept the ongoing development of prostitution practices within the tourist area.

Prostitution can be understood as a social institution founded on the commodification of sexual services. In the context of STA, covert prostitution is sustained by sex workers operating as *call girls*—individuals willing to be contacted and employed through specific informal channels. Their operations fall under the category of *unregistered prostitution*. These service providers do not report themselves to the authorities, and indeed, some members of law enforcement are reportedly complicit in these activities. As expressed by a villa owner, Mr. Kipli, in an interview (Interview, 21 March 2021):

"Well, we all understand, miss. When officials come here to conduct community control checks, we offer them a little money. It's more like a security fee for the villa area than a bribe. But honestly, many officials visit this area and enjoy the same services as everyone else."

This testimony strongly suggests that the local government plays a protective, and arguably legitimizing, role in sustaining covert prostitution in the STA—shielding it from media scrutiny and public discourse. Consequently, the prostitution industry in the area has become a *latent problem*—persistent yet unresolved. While the city government does not officially acknowledge STA as a sex tourism destination, the reality is that the area's tourism offerings are consistently entangled with the sex trade.

Tourism zones, including STA, exhibit complex social, cultural, and economic dynamics. When members of the community begin to regard tourist areas as legitimate venues for prostitution, this reveals how deeply embedded such perceptions have become, making it difficult to dismantle these stereotypes. Criks (2013) offers a critique

of such views through the lens of the "5S" imagery—*sun, sex, sight, saving, and servility*—which is often associated with Western tourism practices. Although tourists are frequently reminded to respect local values and cultural norms, concerns persist over undesirable activities such as prostitution, which continues to manifest as part of the tourism experience. This duality reflects a form of policy ambiguity on the part of the municipal government regarding the development of tourism in the STA. While official narratives advocate for ethical tourism, the realities on the ground reveal a tacit compromise that permits or tolerates covert sexual services as part of the tourism ecosystem. This dynamic aligns with the findings of the study conducted by Jayanthi, Mutia Irna, and Ikram (2009), entitled "*Dampak Keberadaan Prostitusi bagi Masyarakat Lampung.*"

Tourism growth is inextricably linked to the frequency and volume of visitor arrivals. Tourists are typically driven by specific motivations prior to determining and committing to a travel destination. A useful theoretical lens through which to understand these motivations is Klenosky's *means-end theory* (2002: 385–395). According to Klenosky, a person's attraction to a destination (*pull factor*) is not solely based on its objective features (e.g., mountains or scenic landscapes), but also on the subjective values attached to those experiences—such as relaxation, stress relief, or family intimacy.

He explains that *push factors* are primarily associated with internal needs (e.g., escapism, rest), while *pull factors* relate more directly to the external attributes of the destination (e.g., natural beauty, historical significance, cultural atmosphere). Ultimately, both are filtered through an individual's personal value structure, including elements such as hedonism, freedom, and self-actualization.

In this light, the phenomenon of covert prostitution in the STA is not merely a response to environmental stimuli, but rather a deeply personal and contextually embedded aspect of tourism itself. This suggests that those involved in covert sex work—whether service providers, intermediaries, or clients—operate within a framework of pragmatic, hedonistic, and libertarian values. Their engagement is not incidental but is aligned with broader tourism behaviors and psychological motivations.

#### 4.3 Symbiotic Relations among Stakeholders in the Covert Prostitution Network

*Paguyuban Songo.* Established in 2005, *Paguyuban Songo* serves as an organizational body representing all villa owners in the STA. To fulfill this role, the association performs several key functions: 1) acts as an intermediary for local residents intending to establish rental properties (villas); 2) Serves as a forum for grievances and complaints from the community; 3) functions as a legal umbrella in the event of disputes or undesirable occurrences; and 4) facilitates licensing and administrative processes for villa owners' business development.

From its inception, *Paguyuban Songo* was collectively agreed upon by local residents to regulate villa rental pricing, construction, and room classification standards. Community appreciation for this organization is notably high, as its presence is perceived to yield substantial benefits—especially with regard to the management of covert prostitution practices prevalent in the area.

*Municipal Government.* The local government's involvement in supporting covert prostitution practices in the Songo area tends to be indirect. The government has played a role by issuing business permits and legitimizing villa operations under the pretext of community empowerment. In return, monthly taxes are levied on these operations. This governmental support ensures the security and continuity of such businesses, often at the expense of overlooking the detrimental social impacts on the Songo community.

In accordance with *Regional Regulation of BAMA City No. 1 of 2013* on Tourism Management, several articles outline the rights and obligations of villa operators, visitors, and local residents. However, in practice, these regulations are not fully enforced. Authorities appear to turn a blind eye, allowing easy access to these premises. The following illustrates the monthly tax obligations based on villa class, as recorded in a 2021 field study:

- Class A villas: Rp. 1,200,000
- Class B villas: Rp. 850,000
- Class C villas: Rp. 450,000

*Villa Owners.* Villa entrepreneurs are individuals who convert their homes into rental accommodations. They play a significant role in sustaining covert prostitution activities within the STA by providing physical spaces for such illicit acts. While villa owners are generally aware of the negative implications of these practices, the pressure to meet economic demands and improve their standard of living has led many to disregard prevailing social and cultural norms. In fact, despite the legal and religious prohibitions against prostitution, these owners often facilitate such activities. As a dominant demographic within the Songo community, villa owners exhibit an ambivalent orientation toward societal values and moral standards.

*Tour Guides/Motorbike Taxi Drivers.* The roles of tour guide and motorbike taxi driver (*ojek*) are often performed interchangeably by the same individuals. Thus, they are treated jointly in this context. At one moment, a person may function as a tour guide; at another, as an *ojek* driver. The role assumed depends on situational and domestic factors at any given time.

These individuals possess specialized skills in promoting and offering villa accommodations, including the services of commercial sex workers within the Songo Tourism Area. They also act as intermediaries between clients, villa owners, and sex workers. These guides are typically native residents of the Songo area, generally aged 15 and above. The designated operational zones for soliciting clients are divided across the western, eastern, and northern corridors of Songo, allowing for equitable access among local residents to potential tourists seeking villa rentals.

Tour guides follow a rotational schedule to engage in client transactions, ensuring a relatively fair distribution of opportunities. This system was described by AT (30 years old) during an interview on March 29, 2021, as follows:

“Every day is the same, Ma’am—we take turns. We don’t just randomly grab visitors. Everyone has their own order. We’re all from this area. We don’t have the money to buy land, so we work as motorbike taxis to earn extra income. Most of us have only one or two rooms to rent, which isn’t enough to cover living expenses.”

*Clients.* As previously outlined, there are two main channels through which clients access commercial sex services in the STA. Whether experienced or new, clients can frequent the area and engage CSWs within the network without significant concern for their safety or discretion.

*Sex Workers.* The role of sex workers is inseparable from any discussion on prostitution within the tourism industry, including that in STA. The overlap between sex work and tourism is often complex and deeply embedded. The involvement of sex workers as providers of sexual services is intricately linked to their socio-economic circumstances. During interviews conducted on March 19, 2021, at 19:17 WIB, the following testimonies were provided by SN (30), TK (23), and LN (28):

- SN: “Yes, Ma’am, if we don’t do this, we won’t earn any money. Especially now, during the pandemic, we have no choice. Jobs are scarce, and many have been laid off.”
- TK: “It’s also hard to cover our living expenses, Ma’am. We’re migrants, so asking our parents for money is out of the question. We do this to survive and cover urgent needs.”
- LN: “At first, it was just for fun—we met on social media, but then it continued until now. I want to stop, but the needs never stop coming, Ma’am.”

These sex workers do not reside permanently in the STA. They are present only during working hours to preserve the clandestine nature of the operation. As MY (19), a villa employee, stated during an interview on March 19, 2021, at 19:30 WIB:

“They definitely don’t live here, Ma’am. They usually stay at karaoke places temporarily. Everything is organized, including commissions. They also entertain guests who only want to sing or dance. Even though some are originally from this city, they’re still not allowed to live in the STA. That’s why very few people know about this business.”

This operational structure is respected by all parties involved, including the sex workers. Interactions among actors are discreet and well-organized, minimizing visibility. Sex workers in the STA operate on a call basis, arriving only when requested. They are not allowed to accept bookings directly from clients; all transactions are managed under a pre-established protocol. This ensures mutual protection and discretion among all stakeholders involved in the clandestine sex trade in the region.

*Pimps and/or Karaoke and Billiard Business Operators.* Sex workers and pimps are often viewed as two inseparable elements of the prostitution system. The presence of one implies the existence of the other. Pimps play a vital role in maintaining the relationship between sex workers and clients, as well as ensuring a safe and comfortable working environment. The terms “pimp,” “karaoke business operator,” and “billiard business operator” are deliberately combined here, as their roles frequently overlap in facilitating, managing, and temporarily sheltering sex workers before they are booked or serve clients within the STA.

A media outlet released the following report: A pimp, commonly referred to as *Papi TN*, and a female counterpart, *Mami DB*, stated that their revenues declined entering the year 2020. This downturn was attributed to an increase in service fees imposed by the sex workers themselves, which led to a reduction in client interest.

Nonetheless, both individuals reported exercising increased caution in soliciting clients due to the presence of undercover intelligence agents in the area ("*Vila Songgoriti*," 2020). This report highlights the alarming social environment surrounding the villas in the area. The relatively lax conditions for guest admissions have transformed what are ostensibly lodging facilities—intended for rest and tourism—into venues where certain visitors fulfill sexual desires. Notably, many of these interactions involve individuals who are not legally married, thereby raising concerns regarding the misuse of hospitality spaces and the broader implications for social norms and public morality in the region.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings and the interpretive discussion supported by relevant theoretical frameworks, several key conclusions can be drawn. The adaptive social environment, the acculturative cultural milieu, and the pragmatically oriented economic landscape have collectively nurtured and shaped the character of the Songo community throughout its cultural evolution, rendering it increasingly accommodative of covert prostitution practices in the Songo Tourism Area.

The social construction among actors involved in clandestine prostitution in STA—namely the villa association (*Paguyuban Songo*), municipal government, villa owners, motorbike taxi drivers/tour guides, clients, sex workers, pimps and/or karaoke and billiard business owners, and the local population—constitutes a fundamental foundation for reproducing and sustaining these illicit enterprises.

The networked social pattern that underpins this structure facilitates access to capital, operational management, and business protection. These networks are driven by shared economic interests and a common sense of vulnerability or fate, aligning the actors toward a singular goal: material well-being and personal security—often at the expense of consideration for the broader social consequences.

Each participant in the covert prostitution economy occupies a specific position that determines their respective role and the opportunities afforded by the surrounding social, cultural, and economic conditions. These participants are interdependent and mutually bound in ways that solidify a coherent social structure. Should one element of this economic and emotional interdependence be removed—be it a particular actor, entity, or role—the integrity and sustainability of the network would quickly deteriorate and become dysfunctional.

The symbiotic relationships among these actors are maintained through specific role allocations: 1) *Paguyuban Songo* functions as the protector of villa owners; 2) the local government acts as the issuer of villa establishment permits; 3) tour guides/motorbike taxi drivers serve as intermediaries between clients and sex workers, as well as transporters of workers; 4) villa owners provide accommodations not only for tourists but also for sex workers to operate; 5) CSWs function as service providers and client attractors; 6) karaoke and billiard venues serve as holding areas for sex workers prior to bookings; 7) Clients (users) act as consumers of commercial sex services; and 8) pimps (*papi/mami*) organize, manage, and supply the sex workers. Thus, the symbiotic relationship observed is essentially a function of mutual material benefit and collective survival among the actors involved in covert prostitution in the STA.

In light of the findings and analysis presented, the following recommendations are proposed to address the complex and deeply embedded structure of covert prostitution within the Songo Tourism Area. These recommendations aim to promote social well-being, uphold legal norms, and encourage sustainable tourism practices.

1. *Strengthen Law Enforcement and Regulatory Oversight.* Local and municipal governments must enhance the enforcement of existing tourism and public order regulations. The apparent tolerance of covert prostitution practices undermines both legal mandates and social morality. Routine inspections, undercover investigations, and transparent licensing systems should be implemented to deter illegal activities and ensure accountability among villa operators and related businesses.
2. *Reform Local Tourism Governance Structures.* *Paguyuban Songo* should be restructured with greater government oversight and civil society involvement. While the association has historically played a facilitative role in villa development, it must be transformed into a body that actively promotes ethical tourism standards, monitors member compliance, and rejects the normalization of illicit activities.
3. *Socioeconomic Interventions for Vulnerable Populations.* Comprehensive social programs should be introduced to provide alternative livelihoods, especially for youth, women, and migrant populations involved in the prostitution economy. Vocational training, microfinance schemes, and targeted employment initiatives may reduce economic dependency on the sex trade and offer more dignified paths to economic security.



4. *Community-Based Awareness and Cultural Revitalization.* Grassroots campaigns aimed at reviving local cultural values and promoting community-based tourism should be prioritized. Cultural and religious leaders, educators, and NGOs can play crucial roles in reshaping public discourse, challenging the normalization of covert prostitution, and fostering community resilience.
5. *Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration.* Addressing the covert prostitution network requires collaboration among government agencies, law enforcement, academia, community organizations, and the private sector. An integrated task force should be established to coordinate interventions, share data, and formulate long-term strategies for social reintegration and legal compliance.

By adopting these multi-level recommendations, stakeholders can begin to dismantle the systemic conditions that perpetuate covert prostitution in STA and foster a more just, safe, and sustainable tourism environment.

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