

Navigating Vulnerability: Lived Experiences, Deviance, and Resilience among Female Sex Workers in Northeastern, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Sex work remains one of the most contested forms of labor globally oscillating between criminalization, victimization, and agency. In the Philippines, despite legal prohibitions, the sex trade persists under conditions of poverty, gendered inequality, and social stigma. This qualitative criminological study examines how female sex workers (FSWs) in Salug Valley, Zamboanga del Sur navigate vulnerability, social control, and deviance through coping strategies that reflect resilience within constrained socio-legal systems. Using a transcendental phenomenological design, six legally adult FSWs were interviewed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis revealed twelve interrelated themes clustered into three dimensions: structural vulnerabilities (economic precarity, client exploitation, social marginalization, health risks), adaptive coping strategies (forbearance, secrecy, selective disregard, healthcare access), and aspirational goals (children's education, financial stability, personal transformation). The findings revealed that sex work operates as both a survival mechanism and a locus of structural control where law, morality, and gendered power intersect. Despite experiencing stigmatization and violence, participants exhibited agency and resilience, constructing moral rationalities to reclaim dignity. This study contributes to criminological discourse by illuminating how deviance, as socially defined, becomes intertwined with survival strategies in marginalized communities. It advocates for harm-reduction and rights-based policies that treat sex workers as social agents rather than offenders, emphasizing welfare, mental health, and safety within frameworks of social justice.

KeyWords: female sex workers, deviance, stigma, coping strategies, resilience

INTRODUCTION

Sex work, historically labeled the “world’s oldest profession,” remains an enduring criminological concern because of its intersection with law, morality, and gender-based inequality. Across societies, prostitution has been alternately viewed as a moral transgression, a social pathology, or a form of economic survival (Benoit et al., 2017; Evans, 2024). In the Philippine context, prostitution is criminalized under Article 341 of the Revised Penal Code, yet enforcement remains inconsistent, and sex work thrives in urban and rural areas alike. For women in marginalized regions such as Salug Valley, Zamboanga del Sur, the structural pressures of poverty, unemployment, and limited educational attainment create pathways into sex work that challenge conventional criminological notions of deviance and choice.

From a criminological standpoint, sex work embodies a paradox of control and resistance. While formally criminalized, it is informally tolerated in many localities, reflecting ambivalence in social control mechanisms (Caba-ong, 2023). This duality positions sex workers simultaneously as offenders and victims—subjects of legal repression and moral condemnation yet also target of exploitation and social neglect (Lake, 2013). Contemporary criminology increasingly reframes sex workers not as deviant bodies but as social agents navigating systems of inequality and control (Beattie et al., 2020). This study situates the experiences of Filipino female sex workers within this paradigm, examining how they negotiate social stigma, institutional violence, and familial

estrangement while sustaining aspirations for stability and dignity.

The Philippines' socio-legal framework criminalizes the sale and purchase of sexual services, but not the underlying structural forces—poverty, patriarchy, and economic marginalization—that drive participation. Studies suggest that as many as 300,000 to 800,000 individuals engage in sex work in the country (Philippine Commission on Women [PCW], 2019), with women comprising the majority. Yet, despite this prevalence, the voices of sex workers—particularly in rural areas—remain largely excluded from criminological research. Most extant studies emphasize trafficking, public health, or legal reform, neglecting the micro-level narratives of coping and resistance within conditions of systemic vulnerability (Legarde, 2023; Nattabi et al., 2024).

In criminology, deviance is not merely a legal label but a product of societal reaction and moral entrepreneurship (Becker, 1963/2018). The stigmatization of sex workers represents a powerful form of symbolic violence, enforcing moral boundaries through shame, exclusion, and institutional neglect. Yet, beneath this deviance labeling lies a narrative of adaptation and survival. Understanding how sex workers construct meaning within criminalized contexts offers critical insights into social control, resilience, and the boundaries of lawful behavior in marginalized communities.

Objectives of the Study

This study explores how female sex workers in Salug Valley, Zamboanga del Sur, experience and navigate the intersection of vulnerability, deviance, and social control. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Identify the structural and interpersonal challenges faced by female sex workers;
2. Examine the coping strategies they employ to navigate stigma, violence, and legal marginalization; and
3. Illuminate their aspirations for change, stability, and reintegration within society.

By centering the voices of sex workers, this research contributes to criminological debates on deviance, moral regulation, and the negotiation of agency under structural constraint.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three intersecting frameworks—Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), Marxist Feminist Theory (Marx, 19th Century; Evans, 2024), and Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)—which collectively explain the criminogenic conditions shaping female sex workers' lived experiences.

Objectification theory posits that women are often treated as objects of male desire, valued primarily for their physical and sexual attributes (Gattino et al., 2023). Within the sex trade, objectification is institutionalized—women's bodies become commodities for consumption, inspection, and control. From a criminological perspective, objectification serves as a mechanism of social domination, reinforcing gender hierarchies and legitimizing systemic exploitation. Self-objectification, in turn, induces psychological distress, shame, and detachment from one's bodily autonomy (Lloyd, 2022). For Filipino sex workers, this manifests as internalized stigma—an internal struggle between economic necessity and perceived moral deviance.

Marxist feminism situates women's oppression within capitalist relations of production. It interprets sex work as both a product and symptom of economic exploitation—a market where women's bodies are commodified due to structural deprivation (Gerassi, 2015). In this framework, sex workers are not moral deviants but casualties of an economic system that denies them equitable labor opportunities. This aligns with critical criminology, which views deviance as socially constructed and often reflective of power asymmetries. Thus, the criminalization of sex work operates as a form of social control, reinforcing capitalist patriarchy by policing the bodies of economically disenfranchised women.

The Stress and Coping Theory provides a psychosocial lens for understanding how individuals adapt to adversity (Miodrag et al., 2018). Female sex workers, facing chronic exposure to stigma, violence, and legal precarity,

employ coping strategies ranging from avoidance and denial to resilience and solidarity. Within criminology, coping mechanisms reflect the ways individuals resist or internalize social control. For instance, secrecy and selective disengagement can be viewed as both psychological defenses and forms of covert resistance against societal condemnation. This theory helps explain how FSWs construct agency within oppressive structures—balancing survival with self-preservation.

Together, these frameworks illuminate sex work as a complex site of deviance, domination, and adaptation, where structural inequality and individual agency coexist in tension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design, emphasizing participants' lived experiences as the foundation for understanding social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology was chosen for its capacity to reveal how individuals construct meaning from deviant labeling and marginalization—core concerns of criminological inquiry. Rather than quantifying attitudes or behaviors, this approach privileges subjective experience and reflexivity, essential for studying populations under stigma and control.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Salug Valley, is a fertile plain in Northeastern Zamboanga del Sur, covering towns like Dumingag, Mahayag, Molave, Tambulig, Josefina, and Ramon Magsaysay, Zamboanga del Sur in Mindanao, Philippines. The area consists of six (6) municipalities characterized by agricultural livelihoods, limited formal employment, and high rates of poverty. Informal entertainment establishments—such as karaoke bars and restobars—operate as hubs of sex trade, often tolerated by local authorities despite formal illegality. This setting reflects a microcosm of the country's broader contradictions: moral conservatism coexisting with economic dependence on informal sexual economies (Legarde, 2023).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Six female sex workers of legal age participated in the study. Using non-probability snowball sampling, initial contacts were referred to by community outreach workers. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be of legal age (18+), (b) currently or recently engaged in sex work, and (c) voluntarily consent to participate. Participants varied in age (21–39), educational attainment (elementary to high school), and duration in the trade (1–10 years).

This small sample, while not statistically generalizable, enabled rich, detailed accounts of experiences that illuminate broader criminological themes of stigma, resistance, and survival.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in a private, safe setting. Interviews were electronically recorded as consented by the participants and lasted for 45–90 minutes. The interview followed an open-ended interview-guide questionnaire focusing on challenges, coping strategies, interactions with clients and authorities, and aspirations. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all documentation.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in English and Cebuano, with translations verified for accuracy. Field notes captured non-verbal cues and emotional tone.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the participating college. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, trauma-informed interviewing techniques were employed to minimize

re-traumatization and ensure participant safety.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological approach (1994), consisting of the following stages:

1. Bracketing – The researchers suspended personal biases and preconceptions about prostitution and deviance.
2. Horizontalization – Each statement relevant to the experience was treated as having equal value.
3. Clustering and Thematizing – Significant statements were grouped into clusters to form themes.
4. Textural and Structural Descriptions – “What” and “how” participants experienced phenomena were synthesized into meaning structures.
5. Essence Synthesis – The overarching essence of female sex workers' lived experience was articulated, linking findings to criminological concepts of deviance, stigma, and control.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to principles of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent. Given the criminalized nature of sex work, protecting participants' identities was paramount. Pseudonyms were used, and identifiable details were removed. Participants could withdraw at any stage without consequence. The research design aligned with ethical guidelines for qualitative criminology and research with vulnerable populations (British Society of Criminology, 2022).

RESULTS

Data analysis revealed twelve interconnected themes, categorized into three major domains:

1. Structural Vulnerability – economic precarity, client exploitation, social stigma, health hazards;
2. Adaptive Coping Strategies – secrecy, emotional forbearance, selective disregard, healthcare access;
3. Aspirations and Agency – children's education, financial stability, and personal transformation.

These findings portray sex work as a site of both structural deviance and survival adaptation, where women's choices are constrained yet exercised within moral and material limitations.

Theme 1: Economic Precarity

Across all interviews, poverty was the most cited reason for entering and remaining in sex work. Participants framed their decisions as forced by necessity rather than moral failure.

“Because of poverty, I really have no choice. I have a child to feed, and no job will take me.” (P5)

“Sometimes, even if I don't want to go with the customer, I still go. I think about the rent and the rice we need tomorrow.” (P2)

“It's not about pleasure or choice—it's survival. If there were other jobs, I'd stop right away.” (P6)

Economic precarity thus served as the criminogenic condition pushing women toward an activity deemed deviant but perceived as legitimate survival. Their narratives reflect the strain theory principle that blocked opportunities in legitimate structures create pathways toward alternative—though socially condemned—means of subsistence.

Theme 2: Familial Affirmation and Estrangement

Family emerged as both a source of pain and motivation. Several participants described being shunned or misunderstood by relatives who discovered their work.

“My mother told me I brought shame to the family, so I stopped visiting for a while.” (P3)

“When my father died, I used my earnings to pay for the burial. That’s when they softened toward me.” (P1)

“My sister doesn’t talk to me, but when she needs money, she messages me.” (P4)

This ambivalence mirrors Goffman’s theory of stigma—families serve as moral regulators reinforcing social control through emotional withdrawal yet remain economically dependent on the women they stigmatize. The women’s efforts to reconcile their family ties also highlight a desire for legitimacy and belonging within the moral order that rejects them.

Theme 3: Client Exploitation and Violence

Participants reported consistent experiences of harassment, coercion, and violence from clients, often with limited recourse to justice.

“There are customers who slap or choke me. I cry, but I can’t report it because I’m scared of the police.” (P5)

“Some men don’t want to pay the full amount. They think because I’m a prostitute, I have no right to complain.” (P2)

“I was once forced to have unprotected sex. I said no, but he was drunk and stronger. I just wanted it to be over.” (P1)

These utterances reveal sex workers’ vulnerability to victimization within illicit economies. Violence functions as an informal mechanism of power that enforces submission. Fear of law enforcement—viewed as punitive rather than protective—further silences victims, illustrating the criminological paradox of control: the very structures that claim to prevent deviance perpetuate harm.

Theme 4: Social Marginalization and Discrimination

Participants consistently encountered stigma from neighbors, clients, and even local authorities. Discrimination was both overt and subtle, manifesting in ridicule, gossip, and institutional neglect.

“People avoid me in the market. They whisper, ‘that’s the woman from the bar.’” (P4)

“When I applied for a room to rent, the landlady said, ‘We don’t accept your kind.’” (P2)

“I feel like I carry a mark on my forehead—once they know, everything changes.” (P6)

These quotes illustrate symbolic degradation through language and behavior—acts that reaffirm social boundaries between “respectable women” and “deviant women.” In criminological terms, this reflects secondary deviance, where stigmatization leads individuals to internalize the label, shaping their self-concept and reinforcing exclusion from mainstream society.

Theme 5: Vulnerability to Health Hazards

Concerns about physical health, especially sexually transmitted infections (STIs), were pervasive. Participants described a mix of awareness, avoidance, and fear in relation to medical institutions.

“I once had an infection, but I was too embarrassed to see a doctor. I used herbal medicine instead.” (P1)

“We know about condoms, but sometimes clients refuse. If we insist, they threaten to find another girl.” (P5)

“When I go for health checkups, some nurses look at me like I’m dirty. That’s why I go only when I really need to.” (P3)

These utterances expose the intersection of health inequity and moral judgment. Fear of discrimination creates

barriers to essential healthcare, turning structural stigma into physical vulnerability. Such findings echo global criminological critiques of institutional neglect as a form of systemic violence against marginalized populations.

Theme 6: Forbearance and Emotional Resilience

Despite enduring hardship, participants expressed determination rooted in maternal love and self-reliance.

“I cry sometimes, but I tell myself to stand strong. My child depends on me.” (P6)

“Even when customers insult me, I just smile. Fighting back will only make things worse.” (P2)

“Sometimes I feel numb. I just focus on earning and getting through the night.” (P4)

Their emotional restraint and persistence constitute a form of resilient deviance—coping mechanisms that enable psychological survival in stigmatized spaces. In criminological terms, these strategies illustrate the capacity for agency within structural constraint, where endurance becomes resistance.

Theme 7: Secrecy and Privacy

To protect their families and social standing, all participants-maintained secrecy about their work.

“My neighbors think I work as a waitress in a bar. I never tell them the truth.” (P3)

“I change my name when I go with customers, so they can’t trace me.” (P1)

“If my relatives find out, they will judge me again. It’s better they don’t know.” (P5)

Secrecy thus serves as both a protective mechanism and a method of self-control, reflecting Goffman’s (1963) concept of “information management.” Concealment allows women to maintain a dual identity—navigating between moral respectability and economic survival.

Theme 8: Ignoring and Disregarding

Selective disregard emerged as a common coping strategy to manage verbal abuse and stigma.

“When people insult me, I just pretend not to hear.” (P4)

“If you listen to what they say, you’ll go crazy. So I ignore it.” (P2)

“I learned to let hurtful words pass. They don’t feed me, so why should I care?” (P6)

This conscious desensitization operates as **neutralization**—a defense that diminishes emotional harm while preserving agency. Such disregard demonstrates how women **resist moral domination** by redefining what deserves their attention, a subtle but powerful act of resistance in criminological interpretation.

Theme 9: Accessing Healthcare Services

Despite stigma, some participants sought health interventions provided by NGOs or local clinics.

“We have a card from the city health office. They give us free checkups every month.” (P1)

“I attend HIV awareness programs because I want to stay safe for my child.” (P3)

“At least now, there are nurses who don’t judge us. That helps a lot.” (P5)

Access to supportive services enabled a measure of dignity and self-care. These practices exemplify adaptive compliance, where women navigate oppressive systems by strategically engaging with selective institutions that

offer partial acceptance.

Theme 10: Children's Bright Future

Maternal motivation was the most emotionally resonant theme. Nearly all participants linked their endurance to hopes for their children's education and mobility.

"Everything I do is for my son to finish college. That's my only dream." (P2)

"When I see my daughter studying, I feel like all the pain is worth it." (P6)

"I tell my kids to study hard, so they won't end up like me." (P3)

Here, motherhood functions as a moral justification for deviance—a redemptive frame that transforms stigmatized labor into sacrificial virtue. It demonstrates how moral identities are reconstructed within criminogenic environments.

Theme 11: Financial Security and Stability

Participants aspired to escape sex work through entrepreneurship or stable employment.

"If I save enough, I want to start a small sari-sari store." (P1)

"I dream of working abroad one day, maybe as a cleaner or nanny." (P4)

"My goal is simple: to stop this life and have steady income." (P5)

These ambitions reflect desistance aspirations, where participants seek reintegration into normative economic structures. They also highlight how economic empowerment—not punishment—is key to addressing deviance born of deprivation.

Theme 12: Personal Growth and Transformation

Finally, participants articulated aspirations for moral and personal redemption.

"I want to change myself and live a clean life someday." (P3)

"I'm not proud of what I do, but I'm proud that I survive." (P6)

"When I pray, I ask for strength to find another path." (P2)

Such utterances reveal identity reconstruction—a criminological process of self-redefinition beyond deviant labeling (Maruna, 2001). Through reflection and hope, these women articulate a desire not merely to exit sex work but to reclaim social legitimacy and self-worth.

The twelve themes collectively depict a moral and legal paradox: female sex workers exist within a continuum of deviance, victimization, and resilience. They endure systemic inequality through strategies that balance concealment and courage. Their words underscore the human dimension of deviance—one shaped not by delinquency, but by structural exclusion and the pursuit of dignity.

DISCUSSION

Sex Work as Contested Deviance

Participants' narratives make clear that sex work operates within a contested moral and legal space—criminalized by law yet normalized by economic necessity. As P2 remarked, "It's not about pleasure or choice—

it's survival. "Such statements expose how structural strain (Merton, 1968/2019) transforms need into deviance, illustrating that women's "criminal" conduct often stems from systemic poverty rather than intrinsic delinquency.

Labeling theory (Becker, 2018) illuminates the power of community judgment in sustaining moral boundaries. P4's reflection—"People avoid me in the market. They whisper, 'that's the woman from the bar.'"—shows how everyday discourse enforces informal control. Through gossip, rejection, and public humiliation, society performs the work of policing without police. This secondary deviance process traps women within a self-reinforcing stigma: once marked, they internalize shame and anticipate rejection, which limits reintegration prospects.

Criminologically, sex work thus represents symbolic deviance—behavior that challenges dominant moral orders rather than causing material harm. The persistence of punitive policing, despite inconsistent enforcement, reflects what Taylor et al. (1973) called the moral management of the poor: law as a cultural technology to sustain patriarchal and class hierarchies.

Agency, Resistance, and Resilience

Contrary to depictions of sex workers as powerless victims, participants exercised varied forms of micro-resistance and agency. Their voices demonstrate what Arrigo and Milovanovic (2009) termed subjective agency within constraint. P6 stated, "I cry sometimes, but I tell myself to stand strong." P4 added, "Sometimes I feel numb. I just focus on earning and getting through the night." These acts of emotional self-regulation reflect resilient deviance—the transformation of endurance into survival capital. Rather than overt rebellion, their resistance is internal and moral: a refusal to be psychologically destroyed by stigma.

Secrecy and selective disregard also function as forms of self-governance. When P3 said, "My neighbors think I'm a waitress in a bar," she described a deliberate performance of normalcy that shields her from condemnation. Ignoring insults—"They don't feed me, so why should I care?" (P6) Illustrates Sykes and Matza's (2019) techniques of neutralization, enabling women to reject external moral authority while maintaining self-respect.

These strategies resonate with postmodern criminology's emphasis on plural moralities: deviance becomes a dialogue between dominant and subaltern meanings of virtue. The participants' self-definition as "good mothers" despite legal deviance reclaims agency through alternative morality, echoing Winter and Olivia (2024) who found motherhood to be a primary identity repair mechanism among sex-working women.

Structural Violence and Institutional Neglect

Participants' utterances vividly portray structural violence (Farmer, 2004)—the invisible harms inflicted by poverty, stigma, and institutional exclusion. P5's statement, "Some men don't want to pay... I can't report it because I'm scared of the police,"—encapsulates the criminogenic paradox of control: legal systems designed to maintain order instead amplify victimization.

Healthcare encounters likewise reveal institutionalized stigma. As P3 explained, "When I go for health checkups, some nurses look at me like I'm dirty." Such experiences erode trust, discouraging preventive care and perpetuating risk. Abdulla et al. (2024) argue that stigmatized healthcare responses function as symbolic policing of female sexuality—a mechanism of social discipline disguised as public health.

Within this matrix of control, violence is normalized and accountability diffused. The women's silence in the face of assault exemplifies state-produced vulnerability. As P1 lamented, "I just wanted it to be over." Her resignation underscores the futility of seeking justice when the complainant herself is criminalized.

Maternal Morality and Identity Reconstruction

Perhaps the most powerful counter-narrative to deviance labeling emerged from motherhood. P2's declaration, "Everything I do is for my son to finish college," and P6's comment, "When I see my daughter studying, all the pain is worth it," transform condemned labor into moral sacrifice.

This aligns with Silva's (2019) concept of the moral economy of survival, wherein individuals justify illicit acts through culturally resonant virtues. In criminological terms, the mothers' narratives enact moral reframing—a discursive strategy that converts stigma into dignity.

Such reframing also mirrors Maruna's (2001) theory of redemption scripts in desistance research: offenders construct coherent moral stories that explain wrongdoing as instrumental to a higher good. Here, sex workers narrate their actions as temporary and self-sacrificing, projecting eventual transformation. As P3 shared, "I'm not proud of what I do, but I'm proud that I survive."

This identity reconstruction allows moral continuity amid deviance and demonstrates that self-definition—not social condemnation—anchors rehabilitation.

Intersections of Law, Morality, and Gender Control

The participants' experiences expose how law and morality intertwine as gendered instruments of control. Criminalization legitimizes policing of women's bodies under the guise of protecting public morality. Yet, as P5 noted, "If the police catch us, they don't help—they ask for money to let us go."

Such accounts echo global findings that punitive laws foster corruption and exploitation (Platt et al., 2020). The blurred boundary between enforcement and abuse reinforces women's perception that the law serves not justice but domination.

From a feminist criminological lens, this dynamic exemplifies patriarchal governance—where regulation of sexuality preserves male privilege and economic order. By labeling sex workers as "fallen," society reinforces conventional femininity as compliant, domestic, and dependent. Deviant women become necessary "others" through which normal womanhood is defined.

Coping, Compliance, and Micro-Negotiations of Control

Engagement with healthcare and NGOs illustrates how participants negotiate partial inclusion within exclusionary institutions. As P1 shared, "We have a card from the city health office; they give us free checkups every month." These instances reveal a pragmatic adaptation—what criminologists term compliance without conformity.

Rather than outright rebellion, women engage tactically with structures that afford limited protection, while rejecting those that impose humiliation. This balancing act reflects what Foucault (1977) described as micro-politics of resistance—the everyday maneuvers through which marginalized subjects reclaim fragments of autonomy.

Toward a Human-Rights Criminology of Sex Work

The cumulative evidence supports a shift from moral to structural analysis in Philippine criminology. Participants' utterances expose the human consequences of a punitive moral regime: shame, silence, and systemic neglect. Recognizing sex work as labor rather than crime reframes deviance as an outcome of policy failure. As P4 insisted, "We are not criminals—we are just trying to live." This plea echoes the core ethos of critical criminology: to interrogate who defines crime, whose interests the law protects, and how justice can be reconstructed around human dignity.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The lived experiences of female sex workers in Southern Philippines reveal that deviance is socially manufactured, not inherently criminal. Within an economy of scarcity and moral condemnation, women navigate survival through endurance, secrecy, and moral reframing. Their utterances demonstrate that agency and victimization coexist, challenging binary conceptions of crime and virtue.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

1. Decriminalization and Harm Reduction – Replace punitive laws with regulatory frameworks that protect health, safety, and labor rights, consistent with Platt et al. (2020).
2. Trauma-Informed Policing – Develop specialized training to sensitize officers to gender-based violence and reduce extortionary practices.
3. Inclusive Healthcare – Institutionalize anti-stigma protocols and community-based sexual-health programs accessible to sex workers.
4. Socioeconomic Reintegration – Create livelihood, education, and micro-finance programs enabling voluntary exit from sex work.
5. Participatory Policy Design – Involve sex-worker advocacy groups in crafting laws affecting their lives, aligning with restorative-justice principles.

Through these reforms, criminology can evolve from an instrument of control into a discipline of compassion—grounded in empirical understanding and human rights.

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