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**REPRESENTATION OF SEX WORKERS IN MALAYSIAN NEWS  
MEDIA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

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Marginalized populations such as sex workers are at constant risk of violence, abuse, and human rights violation due to inadequate laws governing their rights. Although media has an integral role in influencing the public's perception of these vulnerable populations, it continues to reinforce social stigmas and discrimination against sex workers through stereotypical and negative representation of the populations. Drawing on Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA), this paper is an outcome of a study that used the DHA analytical tools to examine the discursive strategies specifically *referential, predicational and argumentative* strategies employed in 20 articles relevant to sex workers in Malaysia published in *The Star Online* between January and December 2012. Data analysis generally revealed that the local media consistently polarised sex workers as offenders and as victims. These representations are justified and legitimized through specific linguistic devices, fallacious arguments, metaphor, and several topoi, *i.e., topoi of number, blame, threat, and authority*. Such representations create public intolerance towards sex workers and consequently hinder the workers' access to health care, legal and social services. This paper concludes by highlighting the contributions of the study and the need to incorporate the voices of people who work in the industry to challenge the limited representations perpetuated by the media.

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## **1. Introduction**

Traditional sexual morality in many cultures, views sex as acceptable only within marriage, and the access to women's bodies are reserved for only one man (Primoratz, 1999). Hence, when viewed through the lens of sexual ethics, commercial sex is considered morally flawed and 'deviant.' In the attempt to remove this deviant act, the sex industry and sex workers have received different types of sanctions, formally in the policy and legal codes that criminalize solicitation of sex, and socially through discrimination and stigmas against the sex trade and the workers. According to Foucault, (1978), the policing of sex began in the 17th century when tighter controls were placed on any form of sexual discourse. Through this control, a religious confession known as 'Christian Pastoral' was established where Christians were obligated to disclose their sexual misconduct, sexual desires, fantasies, thoughts, and any sexual inclinations to the church. This practice was a turning point when sex became a public matter, and subsequently policed and administered by the ruling authority.

### **1.1. Sex Industry in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, sex workers were first cited in *The Story of Abdullah*, the first commercial Malay literary text published in 1849 (as cited in Nagaraj & Yahya, 1995). In the book, Abdullah recounted his observation of sex workers that he described as 'loose women.' However, the sex industry in Malaysia is believed to have emerged as early as 1718. Purcell (1948) suggested that the emergence of brothels in 1718 in Peninsular Malaysia was due to the gender imbalance of migrant workers brought in by the British to work in the mines and plantations. It was recorded that between 1839 and 1880s, the ratio of males against female migrants in Peninsular Malaysia was at 18 to 1000, and this increased demand for sex workers.

In 1870, the first policy that regulates brothels, known as Contagious Diseases Ordinance, was introduced as an attempt to contain the outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Although the policy was primarily established to control STDs, the compulsory medical examination imposed on brothels had benefited sex workers and protected them from enforced detention and ill-treatment (Warren, 1994). However, the ruling was repealed in 1888, and with that, the medical inspection required for the workers was also withdrawn. In 1931, a new regulation was drafted, and brothels were illegalized entirely, resulting in the criminalization of the industry as well as the people working in the sector (Lim, 1998; Warren, 1994). At present, although prostitution is not a criminal offense under the Malaysian Federal Law, the exploitation of women for prostitution is an offense punishable by imprisonment and a fine or both. This regulation is enacted in the Penal Code 574 Sections 327a and 327b (Penal Code Act 574, 2015). In addition to this provision, sex work is also regulated under the Syariah law, Act 559, Section 21 (Syariah Criminal Offences Act 1997, 2002). Syariah law is another body of jurisdiction that governs Muslims in Malaysia. Under this provision, sex work is considered as an offense relating to decency, and sanction can include imprisonment and a fine or both.

## **2. Problem Statement**

When Malaysia was listed on Tier 2 of the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons 2011 Report, the Malaysian government established the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of

Migrants (the ATIPSOM) under the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act 2007. This newly merged law considers trafficked persons living on or receiving the profits of prostitution, including victims of trafficking as illegal migrants (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, 2010). The inclusion of trafficked victims under this law was highly criticized as it undermines the need to identify and safeguard sex trafficking victims. Besides the ambiguity in the law enforcement, the media plays a significant role in influencing public attitudes towards this population. Much research has shown the mounting evidence of stigmatization of sex workers perpetuated in the media where they are depicted as the ‘other’ and ‘deviant’ even when their involvement is forced (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008). Research has also shown that sex workers often refuse to seek legal protection when faced with violence or ill-treatment since, in many cases, the perpetrators are reported to be people from the law enforcement itself (Gould & Fick, 2008; Scorgie et al., 2013; SWEAT, 2013). As a result, sex workers often regard the assaults against them as normal and as part of their line of work (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008; Svinurai et al., 2019).

Adding to this, academic research on sex workers is also scarce, and they are often interlaced with topics that are frequently linked with sex workers, for instance, the research on AIDS, HIV, and human trafficking (Kantola & Squires, 2004; Noor, 2015). As such, this study is significant as it fills in the gap that exists in the research on sex workers in Malaysia by exploring the discursive representation of this population as the negative-other found in the Malaysian news media. This study believes that the way sex workers are depicted as the negative-other in the media, if not exposed, will continue to perpetuate sex workers’ stigmatization and hinder their rights for public benefits such as health care services, legal rights, and protection from violence and human rights violations.

### **3. Research Questions**

This study used Wodak’s (2001) Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and research questions for this study were formulated based on the strategies suggested in DHA. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the linguistic items used to name and refer to sex workers in the news media?
2. What are the characteristics and qualities attributed to these workers?
3. What arguments used to rationalize the negative representations of these workers?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the explicit and implicit discursive strategies employed in the mainstream media in Malaysia in their representation of sex workers as the negative-other. Through this investigation, the study aims to reveal how sex workers are depicted negatively and how these depictions are justified and legitimized in the media. With this revelation, it will show the extent that negative portrayals of sex workers in the news media contribute to shape and reinforce stigma and discrimination against the population. To achieve this objective, this research attempts:

- i. To examine the ways in which sex workers are negatively represented in the mainstream news media in Malaysia
- ii. To examine the argumentative strategies employed by the media to legitimize their representations of sex workers.

## 5. Research Methods

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) considers the language used to represent a particular group of people within media texts; for example, sex workers as ideological. In other words, the linguistic items assigned to sex workers by and in the media are central to shape and reinforce the way in which the wider public views and treats the sex workers' population. Using the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) in CDA, this research aims to identify the way sex workers are negatively represented in the Malaysian news media. DHA is chosen for a number of reasons, firstly due to its concerns on historical contexts and secondly, its interdisciplinary nature in which it considers perspectives from different fields of studies as well as triangulates its methods of data collection and analysis. As such, DHA provides a number of advantages, including minimizing the risk of biases by capturing the topic under study from different angles, and the triangulation of data from multiple sources to ensure a comprehensive and complete examination of the discursive event (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017).

### 5.1. The Construction of Negative-Other

In the DHA, the construction of the negative-other is a discursive practice frequently used to discredit a particular group of people as *inferior, bad, and different* from the dominant group. The construction of negative-other or the out-group is a semantic strategy that allows a negative representation of a particular group of people, in comparison to a positive representation of the in-group. Wodak (2001) describes this practice as the rhetoric of '*us versus them*,'; a strategy that is used to alleviate the negative features and traits of the 'out-group,' which in this case, the sex workers, to achieve a social, political, psychological aim.

### 5.2. The Discursive Strategies

To examine the explicit and implicit strategies in the construction of the negative-other, Reisigl and Wodak (2017) propose the discursive strategies as tabled in Figure 1:

Strategies	Objectives	Devices
Referential/ Nomination	Construction of in groups and out-groups	- Membership categorization - Biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors, metonymies - Synecdoche (pars pro toto, tatum pro pars) - Verbs and nouns to denote processes and actions
Predication	Labelling social actors more or less positively or negatively, deprecatorily or appreciatively	-Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits - Implicit and explicit predicate
Argumentation	Justification of positive or negative attributions	Topoi refers to arguments used to justify political inclusion or exclusion, discrimination or preferential treatment.
Perspectivation, framing	Expressing involvement, positioning speakers' point of view	Reporting, description, narration or quotation of (discriminatory) events and utterances
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying the epistemic status of proposition	Intensifying or mitigating the illocutionary force of (discriminatory) utterances

**Figure 01.** The Five Discursive Strategies

(Adapted from 'The Discourse Historical Approach', by Reisigl and Wodak, 2017, p.95)

Drawing from the five-discursive strategies in Figure 1, this research employed three strategies: *referential*, *predicational*, and *argumentative* strategies. The *referential* and *predicational* strategies aim to reveal the linguistic items used in naming or labelling an individual or a group. These items often involve positive or negative membership categorization to build either positive or negative representation. On the other hand, *argumentation*, which may include *topoi*, *fallacy*, and *metaphor*, is a discursive strategy through which the negative and positive representations are justified and legitimized. These three strategies are chosen because they are essential in the study of representation, while the other two strategies; *perspectivation* and *intensification/mitigation* that aim to reveal the respond of sex workers' towards media representations of them will not be analysed for these strategies are not applicable in the study of marginalized populations such as sex workers whose voices and ability to intensify or mitigate the media representations of them are absent in the media.

### 5.3. Data Collection

The data for this study consists of 20 news reports relevant to sex workers in Malaysia circulated in *The Star Online* between January 2012 and December 2012. *The Star Online* was selected for its reputation as a leading newspaper in Malaysia as well as the accessibility of its online archives. The corpus was collected firstly, through general browsing of the newspaper archives before being downsized to a total of twenty items. Publication in 2012 was chosen specifically for that year, the Malaysian Royal Police, in collaboration with authorities in the Islamic religious bodies, introduced the first nation-wide operation known as Operasi Noda or Ops Noda to combat prostitution in the country. During the first year of the operation, 13,835 raids were reported to take place (UNGGAS Malaysia, 2012), and for this reason, news reports on sex workers were widely circulated in the media. However, the news reports were filtered based on two criteria; firstly, the articles were under news reports, secondly, the articles dealt with news concerning sex workers resided or operated in Malaysia.

## 6. Findings

In all the twenty news articles, the findings revealed that sex workers were consistently represented as the negative-other and limitedly, as offenders and as victims in *The Star Online*. The negative portrayals were achieved using *referential*, *predicational*, and *argumentative* strategies, which are in line with the strategies suggested in the DHA.

### 6.1. Collectivized and Aggregated

Throughout the news reports, while sex workers were frequently collectivized as a group using plural nouns such as '*women*' '*victims*' and '*prostitutes*,' this is in contrast when the workers were identified as criminals. In narrating the criminalization of sex workers, the news articles tend to highlight the workers' unique identity, particularly their foreign status. It was apparent that the most common nationality emphasized in the news reports were sex workers originating from China.

***“Chinese women were the largest group out of the total 11,832 arrested”, “Chinese women topped the list of foreign prostitutes detained last year” and “influx of Chinese women”.***

***Besides locals, foreigners also prefer them (Chinese sex workers) due to **low chargers**. Each sex session costs between **RM 150 and RM200**.***

**Figure 02.** Women from China pay RM10,000 to work as prostitutes  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012a)

The specific mention of sex workers from China as seen in Figure 2, can be perceived as a negative representation not only because of their involvement in the sex industry but also due to the anti-Chinese sentiment that was at a peak in many Southeast-Asian countries in the year the articles were written. The negative sentiment toward Chinese nationals may be understood against the influx of Chinese migrants into Malaysia between 2010 and 2012 and the territorial dispute between China and Malaysia's neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam (South China Morning Post, 2012). The foreign status of the workers was also used to construct their identity as an out-group as they were often alluded to being lesser in quality based on the description of their price. In this case, the Malaysian sex workers were included as part of the positive in-group in comparison to the foreign sex workers. The division made between local and foreign status within the sex workers community has reinforced the negative image of foreign workers that are usually seen as a problem.

The use of numerative was also frequent when these workers were portrayed as criminals. The implication of aggregating a particular group of people and representing them as statistics, polls, surveys, or numbers is that it helps to create the group as a distanced population. Consequently, the group's projection as a specimen instead of a person will reduce the readers' empathy towards the population, making any actions taken against them deemed justifiable. Additionally, aggregation can also be interpreted as the public's consensus, which works the same way as to how statistics, polls, and surveys are used in the governmental organizations or the marketing as a mechanism to manufacture consensus opinion. By representing sex workers in the form of statistics, these workers are not only objectified to numbers, but the statistics present their criminalization as facts agreed by the public. However, this representation is in a stark difference with the workers' narration as victims. As victims, the workers' age was frequently highlighted. They were identified as very young women and, as such, helpless, innocent, and in need of saving.

***According to the SMS sent out by the syndicates, the prostitutes were aged between 18 and 25 from various countries including China, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines.***

**Figure 03.** Prostitutes making house calls to avoid detection  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012b)

In the excerpt (see Figure 3), although at first glance, the portrayal of sex workers as vulnerable and in need of saving may sound favourable, the consequences of this depiction are otherwise. The rhetoric of

sex workers helplessness will not only enhance the criminality of sex work but will eventually validate the need to remove people in the sector, even by means of violence and intimidation.

## 6.2. Activated and Passivated

As analysed above, even though sex workers were impersonalized, their involvement in the sex trade was frequently depicted as purposeful and voluntary. This was realized by placing the workers as agents and beneficiaries of the selling of sex.

*“Dark Angel confessed that she attracted clients by posting photograph of herself in revealing outfits in a website which offered escort services”*

**Figure 04.** Undergrads netting foreign tourists for sex  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012c)

As shown in Figure 4, the sex worker was identified in a pseudonym '*Dark Angel*' and she given a role as the agent of '*prostituting*,' '*attracting*,' and '*posting*.' She was also the goal and beneficiary of these behavioural processes through the use of the reflexive pronoun '*herself*.' Being both the agent and beneficiary, '*Dark Angel*' was portrayed as a solicitor of sex service, indicating that her action was purposeful and voluntary rather than motivated by other factors. As a result, readers will trust that sex workers are willing participants as well as criminals for intentionally breaking the law through their sex offering. Additionally, this strategy has helped to exclude the creator or developer of the website, which was not mentioned anywhere in the text. The presence of the verb '*confessed*' also implied the worker's sense of guilt, hence a need for her to confess her wrongdoings. The implication of this is clear, that is, to continue placing the sex workers as offenders so that the efforts of removing them are justified.

This portrayal is in contrast with the way media represents the workers as victims. Their victimization is constructed through the passive agency of their involvement. The news headline, "*Bogus job offer lures a woman into sex slavery*," is an example where the passive voice was used to place the worker as the object '*woman*,' the goal of the behavioral process of '*luring*' and the beneficiary of '*sex slavery*.' The workers' image of vulnerability and weakness was also realized in active voices, and this can be seen in the following line; "*Cops rescue Viet women*." In the sentence, '*cops*' is the agent of the behavioral process '*rescuing*.' The cops' agency was activated; meanwhile, the '*Viet women*' were passivated, and they were given the role of the beneficiary and recipient of the cops' good deeds.

*Police acted swiftly to rescue eight Vietnamese women from a human trafficking syndicate within four hours after receiving a tip-off from the embassy.*

**Figure 05.** Cops rescue Viet women  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012d. (Source: The Star Online, 2012d)

It is also evident that the positive-heroic image of the cops was reinforced through adjectives such as; '*swiftly*,' '*rescue*,' and '*within four hours*.' As indicated in Figure 5, these descriptions insinuate the

police effectiveness in carrying out their duties. The positive description of the police is one of the strategies used by the media to distinguish the out-group and the in-group. The police in this context represent the positive-self of the dominant group, while the sex workers represent the marginalized groups that require help and saving.

It is also noted that the selected news articles used verbs and adjectives to highlight the workers' victimization such as, '*lured*,' '*locked up*,' '*imprisoned*,' '*hit*,' '*forced into prostitution*,' and '*rape*.' The use of verb '*rape*' in the line '*the woman was raped by the man several times*' was also crucial in enhancing the workers' victimization in which they were represented not only as victims of physical assaults, but also victims of sexual assaults. This line is instrumental as it gives a new interpretation toward the traffickers, not only as a commercial criminal but also as sex offenders.

### 6.3. Objectification

The news reports also frequently objectified sex workers in their portrayals of sex workers. Sex workers were depicted as objects to be consumed and sold, usually through the description of their prices. Another prominent strategy used to objectify sex workers is through metaphor. An example can be traced in a news report portraying a university student turned sex worker identified as '*Dark Angel*.' From the news headline, '*Undergrads netting tourists for sex*,' (see Figure 4) the workers were first, referred to as a collective group using plural form '*undergrads*,' denoting that '*Dark Angel*' was not operating alone, and many university students are offering the same service. Secondly, the activity associated with sex workers was represented with a metaphor that equates the selling of sex to '*fishing*.' The metaphor is represented through an active verb of '*netting*.' Sex workers in the sentence were positioned in active roles as agents of '*netting*,' and this implied the workers' active involvement in casting the '*bait*' to entice the '*tourist*' and ultimately '*catching*' them. On the contrary, the customers of the websites who were described simply as '*tourists*' were placed in the position of the recipient for the action of '*netting*,' thus placing them as victims. This analogy discounts the fact that the customers may visit the sex service website intentionally to buy sex, hence making them a solicitor of sex service and their involvement as purposeful and not by chance.

Other examples of metaphors are evident when the premise is described as '*den*' (see Figure 6) which dehumanizes sex workers, equating them to animals. The same dehumanization strategy can also be seen in other news reports that described the brothel as a '*prostitution factory*' (see Figure 6) which alludes the workers as industrial objects. The use of metaphors to objectify and dehumanize sex workers can also be traced in the following lines; '*get an escort via drive-thru*,' '*type of escorts*,' '*special dishes*,' and '*attractions*.' However, there was also a paradox committed in one of the articles that insinuate the media's view of the selling of sex as a job. This depiction can be seen in the following excerpt: "*...women from China have been paying an average of RM10 000 to syndicates to help them get jobs as prostitutes.*" Although a paradox when comparing against the other articles that represent sex work as vice and crime, this line is significant because it denotes sex work as a '*job*.' This example, although subtle, implies the legitimacy of sex work as real work and a profession.

#### 6.4. Argumentative Strategies

In order to rationalize the negative representations of the workers, *The Star Online* employed a number of argumentative strategies. The argumentative strategies found in the news articles are as follows:

##### 6.4.1. Topos of Numbers

The growing number of sex workers in the country was justified through topos of numbers, in the form of statistics. Although the source of the statistics used to justify the growth of sex work population was not mentioned anywhere in the text, readers may not question the validity of these numbers as statistics are often deemed to be legitimate and accurate. The numbers also influence readers to consider the phenomenon not only as a fact but as a threat and a problem. Topos of numbers was also frequently applied to emphasize the sex workers' youth, where the workers were represented as either underage or women in their early twenties to legitimize their helplessness and vulnerability. Apart from age, topos of number was also used to highlight the workers' price, for example, in; '*Women from China pay RM10 000 to work as prostitutes*' the amount of money that was claimed being paid by the Chinese sex workers for their sex service was emphasized. With this, the readers will be easily convinced that the workers' entry into the sex industry is not only voluntary but was due to its lucrative benefits, projecting the workers not only as opportunists and materialistic but immoral women who were willing to degrade their bodies for money.

##### 6.4.2. Topos of Blame

Another argumentative strategy that could be traced in the articles is the topos of blame. Topoi of blame are prevalent in justifying sex workers as criminals, and this can be seen in a direct quotation from an expert identified through her profession as a '*Sociologist*' and credentials as '*Prof*' and '*Dr.*' from a reputable university in Malaysia; '*the International Islamic University Malaysia.*' The expert was quoted:

*"Many foreigners had left their wives in their homeland to work here and operators of such dens exploit these men who need to have their sexual needs met".*

**Figure 06.** Foreign workers get satisfactory sex service  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012e)

Figure 6 demonstrates the topos of blame where the workers were made accountable for the clients' involvement in paying for sexual service. The word '*exploit,*' further signified the buyers' innocence, and justified sex workers as criminals.

##### 6.4.3. Fallacy of Presumption

The fallacy of presumption is another argumentative strategy employed by the media to legitimize sex workers' negative representations. This representation is achieved using hasty generalization, where the workers were generalized according to their motivations in entering the sector. These categories were made without any support of evidence, and the examples can be seen in the comments made by a speaker who was individualized as *Bukit Aman CID; Datuk Seri Mohd Bakri Zinin:*

*“The difference in **currency exchange and socio-economic conditions** of the prostitutes’ countries of origin were the reasons why the women end up in vice here. On the involvement of local women, he said there were those who did not choose to do so but were **cheated** into it by their partners. Then there are those who are **forced** into it by their husbands and even some who are **trapped** by their own lust”*

**Figure 07.** Cheap motels add to the growth of prostitution  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012f)

Based on the speaker's claims, foreign sex workers engaged in the sex trade because of the **economic conditions** of their home countries. As can be seen in Figure 7, this claim assumed that foreign sex workers are from countries defined as low economic, and poverty is their trajectory for entry in the sex industry. This remark discounts the possibility that these workers could be trafficked victims or from high-income countries. The speaker also marks a clear division between Malaysian and non-Malaysian sex workers based on their motivations. The locals were depicted as victims who were '**cheated**' and '**forced**' by their partners or husbands. Even when their trajectory was voluntary due to **lust**, the speaker used the verb '**trapped**' to insinuate the local sex workers' victimization. Although these claims were unsubstantiated, the reference made to the speaker's position and authority as **CID Director** provides credence and, as such, legitimizes the claims made. Ultimately, the public will accept these as facts rather than assumptions or personal views, despite a lack of evidence to support the claims.

#### 6.4.4. Fallacy of Authority

It was also evident that the local media used the fallacy of authority to justify their negative representations of the workers. In the selected articles, the authorities were personalized through the reference of their titles, positions, or credentials.

***OCPD Assistant Commissioner** Ahmad Sofi said **the girl was driven into vice as a means to earn money as she came from a poor and broken family.***

***Mallaca Anti-Vice and Gambling task force chief Datuk K. Basil** said **most girls needed the money to maintain their lavish lifestyle.***

**Figure 08.** Cheap motels add to the growth of prostitution  
Adapted from *The Star Online*, 2012. (Source: The Star Online, 2012f)

In Figure 8, it can be seen that the article includes not only the speaker's position at work but also his position in the community to justify the speaker's authority both professionally and socially. Similarly, positions, titles, or credentials such as; '**president,**' '**principal assistant director,**' and '**Assistant Commissioner**' can be found in several other articles under study. Through the fallacy of authority, the media creates a sense of trust for the claims made by the speakers they have interviewed, as they are portrayed as experts in their profession and having 'expert knowledge' in the subject. Ultimately, even with the absence of evidence, for instance in the second excerpt, where the experts assumed sex workers

trajectories in the sector were due to their needs to '*maintain their lavish lifestyle*' and '*to earn money as she came from a poor and broken family*'; readers will not question these claims as the speakers were portrayed as experts of the subject. This strategy is especially crucial in the representation of marginalized people, such as sex workers, as readers have limited knowledge or exposure toward the population's living realities.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings suggest that the local media employed *referential*, *predicational*, and *argumentative* strategies to represent and legitimize sex workers' negative representations as either offenders or victims. The sex workers' victimization was represented through their constant portrayals as innocent young girls and unwilling participants. Topoi of age is also a common strategy used to legitimize the workers' victimization where they were depicted as underage or early-twenties women.

Meanwhile, as offenders, people in the sector were represented as the allies of illegal brothels, or greedy and materialistic individuals selling sex voluntarily for money. These representations were materialized semantically through role activation in the selling of sex, negative lexical items in referring to their activities as well as objectification that levelled the workers to objects and animals. The depictions will ultimately lead the public to consent to the sanctions applied to sex workers even when they are unfair and violate the workers' human rights.

These limited and negative representations are harmful to sex workers population. When sex workers continue being represented as the negative-other, persecution and violence against them will remain justified. It also trivializes the real issues affecting sex workers, such as violence and human rights violations that are common in the sector. Thus, this study reveals and problematizes how sex workers have been unfairly represented through and by the local media. For Malaysia to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in reducing inequalities and providing fair access to safety, protection, and health services regardless and without prejudice; the Malaysian media must change the way it reports people in vulnerable groups of society, such as sex workers. This change can be done through inclusive news that brings in the workers' voices in news reports about them, to understand their day to day living realities.

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