

Sex Workers Still Human? Reading Dehumanization in Photo-Journalism

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Abstract

Photojournalism serves as a powerful medium in shaping societal perceptions, particularly in the representation of marginalized communities. This study critically examines how sex workers are visually portrayed in photojournalism, employing a semiotic analysis grounded in the frameworks of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes. The research investigates the role of denotation and connotation in constructing meaning, while foregrounding the mechanisms of dehumanization. Dehumanization is explored through both overt visual techniques and more subtle compositional choices that strip subjects of agency and individuality. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, the study analyzes a selection of photojournalistic images, focusing on signs, codes, and symbolic structures embedded within the visuals. Findings indicate a prevalent reliance on visual tropes that perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social hierarchies. These visual strategies not only marginalize sex workers but also align with broader patterns of social exclusion and discrimination. The study concludes that ethical considerations in visual storytelling remain critically underexplored, especially in the context of vulnerable populations. Addressing these issues requires a reevaluation of journalistic practices and the incorporation of humanizing visual narratives that affirm dignity and complexity. This research contributes to media studies by bridging semiotic theory with critical discourse on visual ethics and human rights.

Keywords: *Dehumanization, Photojournalism, Semiotics, Sex workers, Visual rhetoric*

INTRODUCTION

Photography as a medium has been revolutionized, with high-quality cameras (Riyadi et al., 2020). Photojournalism plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions, especially in its portrayal of marginalized communities. While it has historically served as a tool for documenting social issues, its ethical dimensions remain contested. Representations of vulnerable groups, such as sex workers, often rely on visual rhetoric that may reinforce rather than challenge prevailing stereotypes. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, provides a fundamental framework for analyzing media texts, including photography. The discipline originates from Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist model, which conceptualizes meaning through the relationship between the signifier (form) and the signified (concept) (Purwasih et al., 2024; Widing et al., 2023).

Charles Sanders Peirce expanded upon this framework by introducing a triadic model that considers the interpretant, which encapsulates how an audience deciphers meaning (Nuessel & Puumeister, 2022). These foundational models have been applied extensively in media studies, particularly in analyzing how visual communication constructs narratives. Applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework distinguishing between denotation and connotation enables a deeper analysis of the meanings embedded within such images (Putri & Junaedi, 2023; Supriatna & Savira, 2021). Although widely utilized in media and cultural studies, this approach remains underapplied in examining photojournalistic representations of sex workers.

Dehumanization, defined as the reduction of individuals to less than human status, is particularly relevant in this context. Visual strategies such as framing, selective imagery, and composition can contribute to perceptions of sex workers as lacking agency or individuality (Bustamante et al., 2019; Valtorta et al., 2024). Historically, dehumanization has played a critical role in justifying social exclusion, discrimination, and violence. It manifests in two primary forms: blatant dehumanization, where individuals are explicitly likened to animals or objects, and subtle

dehumanization, which occurs through the omission of human attributes such as individuality, agency, and emotion (Roupa et al., 2024; Valtorta et al., 2024). While prior research has examined dehumanization in political, racial, and conflict-related media, few studies have addressed how these mechanisms operate in the visual portrayal of sex workers through a semiotic lens.

Contemporary debates on media representation highlight the urgent need to reassess the ethical responsibilities of photojournalism. Although existing scholarship has addressed media bias and the stereotyping of marginalized groups, the visual language of dehumanization remains insufficiently examined within journalism ethics (Markowitz & Slovic, 2020; Xu & Zhang, 2023). This study analyzes *Flowers in the Ruins*, a photo essay by Muhammad Zaenuddin recipient of the 2022 APFI Best Photo Essay award as a case study to explore the relationship between journalistic intent, visual composition, and audience interpretation (Zaenuddin, 2022).

Focusing on the representation of sex workers, the research identifies three critical gaps: (1) the limited application of semiotic analysis to their dehumanization in photojournalism, (2) the absence of systematic examinations of visual language in constructing narratives around sex work, and (3) the underdeveloped discourse on ethical considerations in portraying marginalized communities (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). To address these gaps, the study employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to decode the visual rhetoric in *Flowers in the Ruins*, analyzing denotative and connotative meanings, mythologies, and cultural codes. The findings aim to contribute to media ethics by advocating for a more responsible, nuanced, and humanizing approach to visual storytelling.

Roland Barthes' semiotic framework offers a structured methodology for examining meaning-making in visual media by distinguishing between denotation, connotation, and myth three layers through which ideological messages are embedded in images (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). In photojournalism, these layers collectively shape public understanding of social issues, including sex work. Although visual semiotics has been effectively utilized in studies of advertising and documentary photography, its application to the representation of sex workers in news media remains limited (Nugroho et al., 2023; Pradipta et al., 2023).

Research on dehumanization demonstrates how media reinforce exclusionary narratives by visually and linguistically depicting certain groups as less than human (Bustamante et al., 2019). In photojournalism, compositional choices such as dramatic lighting, blurred identities, and desolate settings can construct perceptions of sex workers as socially marginalized or "othered." Ethical critiques contend that such portrayals often strip subjects of agency, perpetuating harmful stereotypes rather than offering complex, humanizing representations (Xu & Zhang, 2023).

Journalism ethics scholarship underscores the importance of consent, dignity, and narrative agency in representing marginalized populations (Sandra & Noina, 2024). This study applies Barthes' semiotic analysis to *Flowers in the Ruins* to evaluate whether the visual rhetoric employed aligns with ethical standards or contributes to the dehumanization of sex workers.

Although semiotic analysis is widely employed in media studies, its application to the dehumanization of sex workers remains insufficiently explored. Existing scholarship on media representation predominantly emphasizes textual analysis, resulting in a notable gap regarding the role of visual narratives in shaping societal perceptions of marginalized groups (Pradipta et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies on media bias often address racial and gender-based stereotypes, with limited attention given to sex workers as a distinct analytical category (Xu & Zhang, 2023).

Research on dehumanization has largely centered on contexts such as war photography, refugee imagery, and political propaganda, offering valuable insights but failing to account for the specific visual framing of sex workers in journalism (Markowitz & Slovic, 2020). This omission results in an incomplete understanding of how visual language contributes to stigmatizing narratives around sex work.

Moreover, despite ongoing discussions in journalism ethics emphasizing responsible storytelling, there is a lack of empirical investigation into whether acclaimed photojournalistic works conform to these ethical standards. By analyzing *Flowers in the Ruins*, this study addresses these gaps, examining how semiotic codes function to either reinforce or resist the dehumanization of sex workers in visual media.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how the visual elements in *Flowers in the Ruins* either contribute to or challenge the dehumanization of sex workers. Utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the research analyzes the denotative and connotative meanings embedded within the images to assess how visual codes influence public perception. These findings are further situated within the broader discourse of journalism ethics, with a focus on the ethical responsibilities of photojournalists in representing marginalized communities.

This research offers an original contribution by integrating semiotic analysis with discussions on photojournalism, media ethics, and the visual representation of sex workers. While prior studies have addressed media bias and stereotyping, few have systematically examined the semiotic dimensions of award-winning photojournalistic works. By combining critical analysis with ethical reflection, the study not only deconstructs visual narratives but also proposes actionable guidelines for more responsible and humanizing journalistic practices.

This study is confined to the semiotic analysis of *Flowers in the Ruins* by Muhammad Zaenuddin, recipient of the 2022 APFI Best Photo Essay in the General News Category. Positioned within the fields of media studies, semiotics, gender studies, and journalism ethics, the research aims to advance understanding of how visual storytelling can either reinforce or resist the dehumanization of marginalized populations.

Photojournalism has historically played a central role in shaping public perceptions, particularly through its portrayal of vulnerable communities. However, the ethical implications of such representations remain contested. Visual rhetoric used in depicting sex workers often perpetuates stereotypes, influencing societal narratives in ways that may devalue individual agency. Through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework which distinguishes denotation from connotation the study examines the latent ideological messages conveyed through photographic composition (Putri & Junaedi, 2023).

Despite its broad application in media and cultural criticism, this analytical approach remains underutilized in the examination of sex workers' representation in photojournalism. Given the recurring portrayal of sex workers in terms of hypersexualization or victimhood, often devoid of agency or individuality, there is a critical need to explore how visual framing contributes to their dehumanization (Valtorta et al., 2024). While previous studies have addressed dehumanization in contexts such as political propaganda and war photography, few have systematically investigated this phenomenon in relation to sex work through a semiotic lens.

Contemporary debates on media representation underscore the urgent need to reassess the ethical responsibilities of photojournalism. While existing scholarship has addressed media bias and the stereotyping of marginalized groups, the visual language of dehumanization remains insufficiently explored within journalism ethics (Xu & Zhang, 2023). This study analyzes *Flowers in the Ruins*, an award-winning photo essay by Muhammad Zaenuddin (2022), to investigate how journalistic intent, visual composition, and audience perception interact in shaping public attitudes toward marginalized communities.

Focusing on the representation of sex workers who remain among the most stigmatized groups in visual media the study identifies three critical research gaps: (1) the limited use of semiotic analysis in exploring the dehumanization of sex workers, (2) the lack of systematic studies on the visual construction of narratives around sex work, and (3) the underdeveloped discourse on ethical considerations in the journalistic portrayal of marginalized populations (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). Addressing these gaps is essential for promoting a more ethical, inclusive, and critically engaged approach to photojournalistic practice.

To address the identified research gaps, this study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze the visual rhetoric in *Flowers in the Ruins*. Through the examination of denotative and connotative meanings, mythologies, and cultural codes, the study critically assesses whether the photo essay perpetuates or resists dehumanizing representations of sex workers. The findings are contextualized within broader debates on media ethics, advocating for a more accountable and humanizing approach to visual storytelling.

Barthes' semiotic theory provides a structured methodology for interpreting how meaning is constructed in visual media through layered systems of representation: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural associations), and myth (ideological narratives) (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). Although widely applied in media, advertising, and documentary studies, this framework remains underutilized in analyzing the representation of sex workers in photojournalism (Nugroho et al., 2023).

Existing literature on dehumanization highlights how visual and linguistic framing in media contributes to the marginalization of certain groups. In photojournalism, compositional techniques such as dramatic lighting, facial obscuration, and isolating environments can reinforce perceptions of sex workers as socially "othered" (Bustamante et al., 2019). Ethical critiques argue that such portrayals often strip subjects of agency and reduce them to stereotypes, rather than offering complex, humanized representations (Xu & Zhang, 2023).

Journalism ethics scholars underscore the importance of consent, dignity, and narrative agency when reporting on marginalized communities, emphasizing that ethical photojournalism can foster humanization rather than perpetuate stigma (Sandra & Noina, 2024). This study applies semiotic analysis to *Flowers in the Ruins* to evaluate whether Zaenuddin's visual narratives align with ethical standards or inadvertently contribute to dehumanizing representations.

Although semiotic analysis is extensively utilized in media studies, its application to the dehumanization of sex workers in visual media remains significantly underexplored. Existing scholarship predominantly focuses on textual representations, thereby overlooking the influential role of imagery in shaping public perceptions of marginalized groups (Pradipta et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies on media bias tend to concentrate on racial and gender-based stereotypes, with limited attention to sex workers as a distinct category of analysis (Xu & Zhang, 2023).

Research on media-driven dehumanization has largely addressed contexts such as war, refugee crises, and political propaganda, providing critical insights yet failing to examine the specific visual framing of sex workers (Markowitz & Slovic, 2020). This gap results in an incomplete understanding of how visual language functions to construct or contest stigmatizing narratives surrounding sex work.

Despite growing discourse on journalism ethics and the need for responsible storytelling, limited empirical research has assessed whether award-winning photojournalistic works adhere to these ethical standards. This study addresses that gap by conducting a systematic semiotic analysis of *Flowers in the Ruins*, evaluating how its visual codes either reinforce or resist the dehumanization of sex workers.

The central aim of the research is to investigate how visual elements within the photo essay construct meaning through denotative and connotative layers, using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. By examining these visual codes, the study explores how public perceptions of sex workers are shaped and situates these findings within broader ethical debates concerning media representation of marginalized communities.

This research makes an original contribution by bridging semiotic analysis, media ethics, and the visual representation of sex workers an intersection that remains underexplored. While prior studies have addressed media bias and stereotyping, few have offered a systematic deconstruction of the semiotic structures within acclaimed photojournalistic works. In doing so, this study not only critiques existing visual narratives but also proposes ethical recommendations for more humanizing journalistic practices.

The scope of this study is confined to the analysis of "Flowers in the Ruins" by Muhammad Zaenuddin, the winner of the Best Photo Essay APFI General News Category in 2022. This research situates the photo essay within the disciplines of media studies, semiotics, gender studies, and journalism ethics, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how visual storytelling can reinforce or challenge dehumanization.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilizes a qualitative research design, employing semiotic analysis to examine the representation of sex workers in Muhammad Zaenuddin's *Flowers in the Ruins*, a photo essay that won the Best Photo Essay award in the APFI General News category in 2022. Grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the research explores how visual elements such as denotation, connotation, and myth construct meaning and influence public perceptions. Barthes' theory, which builds on Saussurean semiotics, provides a systematic approach to analyzing visual media by decoding embedded ideologies and power structures (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). The research employs a structured qualitative methodology consisting of several stages. First, a literature review establishes the theoretical foundation by examining existing studies on media semiotics, dehumanization, and journalism ethics. Secondly, purposive sampling is employed to select images from *Flowers in the Ruins* that depict sex workers, thereby ensuring that the analysis focuses on relevant visual narratives. Third, Barthes' semiotic framework is applied to identify visual codes within the images, including denotative (literal) and connotative (cultural and ideological) meanings, along with the mythic structures that influence audience interpretations (Nugroho et al., 2023; Pradipta et al., 2023). Data collection involves obtaining high-resolution versions of the selected images and considering contextual elements such as captions and accompanying texts. The analysis process is systematic, breaking down images into visual components such as composition, lighting, and framing to assess how they construct or challenge dehumanizing narratives. The study also incorporates critical discourse analysis, considering how the portrayal of sex workers aligns with or disrupts dominant societal ideologies (Valtorta et al., 2024).

The findings are presented in a qualitative interpretive format, using detailed descriptions and thematic discussions rather than numerical data. Key themes emerging from the analysis include the perpetuation of stereotypes, the presence of humanizing elements, and the ethical considerations of visual storytelling. This study makes a significant contribution to ongoing discussions in media studies, gender representation, and journalism ethics, offering insights into the responsibilities of photojournalists in shaping public discourse on marginalized communities (Xu & Zhang, 2023). By applying Barthes' semiotic analysis to award-winning photojournalism, this study advances critical debates on ethical representation, demonstrating how visual storytelling can reinforce or subvert dehumanization. The study underscores the power of images in shaping public perception, advocating for more ethical, nuanced, and dignified portrayals of marginalized communities in media discourse.

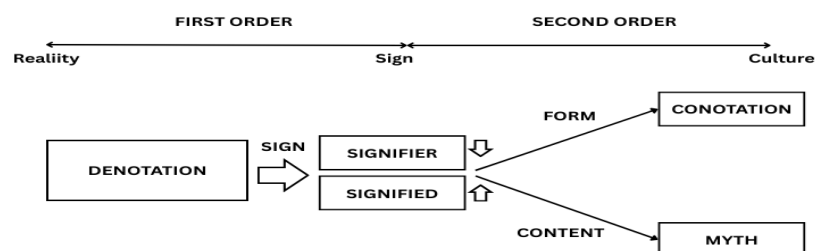


Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

Roland Barthes' semiotic framework delineates a two-tiered system of meaning denotation and connotation culminating in myth, which reflects dominant ideological narratives. Denotation refers to the literal representation of a sign, composed of a signifier and its signified concept. Connotation involves culturally shaped meanings layered onto this literal level. When these connotations become normalized, they form myths that naturalize constructed ideologies. For example, a photograph of a crying woman in a bar may denote distress but connote shame and entrapment, reinforcing societal stereotypes about marginalization. Barthes' model thus reveals how media representations embed and perpetuate ideological meanings beneath their surface neutrality.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a comprehensive semiotic analysis of Muhammad Zaenuddin's award-winning photo essay, *Flowers in the Ruins*. The analysis employs Roland Barthes's semiotic framework to examine the representation of sex workers in the photographs. Each analysis corresponds to a single photograph, and the analysis explores the visual language, dehumanization, and ethical implications embedded within the images.

Isolation and Emotional Distress

The first image captures a poignant moment of emotional distress, with a woman seated alone in a dimly lit nightclub, her face buried in her hands. The table before her is cluttered with half-empty beer glasses, cigarette packs, a microphone, and other remnants of the night's activities. The overwhelming darkness of the scene, punctuated by neon reflections, further isolates her from the rest of the environment, reinforcing a sense of despair. The composition of the image directs the viewer's gaze towards her suffering, while the disorganized elements surrounding her contribute to an atmosphere of disarray and exhaustion.

Figure 1. Woman Crying at a Table with Drinks



From a semiotic standpoint, the image of a distressed woman employs visual signifiers such as a slouched posture, dim lighting, the presence of alcohol, and disorderly surroundings to convey a complex narrative of emotional distress and social isolation. At the denotative level, the scene depicts a woman alone and visibly troubled in a nightclub setting. However, its connotative dimension reveals deeper themes of abandonment, regret, and societal neglect. Visual elements such as neon lighting and environmental clutter function as metaphors for entrapment, highlighting the tension between personal agency and structural forces. Alcohol and cigarettes further imply escapism, alluding to underlying psychological or socio-economic struggles. These components collectively reinforce prevailing media representations of sex

workers as figures associated with despair and excess, rather than as individuals with nuanced and multifaceted realities (Putri & Junaedi, 2023; Supriatna & Savira, 2021).

Historically, such imagery corresponds with enduring portrayals of sex workers as tragic figures embodiments of the "fallen woman" archetype rooted in literary and visual traditions that equate sex work with moral decline and personal failure (Bustamante et al., 2019). Nonetheless, an alternative interpretation reframes the image as a critique of systemic marginalization rather than a reproduction of stereotypes. The woman's solitude may be viewed not as a reflection of individual deficiency but as a consequence of structural exclusion, economic instability, and stigmatization. In this context, the symbols of nightlife surrounding her serve as both instruments of survival and agents of constraint. This reading encourages critical engagement with the broader social structures that shape the lives of marginalized individuals. Through the analysis of semiotic codes, the image can be understood as a site of contested meaning either reinforcing dominant stereotypes or offering space for critical reflection and resistance.

The Power Dynamic Between Authority and Vulnerability

This image presents a tense and ambiguous moment, depicting a man, possibly a security officer or law enforcement figure, holding a woman close while gripping a baton in his other hand. The woman clings to him in an embrace that appears both intimate and desperate. The setting, characterized by dim, neon-hued lighting, reinforces a sense of secrecy and unease. The composition of the photograph places the man in a dominant position, both physically and symbolically, while the woman's posture suggests submission, dependence, or even fear. The contrast between their body language conveys a complex narrative of power, control, and vulnerability.



Figure 2. Man Holding a Woman Close

From a semiotic perspective, the image reveals a complex power dynamic through key signifiers such as the man's authoritative posture, his firm grip, the symbolic use of the baton, and the woman's submissive stance. While the denotative meaning shows a woman clinging to a man with a baton, the connotative level suggests vulnerability, dependence, and institutional dominance. The ambiguous intimacy between the figures blurs the boundaries between protection and coercion, reflecting the paradoxical relationship between sex workers and law enforcement. Culturally and historically, the image aligns with narratives of control and marginalization, illustrating how legal systems have criminalized and neglected sex workers (Bustamante et al., 2019; Putri & Junaedi, 2023). By foregrounding these power structures, the image critiques institutional authority and calls into question the ethical responsibilities of media in representing marginalized groups.

Dehumanization and Objectification

This image captures a dimly lit and chaotic scene in what appears to be a nightclub or bar. A heavily intoxicated woman is slumped over a couch, her posture limp and lifeless, while a man sitting beside her observes with an indifferent or detached expression. The setting is characterized by scattered bottles, glasses filled with alcohol, and an overall atmosphere of excess

and disorder. The presence of blurred figures in the background suggests a crowded space where individuals are engaged in their own revelry, yet the focal point remains on the woman's vulnerability.



Figure 3. Drunk Woman Leaning Over, Man Watching

From a semiotic standpoint, the image reveals a complex power dynamic through key signifiers: the man's authoritative stance, his grip on the woman, the baton symbolizing systemic control, and the woman's submissive posture. While the denotative meaning shows a physical interaction, its connotative reading unveils themes of vulnerability, coercion, and emotional dependency. The ambiguous intimacy between the figures blurs the line between protection and oppression, reflecting the paradoxical relationship between sex workers and law enforcement. Historically contextualized within narratives of surveillance and marginalization, the image critiques institutional authority and underscores the precarious realities faced by sex workers, exposing the ethical tensions in media representations (Bustamante et al., 2019; Putri & Junaedi, 2023).

Violence and Societal Neglect

The fourth image presents a distressing scene of a physical altercation in an outdoor urban environment, where a woman is visibly being attacked while others engage in or witness the chaos. The setting is marked by debris, a fallen chair, and signs of disorder, indicating an environment where violence is commonplace. The surrounding individuals appear either engaged in the fight or indifferent to it, contributing to an atmosphere of neglect and social abandonment.



Figure 4. Street Brawl Involving Women, Collapsed Chair

From a semiotic perspective, the image exposes the normalization of violence against sex workers and the systemic neglect that perpetuates their marginalization. Denotatively, it depicts a public altercation with clear power imbalances, while connotatively, it reveals deeper narratives of societal apathy and institutional failure. Visual elements such as the woman's vulnerable position, the aggressors' dominance, passive bystanders, and the disordered setting underscore

themes of instability, injustice, and cultural indifference. Historically, sex workers have been stigmatized and dehumanized, often portrayed through reductive media tropes that obscure their dignity and rights (Bustamante et al., 2019; Valtorta et al., 2024; Xu & Zhang, 2023). This image challenges such representations by highlighting systemic inequality rather than individual failure. It also raises ethical concerns about the role of visual media in portraying marginalized suffering, emphasizing the need for advocacy-oriented photojournalism (Sandra & Noina, 2024).

The Contrast Between Hope and Desolation

In this haunting image, a solitary woman walks through an urban landscape reduced to rubble, surrounded by remnants of demolished buildings. The dim lighting casts an eerie glow over the destruction, emphasizing the stark contrast between the figure's presence and the abandoned, desolate environment around her. Her posture, direction, and positioning within the scene evoke a sense of quiet contemplation, resilience, and uncertainty.



Figure 5. Woman Walking in Ruins at Night

From a semiotic perspective, the image conveys themes of marginalization and resilience through key signifiers such as the woman's fragile figure, the ruined urban landscape, and the dim lighting. Denotatively, it depicts a lone woman walking through a desolate environment; connotatively, it evokes social exclusion, instability, and the precarious realities faced by sex workers. The ruins symbolize both physical destruction and the fragility of societal and personal security, reflecting broader patterns of displacement and erasure often experienced by marginalized communities (Xu & Zhang, 2023). While highlighting systemic neglect, the woman's forward movement also suggests agency and perseverance. The image thus critiques urban marginalization while advocating for more nuanced and ethical media portrayals that recognize the dignity and strength of those living on society's margins.

Identity and Faith

This image captures a woman in the midst of adjusting or tidying her clothing, her movement slightly blurred, beneath a framed religious text on the wall. The setting is an intimate, enclosed space, suggesting a personal sanctuary removed from the chaos of the external world. The presence of religious iconography juxtaposed with the subject's assumed profession introduces a complex dialogue about morality, faith, and societal perception. The photograph challenges simplistic narratives by visually reinforcing the coexistence of personal spirituality and a stigmatized existence, prompting viewers to reconsider their assumptions about sex workers and religious devotion.



Figure 6. Woman Hanging Clothes in a Small Room with Religious Wall Art

From a semiotic perspective, the image utilizes key signifiers blurred motion, religious text, and a confined interior to construct a layered narrative of survival, introspection, and moral complexity. While the denotative level depicts a woman adjusting her clothing in a modest space, the connotative meaning reveals a nuanced tension between faith and marginalization. The presence of Islamic calligraphy introduces a discourse that challenges societal binaries separating religiosity from stigmatized labor. Culturally, the image critiques prevailing moral frameworks that exclude sex workers from spiritual legitimacy, exposing the contradiction between religious devotion and social ostracization (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). Rather than reinforcing dominant narratives of judgment, the photograph affirms resilience and spiritual agency, offering a counter-narrative that rehumanizes and dignifies marginalized identities.

Reclamation of Personal Space

This image captures a deeply personal and intimate moment of a woman adjusting her clothing, framed by a vibrant red floral curtain. The setting, while simple, carries significant symbolic weight. The contrast between the rich fabric and the act of undressing or dressing presents a visual narrative about reclaiming personal identity and dignity beyond the professional identity imposed upon her. The soft lighting and the confined space suggest a sanctuary a moment away from external judgments, a space where she can momentarily exist outside the lens of societal expectation.



Figure 7. Woman in Front of Red Rose Curtain, Changing Clothes

The image employs rich visual symbolism particularly the red floral curtain, subdued lighting, and the act of changing clothes to convey complex themes of identity, control, and self-definition. While the denotative level captures an ordinary moment, the connotative meaning explores the tension between public and private selves, and the negotiation of bodily autonomy within marginalized spaces. The red motif traditionally signifies passion and femininity but here also evokes commodification and societal control, complicated by the floral pattern's suggestion of beauty and romanticized artifice. Culturally, the image challenges reductive media portrayals that stereotype sex workers as victims or hypersexual figures, instead presenting a moment of

solitude and agency (Xu & Zhang, 2023). The curtain functions symbolically as both a boundary and a safeguard, reinforcing the subject's control over her visibility. Rejecting voyeurism, the image foregrounds dignity and introspection, aligning with feminist critiques that advocate for ethical, multidimensional representations of marginalized individuals.

The Hope for a Better Future

This image captures an intimate and nurturing moment between a woman and a child as they sit together while she reads to them. The composition contrasts starkly with the previous depictions of nightlife, distress, and marginalization, offering an alternative perspective on the life and roles of the subject. The quietness of the moment, framed within a modest but personal space, conveys a sense of warmth, stability, and tenderness that is often absent in mainstream representations of sex workers. Instead of focusing on struggle or victimization, the image emphasizes resilience, love, and the desire for a future that transcends present hardships.



Figure 10. The Book, the Child's Position, the Domestic Setting

The image of a woman holding a framed photograph close to her chest offers a poignant counter-narrative to dominant depictions of sex workers, emphasizing emotional depth, familial bonds, and maternal identity. This act symbolizes memory, love, and enduring responsibility, challenging reductive portrayals of hypersexualization or victimhood (Xu & Zhang, 2023). By highlighting caregiving and maternal devotion, the image critiques societal stigmas that question sex workers' legitimacy as parents, particularly in contexts where sex work serves as a means of survival (Bustamante et al., 2019). Set within a modest yet warm domestic environment, the photograph affirms the subject's dignity and aspirations, urging viewers to confront systemic injustices and adopt more inclusive, humane perspectives on marginalized lives (Putri & Junaedi, 2023).

The Importance of Human Connection

This photograph captures an intimate yet subtle moment of human connection two hands gently intertwined on a bed, with the background blurred. Unlike other images in *Flowers in the Ruins*, which focus on external struggles, systemic marginalization, and dehumanization, this close-up emphasizes an element that is often overlooked in narratives about sex workers: their capacity for meaningful relationships, emotional depth, and personal connections. The image departs from the stereotypical portrayals of sex workers as either hypersexualized or victimized figures, instead drawing attention to the tenderness and solidarity that exist in their lives.



Figure 9. Two Hands Touching on a Bed, Blurred Background

From a semiotic perspective, the image of two hands gently touching symbolizes trust, intimacy, and emotional solidarity, countering dominant portrayals of sex workers as emotionally detached or socially isolated (Xu & Zhang, 2023). While the denotative level presents a simple act of connection, the connotative meaning reveals resistance to alienation and objectification. The blurred background enhances this focus on human connection, emphasizing relational depth over societal stigma (Bustamante et al., 2019). The image aligns with feminist critiques of media that often reduce sex workers to exploitative tropes, erasing their emotional lives and interpersonal bonds (Putri & Junaedi, 2023). Instead, it affirms their agency in forming meaningful relationships, reclaiming intimacy as a universal human need and challenging dehumanizing narratives (Sandra & Noina, 2024).

Nostalgia and Family Bonds

This image captures an intimate and deeply personal moment a woman lying on a bed, clutching a framed photograph of a child. The soft lighting, her facial expression, and the tight embrace of the frame suggest an overwhelming sense of longing, loss, and connection. Unlike the previous images in *Flowers in the Ruins*, which primarily depict external struggles and societal neglect, this photograph shifts the focus inward, revealing an emotional reality that is often overlooked in discussions surrounding sex work. The inclusion of this image provides a necessary counter-narrative to the dehumanizing portrayals of sex workers that typically dominate media and public discourse.



Figure 11. Woman Holding a Framed Photograph Close to Her Chest

From a semiotic perspective, the primary signifiers in this image the framed photograph, the woman's grasp on it, and her posture convey deep emotional significance. A photograph acts as an artifact of memory, symbolizing an unbroken connection between individuals despite physical separation. In this image, the woman clutches the frame close to her body, reinforcing the idea that her love and maternal devotion persist regardless of distance or circumstance. The denotative meaning is simple: a woman holding a picture while resting. However, the connotative meaning is layered with nostalgia, longing, and familial attachment. Her posture and facial expression suggest emotional vulnerability, as if she seeks comfort in the presence of the image.

In mainstream media, sex workers are often reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes that emphasize their profession while ignoring their personal identities (Xu & Zhang, 2023). This photograph disrupts that narrative by depicting a moment of quiet reflection, positioning her as a mother and a person with deep emotional ties, rather than solely as a laborer within a stigmatized industry.

The cultural context of this image is significant in challenging dominant narratives that erase the caregiving roles of sex workers. The assumption that these women are incapable of fulfilling maternal responsibilities often results in real-world consequences, including legal battles where they are deemed "unfit" mothers based on moral judgment rather than their actual parenting abilities (Bustamante et al., 2019). This image forces the viewer to confront these biases, highlighting the reality that many sex workers engage in their profession out of necessity to support their families. The aesthetic choices such as soft lighting and a domestic setting reinforce warmth and intimacy, distinguishing this image from more sensationalized depictions of sex work. The tension between presence and absence is also central to the image's meaning: while the woman is physically alone, her connection to her child remains tangible through the photograph. This interplay challenges the idea that sex workers exist solely within the transactional spaces of their labor, instead presenting a narrative of resilience, love, and the pursuit of a better future. Through this deeply personal moment, the image calls for a more ethical and humanizing portrayal of sex workers in media and public discourse (Sandra & Noina, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the semiotic representation of sex workers in *Flowers in the Ruins*, revealing the complexities of visual storytelling in photojournalism. By applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the analysis uncovered themes of dehumanization, power imbalances, societal neglect, and resilience. While some images reinforced harmful stereotypes depicting sex workers as victims of despair others challenged these narratives by emphasizing themes of intimacy, agency, and motherhood. This study highlights the dual nature of these representations, showing how photojournalism can either perpetuate stigma or foster humanization, depending on how subjects are framed. The ethical implications of these visual choices suggest a need for more responsible storytelling that respects the dignity and complexity of marginalized individuals.

The research contributes to media studies, visual semiotics, and journalism ethics by addressing the underexplored topic of sex workers' representation in news photography. Unlike prior studies that focus solely on negative portrayals, this study identifies both dehumanizing and humanizing elements, advocating for a shift in how sex workers are framed in visual media. The findings highlight the ethical responsibility of journalists and photographers to move beyond exploitative depictions and instead create narratives that acknowledge both hardship and resilience. Additionally, the study underscores the power of visual storytelling in shaping public opinion and calls for a balanced and ethical approach to media representation.

Future research should further explore the impact of media portrayals on audience perceptions and investigate how sex workers engage in self-representation through digital media. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could provide insights into how these narratives evolve globally. Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of ethical visual storytelling, advocating for depictions that go beyond suffering and instead highlight resilience, agency, and the multifaceted realities of sex workers' lives. As media practitioners and researchers continue to engage with the ethics of representation, there is an urgent need to ensure that visual narratives contribute to more just and inclusive understandings of marginalized communities.

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