



Religiosity, Sexual Attitudes, and Public Perceptions of Sex Work: Evidence of a Mediating Relationship from Italy

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Abstract

Introduction This study investigates the relationship between religiosity, general sexual attitudes, and public perceptions of sex work in Italy, a country where religious traditions play a significant role in shaping societal values. We aim to understand how various aspects of religiosity, such as the importance of God, religious service attendance, and prayer frequency, influence attitudes toward the acceptability of sex work.

Methods We use data from the Wave 5 European Values Study (EVS), a large-scale, cross-national survey that provides insights into individuals' values and attitudes across Europe. The study focuses on Italy and Italian respondents, examining their views on sex work. Multiple regression models were employed to assess the impact of general sexual attitudes and religiosity on the acceptability of sex work. Mediation analysis was conducted to explore the indirect effects of religiosity through broader sexual norms.

Results The analysis reveals that general attitudes toward non-committal sexual behavior are the strongest predictors of the acceptability of sex work. While religiosity also influences attitudes, its effect is largely mediated by general beliefs about sexual behavior. The results demonstrate that religiosity has a limited direct impact on attitudes toward sex work in contemporary Italy.

Conclusions Religiosity, though traditionally a strong influence, now plays an indirect role in shaping views on sex work, mediated by broader societal norms about sexual behavior. These general sexual attitudes are far more significant in determining public perceptions of sex work. This study contributes to the literature by showing that in a highly religious context like Italy, religiosity influences attitudes indirectly through broader sexual norms rather than directly.

Policy Implications Rather than engaging in morality-based debates linked to religion, advocates and organizations seeking policies that support sex workers may be more effective by emphasizing the normalization of diverse sexual behaviors and shifting broader sexual norms.

Keywords Sex work · Religiosity · Sexual attitudes · Mediation analysis · Italy · Public opinion

Introduction

Public attitudes toward sex work are shaped by a variety of socio-cultural factors (Hansen & Johansson, 2022, 2023; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). In many societies, religious

beliefs have historically played a central role in shaping moral perspectives, particularly concerning issues related to sexuality, including sex work (Winter & Olivia, 2024). As Winter and Olivia (2024) note, religious frameworks often position sex work as incompatible with accepted moral norms, contributing to both social stigma and restrictive policy approaches. Catholicism—Italy's dominant religious tradition—has been instrumental in this regard. However, as societal norms shift, it is important to investigate whether religiosity continues to have a direct impact on these attitudes or if other factors, such as general attitudes toward sexual behavior, have become more salient.

Previous research has shown that the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward sex work is often limited. Studies

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in the USA and Nordic countries have found that religious beliefs, while traditionally influential, now have a diminished direct role in shaping public opinion on sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2022, 2023; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). Instead, general attitudes toward sexual behavior, including sexual permissiveness and non-committal sexual relations, have become more important in determining views on the acceptability of sex work in these contexts. In comparison, research by Vlase and Grasso (2023) on Romania found a negative correlation between church attendance and support for sex work in the southern European country, which provides some evidence that religiosity may play a role in attitudes toward sex work in certain regions. At the same time, distinctions between secular and religious contexts should be viewed with caution, as national histories and religious traditions often continue to shape norms even in formally secular societies.

In this study, we explore Italy as a most-likely case where religiosity should exert a strong influence on attitudes toward sex work. Although we use the broader term “sex work” throughout this study, our analysis focuses specifically on attitudes toward “prostitution,” which is the term used in the survey item. As discussed in Hansen and Johansson (2023), the term “prostitution” tends to carry greater negative stigma, while the use of “sex work” better reflects scholarly efforts to avoid reproducing that stigma and to frame the topic in terms of labor and rights.

We extend previous research by controlling for general attitudes toward sexual behavior and utilizing multiple measures of religiosity, including the importance of God, religious service attendance, and prayer frequency. While no single measure fully captures the complexity of religiosity or its relationship to institutional religion, these are widely used indicators of individual religious orientation in public opinion research. Furthermore, we conduct mediation analysis to examine whether the influence of religiosity on attitudes toward sex work operates indirectly through general sexual attitudes. We find that religiosity does not exert a sizable direct effect when general sexual attitudes are included as a mediator.

Religious beliefs are often deeply ingrained and transmitted across generations (Copen & Silverstein, 2008), yet our findings suggest that their influence on attitudes toward sex work is indirect, operating through broader sexual norms rather than as a direct determinant. This distinction is important because it indicates that attitudes toward sex work may be more malleable than previously assumed and may shift alongside broader changes in sexual norms. While the Catholic Church has historically shaped sexual morality, its role in shaping views on sex work appears increasingly mediated. Rather than direct challenges to religious beliefs, efforts to shift public opinion may be more effective when focused on broader sexual norms,

which may themselves still reflect underlying religious influences.

Italy—Most Likely Case

Understanding the role of national context is essential when analyzing attitude formation. Italy serves as a highly relevant “most-likely” case for studying the influence of religiosity on attitudes toward sex work due to its strong Catholic heritage and historically high levels of religious observance. In secular societies, such as those in the Nordic countries, research suggests that general sexual attitudes are far more influential than religiosity in shaping opinions about sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). Italy’s deeply rooted religious culture provides a contrasting context where religiosity would be expected to have a more direct role in shaping public views. Of course, this contrast should not be seen as a strict secular/religious binary, as both Italy and the Nordic countries reflect distinct religious legacies—Catholic and Lutheran—that continue to shape cultural attitudes in different ways.

Yet, Catholicism has long played a dominant role in Italian perspectives on morality and sexuality, promoting ideals of sex within marriage and condemning sex work as immoral. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explicitly states that “prostitution does injury to the dignity of the person” and “is a social scourge” (Catechism §2355), framing it as contrary to chastity and the proper ordering of sexual relations. However, the Catholic Church’s historical stance on sex work has been more ambivalent than its official doctrine suggests. While publicly denouncing prostitution, the Church has at times tolerated it as a means to reinforce marriage, prevent “real” adultery, and discourage homosexuality. This contradiction extends to clergy, as sex work among priests has been a well-documented but often overlooked phenomenon in Italy (Hooper, 2010). These complexities highlight how religious influence on sexual norms is not always absolute but shaped by broader social and institutional considerations.

At the same time, Italy has experienced secularization over the past few decades, with declining religious observance and an emerging liberal shift in personal freedoms and sexual behavior. These changes have created a dynamic cultural landscape in which religious values remain influential but are increasingly tempered by more permissive views, reflecting broader shifts away from traditional moral frameworks. The legal framework in Italy surrounding sex work adds an important layer of complexity, particularly in the context of religion’s influence. According to the *Legge Merlin* law, any third-party involvement can be considered exploitation or facilitation of sex work and is therefore illegal. Moreover, local policies often take a repressive

approach toward street-based sex work through ordinances that justify crackdowns as measures to promote “safety” and “public decency.” In many municipalities, sex workers and their clients are subject to administrative penalties (Geymonat & Selmi, 2019, 2022).

Social support for sex workers in Italy is also shaped by this cultural duality, with religious and secular organizations coexisting, albeit with differing approaches. Religious groups, adhering to Catholic values, focus on helping sex workers transition out of the industry, offering services like shelter and counseling, while secular harm reduction projects prioritize health and safety without requiring lifestyle changes. These secular projects offer medical care, legal assistance, and educational resources aimed at reducing risks within sex work (Sempredon, 2023; Testoni et al., 2002).

This historical and cultural complexity where religious influence and modern secular values intersect in unique ways makes Italy a particularly compelling case for exploring how evolving religious influences and secular values shape public views on sex work—knowledge that is relevant in understanding similar dynamics worldwide.

Attitudes Toward Sex Work

Socio-demographic factors, such as gender, age, and education, have been found in various studies to predict attitudes toward sex work (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Research consistently shows that women tend to hold more negative views on sex work when compared to men (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kuosmanen, 2011; Lo & Wei, 2005; May, 1999; Räsänen & Wilska, 2007; Yan et al., 2018). This gender gap can be attributed to the perception that sex work perpetuates gender inequality, exploitation, and violence against women, making women more likely to oppose it (Hansen & Johansson, 2022). Studies on the Nordic countries highlight these differences, showing that women are less likely to support the legal and social acceptability of sex work, in part due to concerns about power imbalances and societal harm (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). In contrast, men, who may view sex work through a less critical lens, often express more liberal attitudes toward its acceptance (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a).

Other demographic variables, including age and education, also influence attitudes toward sex work, although their effects are not always consistent. Generally, older individuals often hold more conservative views, likely due to generational differences in moral and cultural norms surrounding sexuality (Kuosmanen, 2011, 2008; Yan et al., 2018; May, 1999; Sawyer et al., 2001; Vlase & Grasso, 2023). Similarly, individuals with lower levels of education tend to be less

supportive of sex work, possibly due to a stronger adherence to traditional moral frameworks (Escot et al., 2021). On the other hand, younger and more educated individuals may be more open to sexual liberalism and therefore more supportive of the decriminalization or regulation of sex work (Räsänen & Wilska, 2007).

Beyond socio-demographic factors, attitudinal variables, particularly those related to general sexual behavior, are crucial in shaping public opinion on sex work. Studies show that attitudes toward non-committal sexual behavior are among the strongest predictors of views on sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). Individuals who view casual, non-committal sexual relationships as acceptable are significantly more likely to support the legal and social acceptance of sex work. This is consistent with findings from the Nordic countries, where sexual permissiveness strongly correlates with more favorable views on sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). This connection between sexual liberalism and support for sex work suggests that broader social norms about sexuality play a key role in shaping public opinion.

H₁: General attitudes on sexual behavior will have a strong relationship with attitudes on sex work.

Religiosity and Attitudes Toward Sex Work

Previous research has shown that religiosity has a limited direct impact on attitudes toward sex work (Abrams & Della Fave, 1976; Basow & Campanile, 1990; Cosby et al., 1996; May, 1999; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Valor-Segura et al. 2011). Recent studies conducted in the USA and the Nordic countries reveal that religious beliefs, while traditionally influential in shaping moral views, have a reduced effect on opinions about the acceptability of sex work when controlling for broader social norms around sexuality (Hansen & Johansson, 2022, 2023). In the USA, for instance, religiosity is associated with more conservative views on many social issues, but when general sexual permissiveness is considered, the relationship between religiosity and views on sex work weakens substantially (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). Hackathorn et al. (2024) extend this work by demonstrating that sex guilt serves as a key mediator in the relationship between religiosity and the demonization of sex workers. Similarly, in the Nordic context, where religiosity plays a less prominent societal role, general attitudes toward sexual behavior overwhelmingly drive public opinions about sex work, suggesting that sexual norms outweigh religious beliefs in shaping these views (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a).

Johansson and Hansen’s (2024a) study on the Nordic countries provides further evidence that religiosity alone is not a strong predictor of attitudes toward sex work. These countries, known for their secularized societies, show that even among

individuals that indicate religious adherence, its influence on attitudes toward sex work is often negligible compared to broader sexual liberalism. Research by Hansen and Johansson (2022) and Johansson and Hansen (2024a) demonstrates that when controlling for general sexual attitudes, religiosity has little to no direct effect on whether individuals view sex work as acceptable.

In contrast, Vlase and Grasso's (2023) research on Romania highlights a different pattern. Their study shows that church attendance is negatively correlated with positive views on sex work in Romania, indicating that higher levels of religious participation are associated with more conservative attitudes. However, the study does not control for general attitudes toward sexual behavior, which may confound the results. Without accounting for broader sexual norms, the observed relationship between church attendance and negative views on sex work may be overstated. It is possible that in comparatively more religious societies like Romania, general attitudes toward sexuality play a significant role. Therefore, while Vlase and Grasso's (2023) findings provide valuable insights into the connection between religiosity and sex work attitudes in highly religious contexts, further research is needed to disentangle the effects of religiosity from broader sexual attitudes.

In countries with high levels of religiosity, we might expect religiosity to have a direct effect on attitude formation given the salience of religious principles in daily life. On the other hand, the relationship between religiosity and sex work attitudes could be indirect, with general sexual attitudes acting as a key mediator. For instance, individuals with high levels of religious observance may hold conservative views on sex work, but this may be largely due to their broader opposition to permissive sexual behavior. In this sense, general attitudes toward sexuality, rather than religiosity itself, become the primary driver of opinions about sex work. Thus, while religiosity continues to play a role in shaping public attitudes, its effect is increasingly mediated by societal norms regarding sexual behavior (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). Based on this research, we derive two complimentary hypotheses:

H_{2a} : The direct relationship between religiosity and attitudes on sex work is unsubstantial.

H_{2b} : There exists a mediating relationship between general attitudes toward sexual behavior and religiosity on attitudes toward sex work.

Methodology

Data

We utilize the Wave 5 European Values Study (EVS) to predict individual-level attitudes toward the acceptability

of exchanging sexual services for payment in Italy (EVS, 2020). The EVS is a cross-national, longitudinal study conducted throughout Europe. The goal of the EVS is to investigate the values of individuals in European countries on several issues, such as politics, family values, societal views, institutional and social trust, national sentiment, morality, and views on government. Ethical review and approval were conducted by the institutions responsible for data collection in each participating country. While the survey was not designed specifically for the exploration of attitudes on sex work, this study represents one of the only instances where a nationally representative survey asks about attitudes toward the exchange of sexual services for payment in Italy. The data was collected between 24 September 2018 and 30 January 2019. The survey was conducted face-to-face through computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). The language the survey was conducted in was Italian. The number of observations in the statistical models ranges from 1136 to 1147 due to non-response on some of the items. Variable coding and descriptive statistics are provided in Appendices 1 and 2 for all variables utilized in the empirical analysis.

Dependent Variable

The variable of interest assesses respondents' attitudes toward sex work. In particular, the survey question asks respondents, "to what degree do you think prostitution is acceptable?" The scale that the respondent must place their response on ranges from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates "never" acceptable and 10 indicates "completely" acceptable. Hansen and Johansson (2023) find in their study using a question wording experiment that views on sex work can be impacted by the terminology used by the researcher. In particular, the authors find that use of the word "prostitution" in a survey question can elicit a respondent to reflect on negative associations of sex work, while when using "sex work" respondents were more likely to reflect on positive associations (see, Johansson & Hansen (2024c) for a discussion of positive and negative associations). Hackathorn et al. (2024) highlight the distinction between legal (e.g., pornography actors) and illegal (e.g., prostitution) sex work, showing that attitudes differ significantly between these groups. Given these findings, we must reflect on how question wording might impact the results, as well as being cognizant of our own use of terminology. For the former, we might expect a greater degree of negative evaluations. For the latter, we only refer to the exchange of sexual services for payment as "prostitution" when discussing the results since the survey item specifically uses that term.

Independent Variables

The empirical analysis includes several socio-demographic variables that are important for predicting attitudes toward

sex work or are common control variables in attitudinal research. First, we include age to account for any generational gap in attitudes toward sex work. Second, we control for gender since a wealth of research shows that there is a gender gap in evaluations of the exchange of sexual service for payment (0 = man; 1 = woman). Third, we incorporate education into the models as a control due to the impact that education has on a range of attitudinal positions. Finally, income is a control variable that is useful for assessing any social class differences in attitudes that might exist. The variable is measured as the respondent's income category from 1st decile to 10th decile.

In addition, there are several attitudinal variables in the analysis to account for explanations of variance in attitudes toward "prostitution". We include a continuous self-placement measure of political ideology on a scale from left (1) to right (10). We also include a measure of interest in politics since interest has been shown to impact a range of attitudes. The political interest measure is a continuous measure that indicates the respondent's level of interest in politics from not at all interested (0) to very interested (3). We also include a variable that attempts to indirectly get at attitudes toward gender equality. In particular, the respondents' level of agreement with the idea that men are better political leaders is included (0 = completely disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = agree, 3 = completely agree). This variable, used in prior studies, ensures comparability with previous research, though we acknowledge it captures elements of sexism alongside gender equality. Since sexual activity is commonly thought of as private, we include an indirect measure that represents the respondents' level of commitment to privacy. While we do not claim this specifically measures attitudes toward private sexual acts, it has been used in prior research as a proxy for broader privacy concerns (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024a). The question that we utilize asks respondents whether they think the government should have the right to collect information about everyone living in the country without their knowledge (0 = should not have right, 1 = probably should not have right, 2 = should have right, 3 = definitely should have right). Finally, we include a variable that more generally measures attitudes toward sexual behavior. The variable accounts for the extent to which the respondent thinks that non-committal casual sex is acceptable. The measure is continuous, ranging from "1 = never acceptable" to "10 = completely acceptable."

We utilize four different measures of religiosity in the empirical analysis for two reasons: (1) there is no single, agreed upon measure of religiosity, and (2) we want to include multiple measures to show that our results are not a product of our measurement selection. The first measure we include is a continuous variable representing how important God is in the respondent's life (1 = not at all important to 10 = very important). The second measure

is an ordinal level measure of the importance of religion (not at all important, not very important, rather important, very important). The second and third measures represent self-reported frequency of religious service attendance and prayer, respectively.

Statistical Method

First, we estimate several multivariate OLS linear regressions to predict respondents' assessment of the acceptability of prostitution in Italy. The dependent variable is measured similar to traditional feeling thermometers or other Likert-type survey questions which are ordinarily treated as continuous measures. The acceptability scale is 10 points; thus, respondents are offered substantial variation in response offering when indicating whether they find prostitution more or less acceptable. We employ post-stratification survey weights to correct for sampling error and potential survey non-response bias. In sum, we estimate four regression models, each containing one of the different measures of religiosity. The estimation of multiple models is done to demonstrate that any statistical relationship (or lack thereof) between religiosity and acceptability of prostitution is not an artifact of a selectively chosen item to represent religiosity.

Second, we conduct mediation analysis to test whether there is a mediating relationship between religiosity, general attitudes toward sexual behavior, and the acceptability of prostitution. Mediation analysis is a statistical method used to explore the process through which one variable influences another variable through an intermediate variable, known as a mediator. This analysis helps researchers understand the underlying mechanisms or pathways by which independent variables impact a dependent variable. Mediation analysis is commonly employed in fields such as psychology, sociology, and epidemiology to gain insights into the mechanisms underlying observed relationships between variables. It provides a more nuanced understanding of how and why certain effects occur.

Results—Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

In Table 1, regression outputs are provided from the four OLS linear regression models.¹ There were only a couple of control variables that were statistically significant. While

¹ Variance inflation factor (VIF) tests assess the degree of multicollinearity among independent variables in a regression model. In our analysis, all VIF values were well below these thresholds, confirming that multicollinearity is not a concern.

Table 1 Regression models predicting acceptability of prostitution

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	1.89** (0.48)	1.61** (0.50)	1.57** (0.45)	1.73** (0.46)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Woman	-0.37* (0.15)	-0.33* (0.15)	-0.41** (0.15)	-0.31* (0.15)
Education	0.01 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)
Income	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Political interest	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.08)
Political ideology	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Men better leaders	0.05 (0.09)	0.07 (0.09)	0.07 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)
Privacy	0.26** (0.08)	0.27** (0.07)	0.26** (0.07)	0.28** (0.08)
Non-committal casual sex	0.41** (0.03)	0.39** (0.03)	0.41** (0.03)	0.39** (0.03)
Importance of God	-0.09** (0.03)			
Importance religion—not very		0.04 (0.33)		
Importance religion—rather		-0.50 (0.32)		
Importance religion—very		-0.94** (0.34)		
Frequency—religious service attendance			-0.08* (0.03)	
Frequency—prayer				-0.13** (0.03)
Observations	1139	1147	1140	1136
R^2	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.23
Adjusted R^2	0.23	0.24	0.22	0.23

Coefficients displayed; standard errors in parentheses; survey weighted utilized

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

these variables are not the specific focus of this study, they merit some attention. First, women provide a statistically significant lower level of acceptability when asked about prostitution when compared to men. The finding aligns with those found in the literature. The fact that women are more likely to be a victim of the negative aspects of sex work, while men are more likely to be the beneficiary, explains the result. Second, there is a statistically significant relationship between support for notions of privacy and assessments of the acceptability of prostitution. The direction of the relationship is the opposite of what we would normally expect. The results can be explained by two factors: (1) there is

almost no variance on the variable, and (2) while the relationship is statistically significant, it is not substantive. In other words, when plotting predictions for the privacy variable while holding all other variables at their survey-weighted means, the relationship is non-existent. For all other control variables, there exists no relationship with the acceptability of prostitution, such as age, education, income, political interest, political ideology, and views on gender equality.

The outputs from Table 1 indicate that both views on non-committal casual sex and religiosity have a statistically significant relationship with assessments of the acceptability of prostitution. First, views on non-committal casual

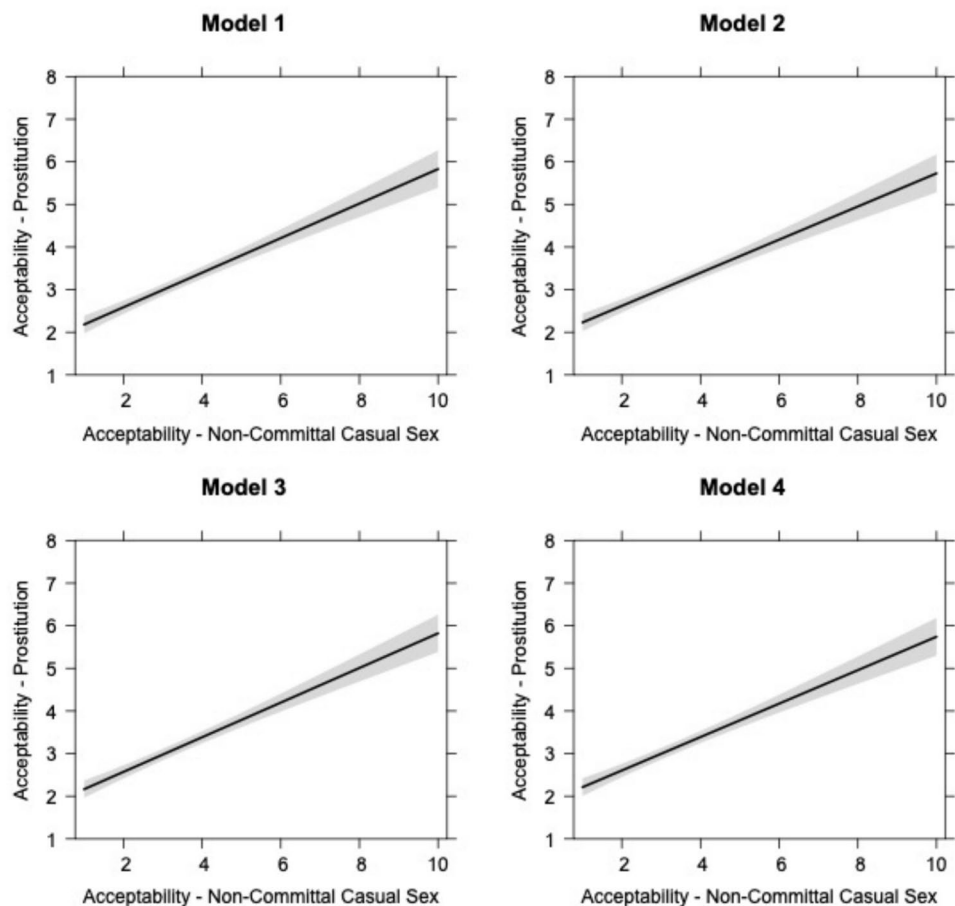
sex have the largest impact of any of the predictor variables on the acceptability of prostitution. In Fig. 1, we plot the predictions for the acceptability of non-committal casual sex variable on views on the acceptability of prostitution across the four regression models—while holding all other predictor variables at their survey-weighted means. The plots show a strong, positive relationship between the two variables. When comparing an individual that indicated that non-committal casual sex is “1 = never acceptable” to an individual that indicated “10 = completely acceptable,” there is an increase in views on the acceptability of prostitution between 2.84 and 3.02 points across the four models (accounting for 95% confidence bounds). Further, the plots show that individuals that indicated values 8–10 on the non-committal casual sex variable were the respondents that were more likely to indicate positive views on the acceptability of prostitution. Taken together, the results from the regression models offer robust support for H_1 .

Second, when investigating the relationship between religiosity and acceptability of prostitution, the results indicate that the greater importance of God in an individual’s life, frequency of religious service attendance, and frequency of prayer are negatively related to acceptability of prostitution. In other words, people with higher values on

these three variables provide a statistically lower level of acceptability (greater assessment of unacceptability). The relationship between importance of religion and acceptability of prostitution requires a more nuanced interpretation due to the variable’s nominal level of measurement. The coefficients for the importance of religion variable are comparing each category to the reference category—not at all important. The results indicate that it is only the respondents that indicated religion was “very important” that are statistically different from those that chose “not at all important.” Individuals that responded “very important” provided a statistically lower level assessment of the acceptability of prostitution when compared to those that said “not at all important.” It is worth noting that the model fit scores (R^2 and adjusted R^2) are statistically indistinguishable from one another, which indicates that the models perform similarly regardless of the measure of religiosity used in the models.

In Fig. 2, we plot predictions for the four religiosity variables from the four regression models while holding all other predictor variables at their survey-weighted means. The plots show that where the religiosity variables have a statistical relationship with views on the acceptability of prostitution, the substantive relationship is miniscule. For

Fig. 1 Effect of acceptability of non-committal casual sex. 95% confidence bounds displayed; independent variables held at survey weighted mean values



example, when accounting for 95% confidence bounds, the difference between a respondent that indicated that God was “1 = not at all important” compared to an individual that indicated that God was “10 = very important” was only 0.15 of a point on the 1–10 acceptability of prostitution scale. The difference between the categories for the importance of religion variable also only differs where substantive by a fraction of a point. Finally, when comparing individuals at the lowest frequency of religious service attendance and prayer to the highest frequency, the difference in acceptability of prostitution is only 0.01 and 0.31, respectively. Overall, the results demonstrate that

religiosity has little direct impact on attitudes toward the acceptability of prostitution, which provides support for H_{2a} .

Results—Mediation Analysis

The previous regression analysis demonstrated that there is a literal direct effect on predicting the acceptability of prostitution in Italy when controlling for more general attitudes toward sexual behavior. To test whether there is a mediating relationship between religiosity, general attitudes toward

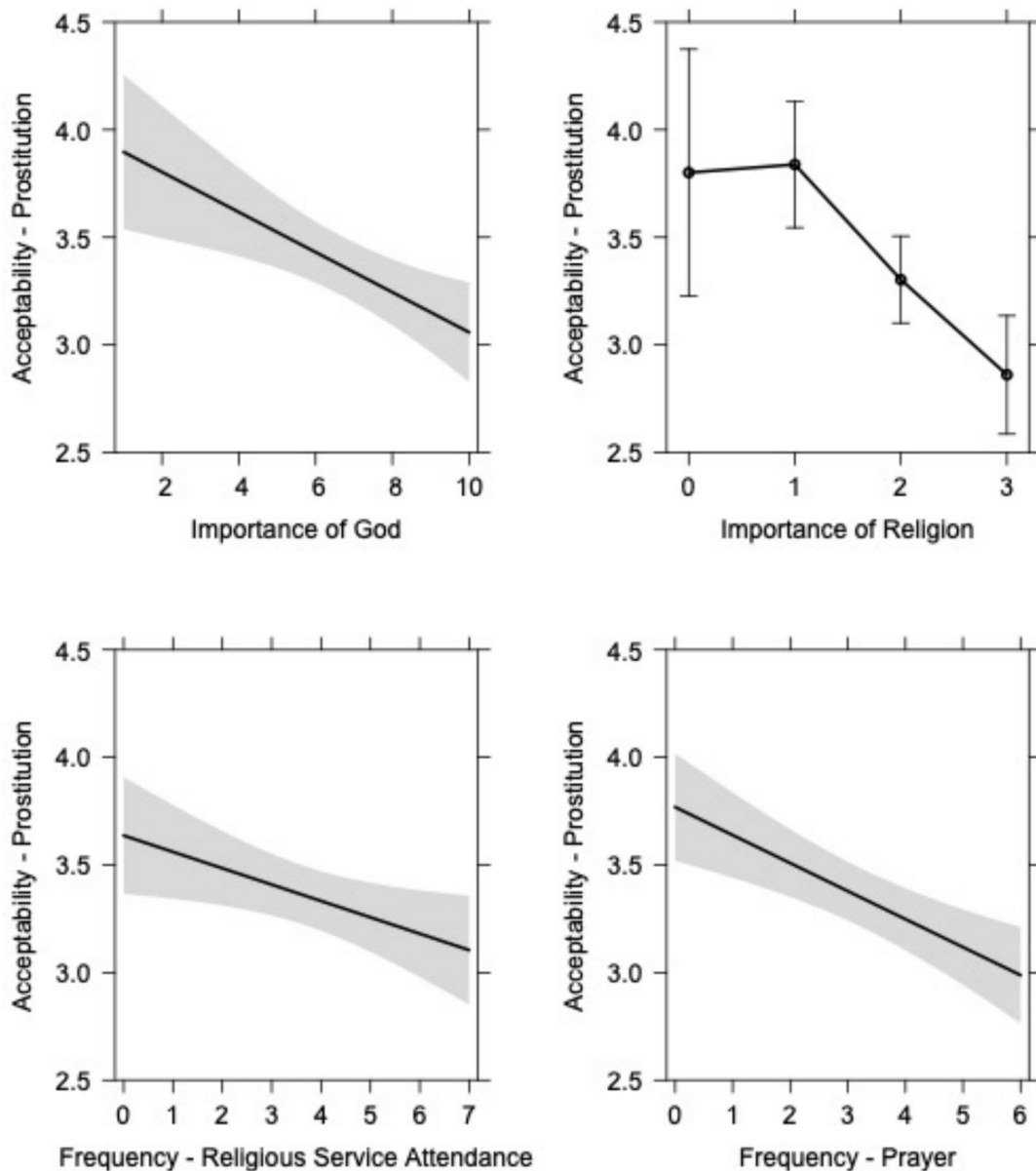


Fig. 2 Effect of religiosity. 95% confidence bounds displayed; independent variables held at survey weighted mean values

Table 2 Mediation analysis

	Importance of God	Importance of religion	Frequency—religious service attendance	Frequency—prayer
ACME	−0.12* (−0.16, −0.09)	−0.20 (−0.47, 0.06)	−0.13* (−0.17, −0.09)	−0.13* (−0.16, −0.09)
ADE	−0.09* (−0.15, −0.04)	0.04 (−0.60, 0.69)	−0.08* (−0.14, −0.01)	−0.13* (−0.20, −0.06)
Total effect	−0.22* (−0.28, −0.16)	−0.16 (−0.86, 0.54)	−0.20* (−0.27, −0.13)	−0.26* (−0.33, −0.19)
Proportion mediated	0.57* (0.41, 0.79)	0.42 (−7.61, 7.41)	0.62* (0.44, 0.92)	0.49* (0.36, 0.69)
<i>N</i>	1139	1147	1140	1136

10,000 simulations; 95% confidence intervals in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$
ACME average causal mediation effects, *ADE* average direct effects

sexual behavior, and views on the acceptability of prostitution, an additional analysis is needed. Here, we conduct causal mediation analysis.² Outputs from the mediation analysis are presented in Table 2.

The average causal mediation effects (ACME) scores represent the indirect effect of the religiosity variables on acceptability of prostitution that goes through the mediator (acceptability of non-committal casual sex). The results indicate that, except for the importance of religion, the other three religiosity measures have a statistically significant indirect effect on the acceptability of prostitution through the attitudes on general sexual behavior measure. The lack of a statistically significant mediating relationship with the importance of religion is due to the relatively low variance of the variable in tandem with the limited number of categories in the variable.

The average direct effects (ADE) scores indicate that three religiosity measures also have a statistically significant direct effect. Given that the 95% confidence bounds overlap for the ACME and ADE scores, we cannot rule out that the indirect and direct effects are statistically similar in size. The total effect is the sum of the indirect and direct effects. Here, we can see that the scores indicate that the total effect is about half the size of the relationship between views on the acceptability of non-committal casual sex and acceptability of prostitution. The results indicate that general attitudes toward sexual behavior play a large role even when accounting for a mediating relationship with religiosity. Finally, proportion mediated indicates the proportion of the effect of religiosity on acceptability of prostitution that

goes through the mediator. The 95% confidence bounds indicate quite a substantial amount of variance in the estimated proportion mediated.

In Fig. 3, we visually present the three statistically significant mediating relationships for ease of interpretation. The major takeaway from Fig. 3 is that beyond the mediating relationship being statistically significant, the size of the mediating effect is statistically similar across all three measures of religiosity. In addition, the size of the direct effect of the three measures is also statistically the same across the measures. Finally, the size of the relationship between acceptability of non-committal casual sex and predicting acceptability of prostitution is similar regardless of the measure of religiosity. In all, the results provide convincing evidence that even in a religious country such as Italy, the impact of religiosity in attitude formation is largely indirect through mediator variables.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into the role of religiosity and general sexual attitudes in shaping views on sex work in Italy. Our findings demonstrate that general attitudes toward non-committal sexual behavior are the strongest predictors of the acceptability of “prostitution,” highlighting the critical role of sexual permissiveness in shaping these attitudes. Religiosity, while significant, plays a more indirect role, with its influence largely mediated through broader sexual attitudes rather than exerting a direct impact on views toward sex work.

The mediation analysis underscores this indirect pathway, showing that religiosity influences attitudes primarily by shaping general beliefs about acceptable sexual behavior. This finding is particularly notable in the Italian context, where religion has traditionally been seen as a dominant force in shaping public morality. The results suggest a shift in how religiosity functions in attitude formation, moving

² Casual mediation analysis was conducted in R version 4.3.2 using the “mediation” package with required support packages for executing the “mediate” command. All four mediating models were calculated with heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors used in quasi-Bayesian simulations. Calculations were estimated with 10,000 simulations for each model.

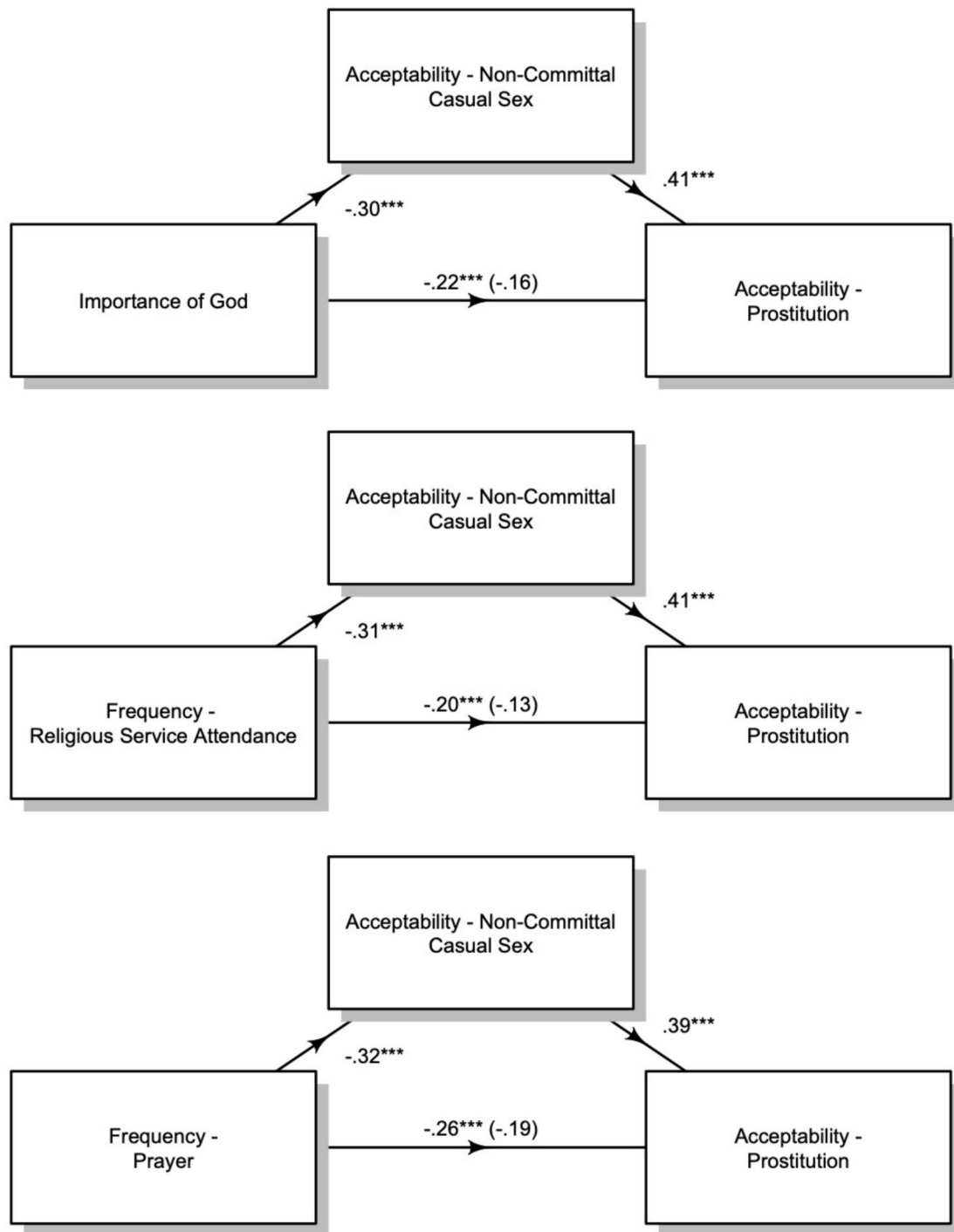


Fig. 3 Mediation analysis: religiosity and attitudes toward non-committal casual sex

from a direct determinant to a more complex, mediated factor, even in more highly religious societies. Our study highlights the need for future research to examine additional confounders, such as economic insecurity, gender norms, or political ideology, to further disentangle the broader social forces shaping attitudes toward sex work.

What sets this study apart from previous research is its focus on Italy, a country where religiosity is expected to play a central role in shaping attitudes toward sex work. However, our findings challenge this assumption. We discovered that general sexual attitudes, rather than religiosity, are the primary drivers of public opinion on

“prostitution”. This shift suggests that broader social norms are reshaping moral views, weakening the traditional influence of religion. This study significantly contributes to the literature by showing that the impact of religiosity on attitude formation is increasingly mediated by broader societal shifts in attitudes, even in contexts with strong religious traditions. Our research not only expands the understanding of sexual attitudes but also offers new insights into the changing role of religiosity in shaping public opinion in societies where religion has historically been a dominant cultural force.

These findings have important policy implications. Since general sexual attitudes are stronger predictors of views on sex work than religiosity, efforts to shift public opinion to benefit sex workers may be more effective when framed around broader discussions of sexual norms rather than religious or morality-based arguments. Advocacy groups should focus on normalizing diverse sexual behaviors instead of engaging in debates shaped by religious frameworks. In Italy, where policies aimed at assisting and protecting sex workers are limited, such an approach may be particularly effective in advancing policies that improve conditions for sex workers.

However, it is important to distinguish between public acceptability of sex work and support for policies that meaningfully improve sex workers’ rights. Acceptance of sex work does not necessarily translate into support for legalization, and even when legalization occurs, it may take restrictive forms that prioritize control over protection. In the Italian context, there is potential for regulatory approaches that reinforce surveillance and precarious conditions rather than securing labor rights and safety for sex workers. Future research should examine how different policy framings influence public attitudes toward both legalization and the broader rights and protections afforded to sex workers.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. The use of the term “prostitution” in the survey may have elicited more negative responses than a more neutral term like “sex work” (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). Future research should refine the language used in surveys and explore the role of context and terminology more deeply to understand how public opinion on sex work varies across different societies and shifts over time. The need for careful attention to language and nuance is particularly important for large-scale comparative survey data. Additionally, as this study relies on pre-existing survey measures, some variables serve as proxies rather than direct indicators of the underlying constructs, a common challenge when working with cross-national datasets such as the World Values

Survey and the European Values Study. Finally, as with all observational research, establishing causality remains a challenge, and future studies should continue to explore alternative methodological approaches to strengthen causal inferences in this area.

Appendix 1: Variable coding

Age—continuous measure representing the age of the respondent at the time of the survey.

Education—continuous measure representing the highest level of education completed, 1=no schooling (grade school) to 12=Ph.D.

Income—continuous measure representing yearly income.

Gender—0 = man; 1 = woman

Political Ideology—continuous measure ranging from 0=liberal to 10=conservative.

Political Interest—continuous measure, 0 = not at all interested; 1 = not very interested; 2 = somewhat interested; 3 = very interested

Men Better Political Leaders—continuous measure, 0 = completely disagree; 1 = disagree; 2 = agree; 3 = completely agree

Privacy—continuous measure, do you think that the Danish state should have the right to... Collect information about everyone living in Denmark without their knowledge? 0 = should not have right; 1 = probably should not have right; 2 = should have right; 3 = definitely should have right

Non-Committal Casual Sex—continuous measure, to what extent do you think non-committal sex is acceptable? 1=not at all to 10=greatly

Importance of God—continuous measure ranging from 1 = not at all important to 10 = very important

Importance of Religion—ordered measure, 0 = not at all important; 1 = not very important; 2 = rather important; 3 = very important

Frequency - Religious Service Attendance—continuous measure, 0 = never, practically never; 1 = less often; 2 = once a year; 3 = other specific holy days; 4 = only on specific holy days/Christmas/Easter; 5 = once a month; 6 = once a week; 7 = more than once a week

Frequency - Prayer—continuous measure, 0 = never; 1 = less often; 2 = several times a year; 3 = at least once a month; 4 = once a week; 5 = more than once a week; 6 = every day

Appendix 2: Descriptive statistics

Table 3 Descriptive statistics—socio-demographics

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	52	51.78	82	17.49
Education	0	3	3.22	8	1.77
Income (scaled variable)	1	5	4.92	10	2.42
Variable	0	1			
Gender	54.05%	45.95%			

Table 4 Descriptive statistics—political attitudes

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	6	5.61	10	2.33
Political interest	0	1	1.36	3	0.91
Men better political leaders	0	1	0.88	3	0.77
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	1	0.95	3	1.00
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	4	4.03	10	2.83
Importance of God	1	7	6.01	10	3.37
Frequency—religious service attendance	0	2	2.58	7	2.58
Frequency—prayer	0	2	2.71	6	2.71
Variable	Not at all	Not very	Rather	Very	
Importance of religion	9.32%	25.72%	40.80%	24.15%	

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Data Availability De-identified data will be made available upon request.

Code Availability R Statistical Software code and packages will also be made available upon request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent for Publication Not applicable.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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