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TITLE: “Selling Love” in a State of Conflict – DRAFT please do not quote

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ABSTRACT:

There are an estimated 80,100 female sex workers in Ukraine, offering services in a variety of sex work environments. Ukraine has prevalence rates of HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) higher than the European mean, which disproportionately affect sex workers. The larger aim of our project is to investigate how the conflict in Ukraine alters the political, social, and economic environment, potentially changing the way that sex work is bought, sold, and produced, which in turn modifies the HIV and HCV risk environments for sex workers and their social-sexual networks. This paper focuses on the agency that female sex workers bring to their work, and identifies the nature of the economic choices they make. The project employed a mixed methods design that included mapping, bio-behavioural surveys and semi-structured interviews. Our results suggest that sex workers generally mitigate the risks present in the workplace, but risks also bring financial reward. In a situation of increasing economic pressures due to the conflict, some workers may choose to engage in riskier behaviour. Prevention efforts should start from a place of acknowledging that sex work is work, and like others doing wage labour, sex workers exert agency and negotiate choice on an ongoing basis.

PAPER:

Intro:

There are an estimated 80,100 female sex workers working in Ukraine in a variety of sex work environments. Ukraine has prevalence rates of HIV and hepatitis C (HCV) higher than the European mean, which disproportionately affect sex workers; Ukraine follows Russia with the second largest HIV epidemic in Europe and recorded HCV rates in the general population of

12% (Hope et al., 2014). The national HIV prevalence is 0.9%, however 7% of female sex workers in Ukraine were living with HIV in 2017 (UNAIDS, 2019). Studies have documented the ongoing transmission of HIV via unprotected sex, including through infections contracted through sex work (Balakirieva et al., 2014; Aral et al., 2012).

HIV research and prevention programs for female sex workers tend to focus on individual level risk factors and behavioural interventions, often without considering the influence that one's environment may have on shaping HIV vulnerability (Okafor et al., 2017; Thanh et al., 2009; Crepaz et al., 2006; Gibson et al., 1998). Articulating the ways that context influences risk environments may enable programs to move beyond individual interventions, and instead, focus on social, economic and political factors that contribute to HIV vulnerability (Rhodes and Simi, 2005). The design of relevant and effective interventions for HIV and STI prevention aimed at sex workers requires an understanding of the industry and work environment and, in particular, how these environments have changed in the context of political conflict.

Ukraine has experienced a series of changes connected to the conflict in the East, which began in 2014. The larger aim of our project is to investigate how the conflict alters the political, social, and economic environment, potentially changing the way that sex work is bought, sold, and produced, which in turn modifies the HIV and HCV risk environments for sex workers and their social-sexual networks. In this mixed-methods paper, we examine the organization and patterns of sex work as illustrated in the framework (figure 1) by describing a few of the various sex work venues in Dnipro, a city located about 200 km from the conflict zone in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Venues are common meeting places where sex workers connect with clients, such as hotels or brothels. Venues can also be virtual spaces such as websites where people do online sex work (e.g. cam girls) however in this study we are describing physical spaces. Our objective is two-fold: (1) We describe the sex work industry in Dnipro as characterized by distinct venues which are the context in which female sex workers work and navigate the risk and decisions making in their work lives. (2) We demonstrate that female sex workers in all venues exercise agency in the control of their work lives.

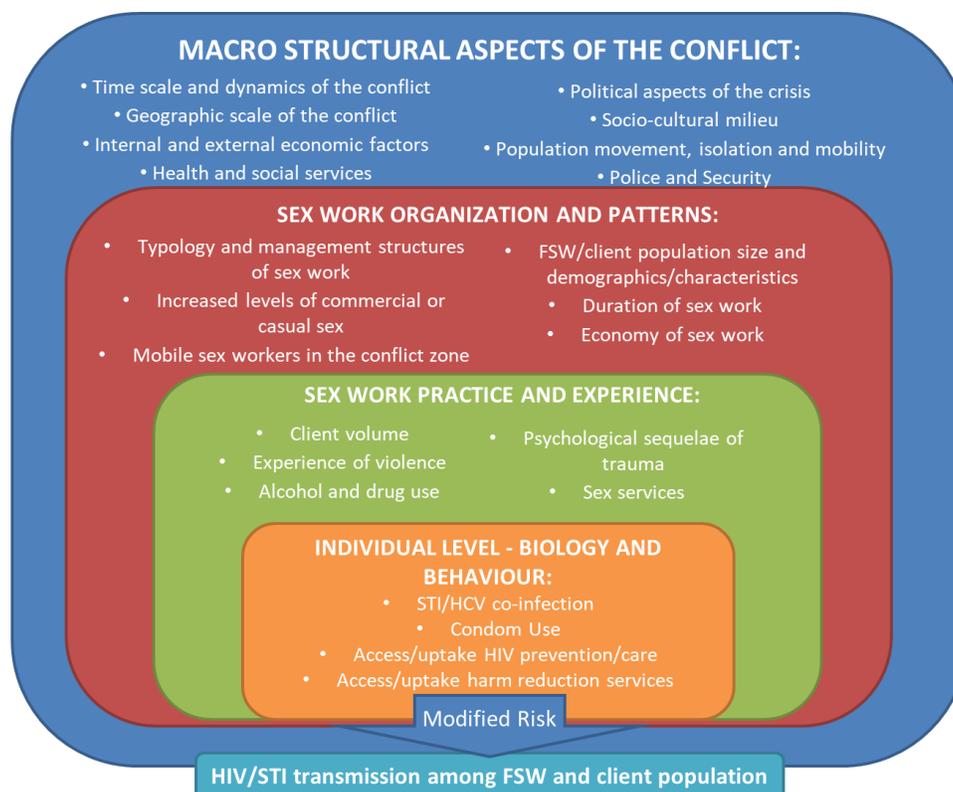


Figure 1

Ukraine in Conflict

The conflict in Eastern Ukraine rose on the heels of a period marked by political and economic crises. Civil unrest and large scale protests endured from November 2013 to February 2014, culminating in the ousting of President Yanukovich. The demonstrations, which were characterized by violence and police brutality, have become known by Ukrainians as the Revolution of Dignity. Following the Revolution, Russian forces seized numerous government buildings in the Republic of Crimea and de facto annexed the peninsula; resulting in the loss of two million Ukrainian citizens and significant military and naval bases (Persson, 2019). It was in this climate that conflict in the Donbas region began in April 2014.

The enduring conflict is localized to Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts where 15,300 km² of Ukraine's territory remains outside the control of the Ukrainian government. A contact line stretches approximately 500 kilometers long separating the conflict zone from the rest of Ukraine (Ponomarenko, 2019). This study takes place in the city of Dnipro, Dnipropetrovsk oblast (population 990,000) which is located approximately 200 km from the conflict zone. Dnipro has become a key destination for internally displaced persons, and a transit city for

frontline forces (Becker et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2017). To date, 1.5 million people have been internally displaced due to the conflict (UNHCR, 2019); 12,800 – 13,000 people have lost their lives; and 27,000 – 30,000 others have been injured (Ponomarenko, 2019).

HIV and conflict

The consequences of the conflict extend beyond the obvious direct effects of increased violence and population displacement. High rates of inflation and a fluctuating GDP have created a climate of financial insecurity for people more generally (IMF, 2019). Socio-economic upheaval has been associated with significant change in sex industries in other parts of the world. A study in Zimbabwe found that effects of economic decline and collapse on the sex industry included: shifting venues for exchange, new forms of payment, change in demand, increases in transactional sex work¹, riskier transactions, and modified solicitation tactics (Elmes et al., 2017).

Concern exists over whether the HIV epidemic will worsen in the wake of conflict, given the association with the consequences of conflict and HIV risk factors (Holt, 2018; Kazatchkine, 2017). Effects of ongoing armed conflict include direct violence, forced migration, labour disruptions, and disrupted health care service and infrastructure (Mock, 2004). Coupled with the mass mobilization of young males and the possibility for increased levels of commercial sex, there is potential for the transformation of the sex industry, the lives and working environments of sex workers, and the spread of HIV and HCV. Global knowledge gaps exist around the influence of conflict on sex work, its association with HIV and HCV among female sex workers and the consequences for the rest of the population. The research surrounding conflict and HIV is inconsistent (Levi, 2018; Kim, 2018; Paxton, 2016) and much of it is situated in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bennett, 2015; Iqbal Z, 2010; Spiegel, 2007; Mock, 2004).

Theoretical Framework:

Women, Work & Agency – or Sex Work is/as Work

Debates about the decriminalization of sex work have led some economists to interrogate the notion of agency among female sex workers (Bettio, Giusta, and Tommaso,

¹ Transactional sex work is sex work done with the expectation that the “client” would provide money, gifts or other resources in return but the price of sex is often not negotiated upfront and is implicitly understood.

2017). Sex workers globally argue for the decriminalization of sex work and acceptance of “sex work as work”, pointing to evidence that criminalization and other forms of legal oppression negatively impact the health and safety of sex workers, including their risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections and HIV (NSWRP, 2019; Benoit et al., 2019; Lazarus, L. et al., 2012; Van der Meulen, 2010; Bruckert, Parent & Robitaille, 2003; Lowman, 2000).

Some researchers take a strong anti-sex work stance, asserting views assert that sex work is a one-sided, male-controlled exchange or consumption of a woman’s body by men (Jeffreys, 2009). Voluntary entry into sex work is dismissed as an impossibility given the implied inevitable context of financial constraint within which the decision is made; this argument undermines the agency exercised in the process. By contrast, Bettio, Della Giusta and di Tomasso (2017) cite Marx to counter-argue that the requirement to engage in wage labour for survival applies to all wage labour, and that those who advocate for the abolition sex work while condoning other forms of wage labour, risk inconsistency.

Arguments critical of women’s abilities to exercise agency in the decision(s) to engage in sex work dismiss important empirical research that recognizes women’s agency and identifies sex work as work. Benoit et al. (2017), for example, explored the intersection of structure and agency in the decision to enter sex work as a viable profession by outlining three broad overlapping reasons: critical life events, need or desire for money and personal appeal of the work:

Both choice and constraints differentially guide both entry into and pathways into different types of sex work, similar to how agentic and structural forces guide entry into and passages into lower-prestige jobs. (Benoit, 2017, pg. 744).

Power and agency is not only exercised upon entry into sex work but also across the spectrum of work experiences in price setting, client choice, types of service provision, work schedule and stigma management (Benoit et al., 2019; Bruckert & Parent, 2003). In their 2019 study, Benoit et al. found that some sex workers discovered a new sense of self-power through their engagement in sex work “including opportunities to set personal boundaries, change social dynamics and exercise greater agency” (Benoit, 2019, p12).

HIV and HCV as an occupational hazard

From the perspective of sex work as work, HIV and HCV are occupational hazards; female sex workers have a higher risk of contracting HIV and STIs (Shannon et al., 2015; Baral et al., 2012). Women face varying degrees of negotiating power in relation to their sex partners' risky behaviours (such as drug and condom use). Female sex workers also encounter stigma and discrimination coupled with coercive sex and physical violence from police, clients and other partners (Decker et al. 2012, 2013).

There are formal rules and cultural norms that constrain and set the parameters of the market while shaping individual choice. In the context of sex work, formal rules are comprised of laws and regulations around sex work which exist alongside the cultural milieu of stigma attached to sex work. Sex work is criminalized in Ukraine; selling sex services punishable as an administrative offense, and managing or organizing sex work is a criminal offense, however buying sex services is not criminal in any form (Article 302 & 303, Ukrainian criminal code). HIV and HCV risk increases because of the criminalized and stigmatized environment (NSWP, 2019; Benoit et al., 2019; Lazarus, L. et al., 2012; Van der Meulen, 2010; Bruckert, Parent & Robitaille, 2003; Lowman, 2000). For example, women might be less likely have condoms on them because they can be used as evidence of their engaging in sex work, while stigmatization might limit access to clinics or other services that could mitigate risk. The varied physical spaces in which sex work occurs can shape the possibilities for exposure to, and protection against, risk. Sex workers soliciting clients from the highway workers have different security measures, screening tools and access to health resources than do brothel-based workers (Owczarzak, Phillips & Cho, 2018).

Methods:

Objective & Hypothesis

We describe the sex work industry in Dnipro as characterized by distinct venues, which are the context in which female sex workers work and navigate the risk and decision-making in their work lives. We hypothesize that the various settings will be associated with differences in how female sex workers display agency in their work life.

Study Setting and Population

The study took place in Dnipro, Ukraine an industrial city of 1 million people located approximately 200 km from the conflict zone in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Our study populations were female sex workers and their male clients. There are approximately 1087 (range 817 - 1357) sex workers in Dnipro (McClarty et al., 2018).

Study Design and Data Collection

The project employed a mixed methods design which included mapping, bio-behavioural surveys among female sex workers and their clients, and semi-structured interviews among female sex workers and other key stakeholders. Data were collected from September 2017 to October 2018.

Serial mapping provided information on sex work 'hotspots' (locations where sex workers solicit and/or provide services to clients), estimated the population size within hotspots and by venue typology across the city (Cheuk et al., 2019; Emmanuel, Isac, & Blanchard, 2013). Sampling followed a two stage sampling design, where in the first stage a representative sample of hotspots was selected², followed in the second stage by randomly sampling sex workers from each hotspot. The sample size for each selected hotspot is proportional to the size of the respective population estimated in the hotspot from the mapping (Becker et al., 2019).

A cross-sectional bio-behavioural survey of female sex workers was conducted of women aged 14 and older who had been in sex work for at least 6 months (n = 560). Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sex workers. Recruitment involved two approaches: i) some participants were recruited as a sub-set of survey participants from those who expressed interest, and, ii) others were purposively recruited through networks of social workers with whom they have established rapport and trust (n=43). Additional in-depth interviews were conducted with key-informants or stakeholders from both local and national contexts; participants were purposively sampled (n=26). Key informants

² The hotspots are selected randomly after stratifying the hotspots by administrative division and type of hotspot

included managers or pimps, service providers, law enforcement officials and other national stakeholders.

This article reports on the baseline interviews of four interviews which took place with sex workers in the first wave of surveys (subsequent interviews have not yet been analyzed). A second wave of surveys will take place in the spring of 2020.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Stata15 to present descriptive statistics outlining the sex work industry. Qualitative interviews were transcribed and translated to English, and analyzed using an idiographic approach. Content and thematic analysis was first performed using NVivo12 to examine the frequency of themes and the characteristics of each theme; themes were then sorted into sub-themes. A second round of coding was performed on the topics of “Entry”, “Client Screening”, Service Provision”, and “Price Setting” to ascertain themes related to work agency, decision making, and work place environments.

Results: Sex Work Industry

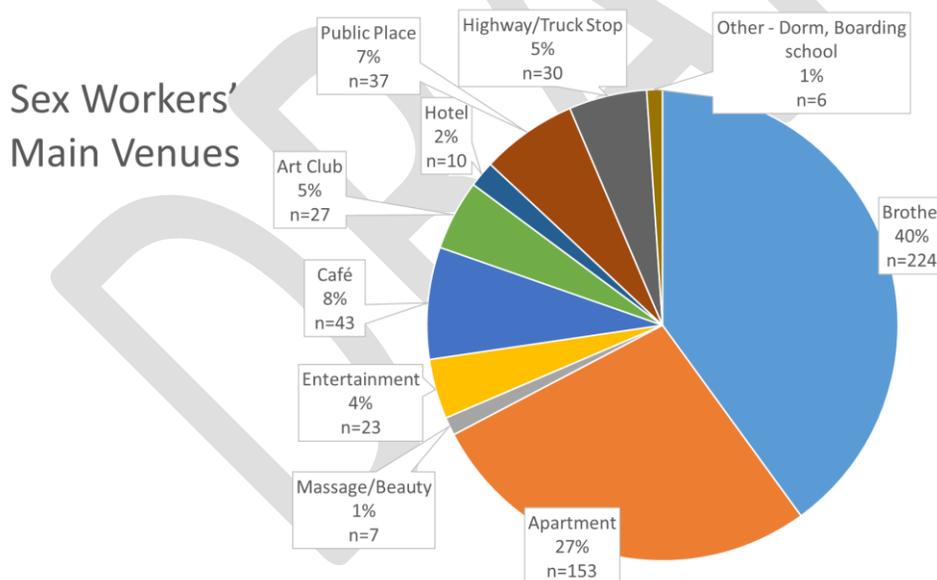


Figure 2

Brothels

The majority of sex workers identified brothels as their main work environment (40%). Brothels are usually referred to as offices. Brothels are venues owned and operated by an owner (or co-owners) who employs one or more other people to do sex work, and possibly other employees such as office administrators (to do payroll, scheduling, solicitation,

advertising), security guards, drivers, cleaners, and bartenders. Drivers would be available for workers doing out calls (going to another place to meet a client). The owners take a cut of the revenue generated by sex work (approximately between 40-60%) to cover their operating costs and make a profit. Most women who were interviewed identified brothels as an average to high prestige venue.

The brothels typically have an organization structure or network much like any other business, which can be more or less complicated depending on how they have structured it. Typically, brothels have more security on site; in addition to the constant presence of a security guard, some interviewees cited security cameras throughout the building, and sometimes an alarm button in the room in case of emergency. The owners may also have a set of rules for workers to follow, especially in the case where a specific level of prestige is maintained. Rules might include a dress code, being sober, using condoms, and having regular medical check ups. Rules which are broken could mean a worker is fined or fired. Often a work schedule is kept. Sometimes people live in these spaces, sometimes they are purely for work. In some, brothel owners organized regular medical check ups, which include screening for STIs and HIV. They may also pay for grooming materials and services such as makeup, manicures, pedicures, waxing etc. Given the illegal nature of organizing sex work, brothel owners usually have less formal arrangements, either with the police or with criminal organizations who can provide additional 'protection'.

The median age of brothel based workers was 25. Self-identified socio-economic status (SES) was average to above average. For the most part clients were solicited via managers (90% responded that managers solicit clients for them), although 43% added they themselves solicit clients as well. It is not clear whether these providers also work outside the brothel, or whether they solicit clients for the brothel. On average, women see 24 clients (sd 8) in a 30-day period, approximately one of those is a military client. Total monthly income from sex work was 11699 UAH (sd 3988 UAH) [487 US\$ (sd 165 US\$)] which represents 78% (sd 19) of total monthly household income. Forty-four percent of women working in brothels reported supporting dependents.

Apartment

The second largest group of women were working in an apartment (n=153, 27%). This venue usually includes one or more women working out of an apartment where they may or may not also reside. On average apartment based workers cited this venue as having average to above average prestige. From our understanding they differ from brothels in that they do not have the same managerial structure. Apartments can be thought of as a single entrepreneur or as a worker owned and operated coop, although other “subcontractors” may be paid to provide security or solicitation services. Conversely, a great proportion of apartment-based workers cited managers as soliciting clients for them (91%), which we did not expect. This may suggest that in some cases, “apartments” are simply less centralized brothels, where an owner rents several sites and hires sex workers. Seventy-four percent of women also reported soliciting on their own, and 28% reported using a middle person, such as a taxi driver or hotel worker.

Apartment-based workers are approximately the same age as brothel-based workers (median age 26); they cite an average to slightly above average SES. Self-reported client volume in 30 days averaged 26 (sd 8); less than one of those were a military client. Total monthly income from sex work was slightly less than brothel-based workers: 10195 UAH (sd 3400 UAH) [424 US\$ (sd 141 US\$)], which represents 70% (sd 16) of total monthly household income. One of the biggest differences observed between the apartments and brothels was that apartment-based workers had more dependents, 62% had one or more dependents. This raises the possibility that apartment-based workers may have more autonomy and control over their time than brothel-based workers, making such arrangements more attractive to mothers.

Art Club

Far fewer women cited other work venues, 27 worked in an Art Club (5%). Women working in art clubs were much younger (median age = 22) and self-reported a higher SES. The art club was reported as being the most prestigious venue; it is our understanding that an art club is a prestigious strip club that does not openly advertise, they appear to be more like a night club but the understanding of what it is implied. For women working primarily at an art club total monthly income from sex work was 11935 UAH (sd 4832 UAH) [496 US\$ (sd 201 US\$)]; which represents 75% (sd 22) of total monthly household income. However, sex workers

there were seeing far fewer clients in a 30-day period (mean 16.7 (sd 6.8), of which only one was military client). So their monthly take from sex work is a little more than someone working in a brothel, however they are making a lot more money per client and seeing far fewer clients. Clients were solicited by managers (44%), a middle person (48%) and by themselves (22%).

Public Place

A small group of respondents worked mainly out of a public place (7% n=37). Public place was usually a public park. The amount of sex work done in parks fluctuates as it is cold during the winter in Dnipro and a seasonal venue. Women cited it as being average to lower prestige, and solicitation was done primarily by themselves (97%), some used a middle person (38%), but rarely did they have a manager (5%). Women were making less money from sex work per month: total monthly income from sex work was 7353 UAH (sd 4052 UAH) [306 US\$ (sd 169 US\$)] which constituted 75% of total household income. They were also seeing fewer clients than those working in brothels and apartments; client volume in 30 days was 17.8 (sd 9.3). Workers at public places were older on average (median age 26) and self-reported lower SES. Approximately 60% of people working here supported dependents. From our results it appears these women do not differ much from those working on brothels or apartments with the important exception that their workplace is less prestigious and they make less money.

Highways and Truck stops

A small proportion of women cited working at this venue (5%, n=30). In many ways the highway and truck stops are similar to the public place venue, they are all outdoor venues. Security can be difficult with highway work, in an open air space, sex workers are more vulnerable to things such as harassment, violence, or thievery. Sometimes they described paying someone to act as security while they worked (usually from afar) or security strategies with colleagues (such as handing over payments while with the client, taking down license plates etc.). Highways were cited by women who worked there as having the lowest prestige. Although solicitation would take place on the highway or truck stop, services might be provided elsewhere – in a car, the client's house, rented apartment, hotel or sauna. The majority of workers did their own soliciting (93%), almost half used the assistance of a middle person (43%), and a few worked with managers (13.3%). Although the majority cite self solicitation, it is

interesting to see how many also have managers and/or middle people. They differed in that on average people working at this venue saw more clients in a 30-day period (mean 27 (sd 9.3)) and made more money per month from sex work. Total monthly income from sex work was 10821 UAH (sd 7170 UAH) [450 US\$ (sd 298)]; which represented 88% (sd 12) of total monthly household income. Their total take home income from sex work was comparable to people working in apartments or brothels, however they were serving more clients at lower prices. This group was by far the oldest (median age 30) and had the lowest self-reported SES. One key difference from the other venues is that women working here saw the highest proportion of military clients – on average, 4 out of 27 clients in the past 30 days were military clients. The other venues report approximately 1 military client in the past month. Seventy-five percent of women working in this area had dependents they were supporting, the highest of the venues.

Qualitative Results

The analysis of themes from the interviews with sex workers paints a picture of work place agency congruent with that presented in other empirical studies of sex work (Benoit et al. 2019, 2018, 2017). Sex workers identified the various forms in which their decision making mitigated risks associated with work but also where certain pressures made it necessary to violate the normally held boundaries, incurring riskier activities.

Entry

The most common motive cited for entry was financial. Many respondents reported that sex work was a more flexible job which earned a higher wage for fewer hours worked. Some respondents worked for extra spending money, a few cited needing the money for drugs, and one individual reported that sex work was a necessary way to earn enough to bribe the crossing agent and get across the checkpoint. The spectrum of responses reveals the range of constraints present when respondents first decided to engage in sex work:

I am lazy, I do not want to work there, work hard somewhere, if I understand that I'll work an hour or two hours a day and earn 1000 hryvnia [41.95 USD] and ... for a thousand hryvnia now people work for a week. Something like that (laugh), if honestly, I'm too lazy to work somewhere in the ATB [store] I do not know, or somewhere else, go to work at 8 am and come home at 8 pm for the 150 hryvnia per day. Well, somehow it's not enough for me. I just take it as a job, I do not know, many people have more disgusting work than I have. (age 33, public place)

I have tried to settle for quite long. I've tried to settle for 2-3 years after I graduated college. And I couldn't. There's no stable income at any place. And due to the fact that I have no apartment, I need to rent one. So I entered this profession. (age 24, apartment)

No, we couldn't get out of there simply. We had to pay money and it was big money. We didn't have such money and we had to look for it, because we wanted to live normally. And so, as I know, my friends were doing... They were making money. They offered me also to do the same, also to sell love for money. (age 24, apartment)

Client Screening

Sex workers described the clients they preferred and those they avoided, along with screening techniques used to filter out undesirable clients – a client described as either risky (violent, would not pay, erratic, ATO³) or that sex workers did not want to work with out of preference. Screening techniques varied according to the type of spot they worked at; in offices or brothels, screening was likely done by a colleague but those who worked autonomously (street-based or apartment-based) would independently screen their clients:

Well, firstly, what condition he is in can be detected by phone. The owner doesn't let them. (age 38, brothel)

Well, you know, I probably already learned somehow ... I never sit with aggressive ones, and I already see by the man who he is. And I will not go with someone I do not like. (age 38, pubic place)

Clients, if girls have ATO guys as clients. Well, I heard, I'm not with ATO guys, I'm afraid of them. (age 44, entertainment venue)

Service Provision

There were many rules and boundaries held by respondents in relation to the kind of services they provided; most frequently cited were rules related to condom use and anal sex. It is clear that their decision making in this regard has an effect on the amount of money which could be earned. Some reported relaxing their boundaries for work if they felt safe, or needed the money and had difficulty finding work:

³ ATOs was a commonly used name for those working for the Anti-Terrorist Operation on the side of the Ukrainian government before the government changed the chain of command to replace ATOs with the name Joint Forces Operation.

For me its anal sex, I do not provide these services, others all, yes, please, but not me. (age 32, apartment)

Frankly speaking, they ask to try without a condom sometimes. But I never let. Some of them sometimes offer extra money. Some of them try to persuade. But I always refuse. Because it is not safe. (age 23, brothel)

Generally, the most that - sex without a condom. We do not do it. I, for example, very rarely allow this for extra payment. 500-600 UAH. Yes. And so, generally, I'm not telling the client that there is such an option. As though, there is no such service. Because if everyone with no condom, first, you can get pregnant. The percentage of diseases is very rare. Because you allow this to such a person, when you see that he is dressed well. All is well-groomed, shaven, smells nicely everywhere. Then you can with him, like, do this. To be engaged in such sex for additional money. And so, there is no such service. (age 41, brothel)

They often ask me for anal, but this is for me hard labor. Of course, I can, but this is not for me. I have ... But! For the money I'll do! Have to. (age 39, public place)

Price setting

In general, sex workers expressed that their prices had increased over time, an effect of inflation or improved price negotiation skills. However, some respondents also reported having to bargain with clients over their regularly set prices and give discounts because they were experiencing a decline in demand. Demand drop was attributed to there being fewer men more generally, or fewer “good” men in the city (due to conflict), and men having less available money because of economic decline. Four respondents spoke of an increase in competition from new sex workers related to the onset of conflict – although they had not come from the conflict zone, rather from the nearby towns. Sex workers also described how they could earn more by providing riskier or difficult to perform services:

Of course prices were raised. Earlier it was less. 200, then they raised prices. Yes. We had a devaluation of the hryvnia. (age 42, brothel)

Before, it was 800, it was 500... Well now one thousand... Well, probably, due to the fact that everything is becoming more expensive, we become more expensive too, the condoms are expensive. (age 35, apartment)

Yes, of course. The regular ones get discounts. If a man requests this, then price goes down. Yes, it is decreased by 100 hryvnias. Not for everyone. If a person asks by phone: please, can you give a discount? Then, of course, I do. Because I don't have as much work, so I can't lose this client. (age 38, brothel)

Well, maybe, it [my general income] has grown a little bit since the moment of the military contact began. I would say so. Well, I've started evaluating more. Well, yes. Setting better price. That's, in the situations, when I used to low down prices for my services – now I raise them. (age 30, apartment)

Yes, it has changed, well, a little bit better, because we raised prices. No, it did not affect the number of clients, because now there are a lot of military men crossing the Dnieper. So because of this, we can say that the number has not changed. There were already those who could not already pay, they were eliminated, and new, military, they appeared. (age 32, apartment)

Well, if with a condom, then it is cheaper. 400 UAH. If without a condom, it is 600 hryvnias. Because it is a risk zone. (age 44, entertainment venue)

We have a lot few clients. First, because of the war. Economic reasons. At us the prices decreased. (age 41, brothel)

They are for cheaper, because it seems that people start having less money. Their budget is cut, or prices are getting high. They lack it, but they want. (age 38, brothel)

It increased several times, not at once. Other offices started rising their price too. And then ours. (age 18, brothel)

Discussion:

The results of our mixed-methods analysis paint a picture of an industry characterized by monopolistic competition. This is especially clear when we consider the high number of “firms” involved, freedom of entry and exit into the market, and pricing techniques. Pricing is flexible and can be determined by the seller, although the range within which price can vary is limited by competition. The services provided are similar, but vary by different venue types: the location, the perceived prestige of the venue, the type of sex services available, and the perceived quality of the service provider.

Women are situated within a social hierarchy where agency exists along a continuum of experiences (Bettio, Giusta, and Tommaso, 2017; Folbre, 1994). Agency is about economic choice in a situation of constraint; it is context specific. Folbre (1994) developed a multifaceted framework of structural constraints on individual choice, acknowledging the interaction between agency and structure:

Like both institutionalist and Neo-Marxist approaches this feminist perspective appreciates the roles of individual agency and processes of coordination, as well as coercion (Folbre, p.49).

Sex workers exercise their agency in making decisions in their everyday work places. This extends beyond entry into the market for sex work, into various forms of everyday choices such as client screening, service provision, and price setting. Sex workers have a clear understanding of the risky aspects of their work and resolve to mitigate those risks, but each faces a different set of constraints surrounding those decisions. At the same time, each venue within which sex work is sold has different implications for health related risks. In some cases this means setting higher prices for risky services, which has implications for health related or HIV related risk.

This article adds additional evidence to the work done by Bruckert & Parent who investigate sex work from a labour perspective:

Sex workers, like any other workers, are selecting their labour location with the context of a constrained range of options (2013, p. 62).

Sex workers are not unlike other wage workers in the service industry (waiters, cleaners, stylists etc.) who labour for an hourly wage or per service provided (Nussbaum, 1998; Benoit, Smith et al, 2018). What makes sex work unique is the degree of risk associated with the work, which is exacerbated by criminalization; illegality intensifies the risky work environment, increases violence, increases stigmatization, affects condom negotiation, and affects access to health care (Van der Meulen, 2010). However we know from our results that women who need to work will still decide to work, how to work, and how to manage the risks they face.

Our preliminary results also suggest that the sex work environment may be made riskier due to conflict, primarily attributable to consequences related to economic downturn. Many interviewees observed decreasing demand for their services; some cited increased competition due to new sex workers entering the market from nearby towns⁴. This situation creates incentives for providing riskier services. Sex workers exercise a relatively high degree of market

⁴ There is a possibility that the drop in demand cited by the interviewees (and attributed to the conflict and the economy) has to do with the age of interviewees, who were older than the mean age of surveyed sex workers, and whose declining age may have had an influence on the declining demand for their services.

power; the question is whether the risk is worth the cost. This depends on financial pressures, options for alternatives, and the size of incentives for risk taking.

It is important to note that these results are drawn from the first survey and the first round of interviews. We expect that, as trust builds through repeated contact, there may be additional revelations about the extent of risky behavior.

Conclusion:

Sex work is work and HIV is an occupational hazard for sex workers. Sex workers mitigate the risks present in the workplace but risks are often accompanied with financial reward. In a situation of increasing pressures due to economic downturn there may be more incentives to risk taking. There are financial incentives for entering the industry (over alternative work), for providing riskier services (condomless sex, different sex acts), or for taking on riskier clients (if for instance demand is low).

The framing of HIV programs is important and doing so around stereotypes of women who sell sex services without considering the agency they exercise in their daily work deflects attention from the gendered socio-economic processes that contribute to their HIV vulnerabilities. The criminalization of sex work intensifies the risky work environment but women who need to work will still decide to work, how to work, and how to manage their risks. Therefore, it is important to manage these risks if the ultimate goal is to address the prevalence of HIV. We suggest the decriminalization of sex work, improved access to preventative care and tailored programming to respond to the changing atmosphere of conflict. This requires us to acknowledge that sex workers are workers.

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