

Yasmina Katsulis

Women and Gender Studies
Arizona State University

Vera Lopez

School of Justice and Social Inquiry
Arizona State University

Alesha Durfee

Women and Gender Studies
Arizona State University

Alyssa Robillard

African and African American Studies
Arizona State University

Female Sex Workers and the Social Context of Workplace Violence in Tijuana, Mexico

Gender-based violence in the workplace impacts the physical and emotional well-being of sex workers and may lead to other health problems, such as PTSD and depression, drug abuse, and a greater likelihood of sexually transmitted infections. This study examines the social context of workplace violence and risk avoidance in the context of legal regulations meant to reduce harms associated with the industry. Ethnographic research, including 18 months of extended field observations and interviews with 190 female sex workers, is used to illustrate how sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico, experience and manage workplace violence. Multiple subthemes emerge from this analysis, including deciding where to work, working with a third party, avoiding theft, and dealing with police. These findings support the idea that the risk of violence is part of a larger “hierarchy of risk” that can result in a “trade-off” of harms.

Keywords: [sex work, violence, risk avoidance, ethnography, Mexico]

The very work on the street, it dehumanized me because I was on exhibit like a thing for sale, facing dangers and being subjected to humiliations and being frightened and abused by the police.

—Yizel, female sex worker, 23 years old

Our research among sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico, reveals a complex variety of strategies workers use to protect themselves from violence. This study examines the social context of workplace violence and risk avoidance in the context of legal

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regulations meant to reduce harms associated with the industry. Using ethnographic research, including 18 months of extended field observations and interviews, we illustrate how sex workers in Tijuana experience and manage violence at the hands of customers, strangers, and police. Multiple subthemes emerged from this analysis, including deciding where to work, working with a third party, dealing with outdoor work, avoiding theft, and dealing with police. Because risk of violence is part of a larger hierarchy of risk, harm reduction measures at the policy level should take into account the social context of risk and risk avoidance. The hierarchy of risk results in a complex system of trade-offs that might involve increasing some risks to reduce others. We propose that policy efforts identify which risks can be modified and which risks, when modified, might simultaneously reduce other, related risks. In this article, we frame sex workers' strategies to avoid violence as a form of harm reduction that can complement legal and policy frameworks that also seek to reduce harms associated with risky behaviors.¹

Studies suggest that workplace violence among sex workers is common. Wahab (2005) reports that 50–100 percent of those working in outdoor (street-based) settings experience violent encounters while on the job; in our study (which includes both indoor and outdoor workers) about 27 percent of our sample had experienced violence at the hands of a customer.² Sex workers from a range of work settings support the claim that violent encounters are shaped by the setting of the workplace, as well as other features of the social context of their work (Brents and Hausbeck 2005; Church et al. 2001; Fang et al. 2007; Giobbe et al. 1990; Katsulis 2009; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Lopez-Jones 1999; Plumridge and Abel 2001; Willman 2008). Studies also show the myriad ways in which sex workers experience, manage, or attempt to avoid violent encounters while working in these settings (Bowen et al. 2006; Downe 1999; Kinnell 2008; Kurtz et al. 2004; Maher 2000; Otutubikey Izugbara 2005; Sanders 2004; Shannon et al. 2008; Sterk and Elifson 1990; Whittaker and Hart 1996). As a whole, this body of work demonstrates that workplace violence is a significant occupational health issue. Workplace violence is context dependent, and sex workers utilize a variety of resources to avoid, or better manage, violent encounters.

Studies about the relationship between sex work and violence can inform the controversial debate about whether prostitution, itself, is violence (Farley 2005; Weitzer 2005). We would argue that framing prostitution as violence obscures the broad continuum of occupational health and safety issues negotiated by actual sex workers in their day-to-day work, as well as the structural factors which expose some to greater occupational hazards than others. The framework does nothing, in and of itself, to further our understanding of the social context of this work, including the deployment of safety strategies and the context of risk avoidance. In attending to the empirical, rather than rhetorical, issues at hand, we do not disregard the very real effects of violence on the health and well-being of those who experience it. It is precisely those negative impacts that motivated us to study the issue in the first place.

Setting

Tijuana, Mexico, is a city located on the busiest migration corridor in the Western Hemisphere, and the reputation of its legalized sex industry is fairly well known.

According to the city clinic that served legal sex workers in Tijuana during the time of this study, approximately 1,000 sex workers are working legally in Tijuana, with about 300 newly registered workers replacing those who leave the industry each year (the number of part- and full-time sex workers who work illegally is not known). Reflecting the unequal social standing of the United States and its neighbor to the south, the huge commercial sex industry in Tijuana came into existence primarily to serve the sexual needs, desires, and fantasies of American men during the prohibition era and the crackdown on red light districts in U.S. cities near the border (Lorey 1999; Martínéz 1996). Today, the city's red light district remains a popular sex tourist destination for U.S. residents, particularly those living in or visiting the San Diego area—and like most border towns, a U.S. military base is very close to the border. The rapid flow of transport workers and male migrant workers traveling through the city has generated a growing demand for the industry (Katsulis 2009).

Sex work in Tijuana, as in many cities in Mexico, has a quasilegal status. It is neither legal nor illegal, although a variety of other statutes (e.g., public indecency) are used to prosecute and penalize those who work without a health card. Those who have health cards and work either outdoors in a designated area or inside a licensed business establishment are allowed to engage in sex work activities without fear of police prosecution. The city clinic provides health cards to adults, age 18 and over, who register with the municipal clinic and agree to mandatory monthly health screenings. The clinic requires a Mexican birth certificate, photo ID, and service fee as a part of the registration process. Sex workers must also pay for health screenings and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Each month, when sex workers pass their STI screening, the clinic provides a stamp on their health card, enabling them to work in designated areas. Most designated areas are located in *la zona roja* (the red light district), which is in a busy commercial and tourist area within walking distance of the U.S.–Mexico border. Health inspectors make random visits to these sites to check for health cards. Sex workers who are caught working without a health card receive verbal warnings, fines, or jail time; establishments found employing these workers receive warnings, fines, and eventual suspension or removal of their license.

Methods

In this article, we report findings from 18 months of extended field observations (1999–2001) by the first author, key informant interviews with police and government officials ($n = 4$), hotel and bar owners and staff ($n = 7$), medical personnel ($n = 13$), and community health outreach workers ($n = 23$), and 190 semistructured interviews with female sex workers in Tijuana. We interviewed sex workers using closed and open-ended questions on a range of topics, including: (1) basic demographic information (household composition, schooling, etc.); (2) work experiences, including previous work histories and why, when, and how they first engaged in sex work, the nature of their work activities, how much they earned from their work, and whether they also engaged in other forms of employment; (3) experiences of workplace violence, harm reduction strategies, and relationships with coworkers or employers; (4) household investment strategies and future career aspirations, including whether or not they had migrated to Tijuana and were sending remittances to

family members elsewhere; (5) the nature of their relationships with customers and police; (6) drug and sexual risk behaviors, and screening and treatment for sexually transmitted infections; and (7) mental health outcomes, specifically as they related to their work. The first author and a trained field assistant carried out all interviews in Spanish, the native language of all respondents. Responses were transcribed, and later coded, using NVivo ethnographic software.

Recruitment

The most immediately accessible venue for recruitment for the study was the city clinic (*Servicios Medicos Municipales*), where sex workers register and obtain their required STI screenings and treatment. Phase one of the project entailed six months of field observations in the clinic setting, 50 pilot interviews with women who had registered to work legally, and the development of a cross-sectional, setting-based recruitment strategy. Thirty of the initial pilot interviews were with women who worked on the street, five with women who worked in massage parlors, and 15 who worked in bars and nightclubs with a hotel next door (a kind of “modern-day” brothel). During this initial phase of research, it became clear that clinic attendees represented only a portion of the local sex worker population. Therefore, we developed a recruitment strategy consisting of various mapping exercises of local indoor establishments (bars and nightclubs, massage parlors) and outdoor areas (streets, parks, beaches, bridges). We then used purposive sampling and a chain referral system to identify an additional 140 participants for phase two of the study. The only requirement for the study was that participants relied on sex work as their primary source of income and that they be willing to disclose their legal status within the interview; however, it should be noted that for theoretical reasons (e.g., wanting to compare outcomes between legal and illegal workers), we aimed to include as many illegal workers as possible. A total of 23 different sites were approached on a regular basis, until we had interviewed at least 100 illegal workers.³ This enabled us to develop a diverse (nonrepresentative) sample of participants. A demographic profile of our 140 participants, including solicitation sites and sexual transaction sites (areas where commercial transactions were completed) is provided in Table 1.

Each interview was approximately 60–90 minutes in length. To compensate them for their time in the study, we provided participants with \$20, snacks, water, a safer sex kit filled with colored condoms and flavored lubricants, a free HIV/AIDS test, and follow-up counseling and referral services by a trained HIV/AIDS counselor following published CDC protocol. To protect participant privacy, as well as because of a range of literacy levels, we only obtained oral consent. We use pseudonyms to refer to specific participants.

Analyses

We utilized Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) and LaRossa’s (2005) grounded theory procedures to analyze the interview transcripts and field notes. Open coding involved breaking down the interviews into concepts defined as a few words, phrases, or statements that conveyed a specific meaning related to the central category,

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Average age (age range)	26 (12–56)
Average age at first commercial sex transaction (age range)	22 (12–41)
Were working illegally at the time of the interview	76%
Solicitation sites used on a regular basis	
Massage parlor	76%
Street	22%
Bar, nightclub, disco	22%
Home, neighborhood, friends, word of mouth	16%
Parties	4%
Café	1%
Internet chat room, ad, phone (call service)	<1%
Sexual transaction sites used on a regular basis	
Nearby hotel	100%
Customer's hotel room	30%
Customer's car	8%
Their own home, or a friend's home	4%
Outdoor location (e.g., alleyway, stairwell, restroom)	5%
Had experienced violence at the hands of a customer	27%
Had experienced violence at the hands of an employer/manager	<1%
Had experienced violence at the hands of a police official	6%
Had experienced violence at the hands of a stranger (e.g., someone mugged them while they were out on the street soliciting customers)	7%

Note: $N = 140$.

strategies used to minimize violence. We then grouped coded materials into multiple subthemes related to this central category.

Women used a variety of strategies to reduce or minimize violent victimization within the workplace, but the ability to use these strategies was constrained by a number of larger structural constraints such as where they worked (indoor vs. outdoor settings) and their legal status. Nevertheless, as we point out, many of the women, irrespective of their relative social positions, did attempt to exercise agency by actively working to minimize the possibility of victimization. These strategies included: (1) deciding where to work; (2) working with a third party; (3) minimizing economic losses; and (4) dealing with police.

Deciding Where to Work

Many sex workers preferred to work indoors, primarily in massage parlors and nightclubs. For these women, indoor work, which also took place in conjunction with a third party, was perceived as safer and more lucrative (\$40–\$200 per customer). Managers and staff at the site could help them negotiate problems with particular customers, forcing potentially violent or threatening customers to leave the premises. Generally, those who worked indoors stayed in that establishment for their entire workday—that is, there were rooms available (either inside the establishment or directly next door) for sexual transactions. They did not have to leave the site to conduct business, and this allowed them to build familiarity with

the physical setting, fellow workers, and other staff. Sex workers who were able to work in this type of indoor establishment were unlikely to agree to accompany a customer to an alternate location—this allowed them to avoid danger as well as make more money by generating a higher turnover. The presence of a bar fine deterred customers from trying to negotiate an off-site, unfamiliar location. The payment of a bar fine also established a sense of transparency and accountability in that customers had to make these arrangements personally with the manager, a third party who could identify them, and who had a vested interest in workforce safety. Indoor work arrangements were beneficial to sex worker employees, hotel staff, and management, who worked together to increase profits. Working on location allowed sex workers to save travel time involved between transactions, enabled hotels to generate profits based on exclusive cooperative arrangements with clubs, and helped management ensure that there were always enough sex workers on hand to serve clients. Sex workers also shared information about violent customers with one another so as to protect others from potential abuse, and those who worked indoors often reported violent customers to their employers. Depending on the nature of the crime, employers could ban the customer from the establishment entirely.

Although working indoors could reduce occupational risks, obtaining permission to work indoors was sometimes problematic. The more lucrative and well-known establishments faced health inspections on a regular basis. Therefore, these establishments had to ensure that their workforce was legally registered and in compliance with required monthly health screenings. Compliance was good for business in that it helped particular venues establish a positive reputation among customers; non-compliance could result in fines, temporary suspension of their license, or being shut down. As a result, sex workers who were not able (or willing) to be compliant with these regulations were often excluded from working these establishments. Multiple barriers prevented, or discouraged, some groups of sex workers from complying with legal regulations. For example, documentation requirements and registration costs impacted the rural poor, as they did not always have the birth certificate or money required for registration. Additionally, migrant sex workers from Central America were often in Tijuana illegally and feared deportation, and minors were not eligible for registration until age 18 (Katsulis et al. in press).

Even given the option of registering to work legally, and thereby having access to more lucrative indoor venues, some sex workers avoided indoor work, choosing to work on the streets instead. These sex workers talked about the deterrents to working indoors, including how they felt about working in a nightclub, which they saw as a “partylike” atmosphere. They noted with disdain the social norms surrounding this kind of work, the requirement to socialize, party, and drink with customers, and the requirement to work around others where smoking and heavy drinking occur regularly. Many of the more established women involved in street work, who were registered to work legally and could have worked indoors if they had wanted to, said that they would never consider this kind of work. Some saw it as conflicting with their traditional values, whereas others stated that they did not enjoy being with customers “socially” and just wanted the transactions completed as soon as possible (many of those who work on the street do not take their clothes off when they are with a customer, and they are able to complete the transaction within about 15 minutes). Some felt strongly that being around smoke, alcohol,

and other drugs was a safety hazard in and of itself—these women regularly turned down potential customers who appeared to be drunk or high, who they saw as unappealing, difficult, and potentially dangerous. Lastly, some worked outdoors for more pragmatic reasons. Those who worked outdoors were sometimes able to meet their financial needs with one or two transactions, allowing them to return home (often to their children) when they had made enough money. Others needed the flexibility of working during the day while their children attended school. If they had worked indoors, they knew that they would be unable to set their own hours, leave early (without paying a fine), or leave to find a more populated area during down times.

Most street-based sex workers tried to work in familiar, well-lit, well-populated areas that were zoned for prostitution, where other sex workers (or trusted others) could look out for them. In these areas, because of the large number of nightclubs, bars, and hotels, doormen, street vendors, hawkers, and police could also provide help if needed. However, because of the large volume of sex workers in the more lucrative areas, territory was competitive. Areas zoned as “tolerance zones” (areas where the police will not bother you if you have a health card) were high-traffic areas, and it could take several months or years of networking to gain access to these territories. On weekend evenings, for example, space was so tight that workers literally stood side by side, for several blocks, waiting for a potential customer. Although these areas may have involved less physical and economic risk in terms of theft, economic competition made income from these areas less stable and difficult to come by.

More marginal zones were dimly lit and less well trafficked, and it was those areas that sex workers (and customers) thought of as the most dangerous. However, because there were fewer sex workers in those areas, there was also less competition, making them more lucrative. Because Tijuana is a border town, sex workers would look on male migrant workers both as potential customers and as thieves, depending on their circumstances. Bridges, parks, alleyways, and the beach along the border fence were all areas that were seen as high-risk areas, but sex workers sometimes worked there if they had few alternatives (this was not common among female sex workers, but it was a strategy used by male and transgender workers). Those who were socially marginalized (e.g., age, visible drug addiction) had a more difficult time accessing the more lucrative, and potentially safer, areas of the city—they worked in more dangerous areas as a result.

Although outdoor work compromised sex workers’ physical safety, it could be financially lucrative. Those who solicited customers out on the street could use their own mobility as an advantage—the ebb and flow, and profile, of customers changed throughout the night and day—and mobility allowed sex workers to capitalize on these demographic movements. Sex workers chose work areas based on the customer base (e.g., tourists, businessmen, newly arrived migrant workers) that they felt that they would be able to attract. The central bus station, the migrant encampments along the border fence, and other “waiting” areas could mean droves of customers, but very little money per transaction (usu. about \$10). Downtown restaurants, the golf course, or even the mall were popular with those who tried to find local middle- to upper-class businessmen. Customers were far less frequent but might be willing to pay quite a bit more (usu. about \$20–\$40). Those who worked in nonzoned

areas were able to avoid the economic competition they might face from other sex workers; however, this also meant that they had less of a safety net.

Working with a Third Party

Both indoor and (some) outdoor workers worked with third parties, including staff and management in massage parlors, nightclubs, and hotels. Some had formal agreements (e.g., having to pay a bar fine for leaving the premises, having a set schedule), whereas others simply utilized existing staff as resources to protect against client violence. For example, members of the hotel staff were familiar with the sex workers working in their establishment, and they were able to monitor the time spent in rooms according to prearranged agreements. Hotel management had a vested interest in time monitoring because they relied on high turnover for profits, and they wanted sex workers to feel safe in their hotel so that they would continue to pay for services. Hotel employees relied on tips left by sex workers for cleaning and arranging the room. Employees prepared the room beforehand by providing towel service and free condoms, and, after the transaction had been completed, they would take their tip and clean the room for the next transaction.

The presence of agreements with a third party (in this case, hotel staff) allowed sex workers to enforce agreements with customers while avoiding violent confrontations. Usually, hotel staff checked in on room occupants after about 30 minutes. They were known to be extremely attentive—banging on the door or barging into a room if there was no response. This allowed sex workers to deflect potential conflict with customers who were not ready to leave the room, or to resist a customer's offer to pay for extra time. As noted by Magdalena (35 years old): "One time a customer was mad because he hadn't finished and we had to leave the room. Because he hadn't finished by that time he told me I was a thief and he left angry." Magdalena's encounter could have escalated into violence had the hotel staff not interrupted the encounter. Some participants reported using code words or sounds (like knocking on the wall) to alert hotel staff of potential problems. Others simply made it known that they expected to be completed with the transaction in a specified time (usu. between 15 and 60 minutes). Many local hotels also invested in closed-circuit cameras and secured gates; this precaution communicated to clients that they were being monitored and that security was being taken seriously.

In spite of these precautions, sex workers frequently had to deal with violent customers (who may also be high or drunk and difficult to deal with). However, when this happened in the presence of a third party, potential injuries could be limited or avoided. Juana, 19 years old, reported:

One guy [customer] was doing coke and was upset that I couldn't get him hard. He threatened to beat the shit out of me. Another tried to rape me without a condom. Also, one young American was spanking me during sex and calling me a bitch and a whore. But the guys [the hotel staff] came and took him.

Women who work outdoors generally can't rely on staff in established venues as a way to reduce violence; some sex workers are, however, able to elicit support and

protection by working in pairs, or by using spotters. As Shannon and colleagues (2008) note, street-based sex workers often work in pairs, using a “spotter” to record information about clients and possibly deter violent encounters. Those who work outdoors are constrained in managing violence in that they do not necessarily have a safe place to take clients. Using a client’s car, for example, limits sex workers’ ability to control the transaction and take any recourse against a potentially violent client. As Juliana (age 20) notes, “Sometimes you do not know the risks you are setting yourself up for. Getting into cars without thinking what can happen.” In more populated outdoor areas, sex workers were able to develop relationships with one another so that they could look out for each other. Outdoor workers who worked in more isolated areas (usu. outside of designated zones) were less likely to have regular arrangements with a particular hotel (see above), and they were also less likely to work near other sex workers with whom they were familiar. Those who worked illegally were often working on their own out on the streets. Treated as social pariahs by those who did comply with the local regulations, and working in unfamiliar areas to escape detection by police, these workers had fewer social ties among fellow workers on the street and hotel staff, and a higher likelihood of having a sexual transaction with a customer in a secluded area—in a client’s car or hotel room, or outdoors (an alley, hill, abandoned building, etc.). As a result, these workers were less likely to have anyone to look out for them, and to help them prevent or address customer violence.

As illustrated in our previous table, violence at the hands of an employer was rare—less than one percent of female sex workers had experienced violence at the hand of a third party. Because sex workers did not have contracts with particular establishments, they were free to stop working in any particular place if they wanted to. It is possible that this freedom discouraged violence or coercion on the part of managers. Additionally, because some sex workers worked legally and had developed relationships with the police (see “Dealing with the Police” below), it is possible that managers feared that they would be reported, fined, or put in jail. When asked about whether or not they had a pimp (a personal manager to whom they paid their earnings), most participants in this study laughed. Only one replied yes, stating that she considered her live-in boyfriend a “pimp,” because he was lazy and lived off of her earnings. It is possible that formal arrangements between a procurer and a stable of sex workers, at least in this city, are uncommon. Given the quasilegal status of sex work in the area, there seemed to be little role for such a person to play except as a bodyguard. Some sex workers, all of whom worked outdoors, did state that their boyfriend or husband would sometimes accompany them to work and sit in their car to look out for them. This provided some sense of security but was not always a viable option (some sex workers did not tell their partners about their work; others had to accompany the customer to a separate location on their own).

Minimizing Economic Losses

Like physical violence and safety, economic violence (theft), which could occur in conjunction with a physical injury, was a serious concern. Because of the nature of their work, sex workers were known to carry cash on them for extended periods of

time, and this made them relatively easy targets for robbery by strangers—especially if they were working on the street. Few street-based sex workers had a safe place to store cash after each transaction (although having a friend, boyfriend, or husband nearby to hold their money was one way to protect earnings). Indoor workers might be robbed after leaving work, but they were rarely robbed while still on the premises. Most used private taxis to avoid the risk of robbery as they came and went from work—this also afforded them some measure of anonymity in that they didn't want to be seen on the streets in these areas by anyone who might know their neighbors or family. Those who could not afford private taxis relied on public transportation to traverse dangerous areas; however, some sex workers were hesitant to use this strategy because they were terrified that someone in their family or neighborhood might find out about the kind of work they were involved in. For them, using this strategy sometimes required walking to a more discreet location first, which involved some risk.

Regardless of the precautions they might take to avoid robbery at hands of a stranger, all sex workers had dealt with customers who simply refused to pay for their services or who threatened to get violent if they did not receive their money back. Most asked for the money up front to avoid this type of confrontation, but sometimes a dissatisfied customer might feel entitled to make the sex worker give them their money back after having sex. The most common difficulties with customers were that the customer had not been brought to completion (orgasm) before the allotted time, or he wanted to have sex without using a condom:

I just work for the money, but vaginal sex only. Not oral, nor anal. I have no problems because of this with the manager, but sometimes there are some clients that get violent because of this so they get their money back from me and go. Sometimes it happens because some customers want to have sex without condoms, and they try to take it [the condom] away. [Soledad, 22 years old]

As we note above, those who worked indoors might have a variety of safety precautions to deter economic violence, to prevent these confrontations from escalating into physical violence, and to hold customers accountable by reporting this violence if necessary. Those who worked outdoors (particularly those without third-party agreements) did not have these resources. For them, verbal skills, carrying a weapon or a cell phone, or being able to escape were sometimes the only recourse they had available.

Dealing with the Police

Many sex workers (esp. those who worked illegally) were terrified of local police corruption, having heard horror stories from other workers or having experienced police violence themselves; others (those who worked legally) were able to use police to deal with client violence. Secondhand reports of direct harm and injury at the hands of police were common, and about six percent of the sex workers in our sample had experienced violence at the hands of a police. Being victimized, especially by civic officials who are supposed to protect you from harm, contributes to the

mental health impact posed by violent encounters. In addition, police crackdowns can compromise sex workers' ability to avoid client violence, "pushing women to work in dark and deserted areas, alleys and industrial settings," and, obviously, necessitating the use of a client's car for the transaction, rather than a location that they control and operate (Shannon et al. 2008:917). One's relationship with the police was therefore influenced by one's circumstances. This section examines both types of experiences.

Sex workers who worked illegally were subject to fines and jail time because they were involved in illegal work, and they had a far more contentious and hostile relationship with the police. In addition, the legality of the work, combined with the legal concerns about citizenship, further compromised health and safety in other ways. As Alicia, 28 years old, explained:

I worked illegally in Cancún and was assaulted twice by the police. I did not have my nationality papers. And I could not report them because I was not a legal resident. I paid a bribe. I have also had ten customers who were very rough with me, and I could not report them for the same reason.

Sex workers who experienced economic or physical violence at the hands of customers were often reluctant to report this violence to police. Those who worked illegally were not likely to report customer violence to the police because they were afraid they would be sent to jail or fined for working illegally. Those who were addicted to drugs were afraid they would be harassed or punished for active drug use. Customers and police took advantage of the disadvantaged legal and social status of sex workers, knowing that it was unlikely that they would ever be reported. Local police were able to take advantage of them by forcing them to pay bribes to prevent prosecution, and some police engaged in sexual assault and exploitation because they had no fear of being reported.

Aimara, 19 years old, noted how precarious this relationship can be with police depending on one's current legal status (which can vary each month depending on compliance with mandatory screening requirements):

Once, I forgot to return [to the city clinic] for a health stamp. The police threatened to take me and nine other girls to jail, but they let us go with a warning and a 2,000 pesos fine [\$220].

Because of their illegal status, street-based sex workers are easy prey—they are not likely to report extortion, abuse, or even rape, for fear of going to jail themselves. They are even less likely to report abuse by law enforcement to other police because they fear further retaliation. Hostile interactions with police created enormous fear, stress, and anxiety, which further contributed to substance-use problems among those already marginalized. As described by Marianna, 21 years old: "I have to use drugs to go out. To give myself the courage to do what I do and face everything the police do to [us] every day and so very often."

Police violence is a problem for sex workers in many cities (particularly for outdoor workers), but this study demonstrates that this need not be the case. Some ways that sex workers avoided police harassment and violence were to register as a

sex worker and obtain a health card, work in a zoned area, or work indoors in a legal establishment—these strategies allowed sex workers to develop a positive working relationship with police. Sex workers who worked legally were more likely to be aware of their rights with respect to the police. They were informed by the city clinic that as long as their health card remained valid, they would be free to work, avoiding prosecution, fines, and imprisonment. Their relationship with the police, who were able to check health cards to identify legal status, was therefore more amicable. Under these circumstances, the police, in true “protect and serve” fashion, acted more like security guards, helping sex workers deal with both customer violence and theft. Several participants had customers who served on the police force; others had given police tips for their services. In legal establishments, or in zoned street areas, police were on hand to settle disputes between workers and customers and to help those who had been victimized by someone else on the street. Thus, for these workers, policing was seen as protective and positive in addressing work-related violence or theft:

Because there are persons who, because they are paying you, want to humiliate you. There are persons that on the street who talk to you very sweetly (*te hablan muy bonito*) but in the room they want to abuse you. They want to do it from behind or they do not want to use a condom. They get angry and they leave. Most of them are cool (*son calmados*). The police come by here a lot and if the client gets angry he just leaves. He does not hit you. It is worse in the U.S. [Michelle, 21 years old]

In spite of these more positive relationships with police, few violent encounters were ever reported to police—given the stigma associated with their work, most sex workers were keen to avoid police whenever possible. They also didn’t see such reports as particularly valuable; that is, they would be unlikely to lead to arrest or criminal sanctions. But, police were seen as helpful in tracking someone down who might still be in the area and forcing him to pay a fine directly to the worker (usu., double the rate agreed on for the transaction):

When they get violent, we just call the police. One day, one man, after being with me, he tried to go away without paying for the service just because I didn’t want to do it without a condom. So we called the police and they made him pay double or he was gonna go to the jail and pay the fine. And he did pay double. [Soledad, 22 years old]

Local business establishments also had positive relationships with police—visible violence or theft meant a loss of revenue, and having a strong security profile with doormen, bouncers, and a rapid police response was important in establishing a marketable profile with clients. Police were treated well in these establishments and were sometimes patrons during their off hours. Sex workers’ customers, who were also patrons of these establishments, exchanged information with one another both informally (through conversations) and more formally (through “trip reports” posted on the Internet) that verified such things as the level of comfort and physical safety provided by particular establishments (Katsulis in press). The visible presence

of police outside of these establishments also deterred mugging, something of particular importance to customers who were also tourists from the United States.

Within legal establishments, it was customers who bore the brunt of police attention, surveillance, and hostility. The Tijuana police are notorious for taking advantage of U.S. tourists. Although this might have deterred potentially violent customers (who were likely the minority), it also impacted those who were not violent. Police regularly “shook down” various establishments, forcing customers to stand against a wall to search them for drugs. Or, they sometimes harassed customers (particularly tourists) to make a quick bribe. On the-spot-traffic “fines” were the most common tactic—people were encouraged to pay on the spot just to make it “go away,” to save themselves the inconvenience of a court date, and to save themselves from going to jail. This worked easily with U.S. tourists, who have heard terrifying stories of Tijuana jails—most tourists would do anything to keep from being dragged to one. Additionally, most were not aware of their rights and were likely to believe any intimidation tactic the police officer tried to use. Tourist customers frequently exchanged information with one another about how to deal with police—advising one another to carry cash for bribes should they be necessary (Katsulis in press).

Discussion

Gender-based violence impacts the physical and emotional well-being of sex workers and is known to significantly increase the likelihood of drug and sexual risk behaviors leading to risk for sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS (El-Bassel et al. 2001; Surratt 2007; Surratt et al. 2005; Wechsberg et al. 2005). Introducing the concept of the SAVA (Substance Abuse, Violence, and AIDS) *syn-demic*, Singer (1996, 2006) suggests that the interrelationships among violence, substance abuse, and AIDS pose a “set of synergistic or intertwined and mutual[ly] enhancing health and social problems facing the urban poor” (Singer 1994:933). As a result of these important connections being made in the literature, harm-reduction programs addressing workplace violence have been proposed and tested in different settings. In a comprehensive review of such programs, Rekart (2005) notes a variety of approaches and priorities, including “education, empowerment, prevention, care, occupational health and safety, decriminalisation of sex workers and human-rights-based approaches” (2123). Harm reduction is taking place on multiple levels, and risk-reduction strategies have been adopted by sex worker outreach organizations, health and police authorities, and sex workers themselves. Although much of the energy (and funding) remains focused on HIV/AIDS prevention, violence prevention is increasingly recognized both because of its role in the epidemic and because it represents a significant health and human rights issue.

The themes discussed in this study build on findings from other research studies that examine the social context of client violence (“bad dates”):

While bad dates may involve emotional harassment, fear and/or experience of physical or sexual violence . . . bad dates are frequent and go largely unreported . . . some women report prioritizing harm reduction practices by

types of clients . . . resulting in a trade-off of harms. [Shannon et al. 2008:915–916]

Others researchers have also acknowledged that the negotiation of some health or safety risks (e.g., avoiding violence) can compete with the negotiation of other risks, including HIV/AIDS (Farmer et al. 1986; McKeganey and Barnard 1992; Parker 2001; Romero-Daza et al. 2003; Schoepf 2001). In our study, regardless of where they decided to work, sex workers tended to avoid direct confrontations with customers. Instead, they relied on intermediaries (hotel staff, managers, police) or avoided customers that they perceived they might have a problem negotiating with. For example, they might try to avoid customers who looked drunk or high, customers who made it clear that they did not want to wear condoms, or customers who appeared reluctant to pay their asking price. They might also avoid customers who requested sexual services (like anal sex) that they did not normally provide. In their experience, noncompliance led to violent retribution, an immediate physical risk that overshadowed other potential risks. However, some circumstances made sex workers less likely to take these precautions. Hunger, drug addiction, housing insecurity, or other economic pressures often compelled some sex workers to accept some risks (e.g., the risk of infection with a sexually transmitted infection, particularly HIV/AIDS) while minimizing others (e.g., violence). This hierarchy of risk is key to understanding how sex workers make choices about where and how to work, and what actions they decide to take to avoid workplace violence.

Sanders and Campbell (2007) argue that vulnerability within sex work settings can be “designed out” through physical and organizational changes that “build in” respect for sex workers’ human and civil rights. Central to their argument is the recognition that the extent and nature of violence differs between indoor and outdoor settings, and that vulnerability arises from environmental conditions within these settings. Although isolation and pressures to avoid police contribute to violence among those outdoors, the greater presence of formal and informal controls within indoor establishments can deter violence. Building on strategies used by managers and workers of indoor establishments, they suggest that some of these elements might inform the design of outdoor work as well. Rather than continuing to hold individual sex workers responsible for risk avoidance, Sanders and Campbell called for more of an emphasis on structural factors and collective responsibility: “sex workers [need] the legal support, environmental conditions, and social status that protect[s] them from sexual victimization and sets out expectations for those who seek out sexual services” (2007:13). Well-managed outdoor areas would allow sex workers to work in the open without fear of police, reducing the likelihood that they will work in more isolated and dangerous areas. A zero-tolerance policy against violence, and reduced fear (among sex workers) of prosecution through decriminalization, would encourage official reporting behaviors, as well as hold perpetrators accountable. Zones such as these have been implemented with great success in some settings (Delacoste and Alexander 1998; Huey 2007; Sanders and Campbell 2007; Turshen 2007), as have programs that encourage reports of customer violence to authorities (Penfold et al. 2004).

Anthropological theory on structural and symbolic violence can be utilized to understand the larger social and cultural context in which this violence is negotiated.

Following Bourgois (2001, 2009), Scheper-Hughes (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), Farmer (2003), and others, we link “suffering to power through a theory that analyzes the multiple levels of lumpen abuse . . . redefining violence as something more than a directly assaultive physical and visible phenomenon with bounded limits” (Bourgois 2009:16). As Scheper-Hughes (1996) notes, *everyday violence* involves the “social production of indifference” to systematic, and systemic, brutality. Like mass genocide and war, systematic violence against sex workers is rendered virtually invisible by the cultural framework in which it exists; this invisibility has several consequences. First, everyday violence against sex workers can be explained and justified as the predictable consequence of a breaking of the sexual and moral order, an order that demonizes nonnormative sexual behaviors, particularly as it relates to women. In this sense, the physical violence experienced by sex workers on the job can also be understood as a form of symbolic violence that reflects their social marginalization in society. Following Bourdieu’s (2000) concept of symbolic violence, Bourgois notes that the repeated exposure to both violent acts and the indifference that accompanies them “leads those who are subordinated to “misrecognize” inequality as the natural order of things and to blame themselves for their location in their society’s hierarchies” (2009:17).

As a result of structural violence (see Farmer 2003), the majority of sex workers exercise their right to work in these hazardous conditions in the face of extreme limitations because of poverty, gender discrimination, and other forms of social inequality. In this context, sex work becomes a strategy through which to avoid many of the hazards associated with a marginalized social position. However, unable to escape entirely from this hazardous environment as a result of their structural position, they develop whatever everyday strategies they can to reduce the likelihood that violence will occur.⁴ Taken as a whole, these multiple levels of violence increase the likelihood that individuals will become sex workers, that sex workers will experience violence on the job, that they will be dismissed or ignored by police, or that they will be incarcerated themselves if found to be engaged in illegal behavior. Awareness of their precarious status is internalized, influencing help-seeking behaviors and damaging their sense of personal integrity.

In our study, we drew on a broad cross-section of legal and illegal sex workers working indoors and outdoors to understand the social context of violence and risk avoidance. Our findings support the idea that vulnerability with sex work settings can be reduced through larger changes in the workplace environment. What is clear from our fieldwork is that each worker determined for herself what compromises she was willing and able to make; she worked within a complex set of opportunities and constraints that were, at least in part, structured by the kind of environment she worked in. Women who worked indoors were the most advantaged in terms of the types of violence avoidance strategies that they could use (e.g., utilizing hotel staff for protection; developing relationships with police), whereas those who worked outdoors relied on other methods (e.g., developing support networks with other street workers). Legal status increased the possibility that sex workers could work in protected areas indoors, or in well-populated tolerance zones. Outdoor workers often had to work in less-well-populated, outdoor areas where their risk of victimization was much higher; these women often had to engage in sex work in clients’ cars and other outside areas with no one available to help them in the event

of impending violence. In addition, they faced the possibility of police harassment and violence. Still, these women sought to minimize their risk of victimization by actively thinking of escape plans, which involved carrying weapons, phones, and scoping out possible escape routes. In this way, they were active agents, seeking to minimize possibility of victimization at the hands of their clients. Based on these findings, we suggest that sex workers be included in the design of any policy or legal changes that might impact their everyday life. They are the experts—all we need to do is stop, look, and listen.

Notes

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1. Since the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the harm-reduction approach has included needle-exchange programs to reduce HIV infection among intravenous drug users (IDUs), and decriminalization or legal regulation of sex work activities to enable organizing and educational outreach to occur.

2. In this article, we use the term *outdoor* or *street-based* work to refer to solicitation activities that take place in streets, parks, and other public areas. The site for the sexual transaction may occur outdoors, in a car, or in a hotel room.

3. It should be noted that although we report specifically on females in this article, the final sample also included male ($N = 42$) and transgender sex workers ($N = 16$). Because the nature of workplace violence for male and transgender workers, and the strategies to avoid or negotiate that violence, seem to differ, we have elected to focus on females only for this article.

4. In spite of these strategies, their position is further aggravated when they commit violence (usu. verbal harassment) against one another as a result of economic competition. Although these incidents are not as brutal as that which they might suffer at the hands of clients or police, they indicate the ephemeral nature of alliance building and the difficulties involved in collective organizing.

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