



Research Article

The upsurge of men and women trading sex in the streets of Gweru, Zimbabwe: Unpacking the dynamics and dimensions of street prostitution in 2013-2014

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Abstract

Commercial sex work has been an insult to the African culture and value system but due to globalisation and changing trends, the phenomena has made inroads in Africa. Zimbabwean laws prohibit such activity according to the old and new constitution of 2013. Due to population growth and changing phases of socio-economic and political hardships, sex work has sprouted mainly in urban areas. Urban centres record higher levels of currency circulation hence the influx of commercial sex work. The introduction of the multicurrency system in 2009 led to a lot of illegal and black market activities as Zimbabweans hunt for the hard earned South African Rand and US dollar. As formal employment opportunities dwindle, people tend to venture into more informal trade due to hardships. Women are the worst affected due to gender imbalances and patriarchal systems of oppression and exploitation. In light of these developments in Zimbabwe, some women have ventured into commercial sex activity. The sector has been green with US Dollars and South African rand. Among other urban areas, Gweru has seen changing dynamics and dimensions of sex trade. Street prostitution has now sprouted as many women and men now flock the urban streets of Gweru to transact sex in exchange for the hard earned cash. The activity is blossoming along 7th street especially between CBZ and Econet building as well as along 8th street area between Gweru City council and Memorial Library. These streets have become a safe haven for the trade. This paper sought to bring out the geographical locations of the sexual transaction, age dimensions, profit margins of female sex workers, risks they encounter and their survival skills, reasons for engaging in street prostitution and their proposed way forward. To get the data, the researcher randomly visited the streets to solicit for the data along the themes noted above. Interviews and observation were the research tools employed by the researcher. The deteriorating economy pushes these women into street prostitution in order to make money for survival and upkeep. They are abused and exposed to life-threatening STIs and other rare diseases but they still have to continue in the trade. This paper call for more researches on the plight of sex workers. An all stakeholders research and policy making conference pivoted on commercial sex work is a practical recommendation to the problem.

Keywords: Commercial sex, African culture, Zimbabwe, Prostitution

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is one of the oldest profession and a multi-billion dollar industry employing millions of women world wide. It is therefore a business sector that many women and men transact. According to Edlund and Korn (2002) sex trade has been contributing 2-14 % Gross Domestic Product for Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand.

Commercial sex work has three main categories which are influenced by the status of women. At the top level is the Indoor or housed activity which is mainly for top class prostitutes. In this category are escorts agencies and call girls. In the middle are commercial sex workers found in brothels, clubs, and bars. At the bottom are street commercial sex workers who are going to be covered by this research (W Khamasi et al., 2011). This research will focus on street prostitutes who are exposed to the worst on the job experience.

In this trade, women are the ultimate entrepreneurs because their product never gets out of style. In Africa, few countries have legalized it while most countries do not allow such activities as it is considered immoral and an insult to the three main religions namely African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam.

Commercial sex work has its own dangers and challenges in the wake of changing socio-economic and political systems. Street commercial work has worse field experience challenges. The most significant challenge lies in the social system which attaches stigma and discrimination to the sex entrepreneurs. Hubbard and Sanders (2003) argue that female prostitutes suffer social discrimination, violence and intolerance. They note that the general populace attach five stereotyping descriptions that lead to prostitutes being deemed social misfits. The five descriptions entail that, "prostitutes smell bad, and prostitutes are socially dead. Prostitutes are deceased, prostitutes are a submissive sex object and are a necessary outlet for natural male excess" (ibid).

Street prostitutes are victims to both private and public violence. The private violence emanate from stigma and discrimination at the hands of family and friends. In this vein they suffer emotional trauma as they cannot tell family about their profession. They also have to operate in distant areas from home areas. They also know that their trade is a high risk area. Public violence is another challenge they face. In this light, street prostitutes are commonly assaulted by general members of the public. They are also subject to police arrests especially in Zimbabwe and other countries where the profession is prohibited. Khamasi et al. (2011) observe that street prostitutes suffer robbery and rape from their clients.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic is a challenge to the commercial sex worker. The street prostitute does not have choice when it comes to client base. Different kind of clients comes for the product and some of the clients are infected by the virus. In some cases, the clients pay higher and request that they engage in sex without protection. Most prostitutes are then infected because of the profit motivation

Zimbabwean constitution and law prohibits commercial sex work much to the chagrin of most gender activists. Prostitution has several dimensions. The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act of Zimbabwe prohibits procuring a person for unlawful sexual conduct, inside or outside of Zimbabwe, but prescribes less than stringent penalties of up to two years' imprisonment. The Act also prohibits coercing or inducing anyone to engage in unlawful sexual conduct with another person by threat or intimidation, prescribing sufficiently stringent penalties of one to five years' imprisonment. Gender activists argue for decriminalisation of commercial sex work due to the legal loopholes of a selective application of the law where only female prostitutes are prosecuted.

In Zimbabwe the laws that illegalise prostitution are discriminatory to women and leave the male folk unscathed. Miss Delta Ndou: Gender activist and feminist interviewed in The Zimbabwean Sunday News (08 September 2013) argued that the problem with the criminalisation of prostitution in Zimbabwe is that it allows for selective application of the law by penalising women who do sex work and not equally penalising the men who pay for sex. This is discriminatory and misogynistic because it presumes that the prostitution problem is a problem caused solely by women and that it can only be remedied through the persecution of women while the men go unscathed. This one-dimensional approach to the cause of prostitution has been used to frame the debates around whether or not prostitution should be legalised without sufficient or equal scrutiny being placed on the men who facilitate the continued existence of the sex work trade and the men who make it profitable for women to trade their bodies.

The Research Area- Gweru

The City of Gweru is located between Harare and Bulawayo and is ranked Zimbabwe's number three in terms of growth. Gweru is not as hot as compared to smaller towns such as Kadoma and Chitungwiza where a sizeable chunk of the population does not retire to bed early. Here by 2100 hours, the city centre will be virtually empty, leaving only a few especially commercial sex workers and security workers. The prostitution sector has many dynamics and dimensions in Zimbabwe.

Research Problem

Increasing numbers of women and men trading sex along the streets of Gweru Central Business district need exploration. This is happening in the wake of the admission that Gweru is amongst the top most HIV and AIDS infected areas in Zimbabwe for the year 2013 Sunday News (08 September 2013). This is happening in the wake of pieces of legislation that prohibit such an activity. The HIV and AIDS scourge has destroyed development sectors and negatively affect families. Sex being the higher risk activity for newer HIV infection is the issue under discussion herein this paper.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are a cause for concern among street prostitutes because this low level of prostitution has such risks more than any other type of prostitution. In September 2013, the National Aids Council Monitoring and Evaluation co-ordinator Isaac Taramuse was quoted by local media saying the country is at risk for new STIs infections. "We have noticed some drug-resistant STIs like syphilis, gonorrhoea and discharges from around 2010 in Masvingo. These drug resistant STIs increased and gradually spread to other places like Harare, Mashonaland East and the Midlands. We believe that Masvingo has become a source of these diseases for other provinces. There is every reason to believe that they (STIs) are coming from South Africa through migrant and transitional labour," The National Aids Council report indicates that last year Zimbabwe had a total of 261 032 recorded cases of STIs and 157 965 of the cases were women (Sunday News 08 September 2013).

Justification of Study

Many authors have written about prostitution and commercial sex work but few have dwelt on the street prostitution aspect in Zimbabwe and Gweru in particular. Most authors who write on women focus on political, legal and economic aspects leaving out social aspects like commercial sex work. Lesley (2000) focused on training women for political leadership. Haleh (2003) looked at women in conflict. Atienza (2000) focused on Gender and Local governance. Sensitive and contemporary women plight issues have been feasted on by journalists. Newspapers make a meal out of hearsay and isolated cases and very few if any among the journalist have sought to carry out a scientific enquiry into urban street prostitution. This gets deeper on the urban street prostitution highlighting key dynamics and dimensions of the activity in Gweru.

Sound and effective policies can only be implemented after such enquiries. This paper will therefore end by suggesting measures and means that may be of good use to the nation and to the city fathers and policy makers. NGOs can also find advocacy space and lobbying lines in their activities. The paper will also highlight the plight of street prostitutes.

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to establish the factors pulling women and men in numbers to trade sex on the streets. Other objectives entail:

- To research the opportunities and challenges encountered by female street prostitutes
- To establish trading dynamics and dimensions by female workers
- To suggest best ways to solve the challenges posed by street prostitution.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs qualitative research paradigm. The subject matter (prostitution) is too sensitive and secretive hence observation and interviews are the data collection methods used in bringing out data. Random visits to the streets during night hours and interviews with the willing female traders are the cornerstone of this research. From my observation close to 30 female street prostitutes trade along 7th street near Econet and 8th street in between Lucky 7 and Gweru City council. This research managed to interview six (6) female prostitutes and from the interview data, these constitute about 20% of the entire population of prostitutes patrolling the two streets during the night.

Some interviews were unsuccessful as some of the female traders declined to be interviewed once the researcher indicated that he just needed information for research purposes. In some cases the researcher had to pay consumer rate cash amounts for "short time" and use the short time to solicit data. In presenting the data pseudo names are given in adherence to ethical considerations to do with confidentiality.

The ten sources of information (six (6) female prostitutes) are my 20% of the total population of street prostitutes and therefore inform the findings of this research. Convenient sampling was used for identifying sources of information. Data is categorised in line with research objectives and other general findings are given at the end of the categorised findings.

Research findings

The table1 below help to illustrate the research findings in line with the research objectives. The findings will be analysed and discussed below the table.

Table1. Illustration the research findings in line with the research objectives

Respondent and age	Years in Profession	Push factor	Risks and opportunities	Trading dynamics and dimensions	What needs to be done
MD 29	10	-Upkeep for 2 children and 6 other OVCs -survival	-police demanding free unprotected sex for freedom	-finding underground venues that may not be conducive but very safe	Decriminalise and legalise it
PM		-survival in the face of unemployment rates	-stigma and discrimination -exploitation by police (rape) -denied ARVs by overzealous nurses -STIs infections -HIV virus infection	-changing places. Started in Mutare and left for Gwanda but now in Gweru	-improve access to healthy services
SN 28		-Need for money to look after siblings and 2 children	-police imprisonment especially on Fridays and then released on Mondays -Time and business lost while in prison	-having unprotected sex to make much money and cover for time lost in police cells -weekends make much money	-take sex as a profession and allow sex trade because everyone wants it -impart sex knowledge
GN 26	4	- Accommodation/rentals -2 Children upkeep	-Police harassment -Venue closures -Sacking of night security guards -dressing properly to attract long distance drivers	-use of night security guards premises -going to Kwekwe for gold panners but expensive -standing alone	-Legalise prostitution
MT35	13	-family upkeep -	-Free sex for police -	-magistrates and prosecutors are rich clients	-Professionalise sex just like soccer where you allow a footballer to use legs. Allow prostitutes to use womanhood
DN		No formal employment-upkeep and survival	-Some clients are violent -abuse from clients		Legalise prostitution and make it an industry

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this section I discuss the findings in line with my interviews and observation data collection techniques. The data herein are of the female traders. Male traders were hard to come by and are elusive in their trading. The findings are categorised in discussion lines.

Age and background data

From the interviews conducted, 60% are single parents that are either widowed or divorced. 40% have children and never got married and do not intend to marry. Mere observation of the workers led the researcher into noting that half of the workers are ailing. These are people whose language, courage and actions need serious exploration. The information helps one to conclude that these sex workers have unique circumstances that made them to rush to the streets for the purpose of trading sex.

Push and Pull factors to Street Prostitution

All but one of the total respondents noted that they need money to support their direct and indirect dependents. Gweru has gone through a rough patch of industrial decline (Dewa et al., 2013). There has been a significant closure of businesses and industries in Gweru hence women have nowhere to get money. There is need for a good upkeep and prostitution becomes a ready market for fast cash. One respondent noted the absence of formal employment opportunity as the reason why she ventured into the profession. The trade seem to be a cash trade and thus pulling many to the streets.

Risks and Opportunities

The street prostitution market poses a great deal of challenges and risks. In as much as there are opportunities to enrich one, the dangers are many. From the interviews conducted 86% had challenges from the police as they are sometimes harassed, abused, raped and imprisoned. The street prostitutes feared the police more than anything else. The respondents lamented the fact that the female prostitutes are arrested while their male clients are left free. In most cases, the street prostitutes would be arrested on Fridays before they make money and according to them, Fridays and Saturdays are money making days. Surviving the police is a priority to the defenceless prostitutes. One respondent noted that the police men would request to sleep with them without protection in order for them to escape arrest. This then leads to high risks of STIs and HIV infections.

The HIV and AIDS disease as well as Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) is a common but major risk for street prostitutes. 30% of the prostitutes lamented that the huge paying clients demand sex without protection and because of economic hardships, the prostitutes comply. In most cases they end up infecting and being infected by the sex cash barons. One of the prostitutes noted that ARVs are not readily available for them. The other one lamented the negative attitude of public health practitioners. Nurses tend to be abusive (verbal abuse) and insensitive to the prostitutes' plight a prostitute needing STI medication was told to bring the partner and she could not identify the infectant.

Violent and abusive clients are also a menace to the street prostitution trade. The respondents noted that they are paid after service and so sometimes they are cheated and violently abused by non-paying clients. Because of the criminality and sensitivity of the trade, the female prostitutes cannot report to the police. One responded noted non payment while the other said that the client underpaid her.

Venue closures and sacking of night security guards who are very helpful to street prostitutes is a challenge. Most street prostitutes along the 7th and 8th street in Gweru use night security guards for security and venues. However most security guards have either been sacked or reshuffled. The security guards premises which sometimes have small makeshift beds have since been closed by the police and building owners. This has left the female clients without safe bases/premises for the profession. They end up trading sex in cars, dark areas and dirty areas.

Stigma and discrimination are risks the respondents struggle to manage. In most cases the societal members do not accept and derogate the would-be prostitutes. As a result the street prostitutes do not trade during the day but come to work during the night. They just cannot face the society which is intolerant to the practice. Travelling and working during the night expose the prostitutes to thieves, robbers and deviant street kids. The respondents noted that they would not risk coming out in the open or disclosing to any member of society or family on their profession. So there is a dark night profession and during the day they are asleep or attending to other aspects of life.

Gweru Street prostitution trading dynamics and dimensions

Security Guards factor

The street prostitutes have entered into a commercial agreement with night security guards for the purposes of physical security as well as for trading bases. Most prostitutes are camped around the security premise at former Lucky 7 building along 8th street. Often the street prostitutes were observed to be moving around security guards along the street especially at National Family planning council premises where one of the prostitutes noted that they were getting their condoms for use. One of the prostitutes noted that the security premises have been turned into trading venue for sex hence the alleged existence of a make shift bed for use. The security guards will benefit monetarily as they are paid a dollar for every transaction.

The Wheels factor

The street prostitutes tend to favour highly mobile clients for purposes of safe venues and secrecy. These are normally driving clients. If they are not driving, normally they hire taxis hence the earlier public outcry on a newspaper publication to that effect. This was after the paper unearthed the tax scandal where taxis were now being as bedrooms for the sex workers. Long distance drivers of haulage trucks sleeping over in Gweru often satisfy their sexual desires with these street prostitutes. Some may even take the workers for the whole night for reasonable prices normally higher than for a short time service. In essence most clients are always behind wheels. These are often less abusive than walking clients who spent time walking towards trading bases and may also be thieves or robbers who decline to pay business time is lost while walking towards the bases for trading hence given a choice, the street workers prefer those behind wheels.

Trading bases/venues

Besides security guard premises and cars as venues, the street workers have established trading venues that are a bit far away from the marauding police. They often trade in dark places around the CBD. From the street workers interviews, it is noted that they use dark venues in between buildings and main streets. These are secluded and difficult to access areas. They have also set up a base opposite Gweru City Council park and near the flats along the main way to Bulawayo where there are unit houses. These are bases mainly for the walking clients who may not have cars. The venues do not have electricity and are therefore good and conducive for the trade. Those with cars often travel to the low density area named Kopje, outskirts areas such as Fair mile Hotel as well as other areas with no or fewer people at night.

Tenth Street is also an area for the sex activity. Gweru city council Health department officials noted the observation of fresh used condoms along the bushy and dark street. City cleaners and maintenance staff interact with these used condoms daily along this street. This implies that the street is the safety haven for sex workers.

Marketing and survival strategies

The first step to attract their male driving clients was to move out of public places such as beer halls, clubs and prostitutes infested areas. These public areas are dominated by established and experienced and ageing senior prostitutes. The street prostitutes are a bit younger and attractive. Their strategy is to dress seductively. They often parade nude body parts that often attract men. They are half naked or half dressed. One of the respondents noted that they dress to kill. This will help them to be identified by clients as well as to woo their clients. They also are quick to respond to potential market hence they are attentive to car hooting as well as car lights (flash lights). They also carry handbags for makeshift sheets and also the bags have condoms to give clients to put on. One worker said she would not be a bit far away from others and would be properly dressed because she observed that decent dressing is required when one gets travelling clients. She also hinted that she often get clients who take her for overnight service and also for clubbing hence the dressing is suitable for that. Standing alone also help her to avoid conflicting over clients.

Profits and business decisions

The work service charges differ with duration of service for what is called "short time" or one round, the workers unanimously agreed that they charge USD \$5 and venue costs will be catered for by the client. For two rounds, one will pay USD \$10. However overnight service minimum charge is USD\$50. The business seem to be paying for most of the workers who hinted that at times they go with money ranging between USD\$ 50- 150 per night. However there are times they go home with nothing or even less than USD \$10. When the business is paying, they are happy and often do their best to attract, serve and satisfy their clients. When business is poor and profits are very low, the street prostitutes hinted that they travel to Kwekwe hunting for gold panners who pay much. However kwekwe is not conducive as they end up paying Lodges hence the cost is too much.

The voice of the Street workers: Way forward

Legalising the trade

Feminists have always clamoured for improvement on the legality and equity issues. They want specific and certain aspects addressed as emanating from the challenges women face at law. Mukhopadhyay (2004) noted that in long periods of history, women have been denied their rights and privileges. From the interviews conducted, 80% of the sex practitioners advocated for the legalisation of prostitution. One senior prostitute noted that sex work is as old as sex itself and thus the need not to fight it off the streets. She noted that there is need to decriminalise and legalise it as it has a potential to aid the economy. She even boasted that the law enforcement agencies namely the police, soldiers and magistrates constitute their paying client base.

Professionalise

The practitioners are advocating for the professionalization of the sex trade. 30% argued that soccer players use their legs to earn a living and thus sex practioners must use their womanhood to earn a living. One of them argued that they are skilled in satisfying their clients who then regularly come to trade with them. She continued to say that the status accorded professional soccer players should also be accorded to professional sex practitioners

Improve health education and access

The sex practitioner lamented the lack of health education and challenges in getting treatment hence the need to improve on that. From the respondents, 15% noted that they needed health education on STIs and HIV/AIDS virus. They noted that the trade required constant and up-to-date information on health aspects. The health practitioners in public health centres should be readily available to assist and not make it difficult for the sex practitioners to access treatment as well as ARVs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has unravelled the push and pulls factors on the subject of street prostitution in Gweru. It has managed to establish some health related and transaction risks that the urban street prostitute faces daily. It is the deteriorating economy and cash liquidity crunch that is forcing the women on to the streets. The activity again makes them more vulnerable in spite of the fact that women have always been vulnerable in patriarchal societies. It should be noted that these women do not necessarily enjoy this work but patriarchy-driven circumstances made them venture into the streets. Society and gender activists seem to ignore the plight of these young and middle aged women selling sex on the streets. The government and local authorities have turned a blind eye to this potential explosive phenomenon. Besides being a dynamic of the geography of urban crime, street prostitution is an activity with far reaching implications on the development of a country. Unfortunately policy makers and related offices seem to ignore this practice. This paper predicts that in the next two to three years, Gweru urban crime and development will be affected negatively by this practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper contends that the women trading sex in the streets need urgent and serious attention from all angles. All the stakeholders must convene and assign academics and researchers to research on what best can be done. This paper has broken the ground for further researches which may help the society to develop.

Local Authorities and local governance practitioners ought to understand the concerns and experiences of women who are on the street. They are on the street but not for a business reason. They have a market of men who come to buy the product on sale. These men also need to be involved in coming up with a community specific solution to the phenomena.

As the paper ends, the most important direction to follow is organising a research and policy making conference aimed at addressing the commercial sex worker situation. All the stakeholders must take part and feed into the policy making process.

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