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Psychological Stressors in the Context of Commercial Sex Among Female Sex Workers in China

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Abstract

Because of the illegality and stigma associated with female sex workers (FSW) in China, data were limited regarding their psychological stressors examined through the lens of occupational health. Analyzing qualitative data from 16 gatekeepers and 38 FSW, we explored these stressors in the context of commercial sex in China. We found that FSW faced a continuum of stressors that resulted from poverty, limited employment, lack of social protection, violence perpetrated by clients, and limited social support from peers and stable partners. We call for empowerment and a structural approach to address the needs of FSW to improve their psychological well-being.

Sex work is considered one of the few long-standing professions in history as well as the most stressful and dangerous occupation (Rekart, 2005; Ross, Crisp, Mansson, & Hawkes, 2012). It is defined as the practice or business of exchanging money or goods for sexual services among female, male, and transgender adults (UNAIDS, 2005). In studies of female sex workers (FSW), who constitute the most common population in the sex industry, FSW are considered either as “passive victims” who are coerced into sex work through poverty constraints, trafficking, or power inequalities (Overall, 1992; Ross et al., 2012), or “active

agent” who are engaged in sex work as the result of supposedly rational choices (Bell, 1987; Kesler, 2002). Because of the special nature of sex work, FSW are entangled in a complex social network composed of gatekeepers (e.g., bosses or managers of their work places), clients, nonpaid partners, law-enforcement authorities, and health professionals. As with any other professionals, the characteristics of sex work may have implications with regard to many stress-related health problems among FSW (Mark & Smith, 2008).

Although an ample number of studies have been conducted among FSW, the majority of them have focused on their sexual risks or other health behaviors (Pirkle, Soundardjee, & Stella, 2007). Few researchers have examined the manner in which the stressful characteristics of sex work impact their well-being (Ross et al., 2012). Vanwesenbeeck (2005) documented several sex-work stressors, including lack of support from co-workers and gatekeepers, lack of job autonomy, lack of reward from work, and work-related stigma, and they all exerted detrimental effects on FSW's psychological functioning.

A better understanding of psychological stressors in the context of commercial sex is, therefore, important. Scholars have applied multiple theories to explain occupational factors and their association with work-related stress. One of the work-stress models called Demands, Resources, and Individual Effects (DRIVE) that captures the process by which characteristics of the workplace (e.g., work load, job security, management style, job control, social support and rewards) and individual differences (e.g., demographics, personal resources, self-efficacy, personality, coping style, personal experience, and role of conflicts) affect health outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, and job satisfaction) (Mark & Smith, 2008).

In the global literature, scholars have identified many potential stressors in the context of commercial sex, including heavy workload, encounters with law-enforcement officials, drug abuse, abusive clients, exposure to violence, HIV/STD infections, exploitation, discrimination, and stigmatization (Rekart, 2005; Ross et al., 2012; Yi et al., 2012). Researchers have also documented higher rates of psychological pathology among FSW (el-Bassel et al., 1997; Inciardi, Surratt, Kurtz, & Weaver, 2005; Jones et al., 1998; Romero-Daza, Weeks, & Singer, 2003). For example, scholars in the Netherlands reported significant burnout among FSW (Vanwesenbeeck, 2005). Researchers found that 53% of FSW in Scotland had ever thought of suicide (Gilchrist, Gruer, & Atkinson, 2005). Brody et al. (2005) revealed that suicide accounts for 4.5% of total deaths among a cohort of FSW in the United States (Brody, Potterat, Muth, & Woodhouse, 2005). We believe that although existing studies are very informative, they have been largely limited to survey design that focuses on the prevalence of psychological pathology and its demographic and behavioral correlates. Conducting qualitative studies on various forms and expressions of job stressors within the specific context of commercial sex will improve understanding of occupational characteristics and work-related stress among FSW, a population highly vulnerable to psychological problems. However, one finds dearth of such studies in China, where commercial sex flourishes.

Commercial sex, a visible part of Chinese culture throughout history, was supposedly eradicated in the early 1950s after the communist revolution through the closure of all

brothels and the transfer of sex workers to so-called reeducation centers (Abrams, 2001; Cohen & Trussell, 1996); however, commercial sex has undergone a resurgence in China since the 1980s, when China instituted economic reform. The revival of commercial sex was driven and reinforced by economic disparities, greater freedom of movement among the population, increased disposable income, and changing attitudes toward sexuality (Gil, Wang, Anderson, Lin, & Wu, 1996; Hershatter, 1996; Ren, 1999; K. Zhang, Li, Li, & Beck, 1999). Commercial sex is still illegal in China; in fact, FSW and their clients are subject to fines and incarceration (e.g., women's reeducation center) if arrested (J. Tucker, Ren, & Sapio, 2010). An estimated four to ten million FSW operated in a complex hierarchy of commercial sex during the first decade of the 21st century in China (Hong & Li, 2008).

In addition to its illegal status, sex work is highly stigmatized. In Chinese culture, sex workers are generally perceived as defying social norms and accepted roles for women (Gil et al., 1996). The notion of sex work is incongruent with the traditional Chinese conception of feminist virtue, such as being gentle, quiet, passive, and sexually innocent (UNPFA, 2003). FSW are typically portrayed as lazy or immoral women selling their bodies for quick money (Zheng, 2009). Because of the strong stigmatization, most FSW do not disclose their occupation to their families and are deeply worried about such a disclosure (Hong, 2008). They are also less likely to receive sympathy when they experience violence and abuse (Sanders, 2004). Recent studies on FSW in China have revealed high rates of depression and suicidal behaviors (Hong, Li, Fang, & Zhao, 2007a, 2007b). In the current study, based on in-depth interviews with 38 FSW and 16 gatekeepers (mommies, managers, or owners of commercial sex venues), we aimed to identify potential psychological stressors within the working environment of FSW. We included both FSW and their gatekeepers because previous literature suggests that for venue-based FSW, gatekeepers exerted significant influences on their work and life (Hong, Li, Yang, Fang, & Zhao, 2009; Morisky, Stein, Chiao, Ksobiech, & Malow, 2006; Yang et al., 2005). Acknowledgement of psychological stressors in the context of commercial sex would help health professionals to increase efforts to improve the psychological well-being of FSWs in China and worldwide.

Materials and Methods

Study Site

The research site was City A, a city in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Guangxi). Guangxi, one of China's five autonomous and multiethnic regions, is located in the southwest China, bordering Viet Nam. The prosperous economy and increased tourism in Guangxi has created a demand and market for commercial sex. City A, with a population of 1.36 million including 550,000 urban residents is famous for its long and beautiful beach, attracting more than four million tourists each year. The local health department estimates at least 155 commercial sex venues in the urban areas of City A with about 2,000 FSW working in these venues. Furthermore, locations along the beach, on the street, city squares, or public parks where women solicit clients were identified. An additional 1,000 FSW work in these nonvenue settings, totaling an estimated 3,000 FSW in the metropolitan area of City A.

Participants and Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, our research team worked closely with local outreach workers to identify various commercial sex venues in City A through ethnographic mapping. To increase the representativeness of the sample, we selected venues of different types and price ranges for the current study. We explained the purpose of the study to the venue owners or managers and asked for their permission to recruit FSW on the premises as well as asked for their own participation. The participation of gatekeepers and FSW was totally voluntary. In each participating venue, we interviewed one gatekeeper and one to three FSW. If no FSW were available (or agreed to participate) from the venue where we interviewed gatekeepers, we went to other similar venues using the same recruitment procedure. In addition to venue-based FSW, we used a peer-referral approach to reach some nonvenue-based FSW who worked as “swimming coaches” (e.g., accompanying male clients in swimming and having sex in the sea or at the beach), second wives (e.g., providing long-term sex services to a man), or street-walkers. Approximately 25% of the venues and 30% of the women who were approached refused to participate. A total of 16 gatekeepers and 38 FSW participated in our study.

We developed an interview guide based on the existing literature (Choi & Holroyd, 2007; Hong, 2008; Y. Huang, Henderson, Pan, & Cohen, 2004; Z. J. Huang et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2008) and our previous studies (Hong, Fang, Li, Liu, & Li, 2008; Hong & Li, 2008; Yang et al., 2005). The interview guide employed open-ended questions regarding job characteristics, such as working conditions and management styles, competitiveness, encounters with abusive clients, encounters with law-enforcement agencies, and perceptions of public attitudes toward FSW.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted in private places convenient for the interviewees. All interviewers were proficient in qualitative interviewing and had prior experiences working with FSW. Each participant was assured of confidentiality in the study and provided written informed consent before the interview started. Each interview took about 60–90 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin. Participants were provided with a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas A&M University, Wayne State University in the US and Beijing Normal University in China.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were read in full and analyzed following a protocol advocated by Ryan and Bertrand (2000) (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The first step was line-by-line reading of the transcript and generating coding themes related to job characteristics and associated stress (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Silverman, 1993). Coding themes were discussed among the research team members until a consensus was reached. Then, two research team members independently coded all transcripts according to the coding themes. All coding disagreements were resolved by discussion among the research team members. Excerpts of quotations and summaries were then categorized by participant characteristics and the coding themes. Because all researchers were readers of Mandarin, we did not

translate the transcripts into English at the time of coding. We translated only sample quotations to illustrate the major themes of findings.

Results

Characteristics of Participants

The ages of the 16 gatekeepers ranged from 20 to 60 with a mean age of 39 years. Of these gatekeepers, five were male and 11 were female; five were owners of massage parlors, four were managers or supervisors of saunas at hotels, four were owners of hair-washing rooms, and the remaining three were managers or owners of a KTV (karaoke establishment), a card-playing house, and a road-side restaurant. The FSW ranged from 18 to 44 years of age, with a mean age of 30 years. The majority of them came from rural areas with two thirds coming from Guangxi, Hunan and Hubei provinces. Among these FSW, two thirds worked in venue-based establishments, including hotel-based saunas, hotel-based massage houses, and street-based massage parlors; the rest worked at nonvenue-based places (e.g., beach, street) with one working as a second wife. The majority of FSW earned a monthly income around 2,000 yuan (at the time of the survey, 1 yuan= 0.14 USD) with a small proportion earning less than 1,000 yuan and a similar proportion earning more than 10,000 yuan per month. Significant demographic differences have been observed among women working at different places. Women working at hotel-based saunas were the youngest with a mean age of 20 and made the highest monthly incomes compared to their peers; women working on the street had an average age of 42 and earned relatively low income. The length of time working in commercial sex varied from 10 days to more than 10 years. Women working at the hotel-based saunas spent much shorter period at the current venue compared to their peers working at massage parlors or other nonvenue-based places. About two thirds of them had stable partners (e.g., husbands, boyfriends) and half of them had children at hometown.

Working Conditions and Management Styles

Working conditions varied by location and venue. Venue-based FSW who lived in their places of working usually had no fixed working hours. They usually worked approximately 12 hours each day, that is, whenever clients came to visit the venue. Among venue-based women who did not live in their work places, the majority worked 7-9 hours per days, starting from 7:00 p.m. and ending around 2:00-3:00 a.m. Nonvenue-based FSW worked according to their own schedules, with “swimming coaches” usually working longer hours on their work days.

Based on the responses from FSW in this study, FSW working at hotel-based saunas served two to three clients under the arrangement of their gatekeepers (e.g., managers) and earned 400-600 yuan for their services per day (approximately 8,000 to 10,000 yuan each month). Clients were not allowed to take FSW out for sex services. Gatekeepers at the hotel-based saunas usually arranged FSW's business and negotiated with clients regarding schedules and fees. As a result, FSW had the least freedom to choose clients, and they usually received 50% of the fees clients paid for their sexual services. Compared to FSW working at hotel-based saunas, FSW at hotel-based massage houses had relatively fewer clients each day and

earned 2,000 to 3,000 yuan each month. Typically, gatekeepers arranged business for FSW and split (e.g., 50-50) the payments from clients with the FSW.

Women working at street-based massage parlors had lowest incomes compared to their venue-based peers in the current study. Gatekeepers (usually owners of venues) were not directly involved in the business occurring between FSW and their clients, and they charged a flat hourly fee of 10 to 20 yuan for using the massage room. FSW working at massage parlors usually had 2 -3 clients for massage service each day with some clients asking for sex services. FSW and clients could negotiate to have sex outside the parlors. They usually made 1,000 to 2,000 yuan each month. In order to avoid legal responsibility, owners of massage parlors pretended that they did not know that these women had sex with their clients inside or outside the venues. Because gatekeepers were not directly involved in the sex trade, FSW could keep what clients paid for their sexual services, but they shared fees with the gatekeepers if the gatekeepers were aware of the sex trade.

FSW working as “swimming coaches” worked only during the warm season of the year (typically from March to October) and went home or did something else during the cold season (November to February). In order to make the money they needed for the entire year, they had to work longer hours during the work season. They usually met clients along the beach. After negotiating the price, FSW and clients went to the sea or nearby hotels for sex. They usually made 2,000 to 3,000 yuan per month during the work season. Similar to “swimming coaches,” street-walkers did not work from a specific venue nor did they have a specific gatekeeper. They usually had 3 to 4 clients per day with relatively low prices. Street-walkers worked on their own schedule but they had to go to places their clients chose, which may have exposed them to higher risks of violence, robbery, and assault.

Stressors in the Context of Commercial Sex

Entering commercial sex: A stressful decision—Among the 38 FSW we interviewed, only five took the job as their first choice after they left school or the countryside. Most FSW entered commercial sex because of financial constraints or lack of alternative employment opportunities. Many noted that it was more a result of their life situation than a personal preference, as illustrated by one participant: “We don't have a good family background, are not well-educated, and don't have any skills. What we can do?” (FSW, age 30, working in a massage parlor).

Many younger FSW had to send money home to support their families (e.g., parents, siblings, and children). In rural China, daughters were expected to work to support family even at young ages, and education opportunities were usually reserved for the boys. One FSW stated:

I wish I had other options. If I were born in a better-off family, I would still be in school at this age; however, this is life. If I continue going to school, my brother cannot. If he does, I cannot. One of us has to give up school. It was a difficult choice. [Pause] I did well at school. (FSW, age 21, working in a hotel-based sauna)

Older FSW, especially those who were divorced, had limited options to support themselves and their families. They usually had to engage in sex work to make a living. An older FSW

noted, “I was laid off; then got divorced, and I have two kids. Now I have to work hard to support my children. I also need to send money to my parents who are taking care of my children now” (FSW, age 35, working as a swimming coach).

A few young FSW entered sex work because of childhood abuse or other tragedy. An 18-year-old girl, who had worked as a FSW for more than three years, shared her story:

My parents got divorced. After that, my mom worked at this [sex work]. I was raped by a group of friends when I was 12. When I was 15, my mom took me to a hair-washing room, and I started working at this. I need to send money to my mom twice a month. (FSW, age 18, working in a hotel-based sauna)

Competition—The participants reported the increasing numbers of women who became involved into sex industry and the subsequent increase in competition among FSW for clients. A woman described the current stagnant sex market:

The business is much more difficult than last year. The number of FSW here is as many as hairs on an ox. There are too many FSW but too few clients. If I can have 2 to 3 clients a night, I would be very lucky; however, sometimes, I do not have even one client for several days. (FSW, age 30, working in a hotel-based massage house)

Sometimes, FSW fought over clients among themselves. One woman described what happened to one of her co-workers: “A client chose her once, but next time when the client selected another girl, she was upset and cursed that girl” (FSW, age 31, working in a massage parlor).

Competition among FSW often led to mistrust. One FSW revealed, “I would not share my personal stories with my coworkers. If they saw my weakness, they would take advantage of me” (FSW, age 29, working in a massage parlor).

With high perceived competition among FSW at the same venue, FSW usually did not usually experience a strong group consciousness. One manager observed the following:

In this occupation, you need to learn everything by yourself. It is a competitive business. If your peers like you, they might teach you a little bit; if they don't like you, they will not speak to you. Nobody gives you training or teaching about how to do business. You have to learn all by yourself. (Gatekeeper, female, age 42, working in a hotel-based sauna)

A gatekeeper corroborated the view: “If they [coworkers] like you, they talk to you. If they don't like you, they do not speak a word to you” (Gatekeeper, female, age 42, working in a hotel-based sauna).

Stress from abusive clients—Almost all FSW in the current study had experienced abusive clients. Verbal abuse was very common; physical abuse was often reported as well. A FSW shared her most recent experience: “Some clients are very abusive and rude. Yesterday, I had one. He didn't treat me like a person; it was like I was an animal. He acted

like ‘I paid, so I can do whatever I want to’” (FSW, age 24, working in a hotel-based massage house).

Frequent violence was also acknowledged by the gatekeepers. One said, “I know many clients are rude to the misses. Some would say nasty things, some would insult them, and some would force the misses to do things they don't want to do” (Gatekeeper, male, age 36, working in a massage parlor).

Because verbal abuse was so common, many FSW developed different tactics to deal with abusive clients, ranging from keeping silent or avoiding them altogether. One FSW shared such tactics with the interviewer:

If I got a drunk client, I would keep silent all the time. He would curse me or insult me and say all nasty things. I would keep silent. I know if I responded, he would beat me up immediately. (FSW, age 29, working in a massage parlor)

Widespread violence in sex work has made FSW simply cope with acceptance and pessimism. One remarked, “You can see all kinds of men if you become a ‘miss’. Every man has two sides, but we [sex workers] only got to see the bad side of men” (FSW, age 24, working in a hotel-based massage house).

Stress imposed by law-enforcement agencies—The local government was often tolerant of sex enterprises for the direct or indirect financial benefits from these entertainment venues. The law was also changed in 1999 so that arrests of FSW could be made only “at the scene.” But “strike hard” police raids still occurred periodically, aimed primarily at collecting fines from FSW and their managers. For example, a gatekeeper noted,

Last year, police arrested more than 100 misses in City A. Many misses had to flee to other places. Business was really bad. The cops posed as clients and asked the misses out. If they went out, they would be arrested. So the business was bad, and we had to pay fines to get our misses out of jail. (Gatekeeper, female, age 30, working in a hair-washing room)

In addition to periodic strike-hard campaigns featuring the arrests of many, police harassment occurred more frequently even without a legitimate reason, as reported by a FSW: “Sometimes police come in; they cannot arrest us for having sex with clients [as we did not do so at that moment]. But they would check our ID and Temporary Residence Cards” (FSW, age 26, working in a massage parlor).

FSW's concerns were also shared by the gatekeepers, as one remarked, “They worry about police. Now it is the time of strike-hard. If arrested, they will be sent to jail plus fines. You need to pay at least 2,000 yuan to get out” (Gatekeeper, female, age 32, working in a hotel-based sauna).

Illegality, stigma and isolation—Because of the illegality and strong stigma attached to sex work, most FSW did not tell their families about the true nature of their work. One FSW

commented, “I could not tell my family. It is not about my face. It is about my parents' face” (FSW, age 21, working in a hotel-based sauna).

Fabricating stories about their work to parents was stressful, but hiding the truth from their children was even more difficult and worrisome. Disguising the nature of the work isolated many FSW from their families and social networks. One FSW stated:

My in-laws are taking care of my son now. My husband is working in Guangdong [a province next to Guangxi]. My son is eight. I cannot tell my husband. I cannot tell my parents. I cannot tell my family or anyone in the hometown about my work. (FSW, age 29, working in a massage parlor)

Stable partners—Many FSW had boyfriends in the current sample, even women who were married. For many FSW, because they had to work until late at night, and they were far away from home, a boyfriend was a must-have for their work; however, the boyfriend could become another stressor in FSW's lives. One gatekeeper commented, “Most girls get upset because of boyfriends. If clients treat them badly, they may not be that upset” (Gatekeeper, age 32, female, working in a hotel-based sauna).

Another gatekeeper explained,

A miss' boyfriend doesn't work, so she needs to make money to support him. It is more difficult for boys to find jobs. No factory is hiring, especially if you are not a local resident. These girls are the lowest [class] in the society. They cannot find good men. Only lazy men want them. (Gatekeeper, age 60, female, working in a massage parlor)

Such observations were corroborated with responses from FSW. If the boyfriends or husbands knew the true nature of their work, they were financially dependent on them. If a FSW had a boyfriend with an expectation or possibility of marriage, the truth was often kept from her boyfriend. For many FSW, a healthy relationship was desirable but unrealistic because of the nature of their work and low self-esteem cultivated in this occupation. One FSW expressed the mixed feelings she had towards her boyfriend,

I love him secretly. He is an excellent man; I am not good enough for him. I hope I can change myself.... Maybe one day I can go with him to see his mom like a decent woman. (FSW, age 39, working as a swimming coach)

Maladaptive coping—FSW practiced a variety of strategies to cope with the stress of their work, but most of these coping strategies were maladaptive. Two thirds of FSW smoked, a few often drank alcohol to the point of intoxication or engaged in gambling, and one used to take heroin. Some used the internet as a temporary escape from real life. Most FSW had to handle the stress and depression alone. Some women attributed their work to fatalism and merely drifted along in life. For instance, a woman said, “Since I took this path, there is no way back. It is already like this, I just do it one day after another” (FSW, age 26, working in a massage parlor).

Another woman noted, “I don't know what to do with my life. Sometimes I am so anxious thinking about this: When I get older and cannot work anymore and I don't have much money, what should I do?” (FSW, age 31, working in a massage parlor).

A few FSW found their own justifications for their work, including supporting their families financially, regarding the career choice as the best they could have made, working less but making more money, or a taking a temporary step for a better future. One FSW shared her sense of the future:

I hope I don't lose my senses when working here. It is hard to make true friends here. You see only the bad side of human nature. I am saving money now. If I have 40,000 to 50,000 yuan, that would be enough for me to open a shop. I have 10,000 yuan now. It is still far away.... I haven't thought about what kind of shop, but it would be a nice one.... (FSW, age 24, working in a hotel-based massage house)

Some FSW hoped to stay healthy by maintaining their lifestyles, as mentioned by one FSW:

Although my workplace asks us to work from 7:00 pm to 3:00 am, I usually go home for sleep around 11:00 pm, and I never had sex with more than three clients in one night.... I am afraid that too much work [sex] will harm my reproductive health.... I heard one of the girls had sex with 27 clients on one day.... I cannot understand why she did so.... It is so bad for health.... (FSW, age 27, working in a hotel-based sauna)

Discussion

We need to note several limitations in the study before interpreting the data. First, similar to other investigations of FSW, we need to be aware of participants' self-report biases resulting from the illegal status of sex work in China. Second, our sampling approach may have induced voluntary bias and unrepresentative samples because women who chose to participate were those open to discuss relevant issues in a research setting. Third, the data interpretation was subject to biases resulting from the researchers' own backgrounds and positions. Fourth, the sample was from an urban setting in a tourist city. The findings of the study may not be generalized to FSW in other settings or other areas of China.

Despite these limitations, our study identified a number of psychological stressors among FSW within the context of commercial sex. Although both venue-based and nonvenue-based FSW have been identified in our study, most FSW face continuous distress and endless threats resulting from a series of adverse factors, including poverty, lack of social protection, violence perpetrated by clients, and limited social support from peers and stable partners. The very limited employment choices FSW have and isolation from family and society have led to maladaptive coping. A strong sense of distress, hopelessness, and powerlessness prevails among these young women. The illegal nature of the work marginalized sex work; thus, the needs of psychological health among sex workers have been largely ignored. Constructive policies and efforts to improve psychological well-being among FSW must, therefore, openly address the existence and needs of individuals in this occupation. In recent years, scientists and advocates have called for a “general wellbeing approach” to FSW (Ghose, Swendeman, & George, 2011) and argued that prevention and treatment of HIV and

STI should not be the sole focus of health services for FSW (Wong, Holroyd, Gray, & Ling, 2006). After examining our data, we suggest that interventions should also address stressors embedded in the FSW's working environment.

Given the disempowered status of FSW, a multi-sector and multi-level approach is needed to address structural factors as well as to improve their health and safety. Tucker and Tuminez (2011) proposed a “behavioral-structural approach” to FSW, which (a) integrates policy makers, legislators, and law enforcement; (b) includes local management and organization of sex venues, sex workers' collectives, and non-government organizations (NGOs); (c) mobilizes the general public and the media; (d) facilitates better understanding of sex work; and (e) establishes a collective identity of FSW (J. D. Tucker & Tuminez, 2011). A pragmatic approach is encouraged for the design of a stigma-reduction campaign that offers FSW access to social, legal, and health services both in China and in international settings.

In addition to implementing empowerment-based and structural approaches to address the needs of FSW, we must remain aware of the large size of the FSW population in China, an estimated 2.3% of young urban women (D. Zhang et al., 2007). Such a large number of women entering sex work voluntarily or involuntarily suggests the need for interventions to address gender inequality and the “empowerment” of the general female population. Based upon guidance from the World Health Organization (2005), we call for equal opportunities for education, skill training, and employment for women in general.

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