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Sexual Partners of Street-Based Female Sex Workers in St. Petersburg, Russia: A Model of Partnership Characteristics as a Basis for Further Research

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Abstract

Street-based sex work in Russia, as in many countries, carries with it a high risk for violence and the transmission of infectious diseases. The male partners of female sex workers are both cause and recipient of such risks. Because little is known about the men, we undertook a preliminary study to determine the feasibility of recruiting and interviewing them, develop typologies that describe partners, and derive hypotheses for further study and risk reduction intervention projects. We were able to conduct open-ended, qualitative interviews with street-based sex workers and, largely through these contacts, their male partners. To these data, we added interviews with social work and medical experts who engage with the sex workers. The text of interviews from 37 respondents were analyzed to identify commonly mentioned partner characteristics in five distinct domains: sociodemographics, behavioral patterns of the partners, motivations in seeking sex services, levels of partner engagement with the sex workers, and the social circumstances that moderate the engagement. Four of the five domains (all but sociodemographics) proved useful in identifying typologies that were best described as populated points in a matrix generated from the intersection of the four domains. The data were too limited to specify which of the points in the matrix are most common, but the points populated are useful in generating hypotheses for further study and in identifying potential avenues for risk reduction interventions.

Keywords

commercial sex work; types of partnerships; sex partners; Russia

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has seen explosive growth in both injection drug abuse and HIV/AIDS infections. There are an estimated 2 million young people who inject drugs in Russia (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2006). Accompanying this, official statistics report that the prevalence of HIV more than doubled from 121 per 100,000 in 2001 to 274 in 2007 (Onishchenko 2007). Simultaneously, the percentage of infections attributed to sexual transmission has increased from 2.3 percent in 2001 to 34.4 percent in 2007 (Pokrovsky et al., 2008). These risks are found combined in street-based female sex workers (sbFSW). High HIV prevalence in this population has been reported in several cities, including estimates of 15 percent in Moscow, 61 percent in Togliatti, and 65 percent in Kaliningrad (Lowndes et al. 2003). In St. Petersburg, sbFSW are involved in

various health-risk practices that include unprotected sex and injection drug use (Benotsch et al. 2004; Krupitsky 2004; Toussova et al. 2009). High rates of penetrative sex with clients reported by sex workers and suboptimal rates of condom use are frequently correlated with the highest rates of drug use observed among the most vulnerable street sex workers (Aral et al. 2003; Ryabenko 2001). A 2003 study of sbFSW in St. Petersburg revealed that self-reported STI prevalence was 31.5 percent, and that serological testing found the prevalence of HIV and syphilis was 48 percent and 44 percent, respectively (Crooks and Baur 2005; Kozuharov 2004). These multiple risks place them at the core for epidemic transmission to the general population.

Few studies, however, reveal the extent to which FSW and sbFSW in particular can serve as epidemic bridges to the general population. In this report, we expand the knowledge base in this area through a qualitative study that focused on typical sets of characteristics of the partners of sbFSW as a foundation for further research. Before presenting the data, a brief introduction into the social and cultural contexts is given.

Prior to this work, anecdotal evidence and limited quantitative data have suggested that use of FSW services is not uncommon among heterosexual men in the general population in Russia. For example, in a random-digit dial survey of St. Petersburg residents in 2001, 7 percent of men reported having ever purchased sex from FSW, and half of those men reported having done so more than once (Amirkhanian, Kelly, and Issayev 2001). Better understanding of risk behaviors among FSW is important in informing the social, political, and public health responses to the epidemics of HIV and injection drug use. Given this need and the lack of research implemented among sex workers' partners in Russia, methodological approaches that address the challenges in reaching this population would be fruitful. One such approach is detailed below.

Background Information on Prostitution in Russia

During the Tsarist era, prostitution was legal and under police and health department regulation (Golosenko 2002). Brothels officially functioned until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, operating with assistance from the state to provide certain health control measures. Within the course of the 20th century, Russia experienced state collapse twice and passed through one civil and two world wars. The combination of poverty, social inequality, totalitarian social order, and wars experienced by most Russians has created a specific Russian culture and mentality characterized by intolerance (Gilinskiy 2006). This presents itself in specific attitudes, behavioral patterns, and social adaptations as people respond to challenging life conditions. In terms of sexual behavior, there has been a doubly reinforcing moral public attitude towards the prostitution (Ilina 2008; Sawyer and Metz 2009) consisting of intolerance and stigma that contributes significantly to keeping the issue and associated social problems out of the public eye (Afanasiev and Skorobogatov 1994). This, in turn, makes both populations of FSW and their partners vulnerable to various risks and hard to reach for researchers.

In the USSR, there could be no official recognition of prostitution since such activity was strictly associated in the Soviet propaganda with the capitalist social structure and bourgeois

morals. This was reflected in the legal code that set long prison sentences for “exploiters” – brothel owners and procurers – but contained no penalties for women engaging in prostitution (Waters 1989). Prohibitionist policies in totalitarian society, criminalization for procuring, and single minded promotion of abstinence among youth was aimed at decreasing promiscuity and halting the epidemics of syphilis that emerged at the start of Soviet era and re-emerged after the political “warming” in the early 1960s (Gurvich 2005).

Despite a gap in social research from the Soviet era, there is evidence amassed from other sources that prostitution was widespread even during Communist rule and was organized to meet discrete consumption patterns (Kon 2005). There appeared to be several main types of clients, closely associated with locations of concentrated demand: native visitors (work-related travelers staying at hotels), foreign travelers (special hotels for the international tourists existed), men willing to pay for sex with marginalized women (e.g., the homeless, the alcohol or drug addicted, or the mentally ill), men employed in logistic services at ports or as truck drivers, restaurants, and bars patrons (especially in establishments associated with high Soviet officials or criminals), the police, and the military.

The scant data published on the issue nonetheless reflect the great variety, the discrete and even polarized types of sex workers and their clients, and the low likelihood that FSW who served these groups would interconnect. In her review on Russian prostitution that included contemporaneous publications, Waters (1989) emphasized, “It was homogeneous neither in its mode of operation nor in its social significance, the Intourist hotel and the railway station representing the two poles of the spectrum” (Gabiani and Manuil’sky 1987).

The issue of prostitution was first raised for open discussion only in 1986, immediately after Perestroika was announced. In one of the few articles in English on this subject, Waters (1989:3) writes, "...[C]urrent discussion in the Soviet Union is being conducted in a language brimful of moral fervor and righteousness." This discussion led in 1987 to prostitution in Russia becoming an administrative offense (Dehne and Kobyscha 2000).

The research implemented by Afanasiev and Skorobogatov in St. Petersburg among women arrested for sex work in 1990-1992 has shown that most of them were working at the time not on the streets (8%), but in hotels (20.1%), restaurants, bars, cafes (26.9%), dormitories (18.3%), and cultural places like museums, exhibitions, discotheques, etc. (5.7%). Most FSW (about 90%) were oriented towards the foreign clients – tourists, businessmen, consulate workers, employees of international companies – as the most preferable ones (Afanasiev and Skorobogatov 1994). Aral et al. (2003) describe the widespread use of sex services among the police and the military and mentions such locations of sex trade as saunas, hotels, and railway stations.

The social, political, and economic transitions in post-Soviet Russia were accompanied by rapid increases on the supply side for sex work (Gal and Kligman 2000; Occhipinti 1996). According to the research implemented in Saratov in 2004, public opinion did not condemn the consumption of commercial sex; among men such behavior was perceived to be “normal” and “proof of a high level of men’s need” (Alihadjieva 2006). In a more recent survey, 22 percent of respondents reported that they knew men who had paid for sex; the

percentage reporting this was higher for men than for women (32% to 12%). This was also associated with age in that 33 percent of younger people, 21 percent of middle aged people, but only 7 percent of seniors reporting knowing such people (Database of Public Opinion Foundation 2008).

Much of the research conducted within the last decade describes a profusion of different types of prostitution with women working in a variety of locations, including railway stations, truck stops, streets, brothels, massage parlors, saunas, and hotels (Aral et al. 2005; Aral et al. 2003). There has also been frequent mention of sexual relationships that resemble prostitution, most notably the "...cynical search of a visible minority of young women for a 'sponsor' (rich older man) to cushion them from the travails of transition" (Ashwin 2000:22).

The Present Study

Given the difficulty in exploring risk behaviors among this hidden population, this study was conceived to provide better understanding of who comprise this sub-population and how best to recruit them into further research. As a basis for systematic prevention research and targeted interventions, we first need to characterize the type of men who are having sex with sbFSW in St. Petersburg. These are defined not just by how the client is related to the sbFSW, but also how, as types, each fits into the general social organization of contemporary Russian life.

In creating such a typology, we analyze data collected from a qualitative study of sbFSW, their partners, and the professionals who interact with them to generate a model of discrete typologies that can then be used to frame more detailed work on the structures of commercial sex work and the transmission of disease between the sbFSW and their sex partners.

Methods

Based on formative studies conducted by members of the research team, semi-structured interview guides were designed and tailored for sbFSW, their partners, and key informants. The interview guides were designed to systematically investigate the interaction of sbFSW and their partners. The interview guide was structured to provide adequate latitude for interviewers to elicit perceptions, understandings, and experiences in domains of particular interest that included personal background, sex partners, relationship characteristics, sexual behaviors and condom use, alcohol and drug use, experiences with legal and health professionals, and potential strategies for recruiting partners into future studies and prevention interventions. Guides were pilot tested, and modifications and continuing training of interviewers was provided following review of initial interviews in each category of informant.

Recruitment of sbFSW was conducted through the Department of Outreach Work at Stellit, an NGO in St. Petersburg with a decade-long history of conducting research and interventions targeted to "hidden" populations. The Department provides regular educational and support services to the sex worker community using a bus to bring teams of outreach

workers to street locations where sbFSW congregate. The sbFSW were recruited from their workplaces during outreach activities. Male partners were recruited through sbFSW, peer referrals, and through doctors involved in Stellit projects. SbFSW and partners were reimbursed for their participation in the amount of 500 rubles (\$15). Professionals drawn from organizations in regular contact with sbFSW were recruited by Stellit staff through their established professional relationships and reimbursed 500 rubles (\$15). Interviews were conducted by Stellit staff whose previous training in qualitative interviewing techniques was supplemented through the pilot testing process.

We conducted 37 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 14 sbFSW (referred to below as SW), 14 client or non-client male partners (MP), and 9 key informants including 3 policemen, 3 social workers, 2 physicians, and 1 epidemiologist (referred to as Experts). Interviews with sbFSW and their partners were conducted outside of the women's work time in the field, either on the outreach bus, on the street, or other safe spaces. Key informant experts were interviewed in their place of work. All interviews were digitally recorded and lasted on average 30-40 minutes. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Yale University and St. Petersburg State University.

Interview transcripts in Russian were read by the first author, who coded the texts manually and entered related texts into an Excel database that was used to develop a coding tree to organize the content of interviews. The analysis was based on the principles of grounded theory, using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Data were broadly categorized into five major domains: sociodemographic characteristics, factors motivating seeking of commercial sex services, patterns of client behavior, situational modulators of service seeking, and levels of emotional engagement between clients and sbFSW. In an iterative process, the coding tree was used to identify the variety within each domain, allowing combinations of characteristics or factors in several categories to become apparent as common patterns of association. In the section below, individual responses are indented and all direct quotes are indicated with italics.

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Sex Partners

Descriptions of the sociodemographic characteristics of both clients and non-client sex partners were broad, generalized, and not particularly helpful in elaborating a typology. All sbFSW were native Russian with a median age of 29.8 years; for partners, the mean age was 37.8. The descriptions of men who have sex with sbFSW given by all the respondents were very general and did not emphasize any social-demographic characteristic as more likely associated with the consumption of sex services. For example, Expert 5 told us, "According to my professional experience, no key age, income, or social group was identified to describe the clients." The sbFSW mentioned the wide variety of their sexual partners' characteristics. Some differences appeared through their individual experiences and perceptions, but while these descriptions offered a few hints, none of the obvious categorization schemes identified the population groups more likely to engage in transactional sex. Five sociodemographic categories were mentioned by informants: age,

ethnicity, profession, income, and marital status. A few examples from the descriptions about the age of clients show that the experiences of informants are too broad for simple characterization.

SW13: “There are men of all ages among clients of mine – from 16 to seniors. Most are men 40-50 years old.”

SW12: “Types of clients are men in their 50s, having problems with their families (about 70% of them are married) and of middle income. Rarely it’s possible to meet very young men (the youngest client of mine was 14 years old) or seniors (older than 70).”

SW11: “Very rare – young boys.”

SW14: “There are crazy youngsters, who are paying for an hour and want sex only; there are quiet, charitable, kind clients who are paying well and invite me to have a rest together at sauna, offer meals, and drinks.”

Expert 6: “They are members of the working class mostly.”

Possible Domains to Describe sbFSW Partner Characteristics

A range of characteristics beyond demographic attributes were reported by respondents in their descriptions of sexual partners of sbFSW in St. Petersburg. Four primary domains emerged from the interviews: *motivations* (motives associated by respondents with the interaction with the sbFSW), *moderators* (circumstances respondents mention that accompany the intention or the consumption of sex services), *behavior patterns* (most typical or recognizable models or sets of behavior of men towards sbFSW), *engagement* (the combination of emotional and practical connections a man has with the sbFSW).

Motivations

Six different motivations were mentioned by informants: recreation, adventure/risk taking, companionship, sexual education, psychological support, and sexual deviance.

(1) Recreation—Several drivers of individual behavior were mentioned that were associated with recreational needs such as sexual relaxation (physical need), coping strategy (the need to decrease stress), and social and recreational practice (the need to relax).

MP7: “I know many cases when men allowed themselves to use sex worker services while visiting another city – to have a rest, or on a business trip, etc.”

(2) Adventure/Risk Taking—Respondents’ statements highlight partners’ need for new and/or exciting and unusual experiences.

MP 14: “As for the motives to use commercial sex in general, it is mainly alcohol and secondly a search for adrenaline.”

MP1: “As the main motivation of visiting sbFSW: greater diversity which is achievable by changing sexual partners.”

MP2: “Men who are drunk are drawn into adventures.”

MP 7: “It is like in sports when you are driving at a high speed, then you get used to it and want more and more.”

(3) Companionship—The data suggest that in some cases a sbFSW may play a role as a means for a man to satisfy his need for shared experiences with a companion, such as relaxed conversation or sharing leisure time in which sex might not play the key role. Dissatisfaction with intimate and/or personal relationships within marriages, loneliness, and personal existential problems are mentioned by respondents in their characterizations of some typical sexual partners of sbFSW.

Expert 6: “If these are married men, the main reason for their use of sex services is dissatisfaction with their intimate relationships with their wife.”

Expert 7: “From the psychological point of view, there could be identified a certain type of client as a man about 50 in life for whom there is emptiness, when he has nobody to talk with.”

Expert 8: “There are those who just need conversation, companionship; sex is not the main purpose, but it is offered.”

(4) Sexual Education—As in many other countries, men beginning their sexual life were frequently clients of FSW. In Russia, this has long been the case. In 1903, for example, 42 percent of male students started their sex life with commercial sex; in 1922 and 1928, it was 28 percent and 14 percent, respectively, suggesting the impact of the Soviet Revolution on sexual mores (Golod 1988). Despite an obvious change in sexual initiation related to the evolution of gender roles and sexual norms over the past two decades, there is evidence that commercial sex not uncommonly provides some men with their initial sexual experiences today. Beyond initiation, there might be specific motives related to one’s interest to explore his sexuality by the intimate contact with the FSW.

Expert 4: “Students of various professional schools use sex services often, especially to get their first sexual experiences.”

MP4: “First I was interested in SW [because] I wanted to learn what it is – to go and to use a woman, not convincing her...but simply by paying.”

(5) Psychological Support (in both or single domains)—The motive to get a “psychological outlet” – in which the sbFSW is esteemed by her intimate partner (including the commercial one) not only as a professional provider of sex services, but mainly as a woman – is well described in the literature (Howe 2004; Måsson 1998) and was presented in the descriptions of clients provided by our respondents in St. Petersburg. It is important to mention the opposite as well: that in search of the psychological support, partners may act aggressively as a compensation for their psychological needs in relatively manageable context.

MP 4 believes that many sbFSW, particularly those who work “independently” in their apartments, are definitely cut out for their job and do help men a lot by acting like psychotherapists and relieving their stress; it is even more true about those who

do not greedily charge for every minute of a visit and find some time to talk to their client in a friendly way.

Expert 6: “Even among affluent men, there is a certain category (about 20%) that prefer to buy sex from street-based sex workers, despite being able to afford elite services... Some clients (20% approximately), through interaction with the sex worker, satisfy their need in power and dominance.”

SW8: “...[E]ven men who tend not to buy sex on the street may resort to it to reduce their stress level or in the case of a conflict in the family.”

SW9: “There are single (divorced or widowed) men for whom sex is not that important as the possibility to talk, to chat with somebody.”

SW12: “Types of clients: these are mostly men about 50 who have family problems.”

(6) Sexual Deviance (sexual perversion, paraphilia)—Most respondents mentioned risks of sexual violence associated with sexual addictions and deviant appetites in men having relationships with the sbFSW in St. Petersburg. These data are consistent with other recent research (Ilina 2008), where in an anonymous survey, clients of SbFSW often perceived of them as a potential route to realize their sadistic impulses, in part at least because a sbFSW cannot complain to authorities and is limited in her ability to protest.

SW 6: “I don’t agree to serve people with perversions like asking to urinate on them, to take a crap on them.”

SW7: “Occasionally there are men inclined to masochism.”

SW8: “There occur people with sexual deviations.”

SW9: “Ten percent of clients are people with sexual deviance – somebody asks to stamp my heels on their intimate parts, somebody is in the luxury car but asks me not to wash for a week.” And “...most men tend to buy sex if their wives are unable to satisfy their sexual urges.”

Moderators

Five moderators, circumstances that accompany the intention to consume or the actual consumption of sex services, include two related pairs, one involving drugs and alcohol and one involving group dynamics, and also the recognition that of all female sex workers, sbFSW were the most easily accessible.

(1) Alcohol and Drug Use—It has been repeatedly shown (Morrison, McGee, and Rubin 1995) that alcohol and drug use are closely connected with risky sexual behavior, including intimate contacts with sbFSW. Almost every sbFSW mentioned the consumption of alcohol by their commercial partners.

SW 1: “I do not use alcohol. Clients do not often quit [drinking] before intercourse, even in cases when they have to drive.”

MP2: “Men who are drunk are drawn into adventures.”

MP3: “Most often, intoxication leads men to visit sex workers.”

MP4: “In my opinion, it is wrong to think that many men are drinking before sex. Likely, they drink first and sexual desire is the result.”

SW14: “Clients are almost all the time drunk.”

A significant number of sexual contacts with sbFSW in St. Petersburg occur in the context of drug use. Substance use may be part of the client’s ritual when interacting with sbFSW or it may be a result of intimate relationships occurring in the context of shared substance use. In the latter case, a man may not play a single role – as a client or non-commercial partner – but change roles over time in respect to a single FSW. Men counted as “non-commercial” partners of SW very often could be considered pimps who live on the income from the sex work of their female partner.

SW14: “Young people are very often under ‘speed’ [methamphetamine] or butyrate....”

Expert 4: “It makes sense to talk to the clients if they are clean [not intoxicated], but very often they are not.”

SW10: “Clients are drinking alcohol before sexual intercourse very often and this is OK, because this makes it easier to get more money of them.”

SW12: “Very often clients are drunk, but for most of them this influence is positive – they become kinder and that is why the fact that they are drunk is not something repulsive.”

Expert 6: “Husbands and cohabitants of SW – often are [alcohol] drinking people.”

MP1: “Of alcohol, I use vodka and beer about few times a week. Alcohol use very often comes before sex. Partners usually do not drink. Alcohol increases the desire, but decreases sensation during intercourse....”

(2) Drug Markets—There is a strong link in St. Petersburg between drug-related activities and sbFSW. Most of the respondents mentioned the significant role drugs play in making women work the streets, choosing their sexual partners, and structuring their daily reality. It seems a common scenario that when a woman sells sex in order to buy drugs, she also becomes involved in non-commercial sexual relations based on getting illegal drugs through the drug-dealers networks; exchanging sex directly for drugs helps to support a costly addiction.

Expert 2: “Most permanent sexual partners of street sex workers (non-clients) are drug-users.” And, he gave this description of the permanent sexual partner of a sbFSW: “...lives with sex worker under the same roof, has a common budget – very often getting money from the sex worker for drugs, often it is the main reason he is living with her. Often we can see them standing near the sbFSW on the highway, guarding and taking away the money....”

Expert 7: “Husbands and cohabitants of SW, as a rule, are the people living on her account not having jobs or stable income. Very often these are heavy drinkers.”

Expert 8: “Almost every sbFSW has a cohabiting pimp, with whom they came together to use drugs. Husbands are rare – mostly these are not registered marriages.”

Expert 4: “Drug-users themselves are using sex services of a sbFSW – in exchange for [a] dose.”

Expert 5: “Permanent sexual partners could be partners in drug use at the same time.”

SW10: “There is a permanent partner, with whom relations are noncommercial. In the last six months we’ve hardly had sex, just share drugs together.”

(3) Groups of Men—The social groups that men belong to can influence the consumption of commercial sex either as demonstrations of masculinity, as part of group drinking behavior, or in compliance with group norms that allow otherwise socially proscribed behaviors. In cases when such social groups are relatively small, homogenous in gender, and the consumption of sex services is perceived to be acceptable by group norms, the likelihood of members to have contacts with sbFSW is increased. These groups occur on formal or informal bases, such as groups of male friends, company coworkers, or professional units.

MP 7 has been using commercial sex sporadically for about 10 years. He reported first trying it together with a friend.

MP 14: “... a typical situation with a group of heavily liquored up friends walking in the street and picking up sex workers on their way.”

MP 6: “Very often, visits to sex workers are accompanied by drunkenness to foster relaxation in the company of other men.”

(4) Professional Groups—Certain social or professional groups such as cadets, military personnel, sailors, expedition staff, and long-distance truck drivers, because of the external limitations caused by their lifestyle or special regime, have limited access to women and in some cases sbFSW are the most available means to satisfy their needs. Police and army personnel are highly associated with the use of services of sbFSW (Dolmov 2008; Koltashov 2006; Lukov 2005; Sarang et al. 2010). Shumov (2001) concluded that this group is at high risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection. While our data are consistent with past research, we find some differences in the way sex with sbFSW is solicited by members of different groups.

SW 1 reported meeting police on daily basis: “...mostly these are ‘tax’ payments.”

SW 2: “Sometimes I have to provide sex for free to policemen – ‘popadalovo’.” [entrapment]

SW4: “There were cases when I had to give sex services to the policemen, but these were strange people, they presented IDs from other departments.... With law enforcement agencies, it is the payment of a daily ‘tax’.”

Expert 5: “Often SW clients are policemen or naval personnel or cadets.” SW9: “There are a lot of long-distance truck drivers.”

(5) Ease of Access—Inability or unwillingness of a regular partner to have sex with men or absence of a non-commercial partner can lead to a search for easy sexual satisfaction (Crooks and Baur 2005). This can result from men whose regular habits bring them into contact with sbFSW or who access specialized publications. Such materials advertising commercial sex are easily obtained at gas stations and are even proffered at traffic lights. Internet sites and chat rooms that provide information about the availability and characteristics of sex workers linked to specific districts of the city have proliferated. Sex work is very much associated with discrete places such as railway stations, hotels, and tourist districts. A few discreet questions to the staff of tourist services may lead to learning locations and prices of sbFSW.

MP6: “Any man has a right to have his sexual life, after all. sbFSW are convenient for me, because I save time and money. When you try to court a ‘decent’ girl you spend much more,” but with SW, “coming home from work, you can easily release all your tensions, forget your problems, and then just carry on with your life.”

MP 11: “Street-based sex workers are considerably cheaper and easily available.”

Behavioral Patterns

Three common behavioral patterns distinguished among the groups of men who were partners of the sbFSW: mechanisms to contact sbFSW, dangerous or deviant behaviors, and condom use.

(1) Use of Mass Media to Contact sbFSW—As mentioned above, locating sbFSW is straightforward and does not vary significantly in St. Petersburg. The most popular routes are specialized publications, Internet forums and Web sites, and broadsheet advertisements. These resources facilitate learning about and seeking commercial sex while influencing individual attitudes and social norms about sexuality and health risks.

SW10: “...[T]here is a Web site on the Internet, a forum where men discuss our [sex trade] outlet and share impressions about sex workers.”

Expert 7: “...[T]here is a tendency among sex business organizers to place advertisements not in print mass-media materials, but on the Internet.... There are several Internet resources known and popular among users of commercial sex.”

Expert 4: “All of those who buy sex either way are looking through the specialized journals, which are getting thicker every year.” And “it is possible to reach the target group [SW clients] via the Internet, precisely, via the porno sites. There are always forums on such sites, where users discuss street prostitution among other issues, on dating sites also where sex workers [themselves] often give information.”

(2) Dangerous, Deviant, or Violent Behaviors—Viewed from the woman’s perspective, rude or unacceptable behavior, insistence on multiple partners, or overly physical actions can all lead to violence. The criminalization of prostitution makes the sbFSW especially vulnerable to psychological and physical violence. SbFSW tend to have strategies to protect themselves from possible risks, and these strategies are based on shared beliefs and experiences. Most sbFSW admitted little control over situations with a violent

partner. Criminalization results in reliance only on themselves or their surroundings like pimps or cohabitants and rules out normal recourses such as the police (Sarang et al. 2010).

SW10: “I don’t agree to sadistic clients.”

Expert 8: “When it comes to youth, in any way there are aggressive actions. Various deviations in sexual behavior occur approximately in one of 10 cases.”

SW 5 had negative experiences with one-time clients: “[A] couple of times [it] appeared to get [out of control], with the mentally disordered clients.” And also, because of personal experiences, she is afraid of the clients in the ages of 20-25, especially if there are two of them in a car: “I do my best not to go with such guys – they have no sense at all.”

SW9: “Try to avoid contacts with the clients who are on drugs (butyrates, amphetamines) in most cases, because of their unacceptable behavior. Do not work with clients who are rude....”

SW10 has a policy of flat refusal “...to give sex services to young clients under butyrates or speed [amphetamines] and those who are oriented to sadism or anal sex.”

(3) Condom Use—Circumstances and individual experience vary from a “must” to “extra payment for no condom.” Condom use practices to protect sbFSWs’ health are associated with some partners’ demographic characteristics. The sbFSW have varying criteria for deciding when to not use condoms.

SW6: “[T]here are senior men with sexual problems, who are ready to reach an orgasm, particularly, who insist on sex without a condom unless the girl notifies him of HIV-infection and hepatitis C (there are about 10% of such men).”

SW 9: “[I] can agree on sex without a condom with someone over 40, but not with young men.”

SW 8: “Sometimes having sex without a condom with a respectable, married partner.”

SW 12: “I don’t use a condom with someone who is my regular client.”

SW 1: “In rare cases, I agree to oral sex without a condom, for unprotected intercourse I agree only for extra payment and if the client doesn’t have any skin diseases.”

Thus, perceptions and attitudes of the sbFSW toward their clients imply some “typologies” and are supported by descriptions that combine individual experiences with more generalized ideas and beliefs about the clients.

The men themselves demonstrate a broad range of protective or risky sexual practices – from it is something that they must do to “I don’t use condoms as they diminish feeling.” At present, even the experts differ widely on this subject.

Expert 1: “Clients usually insist on not using condoms (no less than in 20% of all commercial sex cases); they do not use condoms because they have no information at all...”

Expert 6: “Non-use of condoms happens in single cases (for extra payment) and practically always is connected with the sexual deviance in clients.”

As indicated by the reports from the sbFSW, there appear to be some tendencies in attitudes, beliefs, and implicit ideas on sex services consumption specific to various risky behaviors. Therefore, more data are needed to fully describe the sexual risk behaviors in St. Petersburg.

Engagement

The relationships that men have with sbFSW vary from a one-time, impersonal sexual contact to close romantic connections and marriage. Ongoing relationships may take on a dynamic character and may or may not change over time. Men may develop different relationships with different sbFSW. Indeed, men may have at the same time different types of relationships with different FSW, for example, sponsoring one woman while maintaining sexual relationships with others. This suggests the need for an engagement scale as an indicator of the familiarity and involvement a man has in relationships with the sbFSW. The simplest categorization yields (1) anonymous or one-time clients, (2) regular clients, (3) sponsorship relationships, and (4) noncommercial relationships. The sbFSW, by and large, see clear distinctions between these four categories.

(1) Anonymous, One-Time Clients

Expert 4: “Every girl has a periodic client – today he is, tomorrow he is not.” SW3: “Almost all the clients are random, who you see for the first and for the last time.”

The anonymous, one-time clients are defined as those who it is felt will never increase the depth of their relationship. SW1, for instance, separates clients into the random and constant ones.

(2) Regular Clients

SW6: “There are permanent clients, who come home and because of that she might not be going to the street for weeks.”

SW6: “Permanent clients are mostly married men, ‘workers.’”

SW9: “About 10 persons are regular clients.”

Expert 4: “...[E]very girl has a list of permanent clients in her cell phone.... When it comes to the SW, every girl has a permanent partner.”

(3) Sponsorship or Other Commercial Relationship

SW14 sometimes stops working in prostitution for a few months if a “sponsor” appears – a permanent client who “gives money to buy drugs for me not to go anywhere. During that time period, he is the only one partner.”

SW3 tells of one case: “There is a regular client who has a family and uses sex services for many years, buying sex from only one SW, giving her a call in advance. Even the days she is not working, he goes to her house and waits for her there in the car to have sex.”

SW6: “Sporadically was living with men, a number of clients who were trying to help to get out of addiction and paid for the treatment, but in a while I broke those relationships and got back to drug use and commercial sex.”

SW7 reported five permanent clients who are obtaining sex only from her. At the current moment, she is “...living at one man’s apartment with him, giving him sex as a payment for rent. I do not use condoms in this relationship.”

4) Non-Commercial Partnerships

SW 3 has a permanent sexual partner, “One guy who is not a client.”

SW5: “The only sexual partner besides clients is a husband, and in sexual relationships with him condoms are not used because of complete trust.”

There are differences of opinion about the attributes of the men who are noncommercial partners. While these relationships are considered permanent, other simplistic characterizations are not always accurate. For instance:

Expert 5: Permanent sexual partners are “husbands, cohabitants, drug-use partners.”

SW14: “There is a civil husband, who is imprisoned now for five years for heroin selling.”

SW 3: “Permanent partner doesn’t use drugs.”

The male partners describe how they view their relationships with sbFSW in similar but slightly less well-defined terms. Many of them have explored different options in their relationships with sbFSW.

MP3: “I tend to visit different girls a few times a month. Difficult to give a true number, about 50. It’s not interesting to have the very same ones.”

MP2: “...never had friendships or trust-based relations with any of them, but did live with the woman who was running the brothel. At the current moment, [I am] dating a girl permanently, [meanwhile] there are sexual contacts with other girlfriends sporadically. With the permanent girl, condoms are not used, but in all other cases they are.”

MP5 has relationships with three sbFSW of whom he is a permanent client. These have gone beyond the bounds of commercial relationships and look more like friendships: they stay to sleep at his apartment, and he often feeds them and offers them good wine.

MP1: “With one of the girls for a while there were short-term relationships on a non-commercial basis. We had a summer vacation together.” But now, “I prefer visiting a new SW each time and do not tend to establish trust-based relationships.”

MP4: “I was a regular client of many sex workers.”

Although previous studies led us to expect that all four categories would be mentioned, most of the data described commercial engagements. The border between commercial and non-commercial relationships appeared very flexible in the case of some periodic or long-standing interactions or deep engagements with the sbFSW. Thus, some of the clients have established single partner commercial relationships with the sbFSW. In some cases this is some sort of sponsorship. There might be marriages in which husbands are also pimps.

Model Construction

In analyzing the data, it appeared that beliefs, attitudes, and behavior described by sbFSW, their partners, and various experts identified a set of four major domains – motivations, moderators, behaviors, and engagement – each divisible into useful although not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. On the other hand, general sociodemographic descriptors offered little utility, distinguishing no sociodemographic group as most likely involved in the consumption of sex services. This finding is in agreement with data from studies of other populations (Raymond 2004; Sawyer and Metz 2009).

Our respondents provided information, revealed through the application of grounded theory, that the relationships among the four domains were neither strictly orthogonal nor discrete. The model that flows from the data suggests that the combination of different aspects of each domain creates a complex set of probabilities that characterize the sexual partners of the sbFSW in St. Petersburg. It is evident that the level of engagement (familiarity, involvement) in a type of relationship with the sbFSW is specified by predominant motivations and moderated in ways that may fix sexual predisposition and behavior and, more specifically, the partner’s strategy in developing relationships with sbFSW. While we suspect, based on our limited dataset, that there is no one set of patterns, we hypothesize that if the relationships between the domains are viewed as a multidimensional matrix, then certain points in the matrix will be found most often and that adjacent points will also be represented creating a cloud-like pattern over the matrix in which a central value is represented most often but that adjacent values may also be commonly found. Based on the domains for sexual partners of the sbFSW descriptions in St. Petersburg, it is possible to suggest some combinations of the characteristics that seem more likely to be found together despite our small sample.

Drug use and street-based sex work are shown to be highly associated with each other in St. Petersburg (Lowndes, Alary, and Platt 2003). Sharing of drugs and associated psychosocial problems like the need to obtain drugs or money, as described by Konings (1996), appear to be additionally moderated by social surroundings that include drug-injecting men who are cohabitants with the sbFSW. Such cases create the dual risk of sexual and intravenous HIV transmission. The role of this group in possible “bridging” of infectious diseases could be estimated taking into account the variety of psychological and behavioral patterns presented within this group.

One intersection across domains that emphasizes growing risks for HIV transmission is the moderating factor of alcohol or drug use for the recreational or sexual relaxation needs.

Special attention in further research could be placed on the sexual practices of young, sexually naïve men that may involve moderators such as special rituals, alcohol, or stimulants including amphetamine or methamphetamine as described by some of our respondents.

Experiences reported by respondents suggested several types of transitions in the engagement between customer and sbFSW: as short term or long term, as the only connection between a particular man and the sbFSW that endures for years, or as a permanent exit for a woman out of the street-based prostitution. In this last case, the sbFSW is perceived by men not as a sex worker, but as a woman, especially in cases when the man has difficulties in establishing relationships with the women via more traditional routes and, therefore, does not have a permanent partner. The border between close emotional and commercial intimate relationships is most diffuse for sponsorships. As we were focusing on sbFSW, we asked about transitions into and out of street based prostitution. In general, such transitions seem common for many of the women, and these, in turn, influence the measures they take to protect their health.

The data provide some support for the hypothesis that the more the sbFSW and the client become engaged with each other, the more unsafe sex they have based on familiarity and a mutual “illusion” of trust, knowledge, and control. Similar behaviors and risks exist for non-commercial partners such as boyfriends, cohabitants, and husbands. On the other hand, one-time sex partners of sbFSW in St. Petersburg are at risk for the transmission of HIV and other infections for reasons that include sharing of drugs, engagement in other unlawful activities, idiosyncratic practices (sexual and personal deviances), and engagement in sexual recreation that promotes cavalier behaviors including unprotected or especially risky sex.

Within given pairs of a man and a sbFSW there may be transitions from one type of engagement to another whereas many sbFSW have several types of engagements simultaneously and a man may be engaged in various ways with different women. This suggests the need to explore in more detail the intensity of the individual engagements and their connection to risk behaviors, motivational drivers, and personal or situational moderators. Such explorations appear eminently possible since through the research described in this report, we have learned that sbFSW themselves were clearly willing to provide the research team with the opportunity to reach the men with whom they are engaged in a range of different relationships.

Discussion

The goal of collecting and analyzing the qualitative data was twofold. First, we sought to create a typology consisting of several domains that contain useful categories for characterizing the partners of sbFSW. Following this, the typology allows hypothesis generation about the degree to which these factors are interrelated for testing in subsequent larger studies. In meeting these purposes, we first constructed a model for the domains and then discuss how the model yields a number of testable hypotheses.

We believe that this model of domains arrayed in a matrix provides strategies for moving subsequent research in a promising direction and that the data imply that strict compartmentalization would not be useful. Our small, qualitative study did not amass enough data to draw firm conclusions beyond alerting us that we need to carefully consider variance in individual behaviors when populating the matrix.

Above and beyond HIV risk, almost every sex worker reported meeting, on a regular basis, men experimenting with deviant and/or violent sexual practices, which are associated with a wide range of high health risks. These men are different from those looking for recreation and companionship. Although these men could belong to any social group, they are reported to have specific interests, and taking this into account, it may be possible to reach them via networks where they share their interests and impressions and look for more possibilities such as specialized publications or Internet sites. Understanding the nexus of health risks and violence requires taking into account complex factors driving sex-seeking behavior towards women in general and sbFSW in particular. From the prevention standpoint, “home-cooked” recipes for self protection and/or ignorance of possible risks have to be addressed specifically and need to be informed by information derived from the model.

On the structural level, the interaction of police and sbFSW creates situations that place the women at risk for a range of physical and emotional harm. Consumption of sex services by police reported by our respondents is consistent with earlier studies (Aral et al. 2003; Atlani et al. 2000). The picture is complicated because prosecution of sex work is associated with sbFSW engagement in other criminal activities. Specifically, in St. Petersburg, where more than 90 percent of sbFSW are intravenous drug users, pimps and drug dealers were common regular sexual partners of FSW (Aral et al. 2005; Crooks and Baur 2005). The sbFSW can be arrested for sex work or drug dealing or possession. Men working both sides of criminalized prostitution – purveyors and police – are using sex services that produce special risks and challenges for prevention. More broadly, there is a substantial literature tying drug addiction to commercial sex work in many parts of the world (Li, Li, and Stanton 2010; Vanwesenbeeck 2001). For example, in Lithuania, Slovakia, Ukraine, and China – countries close to Russia – many women with alcohol or substance abuse problems resort to commercial sex for needed income (Chaplinskas and Mardh 2001; Kang et al. 2011; Kyrychenko and Polonets 2005; Staneková et al. 2004). Our study is among the few that sought to describe the partners of commercial sex workers from the vantage points of the women, medical professionals, and partners themselves. The results suggest a more complicated picture than the usual portrayal of addiction driving sex work, for we have found it not uncommon that their partners’ drug use or dealing are the factors compelling the woman’s involvement in commercial sex.

While the role of sbFWS and their partners in epidemic bridging remains uncertain based on our data, it is clear that more data need to be collected and analyzed, and a specific approach to police engagement is key if prevention programs are to have any impact on health risks, destructive attitudes, and policing practice.

Limitations of the study include a small data set drawn from a convenience sample. However, the sample was purposively assembled and the data analyzed to reach an

understanding of possible approaches to recruit sbFSW sexual partners and ascertain their role as possible “bridge populations” in further research and prevention activities. The creation of the “typology” matrix is a first step towards subsequent research that seeks to generate approaches to intervene to reduce health risks in the sbFSW and their partners. Given the high HIV prevalence in sbFSW, this is a vital step in controlling the HIV epidemic in Russia.

The several types of sbFSW sexual partners that we describe are not the only ones suggested based on the data available. Nevertheless, our findings have identified the basic domains we need to create a typology serving further research. The variety of motivations, moderators, behaviors, and engagements may be expanded or collapsed as more data are collected and analyzed, and this will create the specifics for approaching each type with appropriate preventive message content and character. Possible approaches include specialized publications or online platforms that advertise sex services or collaborations with knowledgeable individuals such as taxi drivers and hotel staff.

Despite the small dataset, it was practical to use grounded theory to explore more implicit “typologies” that sex workers have towards their intimate partners as possibly important background information needed for crafting effective preventive messages and campaign development. More research is needed, however, if we are to understand if this approach will prove helpful in obtaining better access to and learning more from specific classes of partners of sbFSW who might be the “bridge” for further HIV and STD transmission from the core groups to the general population.

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