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Migration, violence, and safety among migrant sex workers: A qualitative study in two Guatemalan communities

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Abstract

Despite reports of high levels of violence among women migrants in Central America, limited evidence exists regarding the health and safety of migrant sex workers in Central America. This study is based on 16 months of field research (November 2012–February 2015), including ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and focus groups conducted with 52 internal and international migrant female sex workers in Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, key transit and destination communities for both international and internal migrants. The analysis explored migration-related determinants of susceptibility to violence experienced by migrant sex workers across different phases of migration. Violence in home communities and economic considerations were key drivers of migration. Unsafe transit experiences (e.g., undocumented border crossings) and negative interactions with authorities in destination settings (e.g., extortion) contributed to migrant sex workers' susceptibility to violence, while enhanced access to information on immigration policies and greater migration and sex work experience were found to enhance agency and resilience. Findings suggest an urgent need for actions that promote migrant sex workers' safety in communities of origin, transit, and destination, and programmes aimed at preventing and addressing human rights violations within the context of migration and sex work.

Keywords

migration; violence; sex work; human rights; Central America

Introduction

In 2013, the stock of international migrants¹ (214 million) and the stock of internal migrants (763 million, living outside their region of birth) together represented 13.95% of the world's population (International Organization for Migration 2013; United Nations Department of

Economic and Social Affairs 2012). Among Latin American and Caribbean international migrants (36 millions), Central American migrants are the most likely to reside outside their region of birth (17 million) - most of whose (16.5 million) intended final destination is North America (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2013).

Historically, civil conflicts across Central America, including the Guatemalan (1960–1997), Salvadorean (1980–1992) and Nicaraguan (1978–1990) civil wars, gave rise to the first mass migrations of Central American migrants to Northern countries such as Mexico and the USA. During this period (1960–1997), thousands of Central Americans, especially Guatemalans, fled to Mexico and the USA (Aguayo et al. 1985; Freyermuth Enciso and Godfrey 1993). Civil conflicts in the region resulted in a number of complex issues that continue to shape migration dynamics in the region, including poverty, social inequality, violence and access to arms (Arana 2005; Menjívar 2006).

In addition to historical civil conflicts, current migration flows in this region are shaped by broader structural factors related to globalization, such as income disparity and gang and drug-related violence (International Organization for Migration 2013; United Nations Development Programme 2014). However, due to the irregular nature of regional migration flows and the ‘fragmented’ nature of migrants’ journeys within the region, accurate data on the number of Central Americans migrating to neighboring countries are lacking (Collyer 2010; Mahler and Ugrina 2006; Ruiz 2001).

Globally and in Central America, women play a large role in migration flows. According to the United Nations, in 2010, women outnumbered men migrating South-North as a share of the total migrant stock (International Organization for Migration 2013; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2012). Women frequently migrate independently to support their family as sole economic providers or in search of social mobility (Zimmerman, Kiss, and Hossain 2011). Economic opportunities for female migrants are often constrained by gender roles and legal barriers related to immigration status, frequently limiting economic options to informal sector jobs (Kanaiaupuni 2000; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Pessar 2005). Despite the overlapping gendered and economic vulnerabilities reported by female migrants in this setting, migrant sex workers’ experiences in Central American settings characterised by high migration and mobility, such as Guatemala, have been rarely documented (Galindo et al. 2013; Morales-Miranda et al. 2013; Ogren 2007; Sabidó et al. 2012).

Given previous research indicating the elevated health and social risks experienced by migrant sex workers in other low- and middle-income settings (Goldenberg et al. 2013; Goldenberg et al. 2011), we undertook this study to better understand the drivers of migration and how migration experiences impact exposure to violence (i.e., the “intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (World Health Organization, 2002: page 5) as well as resilience to violence

¹International migration is defined as the movement of persons who leave their country of habitual residence, to establish themselves either permanently or temporarily in another country. Internal migration is defined as the movement of people from one area of a country to another for the purpose or with the effect of establishing a new residence (International Organization for Migration 2004).

(i.e., depictions of individual agency in the face of structural risks (Smith 2006)) among migrant sex workers. As our analysis aimed to examine the experiences of both internal and international migrant sex workers, the study was conducted in the Guatemalan communities of Tecún Uman and Quetzaltenango, which represent strategic locations for both international and internal migration flows within Guatemala and the broader Central America region (Campos-Delgado and Odgers-Ortiz 2012; International Organization for Migration 2012).

Our analysis of migration-related determinants of violence examined experiences across different phases of migration and was informed by a conceptual framework emphasizing the multi-staged nature of risks across the migration process (Zimmerman, Kiss, and Hossain 2011). Additionally, we drew upon the Theory of Gender and Power to guide and contextualize findings related to the social mechanisms that produce gender-based inequities and disparities (e.g., in women's economic potential), and how these inequities can shape women's vulnerabilities to violence (Connell 1987; Wingood and DiClemente 2000). Incorporating these theoretical perspectives enabled us to recognize the complex links between structural forces, including migration and gendered power, and the ways in which these forces shape migrant sex workers' safety.

Methods

Study setting

Tecún Uman and Quetzaltenango represent strategic locations along Guatemala's main migration corridor and play key roles in patterns of internal, cross-border and transcontinental migration (Campos-Delgado and Odgers-Ortiz 2012; International Organization for Migration 2012). Whereas Tecun Uman represents a common destination and transit community for international migrants, including migrant sex workers, Quetzaltenango is also an important destination for internal migrant sex workers. Guatemala has one of the largest populations of internally displaced people² in Latin America (estimated at 248,500 in 2014), largely due to drug-trafficking associated violence (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2015).

Tecún Uman is located at the border crossing between Mexico and Guatemala. Characterised by the frequent and intense exchange of goods and people, in 2013 it accounted approximately 40% of annual registered entries of people from Guatemala into Mexico (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al. 2013). It is a city of the municipality of Ayutla (Pop: 38,057), located in the *departamento* [state] of San Marcos (Pop: 1,044,667) (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2012b). Central American and internal migrants frequently use this city as a gateway into Mexico and to the USA; it is estimated that transnational migrants comprise at least 50% of Tecún Uman's population (Campos-Delgado and Odgers-Ortiz 2012; Villafuerte-Solís 2007). Due to Tecún Uman's geographic position as a gateway into Mexico, populations passing through the community include those associated with

²Internally Displaced People (IDPs) are persons who have been forced to flee or to leave their places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised State border (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2015).

cross-border trade (e.g., truck drivers, businessmen trading products in Mexico) as well as Mexico's agricultural sector (e.g., mobile agricultural workers who work in Mexico's agricultural fields) (Leyva et al. 2004).

Quetzaltenango, capital of the *departamento* of Quetzaltenango (Pop: 807, 561) is Guatemala's second largest city and is located 1,259 miles from the border (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2012a). As a relatively prosperous city and a tourist destination, it attracts large flows of both internal and international migrants. According to a 2010 estimation report, approximately 775 women between 15–49 years old exchanging sex in Quetzaltenango, making it the department with the third-highest concentration of sex workers in Guatemala. Over half of participants in this study reported migrating for the purposes of sex work, including to Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango. Quetzaltenango has been noted to be a key destination for migrant sex workers largely due to its economic prosperity and its location along a major Northbound transit route (Morales-Miranda et al. 2013; Morales-Miranda, Hernández, and Caal 2010). Both Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango are important destinations for migrant sex workers due to their large number of sex work establishments and the anonymity that sex workers can maintain while working in these communities. In both communities migrant sex workers face high reported rates of violence (Leyva et al. 2004; Morales-Miranda et al. 2013).

In Guatemala, public health regulations require that sex workers in certain work environments (e.g., bars, nightclubs) undergo periodical HIV/STI tests at municipal clinics to maintain a health permit to engage in sex work (Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social Guatemala 2012). According to a free transit agreement between Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua [CA4], migrants are entitled to travel between these countries with their national identification card for up to three months, although they are prohibited from working during their stay (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana 2005).

Data collection

Data collection was led by researchers from University of California, San Diego (UCSD, TR, SG) and staff from an HIV prevention NGO in called the Asociación de Educación para la Vida, (EDUCAVIDA) Tecún Úman. Data for this analysis were drawn from 16 months of field research, including ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., conversations with key actors), as well as focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted with 52 migrant female sex workers. Study activities were approved by IRBs at the UCSD, the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG), and Guatemalan Ministry of Health.

The analysis included 29 migrant sex workers interviewed as part of a study on migration, sex work, and health (November 2012–January 2014), which elicited information on migration and sex work history, interactions with authorities, violence and health. We also analysed the narratives of 23 migrant sex workers who completed interviews or focus groups (n=5 interviews; n=18 participated in focus groups) as part of a study examining ethical issues related to sex workers' health, safety, and research participation (June 2013–February 2014). A number of common questions were asked during both studies, allowing us to examine broader structural issues such as immigration, violence, and human rights across

both studies. Moreover, the same investigative and field team were involved in the collection of data in a similar population across the two qualitative studies, and during the research and analytic process noted how similar evolving themes were emerging in both projects (e.g., migration experiences, interactions with authorities). Thus, this analysis drew on data from both projects to increase our analytic sample and enable us to achieve a better understanding of migrant female sex workers' experiences related to violence and migration in these two cities.

Data collection and knowledge translation were guided by a Community Advisory Board (CAB) of local organisations representing sex workers, women's organisations and the municipal clinic. Eligible participants for this analysis were women 18 years old who had exchanged sex in the last month, were able to provide informed consent, and were Central American internal and/or international migrants. Recruitment for both projects involved unobtrusively inviting potential participants to the study during outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues led by our local community partner organisation, EDUCAVIDA. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling scheme that aimed to capture a diversity of experiences and perspectives (e.g., international and internal migration patterns). The interviews and focus groups followed loosely structured guides, which were iteratively revised as data analysis and collection progressed. All participants completed a questionnaire that was used to describe general socio-demographic characteristics. Data collection also included periodic ethnographic fieldwork, including visits to different sex work venues (e.g., bars, cantinas), and informal conversations with bar owners, police and other community members.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed and translated by trained, bilingual staff at UCSD. Any personal identifiers were removed, and each participant was identified by a unique pseudonym. The software QSR NVivo 10 (NVivo 2012) was used to manage data coding. As data collection progressed, interviews and fieldnotes were analyzed to understand participants' reasons for migration, their migration circumstances and experiences in the sex work context. Experiences that conferred resilience and susceptibility towards violence were explored. Even though we were using different methodological instruments (interviews and focus groups) both projects featured the use of open-ended questions related to migration, violence and other structural determinants, as well as the collaboration of the same organization for the recruitment and data collection process. The coding strategy used for both projects was inductive analysis to identify and compare common themes and patterns across participants (Creswell 2003; Fetterman 1998).

The coding strategy first organised the data according to the major themes that emerged in the transcripts. For the current analysis, information regarding reasons for migration, sex work entry and the contexts associated with migration journeys was grouped and regrouped until a cohesive set of codes emerged to describe the data. Next, these data were more closely examined to analyse the relationship of these migration experiences to sex workers' susceptibility to violence along their migration phases.

Findings

Participants' characteristics

Among the 52 participants, the mean age was 32 years old. Approximately half of participants were internal migrants from different Guatemalan communities, and the remainders were international migrants (from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua). Thirty-two participants were single and nine were in a relationship.

Findings—Participants' reasons for migration included community violence (e.g., gang and drug-related violence), violence from intimate partners, and a desire for improved economic opportunities. Unsafe transit experiences (e.g., travelling through isolated areas to avoid detection/detention) contributed to susceptibility to abuse and insecurity during migration. However, women who had previous migration experience reported circular migration and safer experiences while traveling back to their home communities. Negative interactions with police and immigration authorities (e.g., deportation, extortion for sex) were powerful contributors to migrant sex workers' susceptibility to abuse in destination settings. Experience in sex work and enhanced access to information on immigration policies were identified by participants as protective elements in the destination communities.

Structural drivers of migration

According to the United Nations, in 2012, Central America registered the highest homicide rate in the world (<26.5 per 100,000 population). Honduras occupies the first place (90.4 per 100,000), followed by El Salvador (41.2 per 100,000) and Guatemala (39.9 per 100,000) (Human Rights Watch 2014; United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 2013). Violence experienced within women's interpersonal environments (e.g., intimate partner violence) as well as broader community violence in home countries (e.g., gang extortion) were often described by this study's participants as motivators of migration. For international migrants, threats and extortion by gangs and gang-related violence were often reasons to migrate:

I can't go back there [Honduras] because I have gang issues. They [gang's members] wanted me to be part of them, and I didn't want to... if I had stayed, they would have killed me. [Mercedes, 26 years old, born in Honduras]

In addition to the role of broader community violence in participants' communities of origin, intimate partner and family violence were reported to be important factors that influenced patterns of internal migration, particularly for younger migrants:

My aunt was really bad with me, she didn't send me to school and she used to hit me a lot, one time she broke my legs with a hose. That's when I came here [Quetzaltenango] to [live] with another aunt...I was 15 years old. [Selena, 26 years old, born in Guatemala City]

I suffered a lot with my husband.... he treated me very badly, he would start drinking and get really aggressive, he humiliated me and tried to kill me with a gun... I didn't feel safe at home so I left with my children. [Maria, 44 years old, born in Retalhuleu, Guatemala]

In addition to concerns surrounding violence, women's reasons for migrating from their community or country of origin were often economic. Most participants described their migration as influenced by the need to provide for children, as well as a desire for improved social and economic opportunities. Some women had migrated with the intent of engaging in sex work due to the anonymity provided by working outside one's home community, or knowing that they could earn more money in sex work than in other sectors.

I was born in Nicaragua...I left when I was 17 years old. I came here to Guatemala because life in Nicaragua is really hard; there are no opportunities there. Sometimes people try to find a better life for their families in other countries... and sometimes it has to be doing this [sex work]. [Marlen, 27 years old, born in Nicaragua]

After I got married, my husband died and I was alone with two children. That's when I decided to work [sex work]. I was ashamed to work in my country. That's why I came here to Guatemala. [Celeste, 47 years old, born in Honduras]

Despite the gender-based vulnerabilities participants often faced while migrating as well as structural vulnerabilities faced within the context of sex work, women's agency in seeking out new economic opportunities for themselves and their children, as well as an enhanced sense of autonomy, were also cited as critical motivators for, and outcomes of, migration.

With this [sex work], I have done many things; I have supported my children by myself. My daughter will graduate from college next year and my son is an engineer. [Josefina, 45 years old, born in Honduras]

Unsafe transit experiences: Insecurity and abuse during migration—In order to facilitate their migration to Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango, international migrants (from El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua) often engaged in more clandestine means of migration, motivated by a desire to improve their economic circumstances at their destination. With the exception of those who had migrated during adolescence (Guatemalan immigration law states that persons under 18 years old require accompaniment by a parent/guardian), most participants should have had the opportunity to formally enter Guatemala by showing their home country ID or passport. However, lack of information concerning these policies and fear of being detected by immigration officers led many women to engage in undocumented border crossings (Guatemala-Honduras and Guatemala-El Salvador borders). To avoid detention or deportation by authorities, numerous participants were smuggled across the border or crossed through isolated areas:

I came by myself. I was asking for a ride and they [the truck drivers] brought me here. They hid me inside the truck so they [immigration officials] couldn't see us... and that is how I was able to cross the border to this side [Guatemala]. [Carmen, 26 years old, born in El Salvador]

I came with a girl, she paid for everything, I had to hide in the bus...we crossed through the border [El Salvador-Guatemala] and they [police officers] didn't see me. [Bertha, 35 years old, born in El Salvador]

In some cases, women involved third parties such as smugglers in their undocumented migration. This was common among those attempting to migrate to the USA:

We were going to the United States and the coyote [smuggler] let us there, we already had paid everything but they let us there in the middle of nowhere. We had to come back here [Quetzaltenango, Guatemala]. [Justina, 46 years old, born in Olintepeque, Guatemala]

For internal migrants, vulnerabilities while travelling between cities, such as travelling to an unplanned migration destination or travelling through more dangerous or isolated areas in order to avoid detection by police, were most commonly described among those who migrated as young people:

I left my house when I was 15, I met other girls... and we all wanted to leave [Suchitepéquez]. We were on our way to Guatemala City but the police was asking for identification, so we came to Tecún Úman. [Angela, 26 years old, born in Suchitepéquez, Guatemala]

Unaccompanied migration and transit through isolated areas for young women have been previously shown to entail high vulnerability to abuse, including sexual violence (Bronfman et al. 2002; Shiavon and Díaz-Prieto 2011; Vogt 2013). Participants in this study often described 'fragmented' or non-linear migration patterns, having often moved to or remained in a different community from that which they had originally planned due to external factors (i.e., gangs extortion, unemployment) (Collyer 2007, 2010).

Notwithstanding dangerous experiences during transit, some participants engaged in circular migration between communities or countries (e.g., between home communities and the Guatemalan border with El Salvador and Honduras). This practice was common for both internal and international migrants and typically entailed greater reported safety during transit; this was most common among women with enhanced access to information on immigration policies or who had more migration experience:

I often go see my kids [in El Salvador]. I've been here [Guatemala] for about three weeks, but before that I stayed here for 11 days and then I went back home, I have no issues going to El Salvador and then back here [Guatemala]. [Victoria, 30 years old, born in El Salvador]

Drivers of violence and abuse in destination communities—Participants frequently experienced extortion and abuse of power by government authorities, including the police, immigration officials, and public health inspectors, in destination communities. These forms of abuse typically occurred during raids and other forms of surveillance carried out by police and immigration officials in sex work environments. International migrants were often disproportionately vulnerable to abuse and violence during such interactions, due to the 'double vulnerabilities' they experienced on the basis of their status both as non-citizens and as sex workers:

They [police] always come to the bar and always want to abuse women, they know we are not from here [Guatemala] and they are always taking advantage of us in bars, cantinas everywhere. Sometimes, they rip up our passport so we don't have any documentation...that is because they don't want us here; they want us out of Guatemala. [Alejandra, 25 years old, born in Honduras]

The role of police and immigration authorities in enforcing immigration and sex work regulations within sex work venues were often blurred and overlapping. In this setting, the role of police in the implementation of public health regulations surrounding sex work has been historically institutionalised; for example, police in both communities carry out routine inspections to ensure that sex workers maintain a health card with evidence of recent HIV/STI testing at municipal clinics. In Tecún Úman, sex workers must also have their card stamped and verified by police after each clinic visit. These social mechanisms of abuse of power constrain sex workers' agency surrounding their own health and safety (Rocha-Jiménez et al. 2014; Wingood and DiClemente 2000)

Internal and international migrants often recounted experiences with immigration and police raids at their work establishments, mainly in larger cities (e.g., Quetzaltenango). Raids in Tecún Úman were more sporadic. Typically bar owners were informed (by police) before the raids occurred, so that migrants working in the establishment had the opportunity to avoid detection.

Many women reported extortion, mistreatment, sexual/physical abuse, and other violations of rights by immigration officers and police during deportation and detention proceedings, which often failed to respect due process or occur in a timely manner:

They [immigration authorities] took us as if we were dogs...they took us to a [detention] center, where they had all the migrants, and held us for 18 days...Some officers told us 'if you give us 1,000Q [130 USD] and have sex with us, we'll release you'...We told them that we preferred to be detained than to do that with them. [We said], 'You are officers, you should be more respectful'. [Ana, 36 years old, born in Nicaragua]

However, within this context of structural violence, enhanced access to information on immigration policies and greater experience as a migrant and within the sex industry were found to confer protective strategies for migrants in destination communities:

I have been here [Tecún Úman] so long, and I lie to the police about the place I work; because in a cantina it is not allowed to do sex work. If the police...come and find you they screw you and send you back to your country. But this way they don't mess with me, I'm just working [sex work] and they don't mess with me. [Yoselin, 33 years old, born in Honduras].

Discussion

In this study, participants reported diverse reasons for migration, including the desire to flee from different forms of violence and economic considerations. This echoes the findings of previous studies from other Central American countries (Bronfman, Leyva, and Negroni 2004; Bronfman et al. 2002; Vogt 2013). Reasons for and experiences of migration were shaped by highly gendered vulnerabilities (Arana 2005; Bell 2009; Mahler and Pessar 2003; Musalo et al. 2010) and structural violence (Spener 2008). Our analysis also revealed how enhanced experience and information regarding migration and sex work enabled female migrants to counter structural vulnerabilities within their environment, enabling increased independence and economic mobility in destination communities (Van Blerk 2008).

During the pre-migration, transit, and destination phases, migrant sex workers were frequently subjected to various forms of violence, abuse, and human rights violations. Indeed, our findings add to a growing body of research highlighting the severity and context of gender-based violence experienced by women and girls in Central America (Gherardi 2012; Hurtado and Frías 2010; Watts and Zimmerman 2002). There is need for larger studies across Central American countries that comprehensively analyse the implications of different types and drivers of violence within each country (e.g., drug-related violence moving into Guatemala from Mexico).

Our findings suggest that the risks attributed to the structural environment surrounding sex work (e.g., susceptibility to police abuse) (Decker et al. 2015) may be compounded by migrant status. This was found to be true for both internal and international migrants (Cuadra and Marsal 2004). While our analysis included both internal and international migrants' experiences in order to more comprehensively consider migration-related determinants of violence for sex workers in, it also revealed the ways in which risks may be exacerbated among international migrants who often face enhanced vulnerabilities, such as the threat of deportation, related to immigration status (Servan-Mori et al. 2013; Vogt 2013).

Women's testimonies suggests that restrictive migration policies, combined with limited opportunities in their countries of origin, led them to engage in clandestine migration journeys (Bustamante 2009; Carreón-Diez et al. 2006; Casillas 2008; Collyer 2010; Cornelius and Lewis 2007). The implementation of immigration policies and the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers were linked to the abuse of power and the violence committed by public authorities. Despite the structural vulnerabilities characterising this context (e.g., inequities in gender and power; gang and drug-related violence), testimonies of resilience also emerged within international and internal migrant women's experiences. Previous studies in different settings have elucidated the ways in which sex workers' efforts to organise or advocate against abuses (e.g., lying or bribing police to avoid arrest) are commonly employed by sex workers to counter structural violence within the work environment (Biradavolu et al. 2009; Scorgie et al. 2013).

Our study participants highlighted the importance of providing migrants with appropriate support and resources (e.g., information about migration policies), especially for recent migrants. Additionally, they expressed their interest in peer-based education, particularly among women with more migration and sex work experience. Despite the multitude of migration-related vulnerabilities documented, we found that even among women who were aware of the risks associated with migrating through this region, some chose to embark on or to continue their journey despite such challenges. Prior studies suggest that this is linked to economic drivers, including the need to support dependents, as well as violence in communities of origin (Bell 2009; Servan-Mori et al. 2013). This evidence suggests that policies implemented to discourage migration may not be effective for marginalised women in Central America in the absence of efforts to address broader structural needs. Migration policies and interventions rooted in a human rights' approach and which acknowledge women's agency and resilience in the migration process remain essential (Scorgie et al. 2013; Zimmerman, Kiss, and Hossain 2011). Moreover, consideration of the complex experiences and structural exposures that influence migrant sex workers' safety and well-

being should be pillars of policies and programmes to prevent violence among female migrants and sex workers (Baral et al. 2012; Gupta et al. 2008; Zimmerman, Kiss, and Hossain 2011).

Strengths and limitations

Although our sample size does not permit generalisation of findings to a wider population, the testimonies provided by this study offer key contextual data regarding Central American sex workers' migration experiences and their consequences within the Guatemalan context. While women interviewed in Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango were often highly mobile and often described features of local and regional sex work and migration contexts in other Guatemalan cities (e.g., Guatemala City, Suchitepéquez), our qualitative study design and sampling in these two sites does not permit generalisations about all female sex workers' experiences in Guatemala or elsewhere. Whereas interactions between sex workers and police have been better-studied internationally (Decker et al. 2015), few studies have gathered empirical evidence regarding migrant sex workers' interactions with immigration authorities, which was a crucial source of structural vulnerability for participants in this study. Given the small number of participants who reported experience or intentions to migrate to the USA, further research on this issue is needed. Lastly, given that this study included data from two different projects, one of which was not designed *a priori* to explore issues of migration and violence, these issues may have been under-represented and warrant further mixed-methods research.

Conclusions

Findings of this study reveal the importance of violence and economic factors as drivers of international and internal migration among migrant women engaged in sex work in Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Participant testimonials highlight the ways in which restrictive, and often corrupt, immigration and law enforcement policies negatively impact migrant sex workers' safety and undermine human rights during and following migration.

These findings elucidate the disconcerting extent to which the response to these vulnerabilities is hampered by rights abuses by government authorities, which constitutes a pressing health and safety crisis. Our results also illuminate how women's networks and increased access to information in destination settings (e.g., information on interacting with police and immigration) increase opportunities for resilience and protective strategies in the face of structural violence. Actions to promote migrant sex workers' ability to share and access appropriate and timely information on immigration and sex work issues (e.g., legal information on immigration policies, public health regulations surrounding sex work) in transit and destination communities are recommended. Programmes and policies to support the safety and well-being of migrant sex workers should address structural determinants such as poverty and diverse forms of violence (e.g., community, familial) in communities of origin, transit, and destination (Goldenberg 2015). Interventions that acknowledge and build upon the resilience and agency of migrant sex workers – such as working with local organisations that advocate for the human rights and strengthening local networks of migrant sex workers themselves – are strongly recommended.

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Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of Central American migrant sex workers (N=52) in Tecún Úman and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

Measure	N
Age, mean (min, max)	31 (20–47)
Civil Status	
• Single	32
• Married/Partnership	9
• Widowed	7
• Divorced	4
Country of Origin	
El Salvador	10
Honduras	11
Guatemala	27
Nicaragua	4
Recruitment site	
Tecún Úman	38
Quetzaltenango	14
Migration Status	
• International migrant with home country ID or passport *	18
• Undocumented international migrant **	7
• Internal migrant	27
Level of education	
• None	6
• Some primary school	21
• Finished primary school	11
• Some secondary school	2
• Finished secondary school	5
• Some preparatory school	1
• Finished preparatory school	6
Place where women engage in sex work	
• Entertainment venues (bars, night clubs)	29
• Informal venues (cantinas)	6
• Independent or mobile (hotels, rented rooms)	17

NOTE: All numbers refer to the number (N) of participants, unless otherwise stated.

* Refers to authorised entry into Guatemala under the CA4 agreement (lack of work authorization).

** Refers to foreign-born participants who reported not having any type of immigration document.