

article

'If this isn't for my children, who is it for?'

Exploring experiences of structural violence among migrant mothers who sell sex in Johannesburg

Rebecca Jane Walker, bexjwalker@gmail.com

African Centre for Migration and Society, Johannesburg, South Africa

This article examines the vulnerabilities and forms of structural violence experienced by migrant mothers who sell sex. In Johannesburg, migrant sex workers face multiple vulnerabilities including abuse, discrimination, criminalisation, and many levels of violence, directed particularly at non-nationals. For migrant mothers selling sex, these vulnerabilities increase as they balance the responsibilities of providing for their dependants with the risks and challenges that selling sex entails. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with cross-border migrant women, this article explores their difficulties in accessing healthcare, in finding accommodation, widespread stigmatisation and xenophobia. The article argues that to develop a greater understanding of women who are migrants, who sell sex and who are mothers, there is a need to further explore the challenges that they face as well as the multiple roles negotiated in everyday life.

key words sex work • structural violence • mothers • South Africa • migration • urban spaces

To cite this article: Walker, RJ (2017) 'If this isn't for my children, who is it for?' Exploring experiences of structural violence among migrant mothers who sell sex in Johannesburg, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol 6, no 2, 291–306, DOI: 10.1332/204674317X14861128573280

Introduction

Migrant mothers who sell sex in Johannesburg face multiple vulnerabilities and forms of structural violence on a daily basis. These include discrimination within the healthcare and education systems, challenges finding affordable and safe accommodation, and a lack of access to childcare and support services. In addition, they encounter widespread stigmatisation and xenophobia directed at non-national individuals who sell sex, particularly women who have children and/or are pregnant. It is these experiences of encountering structural violence, and in turn what this means for how migrant mothers perceive themselves as mothers and as women who sell sex, that are the focus of this article.

Currently, all aspects of sex work in South Africa are criminalised under the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957 (last amended in 2007), including the buying and selling of sex, pandering and running of brothels. In this article sex work is defined as ‘the exchange of sexual services for financial reward’ (Gould and Fick, 2008: 39) and involves adult, consensual sex. It does not include trafficking or the sexual exploitation of children. Sex work in South Africa and globally is an extremely contentious issue, and is often understood through a simplistic and polarised debate in which sex work is either regarded as a form of violence against women or recognised as a legitimate form of work (Weitzer, 2000). Where the first approach focuses on exploitation and victimisation (cf Barry, 1995; Farley, 2003), the second focuses on choices made (albeit sometimes constrained) to sell sex, and the push and pull factors involved (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998; Weitzer, 2000; Busza, 2004; Kempadoo, 2005; Agustín, 2006, 2007).

While an increasing body of research and advocacy work highlights the complex and nuanced ways in which the multiple dimensions and experiences of the sex industry can be understood – for example, as both exploitative and empowering (cf Connelly et al, 2015) – the essentialist and polarised discourse continues to frame and limit discussions around sex work. This is illustrated in South Africa through the pro- and anti-sex workers’ spaces. The pro-sex worker space upheld largely by the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and Sisonke,¹ a sex worker movement run by sex workers for sex workers, is directed by a campaign for the decriminalisation of sex work and for the recognition and protection of the human rights of those involved in the industry. Meanwhile the anti-sex worker space opposes this perspective by arguing that all sex work is inherently violent and exploitative, and by commonly conflating human trafficking with sex work² (cf Walker and Oliveira, 2015).

Despite these limitations, there is a small but growing body of research documenting the complex realities of sex workers, including migrant women selling sex in South Africa (cf Gould and Fick, 2008; Gould, 2011; Vearey et al, 2011; Richter et al, 2012; Walker and Oliveira, 2015). These, in turn, fit with a larger global picture of the vulnerabilities and risks faced by women selling sex, particularly in criminalised contexts. Such vulnerabilities include gender-based, interpersonal and behavioural violence (attacks from clients, abuse by the police or members of the public etc), and structural violence experienced in the form of police and client harassment and brutality. Barriers to healthcare, HIV testing and treatment, anti-foreigner sentiments from service providers and problematic access to documentation and socio-legal services have also been widely reported (cf Busza, 2004; Kempadoo, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Agustín, 2007; Weitzer, 2010a; Global Commission on HIV and the Law, 2012; Richter and Vearey, 2016). In recognising these complex realities and multiple forms of vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers, such research importantly troubles the lines drawn around sex work, and asks questions about many of the interrelated issues that are less understood. These include how sex work and selling sex, migration and motherhood shape one another, and how forms of structural violence encountered are thus heightened. Therefore, in this article, while acknowledging the inherent risks of sex work created by the context of illegality and police brutality, the focus is on the less recognised experiences of structural violence.

Structural violence here refers to less visible forms of violence that are experienced through societal structures, relationships, ideologies and in various forms of social life on an everyday basis (cf Bourgois, 2010: 19). Given that experiences of structural

violence are generally indirect and considered as 'normalised conditions of existence' rather than 'violent acts', they can be all the more insidious and damaging (Bourgois, 2010: 19). Therefore, in this article, structural violence offers a lens through which the experiences of women who sell sex, who are also mothers, and migrants (often undocumented), can be explored. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with cross-border migrant women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe and Mozambique who are all mothers to young children and who sell sex on a regular basis, this article explores such encounters with and experiences of structural violence including access to healthcare, housing, discrimination and stigma directed specifically at mothers who sell sex.

The distinction between 'sex work' and 'women who sell sex' is crucial here as it highlights the different and often contradictory ways in which the women who participated in this study saw themselves and related to the label of 'sex worker'. While this is explored in greater detail further on in the article, at this point it is important to highlight the fact that of the 10 women interviewed, none identified as 'sex workers'. All preferred to emphasise the temporary nature of selling sex, and described it as one livelihood strategy among others employed to enable them to provide for their children. This also hints at the politicisation of the term 'sex worker' in South Africa, and the fact that not all those who sell sex are comfortable with claiming such a label and its connotations. Further, this highlights women's conceptions of their roles as mothers, and their belief that they sold sex in order to be 'good mothers', despite frequently being labelled as 'bad mothers' (Dodsworth, 2012: 100). While little is known about sex workers who are mothers, the limited research available indicates that many women sell sex in order to support their families (Basu and Dutta, 2011; Dosworth, 2012). This finding is also reflected in the narratives presented in this article, which suggest that motherhood and selling sex should be viewed in terms of the ability of mothers to provide for their children and the challenges they encounter in doing so, challenges shaped by structural violence directed especially at non-nationals and women who sell sex.

Therefore, in considering the experiences of migrant mothers who sell sex in Johannesburg, this article suggests that the vulnerabilities and forms of violence encountered should be understood within the context of discrimination, stigmatisation and abuse directed at non-national mothers who sell sex. While recognising that there are specific risks and forms of violence within the sex industry, the article argues that to focus only on these, or to treat selling sex and violence as synonymous, is to overlook the broader and more complex framework of structural violence. It is through this framework that the everyday experiences of women who are non-nationals, who are mothers, and who sell sex are often shaped. A shift in focus, it is suggested, would thus enable a recognition of the multifaceted and layered lives of migrant mothers who sell sex, lives that move through, around and counter the structures of violence, and lives that are far more than just their experiences of violence or selling sex.

The first section of the article begins by describing the methodology of the research, placing it within the context of the findings of research on migration and sex work in South Africa, and highlighting some of the main risks and vulnerabilities faced by migrant sex workers. It then draws on the narratives of the women interviewed for the research to outline their everyday experiences of being migrant mothers and selling sex in Johannesburg. These are looked at in the second section in relation to work in the informal sector, access to housing, challenges accessing healthcare and abuse from

police. Through these issues, the importance and struggles of being a mother when also a non-national and selling sex become apparent. This is then explored further in the final section, which looks at the relationship between mothering, being a migrant and selling sex. In commenting on how the three aspects of identity intersect and shape one another, it also shows how migrant mothers themselves grapple with their identities and especially the assumption that they are not ‘good mothers’ (Dodsworth, 2012: 100). In conclusion, I argue that any consideration of sex work and selling sex in relation to violence needs to take into account the complex and multilayered vulnerabilities and forms of structural violence faced by migrant mothers who sell sex, and how they counter them.

Methodology

The research for this article is drawn from a project that focused on the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by migrant sex workers in Johannesburg.³ A central concern of this research was to engage with women in the inner city who sold sex, but who had not been a part of any other sex work-related research in Johannesburg and/or were not connected to the local sex worker movement, Sisonke. This was in order to better understand the less visible and documented experiences of selling sex in the city, and in particular, to understand why many cross-border migrant women did not use the term ‘sex worker’.

As Richter and Vearey (2016: 268) note, in South Africa there is a significant overlap between sex work and migration. While the overall number of sex workers in South Africa is unknown, it is estimated that there are between 131,000 and 182,000 male, female and transgender sex workers in South Africa, or between 0.76% and 1% of the adult female population (Konstant et al, 2015). Of this number, research suggests that the majority are internal or cross-border migrants. A study conducted at four sites in South Africa during the 2010 FIFA World Cup, for example, showed that more than 85% of female sex workers had migrated from their place of birth, with 39% being internal migrants and 46% cross-border migrants (Richter et al, 2012). Furthermore, where migrants experienced some advantages compared to their non-migrant counterparts – including higher education levels and earning more money per client – they also reported facing high levels of risk and violence, in particular, abuse and brutality from the police, challenges accessing healthcare and less frequent condom use (Richter et al, 2012).

It was within the context of multiple vulnerabilities that I sought to interview migrant women who sell sex in order to understand their everyday experiences and lived realities. However, given the hidden nature of selling sex in a criminalised and highly stigmatised context, locating research participants who were willing to engage with such research was not easy (cf Shaver, 2005). I relied on the snowballing method to build up contacts, and worked through informal networks established in previous research with migrant women in Johannesburg (Walker and Clacherty, 2015). However, this approach was also challenged by the fact that it was not always easy to maintain contact with participants (some changed phone numbers during the research process and others simply disappeared). Participants were also quite often fearful of talking and sharing personal information. I therefore began the research with one contact, Heather (pseudonym), a 24-year-old woman from the DRC, whom I had met while working at a women’s shelter in Johannesburg from 2011–13. Heather had talked

about her challenges of surviving as a migrant in the city of Johannesburg, and how she had begun selling sex at the age of 18 to pay rent. Heather then connected me to Amy, a 26-year-old mother of four also from the DRC, who then introduced me to other women she knew who sold sex. In total I worked with a group of 10 women over a period of 24 months. Seven of the women were from the DRC, two from Zimbabwe and one from Mozambique.

The advantage of working with a relatively small group meant that I could build relationships with the respondents, and crucially, over time, gain their trust. I was also able to explore issues in depth and discuss sensitive and often difficult topics with the participants, which would not have been possible with a larger sample. However, it is also important to recognise the limitations of both using a snowball sample and a sample that is relatively small. Snowball sampling meant that I relied on an already established contact and personal referrals to access further contacts, thus limiting my research to a specific network of women, and possibly precluding other informants who may have provided different perspectives (Creswell, 2003; Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Bryman, 2012). That having been said, the snowball process does not necessarily mean that all participants represent the same experiences or perspectives, or that they interact or influence one another (Neuman, 2014). Moreover, while generalisations about migrant mothers who sell sex cannot be made from a sample of 10, the research can provide an important insight in and of itself, and offer a platform from which specific key issues and perspectives can be highlighted and further research directed.

Of the women interviewed, all were over the age of 18 and all had made a choice (albeit often against a very limited range of options) to enter the sex industry. All participants also had young children, reflecting findings by Richter et al (2012), that migrant sex workers often have dependants: in the World Cup study it was found that non-migrants had a median of two dependants, internal migrants three dependants, and cross-border migrants four dependants (Richter et al, 2012). The women were all single parents; eight supported their children in Johannesburg while one had left her children with her mother in the DRC and another had sent both her children back to Zimbabwe just after birth. All the women were undocumented (most had arrived on asylum permits that had now expired), and this meant that the vulnerabilities that they faced as non-nationals were compounded by the risks they endured through residing in South Africa illegally.

Given the criminalisation of sex work and the importance of anonymity, the women were given the option to use pseudonyms and to opt out of the research at any time. Interviews were conducted in private and held in a neutral space away from the participant's home and work areas. Each participant was also compensated with a food voucher or airtime for their time and any potential loss of earnings. All of the women were proficient in English, so, given the sensitivity of our conversations, translators were not used. Interviews were also not recorded. It was clear from the first few interviews that the women felt uncomfortable speaking with a recorder on, and so notes were taken. Transcripts were then read a number of times to identify prominent themes and categories. Interviews were loosely structured with basic questions directed at exploring how the women came to be living in Johannesburg, what forms of work (including selling sex) they had been/were involved in, and the kinds of challenges that they faced, for example, in regard to accessing healthcare and supporting their children. The women were never directly asked whether they sold sex, but instead, the questions were open enough as to allow this information

to be shared, if and when they felt comfortable in doing so. Moreover, because the research explored multiple forms of vulnerabilities encountered, the intention was to avoid fixing sex work as the framing topic, but to see how it shaped other everyday experiences and vulnerabilities.

Ethical clearance for this article was provided by the University of Witwatersrand,⁴ and guidance on ethical issues was drawn from a body of research carried out with sex workers and migrants in Johannesburg at the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS). However, the nature of this kind of research with women living in very marginal and precarious contexts means that many complex and context-specific ethical issues are encountered. For example, some participants had expectations of support and employment, while others had immediate and often very urgent needs – including health and accommodation problems. Moreover, my perceived position of privilege and knowledge made for assumptions concerning my access to support and this also complicated the maintenance of ethical boundaries, and at times even knowing where those boundaries should lie. Such issues and research challenges reflect the specific context of life in Johannesburg, where there is little structural support available to women in extremely marginal situations – especially those who are non-nationals and sell sex – and where everyday life is precarious and often risky for the majority of the population (Walker and Oliveira, 2015).

Structural violence in the city

Migration and the informal economy

All of the women interviewed stayed in and around the inner city of Johannesburg. Located in the Gauteng Province, Johannesburg hosts the largest proportion of South Africa's migrant population, and it is estimated that 35% of the population originate from other areas of South Africa (internal migrants), and approximately 7% were born in another country (Statistics South Africa, Census, 2011: 20–1). While the focus of this article is on cross-border migrants, the number of internal migrants is important to note as it highlights the significance of different kinds of migration and mobility within and across South Africa. This point also challenges the common misconception that Johannesburg is over-saturated with cross-border migrants, a misconception that fuels negative stereotyping, and xenophobic and anti-foreigner sentiments (Wilkinson, 2015).

An increasingly restrictive immigration regime combined with increasing unemployment figures and xenophobia means that many migrants are unable to enter formal workspaces, and therefore find that they have to engage in different kinds of informal livelihood strategies, including selling sex (see Vearey et al, 2011; Richter et al, 2012). Meanwhile, the lack of regulation of the informal sector means that workers are easily exploited and face a number of vulnerabilities (see Devey et al, 2006). These increase when the work is in the sex industry (Gould and Fick, 2008; Richter et al, 2012). Patricia, a 25-year-old mother from Zimbabwe, for example, described how she tried to find work when arriving in Johannesburg, and the forms of exploitation that she faced:

'I was looking for work so I moved to Hillbrow.⁵ I found a job in a restaurant but because I didn't have papers they treated me very badly. They didn't pay

me, I just got tips. I worked there for one year and six months. Then they told me to leave so I started work in another place. I still didn't have papers so I lost that job. I then worked one month in a pizza place. They didn't pay me after one month. They said I couldn't do anything without papers. They didn't care. So that's when I started the prostitution job.' (Patricia, Zimbabwe, 20 October 2014)

The significance of this narrative, which also echoes the experiences of many of the other women interviewed, is not so much about the moment at which Patricia started to sell sex, but rather that it highlights the various other routes she followed to find work and the vulnerabilities, including forms of exploitation, that she faced in doing so. Similarly, Miriam (age 26) from the DRC described how she started selling sex to make money in the DRC. Unable to find other work once in Johannesburg, she again turned to selling sex to supplement her income:

'I ran away [from home] at 16 years to find money. So then I started to get money for sex. I was 17 when I had my first child. Then when the child was four years – the same situation [she had another baby].... I needed to travel so I left – no family there. I found one driver and he sent me to Zambia. Then from there I came to South Africa. To get to Musina⁶ I gave the driver sex.... [I]n DRC people said Jo'burg is nice, there is money – they tell me they like slim bodies there so I will get money. But when I come here – it's not like that. I came no English – one friend from South Africa she told me English words.... I told her I wanted to model. She went with me to a modelling agency. They were keen but they wanted English speaking and R1000.00. Then I decided to do the [sex] work again as I needed money. I had to pay rent ... later I found work in a bar. It's owned by a Congolese man. I work there and then I find the men after work. The pay is little at the bar but with the men I can earn more and send back to my kids...'

(Miriam, DRC, 20 December 2013)

Miriam's story, like Patricia's, demonstrates the many complex realities of migrating to South Africa and the choices she made about selling sex, in the context of many constraints and blocked opportunities. While highlighting the fact that selling sex can emerge as the most viable option when other avenues for work have failed, the narratives also show that Miriam and Patricia were not forced into selling sex, as many proponents of the sex work 'rescue' industry would argue (cf Walker, 2015). Furthermore, Miriam's story is also shaped by her responsibilities as a mother and how she negotiates the city in order to earn money to send home to support her children. As with many of the women I interviewed, the need to provide for their children determined their decisions around earning money.

Access to housing

In addition to exploitation at work, one of the common vulnerabilities faced by the women was in relation to finding safe and affordable accommodation. Heather described what happened when she couldn't pay her rent:

'I came back from the doctor to find the door [of her flat] locked and boarded. They [the landlord] took all my stuff and his [her son's] clothes and toys and kept them. I had to go stay with a friend. I can't get anything back until I pay the money.' (Heather, DRC, 5 December 2013)

Heather had come to South Africa at the age of 12 after fleeing the conflict in the DRC. After spending months working on a farm in Zambia, her elder brother paid a truck driver to help Heather and her sister cross into South Africa so that they could stay with a relative in Johannesburg. As a teenager, Heather sold sex as a way of paying rent and providing for her son, born in 2012. During 2013, she moved eight times, usually due to being unable to pay the rent. The majority of places she rented were very small rooms (subdivided from a larger room) and cost between R2000–3,000 per month.⁷ For migrants, especially non-nationals, housing in inner-city Johannesburg is extremely problematic, with over-charging by landlords, over-crowding and poor facilities (Greenburg and Polzer, 2008). As Amy also describes:

'If I can find one [a job] then I could stay in a good place. But I can't work and I need to look after them [her children] ... so we are always looking for a place... but these places are not nice and too much [money].' (Amy, DRC, 5 December 2013)

Helen, a 30-year-old mother of one from the DRC, had also explained the many problems she experienced in finding a safe place to live with her children:

'You ask and they [friends] tell you it's safe – you can go there – but when you go and the people there, they see you and you have children and you are a foreigner then they say no ... they don't want you because they say you make noise, you make problems.' (Helen, DRC, 7 December 2013)

I asked Helen what she did when she was turned away from accommodation. The following exchange highlights how she negotiated the vulnerabilities she faced and made her situation work for herself and for her children:

- Helen: 'I look again and if I find a place that will take me and the kids then I put the kids there and go out to get the money. I have to leave the kids so I can get the money to pay rent.'
- RW: 'So the children stay alone?'
- Helen: 'They have to ... they play.'
- RW: 'What about finding a women's shelter or somewhere that can offer you support? Is that available?'
- Helen: 'There is nothing. I tried a shelter but they told me I can't bring all the kids. They don't want the boy there in the women's shelter ... but I need to be with my kids.'
- RW: 'So then, when you do find a place to stay, how do you pay the rent?'
- Helen: 'If I find them [clients] then I can. But then the problem ... the other people staying there – they hear what I do and then the talk. They say bad things. They say I am [a] bad, bad person.'

That I shouldn't have kids ... but what do I do? I need to pay rent. The kids are inside.' (DRC, 7 December 2013)

Helen's description of the multiple vulnerabilities she faces when trying to find accommodation and provide for her children reveals the challenges that migrant mothers who sell sex face on a daily basis. Where Helen is discriminated against for being a non-national, she is also judged for selling sex and, due to a lack of support and provision for women and children, forced to take risks by leaving her children so that she can make money to pay the rent. Previous research has shown that there is very little support for women and children in Johannesburg, with the limited sheltered accommodation constantly full and also often unwilling to take male children with their mothers (Walker and Clacherty, 2015). Therefore, alongside the other examples here, a picture of multiple forms of vulnerabilities and structural violence is clear.

The context of migration in the city means that non-nationals must negotiate and strategise around restrictions and unsafe spaces, and for mothers who are non-national and who sell sex, these restrictions are further increased. The discrimination and stigmatisation shaped by what they do and how they are seen by others is also revealed in the discussion below concerning accessing to healthcare and abuse by the police.

Abuse in the healthcare system

One form of violence that emerged prominently in the interviews was in relation to discrimination and abuse within the public healthcare system. While research has shown that South African nationals also face discrimination at times in healthcare facilities, it is clear that it is overwhelmingly non-nationals who are the recipients of maltreatment and who struggle with access, over-charging and abuse when accessing treatment (Vearey et al, 2011). Additionally, abusive and unethical treatment of sex workers by healthcare providers in South Africa and elsewhere has also been noted, with studies confirming that sex workers' negative experiences with healthcare services act as a barrier to effective treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STI) and care (Khonde and Kols, 1999; Pauw and Brener, 2003; Binagwaho et al, 2010; Richter et al, 2011; Stadler and Delany, 2013). In bringing together the experiences of migrants and sex workers it is clear that the forms of abuse and maltreatment are heightened.

Christa, who came to South Africa from the DRC in 1999, described her experience of giving birth at a hospital where the nurses slapped her and referred to her as *kwerekwere* (a negative term commonly used to denote non-nationals in South Africa) while she was in labour: "[T]hey told the staff not to give food to me and another lady who was from Nigeria and said that food was not for foreigners" (Christa, DRC, 5 December 2013). Nursing staff also refused to clean her stitches and treat her child for jaundice. Patricia also described being charged R2000 to deliver her baby and subsequently being mistreated by healthcare professionals when she gave birth. As she stated:

'I was bleeding heavily and losing consciousness and this doctor kept telling me "you Zimbabweans do this on purpose – you come here get pregnant and drink stuff to make your babies come early – you make problems for us." The blood kept coming and this doctor didn't explain to me the problem. He just kept pushing his hand inside and it was so painful. I had no one

there with me and only the cleaner came to see if I was okay.' (Patricia, Zimbabwe, 16 September 2014)

What Patricia and other women highlighted in these narratives was not how they were mistreated for selling sex, but for being non-nationals and especially, expectant mothers. Patricia had added, "If they knew what I do, they would probably have let me die" (Patricia, Zimbabwe 16 September 2014).

In another incident, Robin from the DRC who is living with HIV, was denied access to anti-retroviral medication (ARVs) for both herself and her three-year-old daughter despite the fact that, according to the law, ARV treatment is free to all who reside in South Africa, regardless of documentation (cf Vearey et al, 2011). Robin had been turned away from three clinics for being undocumented. After numerous visits to a government clinic, and working through personal contacts in the clinic, Robin and her daughter were finally given counselling and put on ARV treatment.

Police and 'bad mothers'

Abuse by the police was a common issue that arose during interviews. During one interview, Robin, a 22-year-old from DRC, showed me her little finger on her left hand that was bent to one side: "this was by the police", she told me "the police can pick you up at anytime, they know if you don't have ID then you are more scared and they can do what they like" (Robin, DRC, 15 April 2014). Christa also stated that when she would visit clubs for the purpose of finding clients the police would often be waiting outside. "They would ask for my ID and when I said I don't have one they would put me in the van and take me to the station." She recounted one time over Christmas when she had left her young baby at home with a friend and had gone out to a club. "I went to have a good time not to work", she explained,

'But they know my face. They took my picture before so then they come [the police] and arrest me and they take me to Sun Hill [police station]. I was crying and pleading with them to let me go. I told them I have a small baby at home and the babysitter cannot stay. So they say you must not do this when you have a child. They asked me what kind of mother are you? This is not what good mothers do. Then they let me go.' (Christa, DRC, 15 April 2014)

Where police harassment and the threat of arrest are ever-present realities in the lives of individuals who sell sex in South Africa (Scorgie et al, 2012: 1), for Christa the specific judgement in this situation was based on her being a migrant mother who sells sex. The policeman's question, "What kind of mother are you?" and the comment "[T]his is not what good mothers do" reflects common perceptions that migrant women who sell sex are violating normative ideas of women's role in the home and of their so-called 'purity' by destroying family structures (cf Palmary, 2010: 51; Basu and Dutta, 2011; Duff et al, 2014; Shah, 2014). Moreover, it relates directly to beliefs that women who sell sex cannot be 'good mothers' (Dodsworth, 2012: 100). Yet, as shown throughout this article, the very reason the women interviewed sell sex is in order to provide for their children, and, as the next section shows, where they face challenges it is not only because they sell sex, but because this fact, combined with

their identities as migrants and as mothers, heightens the web of structural violence encountered at multiple levels.

"If this isn't for my children, who is it for?" Selling sex and being a mother

The final section here explores the relationship between motherhood, being a migrant and selling sex. In particular it looks at two interrelated issues – the significance of labelling and not being called a 'sex worker', and the impact of managing a series of identities and roles including, crucially, that of a migrant mother who sells sex. As previously noted, none of the women interviewed in this study identified as sex workers. All highlighted selling sex as a viable livelihood strategy determined by flexible hours, better pay than other informal work and no need for documentation or formal qualifications (cf Gould, 2011; Oliveira and Vearey, 2015). However, they also clearly described selling sex as a temporary strategy. As Amy noted, "I have to pay rent so I have to get the money ... later I will do something else.... If this isn't for my children who is it for?" (Amy, 20 April 2015). The prioritising of motherhood here in terms of being able to provide resonates with Basu and Dutta's (2011) research in which they report that Indian sex workers assert being 'mothers first' before sex workers, and that they expressed a strong desire and dedication to raising their children.

The notion of temporality – and that selling sex was a strategy used in the present moment to get by – also reflects the caution expressed by the women around identifying as a sex worker and aligning with other sex workers. Many of the women were ambivalent about selling sex, and their narratives showed that they did not recognise it as a legitimate form of work, but as something that helped them to earn money in difficult times. As Miriam stated:

'When I do it, I say to God I am doing it for the money – for my life. It's not a nice job but if God provides then I am not wrong. Some do jobs because they like it and others do it for money. When you get money you have respect. On the streets there is no respect and you only get R200. When you respect yourself others will respect you. If you are expensive you get respect.'

Amy also explained:

'I don't think what I do is wrong but I wouldn't do it if I had kids. That time when I had just one baby I didn't do it. It's not nice. The tavern owners are rude to us because we are prostitutes and the clients can treat us badly.'

She went on:

'I never want my children to do this. But if we don't support them they will do it. You have to give them everything. If we have money we try to spoil them with whatever. If I wake up and find out that my daughter is doing this I will feel I have failed as a mother ... we fight for decrim [decriminalisation] so that the police won't harass us not so our kids can do this.' (Amy, DRC, 7 November 2015)

These comments, alongside earlier examples of how the women were judged by police and by neighbours, highlight the general perception that selling sex is wrong and immoral (Ahearne, 2015). This compounds the ambivalence felt by the women about selling sex and how this translates into an identity and especially, their ability to be ‘good mothers’. In response to further probing as to why Amy would see herself as a ‘failed’ mother if her daughter sold sex, she explained that she did not think selling sex was ‘nice’ and that she wanted better things for her children. This seemed to reflect issues of stigma and shame associated with the selling of sex (Ahearne, 2015), as well as recognition that multiple vulnerabilities and risks were involved.

Thoko, a Zimbabwean 22-year-old mother, sent her two young children back to her mother in Zimbabwe a few months after they were born. In explaining why she did this she had stated:

‘They are not safe here. This side [referring to South Africa] is not good – you can come here and do these things like prostitution and what ... but it’s not good for the kids to see this. I want my baby here. I want to see my daughter and hold her. But I am scared. They don’t treat us well and I don’t have money ... so it’s better that she is not here.’ (Thoko, Zimbabwe, 15 April 2015)

What emerges as most significant in all of the above comments and experiences is that for migrant women who sell sex, being a mother shapes and intensifies the kinds of challenges and especially the forms of structural violence encountered. Moreover, the need to provide as a mother also determines the choices made, which includes selling sex, and trying to find ways to keep their families safe. Therefore, where selling sex is often seen as the defining frame or identity through which the violence experienced by women is explored and understood, the examples given here of how migrant mothers who sell sex make sense of what they do, how they are viewed by others and how they counter perceptions of being ‘bad mothers’, illustrate the multiple identities at play. While their lives are more than simply about violence, their identities are also far more than those of women who sell sex.

Conclusion

Farmer et al (2006) note that ‘structural violence is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm’s way.... [T]he arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organisation of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people’ (Farmer et al, 2006: 43). This injury, as we have seen throughout this article, is experienced by migrant mothers who sell sex in terms of harassment, discrimination, stigmatisation and abuse at the hands of the police, of healthcare providers and landlords. These are forms of structural violence that are not simply defined by the selling of sex, as often assumed, but through the intersections and layers of identity and experience – through being a migrant, a mother, and selling sex. These three issues, when considered together, heighten and intensify the risks and forms of structural violence encountered. Moreover, what the narratives in this article highlight in particular is that having the responsibility of providing and caring for children, in the face of stigmatisation and discrimination, poses some of the greatest challenges for migrant

mothers who sell sex. Where the need to care for children is identified as a primary reason for selling sex, their identities as women who sell sex come into question. Thus the ambivalence and confusion expressed by the mothers in relation to selling sex illustrates the entanglement of engaging in a livelihood strategy that, on the one hand, enables them to provide, yet at the same time, is framed by a sense of being 'bad mothers' and being immoral. This not only intensifies the forms of structural violence already faced, but also illustrates the negotiations and grappling with identity that migrant mothers selling sex face on a daily basis.

Overall, this supports the argument that where the sex industry has commonly been considered in relation to the inherent risks of selling sex, and through frames such as health-related risks and gendered forms of violence, there is a need to consider the other complex and intersectional positions and identities that place migrant mothers selling sex at risk, such as being mothers and being non-nationals. A greater understanding of structural violence in different and ordinary spaces of the city is therefore needed to take us beyond individual and sex work-related issues to wider social and structural factors that have an impact on women who are migrants, who sell sex, and who are mothers in order to support and protect them and their children.

Notes

¹ Sisonke is funded by SWEAT.

² The anti-trafficking rhetoric was particularly vociferous following claims that emerged around the 2010 FIFA World Cup (hosted by South Africa), that the country faced a massive human trafficking burden. South Africa was also placed, in the mid-2000s, on the US Department of State's Trafficking in Persons Report Watch List despite a lack of credible data. It has been noted that research in trafficking is scarce, and the data that does exist is often acquired through methodologically unsound ways (cf Gould et al, 2010).

³ The research was funded by the NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, Migration, Development and Conflict programme through Professor Jo Vearey (African Centre for Migration and Society – ACMS, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) and Professor Lorraine Nencil (Vu University, Amsterdam). The author would like to thank Lorraine, Jo and ACMS for their support in this project.

⁴ Certificate number: H140212.

⁵ A migrant-dense area of inner-city Johannesburg.

⁶ Musina is the northernmost town in the Limpopo province of South Africa and borders Zimbabwe; it is the first arrival point for most migrants arriving from states north of South Africa.

⁷ R2000 equals approximately £120.79

References

- Agustín, L, 2006, The disappearing of a migration category: Migrants who sell sex, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, 1, January, 29–47
- Agustín, L, 2007, *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, New York and London: Zed Books
- Ahearne, G, 2015, Between the sex industry and academia: Navigating stigma and disgust, *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 11, 2, 28–38
- Barry, K, 1995, *The prostitution of sexuality: The global exploitation of women*, New York: New York University Press

- Binagwaho, A, Agbonyitor, M, Mwananawe, A, Mugwaneza, P, Irwin, A, Karema, C, 2010, Developing human rights-based strategies to improve health among female sex workers in Rwanda, *Health and Human Rights* 12, 2, 89–100
- Bourgois, P, 2010, Recognizing invisible violence: A thirty-year ethnographic retrospective, in B Rylko-Bauer, L Whiteford and P Farmer, eds, *Global health in times of violence*, Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research Press, 17–45
- Bryman, A, 2012, *Social research methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Basu, A, Dutta, MJ, 2011, ‘We are mothers first’: Localocentric articulation of sex worker identity as a key in HIV/AIDS communication, *Women Health* 51, 2, 106–23
- Busza, J, 2004, Sex work and migration: The dangers of oversimplification – A case study of Vietnamese women in Cambodia, *Health and Human Rights*, 7, 2, 231–49
- Connelly, L, Jarvis-King, L, Ahearne, G, 2015, Editorial – Blurred lines: The contested nature of sex work in a changing social landscape in contested spaces: Exploring the intersections of migration, sex work and trafficking in South Africa, *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 11, 2, 4–21
- Creswell, JW, 2003, *Qualitative research designs: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Devey, R, Skinner, C, Valodia, I, 2006, *Second best? Trends and linkages in the informal economy in South Africa*, Working Paper No 06/102, Durban, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Developmental Studies
- Dodsworth, J, 2012, Sex worker and mother: Managing dual and threatened identities, *Child and Family Social Work* 19, 1: 99–108
- Duff, P, Shoveller, J, Chettiar, J, Feng, C, Nicoletti, R, Shannon, K, 2014, Sex work and motherhood: Social and structural barriers to health and social services for pregnant and parenting street and off-street sex workers, *Health Care for Women International* 36, 9, 1039–55
- Farley, M, 2003, Prostitution and the invisibility of harm, *Women and Therapy* 26, 3/4, 247–80
- Farmer, P, Nizeye, B, Stulac, S, Keshjee, S, 2006, Structural violence and clinical medicine, *Plos Medicine* 3, 1686–91
- Global Commission on HIV and the Law, 2012, *HIV and the law: Risks, rights, and health*, New York: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), HIV/AIDS Group
- Gould, C, 2011, Trafficking? Exploring the relevance of the notion of human trafficking to describe the lived experience of sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa, *Crime Law Social Change* 56, 529–46
- Gould, C, with N Fick, 2008, *Selling sex in Cape Town: Sex work and human trafficking in a South African city*, Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Security Studies
- Gould, C, Richter, M, Palmary, I, 2010, Of Nigerians, Albinos, Satanists, and anecdotes, *South African Crime Quarterly* 32, 37–44
- Greenburg, J, Polzer, T, 2008, *Migrant access to housing in South African cities*, Special Report No 2, Migrant Rights Monitoring Project, Johannesburg, South Africa: University of the Witwatersrand (www.migration.org.za/uploads/docs/report-6.pdf).
- Kempadoo, K, ed, 2005, *Trafficking and prostitution reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers
- Kempadoo, K, Doezema, J, eds, 1998, *Global sex workers: Rights, resistance, and redefinition*, New York: Routledge

- Khonde, N, Kols, A, 1999, Integrating services within existing Ministry of Health institutions: The experience of Ghana, *Journal of Sex Work Research*, 2, 16–17 (www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/R4SW-02.pdf).
- Konstant, TL, Ranganami, J, Stacey, MJ, Stewart, ML, Nogoduka, C, 2015, Estimating the number of sex workers in South Africa: Rapid population size estimation, *AIDS and Behavior*, 19 (S1), 3–15 (<http://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-014-0981-y>).
- Leedy, PD, Ormrod, JE, 2005, *Practical research: Planning and design*, Prentice Hall: Pearson Education
- Neuman, LW, 2014, *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*, 7th edn, Edinburgh and Harlow: Pearson.
- Oliveira, E, Vearey, J, 2015, Images of place: Visuals from migrant sex workers in South Africa, *Journal of Medical Anthropology* 34, 4, 305–18
- Palmry, I, 2010, Sex, choice and exploitation: Reflections on anti-trafficking discourse, in E Burman, K Chantle, P Kiguwa and I Palmry, eds, *Gender and migration: Feminist interventions*, London: Zed Books Ltd
- Pauw, I, Brener, L, 2003, 'You are just whores – you can't be raped': Barriers to safer sex practices among women street sex workers in Cape Town, *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 5, 6, 465–81
- Richter, M, Vearey, J, 2016, Migration and sex work in South Africa: Key concerns for gender and health, in J Gideon, ed, *Gender and health handbook*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing
- Richter, M, Luchter, S, Ndlovu, D, Temmerman, M, Chersich, MF, 2012, Female sex work and international sport events – No major changes in demand or supply of paid sex during the 2010 Soccer World Cup: A cross-sectional study, *BMC Public Health* 12, 763
- Richter, M, Chersich, MF, Vearey, J, Sartorius, B, Temmerman, M, Luchters, S, 2011, Migration status, work conditions and health utilization of female sex workers in three South African cities, *Journal for Immigrant and Minority Health* February, 16, 1, 7–17
- Sanders, T, 2005, *Sex work: A risky business*, Cullompton: Willan
- Scorgie, F, Chersich, MF, Innocent, N, Gerbase, A, Lule, F, Ying-Ru, L, 2012, Socio-demographic characteristics and behavioral risk factors of female sex workers in Sub-Saharan Africa: A systematic review, *AIDS Behaviour*, 16, 920–33
- Shah, S, 2014, *Street corner secrets: Sex, work, and migration in the city of Mumbai*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC
- Shaver, F, 2005, Sex work research: Methodological and ethical challenges, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20, 3, 269–319
- Stadler, J, Delany, S, 2013, The 'healthy brothel': The context of clinical services for sex workers in Hillbrow, South Africa, *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 8, 5, 451–64
- Statistics South Africa, Census, 2011, Statistical Release (www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P03014/P030142011.pdf)
- Vearey, J, Richter, M, Núñez, L, Moyo, K, 2011, South African 161 HIV/AIDS programming overlooks migration, urban livelihoods, and informal workplaces, *African Journal of AIDS Research* 10 (Supplement), 381–91
- Walker, R, 2015, Beyond rights and rescue: Stories from the 'grey zone', *Buwa! A Journal on African Women. Women and Economic Injustice* (www.osisa.org/openspace/economic-justice/regional/beyond-rights-and-rescue-stories-%E2%80%98grey-zone%E2%80%99)

- Walker, R, Clacherty, G, 2015, Shaping new spaces: An alternative approach to healing in current shelter interventions for vulnerable women in Johannesburg, in I Palmay, L Nunez and B Hamber, *Healing and change in the city of gold: Case studies of coping and support in Johannesburg*, New York: Springer, 31–59
- Walker, R, Oliveira, E, 2015, Contested spaces: Exploring the intersections of migration, sex work and trafficking in South Africa, *Graduate journal of Social Sciences: Blurred Lines: The Contested Nature of Sex Work in a Changing Social Landscape* 11, 2, 129–53
- Weitzer, R, 2000, Why we need more research on sex work, in R Weitzer, ed, *Sex for sale*, London: Routledge
- Wilkinson, K, 2015, Analysis: Are foreigners stealing jobs in South Africa?, Africa Check, 17 April (<https://africacheck.org/2015/04/17/analysis-are-foreigners-stealing-jobs-in-south-africa/>).