Migration, Violence and Safety among Migrant Sex Workers in Guatemala

Background

Female migrants in Central America experience high levels of violence, while migrant sex workers in other low- and middle-income countries face elevated health and social risks. Little research has looked at the health and safety of migrant sex workers in Central America, specifically Guatemala.

The Question

What factors and experiences impact migrant women sex workers exposure to violence and resilience to violence, in Guatemala?

The Study

The research team from the University of California, San Diego, and staff from Asociación de Educación papa la Vida (EDUCAVIDA Tecún Úman, conducted interviews with 29 migrant sex workers as part of a larger study on migration, sex work and health between November 2012 and January 2014. Researchers also analyzed narratives of 23 migrant sex workers who participated in focus groups and interviews as part of a study examining ethical issues related to sex workers' health, safety, and research participation between June 2013 and February 2014.

The Results

Participants migrated for several reasons, including:

- Community, family and intimate partner violence;
- Economic needs and opportunity, such as providing for children; and
- An enhanced sense of autonomy.

'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.

Many women reported undocumented border crossings, use of smugglers, and/or migrating unaccompanied. These women are highly vulnerable to abuse, including sexual violence.

Drivers of violence and abuse included extortion and abuse of power by government authorities, including police, public health inspectors, and immigration officials.

The Policy Implications

- Migrants should be provided with appropriate support and resources, and efforts for peer-based education by women, migrants, and sex workers should be supported.
- Migration policies and interventions should be rooted in a human rights approach that acknowledges women's agency and resilience.
- Experiences and structural factors that influence migrant sex workers' safety and well-being should be central to policies and programmes to prevent violence against them.

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