



## Migration, violence, and safety among migrant sex workers in Guatemala

### Background

Despite reports of high levels of violence among women migrants in Central America, little is known about the health and safety of migrant sex workers in this region.

### The Question

How do migration-related determinants impact susceptibility to violence and resilience among internal and international migrant women engaged in sex work at the Guatemala-Mexico border?

### The Study

This study is based on 16 months of qualitative research (November 2012 – February 2014), including ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and focus groups conducted with 52 internal and international migrant female sex workers in Tecún Umán and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, key transit and destination communities for both international and internal migrants. Researchers from GSHI, University of California San Diego, and staff from a HIV prevention NGO (EDUCAVIDA) led data collection in consultation with HIV, women's, and sex work organizations locally.

### The Results

Key drivers of migration:

- Violence in home communities (e.g., gang-related, domestic)
- Poverty, family needs, and economic vulnerability

Due to their status as both non-citizens and as sex workers, migrant women were disproportionately vulnerable to abuse and violence.

Contributing factors to experiences of violence included:

- Unsafe transit experiences and undocumented border crossings, especially among younger women
- Negative interactions with and human rights violations committed by police and immigration authorities

*“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, Honduras*

### The Policy Implications

Actions to address human rights violations experienced by migrant sex workers and to promote access to information and supports related to immigration policies and human rights represent important strategies to support women's agency and resilience. Community initiatives and legal reforms to promote migrant sex workers' human rights and working conditions in origin, transit, and destination settings are recommended.

Rocha-Jiménez, T., Brouwer, K. C., Silverman, J. S., Morales-Miranda, S., Goldenberg, S. M. Migration, violence, and safety among migrant sex workers: a qualitative study in two Guatemalan communities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 18(9): 2016.