



Migration, Violence, and Safety among Migrant Sex Workers in Guatemala

Background

Despite high levels of violence among female migrants in Central America, and previous research showing the elevated health and social risks experienced by migrant sex workers in other low and middle income settings, there is little evidence on the health and safety of migrant sex workers in Central America, specifically Guatemala.

The Question

What factors and experiences impact female migrant 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 para 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 stay examining ethical issues related to sex workers' health, safety, and research participation between June 2013 and February 2014.

The Results

Participants reported **motivators of migration** including:

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

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. Participants reported:

- Raids, surveillance, and enforcement of sex work and immigration regulations;
- Extortion, mistreatment, physical/sexual abuse, violations of rights by immigration and police during deportation or detainment.

The Policy Implications

- This study highlights the importance of providing migrants with appropriate support and resources, supporting efforts for peer-based education by women, migrants and sex workers.
- Migration policies and interventions rooted in a human rights approach that acknowledges women's agency and resilience remain essential.
- Consideration of experiences and structural factors that influence migrant sex workers' safety and well-being should be pillars of policies and programmes to prevent violence against them.

Rocha-Jiménez T, Brouwer KC, Silverman JG, Morales-Miranda S, Goldenberg SM. Migration, violence, and safety among migrant sex workers: A qualitative study in two Guatemalan communities. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 2016.