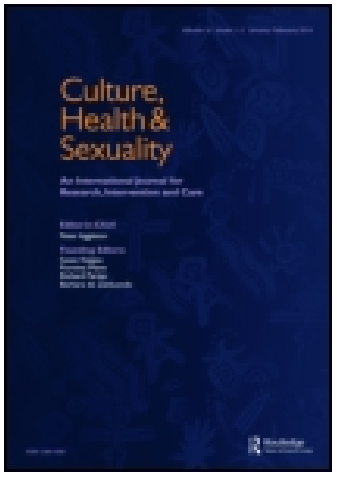

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How sex work becomes an option: Experiences of female sex workers in Kerman, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Sex work is rarely an occupation of choice for Iranian women and is often described as a last resort. While several factors play a role in creating an environment where individuals become involved in sex work, female sex workers' experiences regarding entry into sex work in Iran are poorly understood. In this qualitative study, a convenience sample of 24 participants was recruited from a drop-in centre for vulnerable women in Kerman, Iran. Through in-depth interviews, participants were asked about their personal lived experiences of initiating sex work. Grounded theory was used to analyse findings from this research. We learned that major factors impacting on women's initiation into sex work circulated around their vulnerability and chronic poverty. Participants continued to sell sex due to their limited opportunities, drug dependence and financial needs. Improving sex workers' economic status could be a vital intervention in providing vulnerable women with options other than sex work. Female sex workers should be provided with government support and educational programmes delivered through special centres. Despite the illegal status of their work, sex workers' needs should be recognised across all aspects of policy and legislation.

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Female sex work; drug use; HIV prevention; sex workers; Iran

Introduction

Female sex work is not only a challenge to public health professionals and policy makers, but is also construed as a threat to the social and religious values of conservative communities in some countries. While sex work may pose various health risks, such as HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, to female sex workers, their clients, partners and children, hegemonic social norms and societies tend to blame sex workers for the perceived deleterious effect of the profession on sociocultural structures (Khan et al. 2010; Ramaiah 2006). Consequently, female sex workers are often shamed as deserving of social exclusion, which places them in

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a vulnerable position in society and jeopardises their social welfare, healthcare access and reproductive health rights (Ramaiah 2006; Weitzer 2009).

Tolerance of sex work has varied greatly historically and geographically and the legal status of sex work varies from country to country. For instance, while sex work is illegal in most states of the USA, in some European countries, selling sex is not illegal in itself; however, female sex workers may be frequently arrested for soliciting for clients on the street (Weitzer 2009). In more conservative sociocultural settings, such as the Islamic countries in the Middle East, women engaging in sex work are ostracised and are often regarded as 'social evils' (Laurent 2005).

Sex work is illegal and highly stigmatised in Iran, and the sociocultural environment of the country endangers female sex workers' lives by putting them at risk of abuse and violence (Hamzić and Mir-Hosseini 2010; Mohebbi 2013). Book two of the penal code of Iran's constitution, defines the act of *zina* or fornication as any form of penetrative sex (vaginal or anal) between *namahram* (unrelated) men and women outside of legal marriage, which, according to Article 88, is punishable by lashing, jail or even execution (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center 2014).

While sex outside state-sanctioned marriage remains a criminal offence in Iran, Shi'a Islamic law has a loophole for engaging in either premarital sex or sex work through the institution of *sigheh*, or temporary marriage. *Sigheh* is a contract in which a married or unmarried man may marry an unmarried woman for a fixed term, ranging anywhere from one hour to a century. Despite Iranian clerical encouragement of *sigheh*, the institution is stigmatised in contemporary Iran and remains a controversial topic in both Iranian and Islamic discourses, with some, especially amongst the educated and urban middle-upper class strata, viewing it as akin to legalised prostitution. Thus, *sigheh*, as a morally and religiously permissible institution, may be used as a cover for women engaging in sex work, further complicating the sex work landscape in Iran (Farahani 2007; Haeri 1994).

Furthermore, a variety of factors, such as youth demographics, the progressively delayed onset of first marriage, education, urbanisation and modernisation, are often cited as reasons for the complex and transforming social and sexual landscape of modern Iran (Mahdavi 2007; Sadeghi 2008).

Several studies highlight economic pressure (Mallory and Stern 2000), a history of childhood sexual and physical abuse (Medrano et al. 2003), homelessness (McClanahan et al. 1999), antisocial personality disorder, drug addiction and parental substance abuse (Kramer and Berg 2003) as factors influencing entry into sex work. No one single factor, however, leads directly to engagement in sex work and the intersection of various factors creates an environment conducive to involvement in sex work (Roe-Sepowitz 2012). Also, some women are recruited or coerced into the sex trade, some drift in or are runaways and some work in other branches (e.g. massage parlours or strip clubs) of the sex industry (Bernstein and Shih 2014; Weitzer 2009). Commercial sexual exploitation including pornography, prostitution and sex trafficking of women and children is an important route of entry into sex work. While some sex trafficking victims may be visible, many others (e.g. brothel-based female sex workers) remain unseen (Weitzer 2009). Reasons for entering sex work are complex, varied and not static but, across different contexts, economic motivations predominate throughout the process (Bernstein and Shih 2014).

Female sex workers' existence had until recently been denied by Iranian government officials, and as a result, this vulnerable population continues to be highly understudied

and underserviced (Mohebbi 2013; Nasirian, Karamouzian, and Haghdoost 2013). Data on female sex workers in Iran remains relatively scarce compared to other regions throughout the world and is widely believed to be inaccurate due to the sensitive nature of sex work in the country and poor quality surveillance. The Iranian Ministry of Health estimated that there are approximately 30,000–60,000 female sex workers in the country, as of 2013 (Mirzazadeh et al. 2013). However, estimates based on mathematical modeling places this number much higher, at around 80,000 (Sajadi et al. 2013; UNAIDS 2012).

Recently, the Iranian government acknowledged that female sex workers are a key population who are highly vulnerable to HIV infection and, thus, are in need of HIV prevention, treatment and care. Currently, several centres provide services to female sex workers, including basic sexual and reproductive healthcare and counselling, HIV testing and counselling and methadone maintenance therapy (Karamouzian, Haghdoost, and Sharifi 2014; Mirzazadeh et al. 2013; Sajadi et al. 2013). These drop-in centres, catering for vulnerable women,[1] provide attendees with both free condoms and meals, when available. In addition to catering for the health of female sex workers, drop-in centres may also provide services to female injecting drug users, as well as partners of men who inject drugs and other marginalised populations.

Although Iranian health policy makers are increasingly recognising female sex workers' basic healthcare needs, penalties for sex work remain the same as those for adultery, including harsh punishment and even execution. Iran's traditional policies include police sweeping operations and detention and attempting to force female sex workers to stop selling sex. However, these strategies are counterproductive and have demonstrated limited success to halting sex work, only serving to push clandestine sex work further underground (Mirzazadeh et al. 2013; Mohebbi 2013).

Within this context, there remains a dearth of knowledge about the experiences of female sex workers regarding engagement in sex work in Iran. Understanding the factors influencing Iranian women to sell sex and stay in the profession is thus essential to improve their reproductive health and to inform both healthcare providers and policy makers.

Methods

Study setting

Iran is divided into 31 regional provinces. Each province is governed by a local centre, which is often the largest city and capital of the province. Kerman city, where this study took place, is situated in the south-east of the country and has a population of around 821,000 (Statistical Centre of Iran 2011).

Study design

This study took the form of a qualitative cross-sectional investigation, employing qualitative, in-depth interviews with female sex workers in Kerman, Iran. The purpose of these interviews was to characterise reasons for initiation into sex work and factors influencing women's decision to stay in the profession.

Population

Data collection was carried out between May and July 2012, and a convenience sample of 24 eligible participants was recruited from the main drop-in centre in Kerman, Iran. Inclusion

criteria for participation in this study were to be: a woman 18 years of age or older, fluent in Persian, presently residing in Kerman and reporting exchanging sex for money, services or goods in the past year, and capable of giving informed consent to participate in the study.

Methodology

The systematic inductive research methodology of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was used throughout both data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is a methodology that aims to develop theory inductively from data. As an exploratory method, it is particularly well suited to investigating social processes that have attracted little prior research attention (El Hussein et al. 2014).

Data collection

During an initial period in the drop-in centre in Kerman, researchers familiarised themselves with the setting, potential participants and the staff. Staff, including a counsellor at the drop-in centre, were briefed on the objectives and methods of the study. They were approached to help build trust and rapport with the participants and to help familiarise the women receiving services in the drop-in centre regarding the purposes of the study. As there is resistance towards admitting selling sex in the traditional and religious social context of Iran due to social desirability bias and its criminalisation, it would have been difficult to approach participants directly for participation in the study.

During the informed consent process, researchers conducting the interviews outlined the purpose of the study and explained the nature of the questions pertaining to sex work that would be asked during the in-depth interviews and steps that the research team would take to mitigate breaches of confidentiality of participants' responses. The researchers revealed that they were self-identified independent academics and not affiliated with any judiciary organisation in the country. Participants were informed that they could opt to end the interview or refuse to answer any question. Except for four participants who refused to participate in an interview or denied their involvement in sex work, a total of 24 women provided verbal informed consent to participate. Oral, as opposed to written, consent forms were used to minimise any possible breach of confidentiality. In-depth interviews took place in closed and private rooms in the drop-in centre.

A non-monetary incentive of food worth 200,000 Rials (~US$8) was provided to all participants upon completion of the interview. The in-depth interviews were conducted in Persian and followed a semi-structured format, consisting of open-ended questions with potential probes based on a literature review of engagement in sex work, inquiring about participants' experiences of initiating and staying in sex work. Interviews took around 45–60 minutes to complete. The interviews started with general questions about women's experiences with sex work, such as: how did you get involved in sex work; what motivated/forced you to initiate selling sex; and are you considering staying in the business? All in-depth interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English.

Data analysis

As is common in a grounded theory approach, all 24 transcripts were read in their entirety to inductively derive common, recurring codes and emergent themes. Initial line-by-line coding was used to code transcripts in order to develop a preliminary codebook (Charmaz 2014;

Glaser 1978). This codebook, which included axial codes relating categories to subcategories for the female sex worker's interview transcripts, was then used to guide more focused conceptual coding (Charmaz 2014; Glaser 1978). The codebook was optimised as the qualitative data analysis progressed and theoretical saturation was achieved during the coding process. A reflexive approach was adopted with a focus on awareness of the self and possible biases introduced.

Ethical considerations

All audio files, transcripts and files were labelled with a unique code rather than with participants' names. To help protect the identity of participants, all names were fictionalised in the interview transcripts. Interviewers and drop-in centre staff also received appropriate training on issues of confidentiality and research ethics, especially as it pertains to vulnerable populations. All computers were password-protected to protect the integrity and confidentiality of participant data files. Participants were informed that refusal to participate in the study would not in any way influence the services or treatment provided to them at the centre. The Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences reviewed and approved this study.

Results

Our findings begin with a brief description of the participants. We then proceed to explore three main themes of relevance to sex work identified in the course of the study: (1) vulnerability and predicament, (2) sex work initiation and (3) continuation of sex work. Following this, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) was developed, detailing these different phases and respective factors influencing each.

Participants

The 24 women all self-identified as heterosexual and all but two of them had ever married. On the whole, participants were not willing to share detailed information on their sociodemographic characteristics, including age, due to concerns about privacy and confidentiality. Thus, the age provided in parentheses in the quotes below is an approximation of the participant's age based on the interviewer's judgement (ranging approximately from 18 to 50 years). Inquiring about female sex workers' lived experiences with sex work, research team members identified a set of underlying reasons that had functioned as catalysts for participants entry into sex work and that encouraged them to remain within it.

Vulnerability and predicament

All participants initiated their narratives by discussing their difficult lives and how disruption in their normal lives had put them in a vulnerable position, both emotionally and financially. Some reported that this personal disruption occurred early in their childhood through the death of a parent, thus rendering a loss of their financial and emotional support systems. For example, one young woman who had lost her mother due to an unexpected illness, had run away from home because of problems with her stepmother. She was then lured by a pimp (often called *khaaleh* or *maadaam* in Persian) who temporarily provided her with food and accommodation:

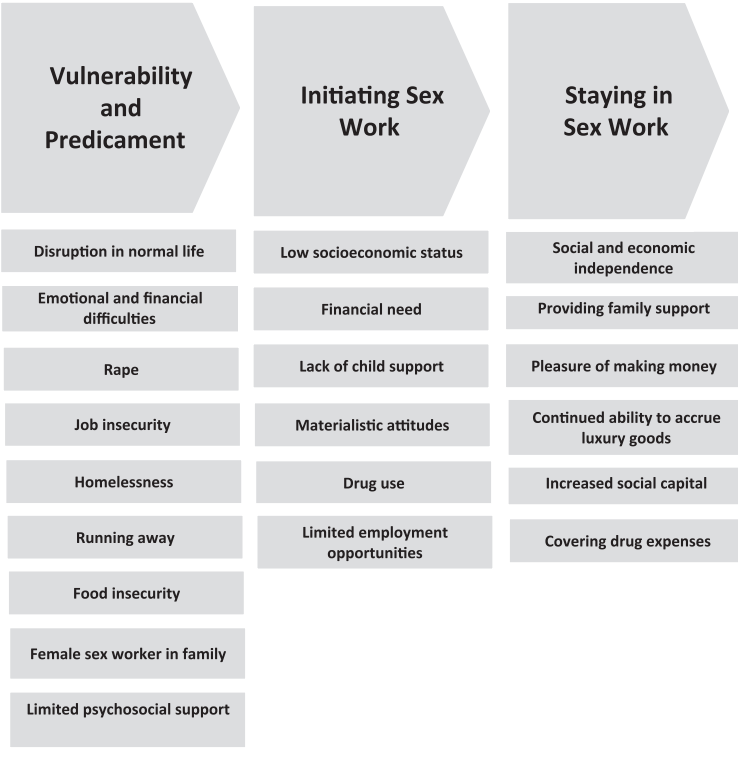

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

> I was 12 when I lost my mother. I was a mess afterwards and had to live with my stepmother. When I met a woman on my way to school who was so kind to me and offered me to live with her, I escaped home and started living with her. I never went back home and they [participant's father and stepmother] did not try to find me … I assume … I don't know. (Pari, 18)

Pari's lack of family and social support, as well as her financial insecurity, left her in a very vulnerable position. The woman she met, who Pari later realised to be a madam, started taking sexual advantage of her soon thereafter; Pari was eventually raped by the woman's son. Having lost her virginity and having no other place to go to, she found herself in an even more socially vulnerable position than before and accepted to stay longer with the pimp who had reassured her that her son would marry her. However, with Pari having lost all of her family safety nets, the marriage was not negotiated; the pimp's son simply terminated their relationship and left:

> When I lost my virginity to her son, she reassured me that it was not a problem and promised that he would marry me. Our relationship went on and on until he dumped me. (Pari, 18)

Another type of disruption leading to vulnerability happened later in the lives of some women, when participants lost their financial supporter (often a partner), mainly due to either a failed marriage or their partner's imprisonment or abandonment. These disruptive events removed financial safety nets. Without family support, widowed women and single parents, especially those from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background, were left with limited options to support themselves and their children. Jobs commonly assumed by our

participants included a secretary, housemaid and street vendor. The first two are usually very low paying and the third one is illegal in Iran. One woman, who was widowed due to her husband's incarceration, had applied for several jobs as a secretary but had been treated badly in interviews:

> When my husband was jailed, we separated and I was on my own for the living expenses. Although I have what it takes to be a secretary and know the work well, wherever I applied for a job, they wanted to make a mistress out of me with a low monthly salary of 4,500,000 Rials [~US$150].[2] They only look at your face and body and want to propose a price based on your body. (Sheila, 30)

These narratives demonstrate how structural and sociocultural factors restricted participants' options when it came to dealing with difficult situations and decisions in life. Embedded in the vicious cycle of vulnerability and poverty, participants were frequently tipped into situations in which selling sex appeared to be the only option. These situations were often described as events of homelessness, food insecurity or rape. For example, one young participant who was homeless and recruited by a madam, described how she had been raped, not by the clients of the brothel, but by the neighbours of the brothel who took advantage of her vulnerable position. Similar to Pari, Mojgan was also devastated by losing her virginity at such a young age:

> I remember my first experience [sexual intercourse] clearly. There were two guys. I was not there to have sex and told them that I was a virgin, but to no avail. They said they wouldn't hurt me, but they raped me. I was only 13 years old when I was forced to have sex. I had no choice. (Mojgan, 20)

Another participant who was born into a family of sex workers described how interactions with her sex worker family members had influenced her. She was rejected by her mother, who was a female sex worker and was later forced to live with her aunt who was also a sex worker. She was later raped by one of her aunt's neighbours:

> My mother was a prostitute. She didn't give a damn about me and sent me off to live with my aunt who was also a prostitute. My uncle died of AIDS at the time. I was raped by my aunt's neighbour and a couple of his friends. I was devastated and it was a total nightmare. (Zari, 30)

Another participant who was a runaway when she first became engaged in sex work, described feeling homeless and desperate as she considered selling sex for food and shelter:

> I thought about selling sex for food and a place to stay for a few nights. Hunger knows no God or religion. One cannot starve to death. Can she? (Layla, 25)

Initiating sex work

Without exception, all participants described how low socioeconomic status played a key role in forming their first experience of selling sex and continuing sex work. Financial need was reported as a major reason to selling sex and many participants associated their first experience of sex work with economic pressures on themselves and/or their family members (children in particular). Most were unable to afford their basic expenses, thus prompting entry into sex work. These financial crises were often associated with lacking financial or emotional support from their partners, either due to the loss of their partners through death, imprisonment or divorce. In some cases, they were due to the presence of a non-contributing partner who was usually a drug user. Two participants who were single parents and had been beggars before becoming involved in sex work, felt desperate for money to take care of their children. One middle-aged woman who used to be a beggar and whose husband

was in jail with a lifetime sentence, described her inability to pay for her sick son's treatment as a factor driving her to sell sex:

> My first experience of selling sex goes back to when my son got sick. I was living off begging on the streets at that time, but I could not cover his hospital fees by begging. I would never do that [sell sex] if I had a supportive husband. On top of my son's illness, I have renal disease, which requires care and treatment. What could I possibly do? I started selling sex to get enough money to pay the hospital fees. (Elham, 40)

Another woman broke down into tears when remembering her first experience of selling sex. She had been raised in a rural locale and had moved to the city to marry, but was then left behind with a child and no acquaintances, except her ex-husband's family, who refused to support her child. Feeling frustrated and desperate, she had started begging on the street, but her income was insufficient due to ever-increasing costs of living:

> I needed money to get milk formula for my baby and to pay rent. At first I started begging but that was not enough. Then, people started telling me that 'you are beautiful' or 'you deserve more than this' or 'you shouldn't be begging cause you can make money [sell sex]'. I swear to God, I swear to Quran,[3] that it was only because of feeding my hungry baby. I didn't want to start this [sex work]. (Batool, 38)

Although most participants had entered sex work to meet basic needs (food, clothing and housing expenses), a subset of narratives revealed that three participants had entered sex work after they had started using drugs. They had all been exposed to drugs at an early age, often through their parents' dependency. For some, opium use in particular was normalised in their families. Some women also had partners who were using drugs as well. Drug dependency forced them to look for a source of income to cover their drug habit expenses:

> I was seven when my mother got incarcerated and I had to live with my older brother. When I was 13, I escaped the house and met a woman who took care of me and let me live with her. I stayed with her for a while and gradually started smoking opium with her. Soon after, I had become a drug user. She told me to leave or make money to cover my drug expenses. That is how it [selling sex] started. (Anahita, 40)

While economic pressures were a major underlying reason for entry into sex work, this was not the case in all participants. Selling sex was not always rooted in a financial need to afford basic living expenses: two participants reported selling sex to earn money to buy themselves luxury items, such as designer clothes, jewellery and makeup. These participants could afford to cover their basic needs, but had a desire to maximise their social capital through more expensive material assets:

> Who doesn't want to look good? I want to fulfill all my childhood desires. I never had money for what I wanted. I want to look good and buy myself fancy clothes. Whenever I dress up and roam around my old neighbourhood, people point at me and treat me with respect. Having money is exciting and this is a business. (Parisa, 25)

Staying in sex work

Most, but not all, participants reported having a negative attitude towards selling sex for money and seemed to regret becoming entangled in the web of sex work. Several participants declared that they would have left the business if they had an alternate way to obtain steady income to meet their financial needs. For example, one young, single parent who was concerned about the future of her children stated:

> Whenever I am alone, I suffer from what I do for living and want to quit. I have always asked God to show me another way to stop this [sex work] but this cannot take away my concerns for the reality of life and survival for my children and me. (Sheila, 30)

No alternative employment opportunities, coupled with limited government support for single parents, had put these women in a desperate and vulnerable position. They viewed their best shot at survival to be selling sex and some were satisfied with this decision. A few participants described how sex work had enabled them to support their families and take care of themselves:

> I think for women like me who are single parents supporting their families, this is the best occupation. Because with such a low education and set of skills, they want to offer very low salaries, most of which are coming with intentions of taking advantage of you sexually. (Sarah, 32)

However, some individuals had other reasons to continue selling sex. While in most cases, selling sex was reported as a survival mechanism to meet the basic needs of themselves and their families, some participants reported having made enough money to end their former 'miserable' lives. The pleasure of making money, having a constant source of high income and obtaining desired respect by making a decent income, motivated these participants to continue to sell sex. Two participants, who had been beggars before they started selling sex, stated that as long as the income was good enough and yielded more money than begging, there is no reason to leave the business. Participants also talked about how they preferred sex work to begging in the streets, assuming they could quit sex work whenever they wanted:

> I was begging on the street when someone came by [probably a pimp] and told me to sell sex instead of begging. I tried it once and they paid very well. That's how it began and here I am now. I am making good money and it is better than being a beggar. I can eat well and look well. (Golnar, 33)

Women who had entered sex work to meet the desire for luxury goods reported that their satisfaction with economic independence and some control over their occupation had created a safety net for them that was accompanied by respect and a sense of freedom in the context of Iran where women are likely to face restrictions and discrimination in many aspects of their lives:

> I want to look stylish and fashionable in front of others. I used to be a drug user and everyone would keep a distance and hide their belongings when I was around. Look at me now! Those who knew me from before [friends and neighbours] talk about how amazing I look in those clothes. I am happy that I can buy beautiful clothes for me and go wherever I want. I want to look like those uptown girls. I can make money like anyone else. What's wrong with that? (Nina, 28)

Finally, a subset of narratives described how for some women drug expenses were a basic need that had to be provided for. Covering the drug habit expenses of both themselves and their partners was the reason for staying in sex work business cited three sex workers who used drugs. For example, one participant whose husband was an abusive drug user, talked about how he forced her to sell sex for money or drugs:

> My husband is a drug user who forces me to bring him money and/or drugs. He doesn't give a damn about how I am supposed to get that money. I sleep with some of his friends who know my living conditions, but would only pay me for sex. (Mahroo, 45)

Another participant who was using drugs and also had a drug using partner, talked about survival sex as a mechanism to cover the whole family's basic needs:

> We are both drug users. He doesn't have a job, so I have to stay in the business [sex work] to make ends meet, feed my kids and cover our drug expenses. (Tala, 50)

Discussion

In this qualitative study, we explored female sex workers' experiences of vulnerability prior to entering sex work, their initiating sex work and their reasons for staying in the business. The conceptual framework provided in Figure 1 shows progression through the different phases of sex work and key factors associated with each phase in line with the socioecological model proposed by Sweat and Denison (1995), emphasising the interdependence of the individual, her sociophysical milieu and macro-level forces influencing engagement in sex work. Underlying factors relevant to the different phases of sex work included individual (e.g. drug use), interpersonal (e.g. limited psychosocial support) and structural (e.g. limited employment opportunities) influences.

In the course of this study, we learned that many of the factors influencing women's initiation into sex work related to their vulnerability and poverty. While participants' initial perception of the benefits of selling sex were accompanied by the belief that it would be possible to quit as soon as their economic needs were met, matters became more complicated with the passage of time. With no alternatives, female sex workers' life circumstances, which were usually beyond their control and influenced by limited opportunities, further entangled them in the web, making it harder, if not impossible, for them to leave sex work. Importantly, similar findings have emerged from studies in Thailand and Pakistan (Khan et al. 2010; Nyindo 2005; Ratinthorn, Meleis, and Sindhu 2009).

Poverty, presented as a common reason of entry into sex work, appeared to be the major force that kept women in the business in the long run. Some participants reported being in constant economic hardship and deprived of financial support from their partners/husbands. They were unable to find sufficient sources of income to support themselves and their children and, in consequence, had started sex work and continued selling sex. Widowed women who come from a low socioeconomic background and who lack family support are placed at an especially vulnerable position in Iranian society. They are often caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, abuse and despair that maintains their vulnerability. Moreover, they are also more likely to be paid less and have limited autonomy in their occupational choices (Razavi and Habibi 2013).

Empowerment programmes for this vulnerable population, which provide women with a core and transferable set of skills may help connect them with employment opportunities. Providing options for women to resume their studies, take up loans or set up a small business in order to reduce their reliance on sex work could be an effective intervention to prevent some from entering sex work in the first place.

Because of the stigmatisation and criminalisation of sex work in the Islamic context of Iran, entry into sex work is often thought to be the last resort. However, some participants indicated that materialistic factors had motivated them to enter sex work and remain in it. They described how sex work had brought them the power of choice, respect and affordability of luxury items. Interestingly, these participants did not feel as bad or shameful about selling sex and referred to it as 'doing business' and 'making money'. They seemed to perceive that selling sex to buy luxury goods did not constitute sex work.

A final key factor affecting both sex work initiation and continuation among the participants was drug use. Globally, coercion, deception or trafficking into sex work is often facilitated through dependence on drugs (Bruinsma and Meershoek 1997; Farmer, Connors, and Simmons 1996; Kelly and Regan 2000). Studies suggest that those who use drugs and have

partners who also use may be in a particularly complex situation, struggling to meet financial needs in profoundly difficult circumstances (Alipour et al. 2013; Karamouzian et al. 2014).

Limitations

It is important to recognise that the study did not intend to address the process of entry into sex work comprehensively, but tries to highlight only some of the factors involved. As participants were recruited via a convenience sample drawn from a single drop-in centre in Kerman, our research findings are not generalisable to the overall population of female sex workers in Iran or indeed to those who do not receive services from drop-in centres. We also recognise that female sex workers in drop-in centres comprise a small portion of a highly varied sex work industry in Iran. Moreover, as all of our participants were female sex workers from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, our findings may not be relevant to higher class women whose entry and continued involvement in sex work may be motivated by different factors. Future research to understand the diverse motivations for engaging in sex work in countries such as Iran, particularly non-survival sex work, will be especially important.

Conclusion

This study indicated that the pathway in entering sex work for women in Iran is mainly underscored by narratives of poverty, coercion, choice and opportunity. Feeling desperate due to inadequate financial safety net and psychosocial support, materialistic attitudes and drug addiction were key reasons of entry into sex work and remaining in the business. Strengthening harm-reduction programmes among female drug users would be a helpful point of entry in reducing the problems of sex work among these populations. In addition, it is important for policy makers to recognise that not all female sex workers may wish to stop selling sex for money, which highlights the importance of funding harm-reduction services for female sex workers, despite their illegal status. Improving their economic status through financial support and empowerment programmes provided by non-governmental organisations and other related organisations may also be a valuable strategy.

Notes

1. Because of the stigma surrounding sex work in Iran, female sex workers are often referred to as 'vulnerable women' in social and political discourse in Iran.
2. The average cost of living in urban areas in Iran is 12,500,000 Rials (~US$415) per household (Statistical Centre of Iran 2012).
3. The Quran is the religious book of Islam.

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