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Diverse Risks, Diverse Perpetrators: Violence Risk Perception Among Street-based Sex Workers in New Zealand

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Abstract

For street-based sex workers, the management of violence-related risks on the street invariably relates to individual perceptions of violence. This paper explores perceptions and experiences of violence amongst street-based sex workers in Wellington and Christchurch. This paper begins with an overview of how risks of violence have been conceptualised and how the diversity of these risks is reflected in the perceptions and experiences of the women interviewed. Some complexities in how these risks were constructed and managed by the women are then explored, including perceptions of the street as a work environment. To conclude, I discuss the significance of these findings in the context of debates on sex worker safety.

Keywords

Street; prostitution; violence; risk; sex workers; perceptions of violence.

Introduction

This article aims to unpack the ways in which street-based sex workers conceptualise and experience diverse risks of violence in their work, drawing on the narratives of 28 New Zealand-based street-based sex workers. It begins by discussing what is meant by risk and who is at risk within the street-based sex work scene, and proceeds to identify the generally recognised nature of those risks. The paper then outlines the research methodology and background before exploring the nature of the violence-related risks managed by these women breaking these into four key typologies of violence. The article further explores the ways in which these risks were perceived by the sex workers interviewed and discusses how these perceptions interact with conceptualisations of the street as a workplace, identity, and their previous experiences of violence.

Risk and street-based sex work

As a diverse population, women working on the streets have varied perceptions of risk in their work, as shaped by their present and past life experiences. Sanders (2004a) notes that the concept of risk is both 'an objective calculable event associated with certain actions, but relative

to the individual and social circumstances' (558). A large amount of research has been conducted internationally in countries including New Zealand, the UK, the USA, Australia and Canada, with a focus on the incidence of violence in street-based sex work (Abel 2010; Barnard, Hart and Church 2002; Benson 1998; Church et al. 2001; Dalla, Xia and Kennedy 2003; Kinnell 2008; Lowman 2000; Phoenix 1999; Raphael and Shapiro 2004; Silbert and Pines 1982; Whittaker and Hart 1996; Williamson and Folaron 2001). Far fewer studies have explored perceptions of the risks of violence amongst street workers (Plumridge 2001; Pyett and Warr 1999).

Sex work is pre-defined as risk behaviour in mainstream society. Sanders (2006) noted that 'the discourse of risk is applied to certain sexual behaviours and identities as a control mechanism to regulate those considered as "other"' (Sanders 2006: 96). Sex workers on the street are also portrayed as increasing risk for other non sex-working women who may be mistaken for sex workers and propositioned (Bondi 1998; Edwards 1997; Kantola and Squires 2004; Matthews 2008; Sharpe 1998). For instance, in a UK-based study on community perceptions of street-based sex workers, some male residents felt that that the practice of street sex work made other women in the area more vulnerable (Pitcher et al. 2006). Thus, the concept of risk in relation to street-based sex work is multi-faceted. On the one hand, street-based sex workers are considered at risk as potential victims of violence. On the other hand, they are constructed as a risk to others, portrayed as 'predatory, unruly, aggressive and threatening, disrupting the passage of their male victims' (Frances and Gray 2007: 318). So just as sex workers have been defined as 'at risk', so too have they been construed as a risk to broader society (Harris, Nilan and Kirby 2011).

This dual construction of sex workers as both 'at risk' and also posing a risk to others can be linked to societal anxiety about women who defy expectations of the conventional female role. To manage risk, women are expected to practise risk avoidance (Walklate 1997). This, in turn, has cemented divisions between sections of the population leading to an assumption that people can effectively 'avoid' being victimised should they try hard enough. Those who are not perceived as practising conventional risk avoidance are subsequently stigmatised, morally judged and construed as bringing violence on themselves (Lupton 2006). Since street sex work is pre-defined as risky behaviour, women involved in it are constructed as failing to practise risk avoidance, and are thus defined as risk takers engaging in an activity assumed to be characterised by extreme danger. This may then impact directly on how risks are perceived by those working in this sector since the more stigmatised and dangerous an individual's life circumstances are, the more extreme their perception of risk may be (Harris, Nilan and Kirby 2011). However, there is a paucity of research that focuses on exploring the ways in which risks of violence are conceptualised, defined and negotiated, particularly amongst street-based sex workers.

The nature of risk

A wide range of studies conducted internationally suggests that street-based sex workers experience many types of violence including rape, physical assault, robbery, abduction and murder (Kinnell 2008; Lowman 2000; O'Neill and Barberet 2000; Sanders 2004b; Williamson and Folaron 2001). Violence may also comprise harassment from community protestors who hassle street-based sex workers in an attempt to drive them out of the area (Morgan Thomas 2009; Sagar 2005; Sanders 2004b; Williams 2008). Street-based sex workers may also experience frequent verbal abuse from passers-by, according to studies conducted in the UK, USA, New Zealand and Australia (Day et al. 2001; Miller and Schwartz 1995; Nixon et al. 2002; Pitcher et al. 2006; Prostitution Law Review Committee 2008; Sharpe 1998). Furthermore, violence from clients may include coercion to perform sex acts that were not pre-negotiated,

covert removal of the condom, verbal abuse and being 'ripped off' (Nixon et al. 2002; Sanders and Campbell 2007).

Clients have been perceived as the main perpetrators of violence against sex workers (Abel, Fitzgerald and Brunton 2007; Benoit and Miller 2001). This finding can in part be linked to the murders of women working on the street in New Zealand and elsewhere, and increased interest in the risks of sex work in the mainstream media. Attention afforded to the risk of violence from clients can also be associated with the legislative approach enacted in Sweden in 1999, which defined prostitution as a form of violence against women and criminalised clients of sex workers as a result (Ekberg 2004). This approach, typically supported by those endorsing the abolitionist feminist perspective on sex work has led to the construction of male clients as inherently violent and, as a result, has supported their criminalisation (Scoular and O'Neill 2008). Arguably as a consequence of these factors, insufficient attention has been paid to the broad nature of violence-related risks in street-based sex work (Day, Ward and Boynton 2001).

The Research

The research that forms the basis of this paper was a three-year study of the strategies used to manage risks of violence amongst female street-based sex workers in New Zealand. Prostitution was decriminalised in New Zealand in 2003 and, while this paper focuses more broadly on perceptions of violence-related risks, the impact of this change was central to the research. The fieldwork, completed between October 2008 and July 2009, involved a three-pronged approach. The first involved in-depth interviews with 28 women working in the sex industry in Wellington and Christchurch. Although the capital city of New Zealand, Wellington is home to a relatively small population of street-based sex workers. However, as the city where I was initially based, Wellington represented the most appropriate location to undertake initial interviews with sex workers. Wellington is also where the national office of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) is located, and building relationships with staff within this organisation was essential to making contact with women working on the streets, particularly in the early stages of the fieldwork. The first five interviews with sex workers were conducted in Wellington. The rest of the fieldwork took place in Christchurch, primarily because this South Island city has the nation's highest population of street-based sex workers as a proportion of all sex workers in that city (26 per cent or one in four) compared with only 13 per cent who are street-based in Wellington, and 11 per cent in Auckland (Abel, Fitzgerald and Brunton 2007).

Interviews with 17 key informants from agencies and groups with an interest in sex worker safety and/or monitoring of the sex industry represented the second strand of data collection. The third strand was researcher observation over a six month period, on the street with outreach workers and at day and evening drop-in centres for street-based sex workers. Sex worker interviews focused on the circumstances surrounding their entry into sex work, perceptions of risk and vulnerability, feelings of safety, and strategies to manage risks.

Sex worker participants were recruited using snowball sampling, drawing from networks within community-based organisations, primarily NZPC, and a late night drop-in centre managed by the Salvation Army. Five women were interviewed in Wellington, where there is a relatively small population of street-based sex workers. Twenty-three women were interviewed in Christchurch which, at the time of the fieldwork, was the city with the largest population of street-based sex workers as proportion of all sex workers (Abel, Fitzgerald and Brunton 2007). Interviews were conducted in a meeting room in two drop in centres and, in two cases, in participant's homes. The average duration of interviews was one hour; however, this varied between 40 minutes and two and a half hours.

There was considerable diversity between the women who took part in interviews, in both their experiences and their demographic profiles. The average age of entry into the sex industry was 20; however, one woman described how she became involved in street-prostitution at the age of 12 and another woman had started working in the sex industry aged 45. Twenty-three of the women had started working in the sex industry before prostitution was decriminalised, while five had started working after the law reform. Participants were between 17 and 57 years of age. Fourteen of the women identified as Māori, 13 as New Zealand European and one as Cook Island Māori. The women had worked in the sex industry for varied lengths of time, between two months and 22 years. Several women had also worked in the indoor sex industry, with 16 having also worked in brothels or privately in their own home. Eighteen of the women had worked in other occupations either prior to or concurrent with working in the sex industry. Five women reported that they were studying either full- or part-time and four described doing volunteer work. Seventeen of the women had children, although not all were full-time caregivers.

All participants were given an information sheet to read prior to the interview, and were required to sign a consent form confirming that they wished to take part. There were no refusals, although a few women who initially expressed an interest were unable to commit to an interview time. To protect the identity of the women, respondent names used in this research are pseudonyms. All of the women had the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym so they could identify themselves in the research. A few of the women preferred a name be chosen on their behalf. Care has been taken when choosing pseudonyms to ensure the identity of all participants remains private.

A typology of violence at work

The women described managing a diverse range of violence-related risks while working on the street. These risks included violence from passers-by, violence between sex workers, violence perpetrated by street associates such as minders, and violence from clients and from individuals who approached as clients.

Violence from passers-by

Most commonly, the women described violence from passers-by that took the form of verbal abuse, the throwing of 'missiles' such as bottles and bricks and, in some cases, more explicit physical violence. Overwhelmingly, the women emphasised abuse from passers-by was far more frequent than abuse from clients. Lisa-Lou described the verbal abuse she had experienced at work, explaining: 'Actually you would get more abuse from ones that don't, you know that ain't clients ... well they yell things out like 'twenty cents' and stuff like that. It's really terrible'.

Shania explained that, for her, this was a particularly negative aspect of working on the street. She perceived the risk of violence from clients to be a lesser issue by comparison to the frequent violence from passers-by:

The narrow mindedness, small mindedness of people in general in the community ... Like you're out there and they go past and hurtling things at you and abusing you not so much violence from clients, I struggle more with the taunting and shit from other people from society. (Shania, Christchurch)

During fieldwork, I observed frequent instances of this type of violence towards women working on the street. However, whilst it was the most frequently discussed form of violence, it was not perceived as a particularly troubling risk.

Violence from street associates

Violence from street associates, including minders, was also perceived as a risk. Some women interviewed described situations where individuals would attempt to 'stand over' sex workers for money whilst they were working on the street. This was perceived to be a risk more so for those who were inexperienced and new to the street environment. While perpetrators were both male and female; at the time of the research in Christchurch, women were considered to be the main perpetrators. Shania described being confronted by one particular woman who was not a sex worker but who stood over street-based sex workers for money:

Well she just fucking said, you know, that it's her street (laughs) and um every cunt pays her or else you're fucking out and you'll never be back on there again and so this is how much I had to give. (Shania, Christchurch)

Violence between sex workers

Violence between sex workers was also considered to be a risk. A hierarchy was described, and it was clear that those who were inexperienced were at risk of being victimised. Women who were new to the street scene were often perceived as a threat to the economic success of others. If a woman new to working on the street charged less than other women there was a risk that, as Shania noted: '... you're going to get your head kicked in'. Violence described between sex workers typically involved money being taken by other women who would 'charge rent' on a particular corner. Catherine explained:

I remember feeling very upset and I guess afraid at the time ... Down by the bridge I had one incident where a girl took my bag off me, like just ripped it off my shoulder and went around the corner and took half the money that was in my bag ... I didn't really go back to that corner after that because it's just not worth the hassle, it's just a fucking corner. And while I feel that, you know, they don't have a right to charge rent on any corner because it's not theirs, um, ideals are all very well. But then there is the reality, right? (Catherine, Christchurch)

In spite of these types of occurrences, a strong ethos of peer support also existed between the sex workers on the street which helped protect them against violence from outsiders; nonetheless relationships between the women were complex. It was clear that the women perceived violence from co-workers as a risk to be managed.

Risks of violence from clients: The good, the bad, and the ugly

Violence from individuals approaching as clients was perceived as a risk. However, 'clients' *per se* were not considered violent. Overall, the women described positive interactions with clients. This supports previous findings from a UK-based study that suggested most contacts between sex workers and clients were incident free (Barnard 1993). Hollie for instance explained 'um nah the clients usually have a lot of respect'. Shania also stressed that most clients did not threaten her wellbeing. She noted: '... there's a lot of good guys out there. There's definitely a lot more good ones than bad'. Jane perceived violence from clients to be relatively uncommon. She explained: '... you only get once in a blue moon where you get a real arsehole'. The overall perception was that, although there was the potential for violence in every encounter, clients were usually genuine in that they wished to pay for pleasure.

Sex workers did not construe clients as inherently violent, but as buyers seeking a legitimate service in a recognised market. However, violence inflicted on sex workers by individuals who initially approached as clients is well documented. The work of Kinnell (2008) provides an interesting analysis of this type of violence. In differentiating between 'good', 'bad' and 'bogus' clients, Kinnell provides a more accurate breakdown of the risk represented by those

approaching as clients. She argues that, although perpetrators may initially approach as clients, they generally do not pay for sex and instead inflict violence on the sex worker. As such, these individuals cannot be considered clients (Kinnell 2008).

Such individuals who approach as clients but perpetrate violence instead may then be understood as 'bogus' clients or 'ugly mugs'. A few of the women described experiencing violence from individuals who had initially approached as clients but seemingly had no intention to pay. Shannon explained: 'He offered me seventy dollars for a sex job. So I said 'ok' so we went into somewhere round near Hagley Park and, um, he never paid me ... He also took what money I had'. Another sex worker, Claire, described an attempted attack by a man who had approached as a client:

I was asking for the money and he just like looked at me like 'I've got nothing for you' ... I had to tell him, you know, 'This isn't right. You either give me the money or else I'm getting out of here'. And he sort of went to like grab me and, you know, tried to overpower me. (Claire, Christchurch)

Vixen described being raped by an attacker who had initially claimed he wanted to pay for oral sex:

A guy just wanted a blow job and I was on Peterborough Street and just went behind the station and I bloody bent down to get a condom and next minute it just all happened so fast, he was on top of me and inside of me and then he was off. (Vixen, Christchurch)

Some findings suggest that the behaviour of these offenders is complex. Kinnell (2008) notes that offenders may pay for sexual services and then demand money back or additional services using force to achieve this. In Christchurch, a few women described having experienced this. Lexi explained:

We did the job sort of thing and that's when it all started coming up that it was one of the better jobs that he'd had and um he'd been fucking ripped off before so he wanted more and he ripped the condom off and got something sharp and scratched my fingers. (Lexi, Christchurch)

The experiences of these women support the theory proposed by Kinnell (2008) that describing perpetrators as 'clients' is often inaccurate. These findings suggest that it is useful to consider those who approach as clients on a continuum of 'good', 'bad' and 'bogus' when reflecting on clients as potential perpetrators. The women interviewed stressed that they did not fear violence from clients *per se*; nevertheless, they had to consider the potential for violence since there was a continuing possibility that someone may approach who did not fit the genuine client profile, and could perpetrate violence. In line with this, the possibility of being attacked by an individual who had approached as a client was positioned by the overwhelming majority of these women as their most concerning risk at work. Kay explained:

Probably a client getting out of control would be the most freaky for me. I'm not too worried about being ripped off because hey you know you can always make the money back. But that's more a fear ... the client freaking out, raping and murdering that kind of thing. (Kay, Christchurch)

The women interviewed therefore worked in the context of diverse risks of violence from a range of potential perpetrators. However the ways in which these risk were perceived is also complex and multi-dimensional.

Risk perception and risk management

The ways in which the risks of violence were perceived in this research is complex and relates to a number of factors. Almost all of the women interviewed perceived violence as a fundamental risk of their profession. For instance, Alphadites noted:

I know in the back of my mind like any other working girl you put yourself in danger when you're out on the streets working ... You're never safe. You never perceived yourself as being safe. You always think in the back of your mind you've got to be careful. You know, have your wits about you. You're never safe when you're out there. It's always there. You always worry about it. (Alphadites, Wellington)

These responses are in agreement with earlier findings that point to physical violence as the main risk amongst street-based sex workers in New Zealand (Abel 2010). However, despite the diverse risks described, a few of the women denied feeling afraid whilst working on the street. Pania explained:

No, I mean it doesn't scare me. I mean it's something that you can count on to happen really. I mean it's all with the job which is really sad but there's every chance it could happen you know? But it doesn't scare me. I mean so be it – if I die then it's meant to be. (Pania, Christchurch)

In their research with female street-based sex workers, Pyett and Warr (1999) argued that the risk of violence may be normalised to an extent for those working in an environment in which there is ongoing potential danger. Other findings suggest that feelings of safety may relate to the level of familiarity with the street environment, with those who have been involved in street sex work in the longer term feeling more safe (Abel 2010). Pania's perspective that violence is to some extent inevitable may in part relate to a normalisation of violence, also linking to her familiarity with the street scene. Some findings suggest that this results in a passive acceptance of violence amongst street-based sex workers, where the experience of violence is regarded as an 'occupational hazard' (El-Bassel et al. 2001; Gorry, Roen and Reily 2010; Harris, Nilan and Kirby 2011; Phoenix 1999).

In both Wellington and Christchurch, however, the majority of the women did not appear to passively accept risks of violence in this way. Predominantly, the women clearly recognised that the risk of violence was ongoing in the decriminalised context. For a few women, feelings of safety appeared to emerge from their sense of preparedness for what could eventuate if they encountered a violent client. As with women interviewed for Mullins' (2008) research, these women portrayed a street persona that was characterised by toughness and strength, and was antithetical to conventional norms of femininity. This sort of response was most common amongst younger women who had essentially lived with adult responsibilities from a young age. Zoe for instance claimed 'it doesn't phase me ay because I've seen a lot of shit in my life', positioning her perception in the context of her previous life experiences. One woman dismissed the possibility of being murdered whilst working on the street, by suggesting this was something she could control. Cindy noted: 'I'm not a silly bitch. I wouldn't get killed'. Two of the women said they felt safe as long as they had their minder with them when working on the street. Sapphire explained: 'I do feel pretty safe the majority of the time because I have a minder'. These women therefore used perceptions of their circumstances and backgrounds to approximate the potential risks of violence in their work.

Douglas (1985) argued that risk perception is underpinned by a need to downplay the extent of risk which will then allow individuals to feel safe in the world. In the context of street-based sex

work, one New Zealand-based study argued that interviewed sex workers acknowledged and yet simultaneously downplayed their own vulnerability (Plumridge 2001). However, other findings have contradicted this suggestion, such as Sanders (2005) UK-based research with indoor and outdoor sex workers. Sanders' research found that sex workers were skilled in their assessments of risk and reasonably precise in their perceptions of potential harm. Indeed, a desire to distance from the realities of working in a risky environment may play a role in constructions of risk amongst *some* individuals, but there are complexities within this and many additional factors. Specifically, distancing may not necessarily equal denial. Sydney, one of the women interviewed in Christchurch, expressed acute awareness of the risk of violence. However, despite this she described deliberately distancing from the risks of violence. She explained: 'If you stress too much about it you won't go out, know what I mean? You have to get your head into a totally different zone to stand out there ... If I worried about it I wouldn't be out there'. Sydney did not deny the risks of violence, nor did she construct herself as a 'fearless protagonist' (Plumridge 2001: 210). Whilst acknowledging the risk, Sydney distanced herself from this aspect of her work, not because she was in denial but rather to protect her emotional self from constantly reflecting on this. Marie, a younger sex worker, explained that she was not concerned about the risks of violence because her partner worked as her minder. At the same time she described a desire to distance from the potential for violence, explaining: 'I try not to think about it too much because otherwise it just messes with my head'. This highlights some of the complexity around how risk is constructed and how these perceptions and fears are subsequently managed in the context of street-based sex work.

This research revealed several layers underpinning perceptions of the risk of violence amongst these women interviewed for this research. Perceptions of violence-related risks also appeared to relate to how the women constructed the street as a working environment and to previous experiences of violence at work.

Perceptions of violence in the street context

A number of studies have indicated that there is a higher incidence of violence in street-based sex work compared to indoor settings (Abel, Fitzgerald and Brunton 2007; Church et al. 2001; Whittaker and Hart 1996). The construction of the indoor sector as fundamentally safer raises questions about why some women continue to work on the street, particularly in New Zealand's post-2003 decriminalised context. Street-based sex workers are typically assumed to have little choice over the location of their work and as a consequence they sacrifice their safety by working on the street as a survival strategy. However women in this research overwhelmingly constructed their decision to work on the street as a personal choice made relative to their perceptions and experiences of the indoor sex industry. The central motivation for working on the street was autonomy, echoing previous findings in New Zealand and elsewhere (Abel 2010; O'Neill and Pitcher 2010; Pyett and Warr 1999; Rosen and Venkatesh 2008). Amy constructed her decision to move into the street sector as driven by the flexibility this allowed, and her perception that amounts of money at least comparable to indoor work could be made working on the street. She explained:

Flexibility really and ... the client pays more at the parlour but you still end up with the same amount working on the street and you actually probably get more work out on the street though. But you can just go there do a job, leave, do another job and so like stay out three hours or something. (Amy, Christchurch)

Shania defined her experience of street work positively, explaining that it helped her avoid financial hardship, and had allowed her to remain in control of her work. She explained:

It definitely stopped me from doing a lot of criminal activity and kept me out of jail. And enabled me to support my children, you know, take care of my kids ... And not that I'm passionate about this but I am really into the money ... definitely made more money going to the street ... Yeah and it was at my discretion, you know, I had a lot more control. Well I had all the control in the situation if you know what I mean? (Shania, Christchurch)

Shania, like the majority of the women interviewed, described her decision to work on the street as relating to flexible working hours, financial gain, and increased control over her work. The street-based sector is frequently portrayed as out of control; however, these women's perceptions suggest that the decision to work on the street instead of indoors directly related to a desire to be in control.

The diverse ways in which the women described their involvement in the street sex industry was also related to their perceptions of violence in the sex industry, and their desire for autonomy was linked to this. Sex workers may move into the street sector in response to violence they have encountered in other work settings, viewing the street as safer because of the public setting and the presence of other sex workers (Day, Ward and Boynton 2001). Quantitative findings in the New Zealand context estimated that 79 per cent of street-based sex workers started working initially from the street, although it is also acknowledged that some sex workers work in more than one sector (Abel 2010). In Wellington and Christchurch, 16 of the 28 women had also worked indoors in brothels or in their own homes. The women overwhelmingly emphasised that the perception of increased autonomy made them feel less vulnerable, and suggested that this had shaped their decision to work on the street. A few of these women suggested that when working in an indoor setting they had felt disempowered in their management of risk. Sapphire explained why she preferred working on the street:

You don't have to be abused - you don't have to be downgraded and you don't have a madam trying to boss you around. Because I used to refuse to go out and see certain customers because I realised that they were just there to downgrade us. So I turned around and I said 'I'm not going out there' and she turned around and she said 'yes you are - this is what you're here for. If you don't get out there then you're not working here' ... We're not there to be abused, we're there to provide a service, that's all. And abuse isn't part of it in any form, whether it's verbal or physical. (Sapphire, Christchurch)

A few of the women, therefore, felt that the street sector provided them with more autonomy and control over their work and reduced scope for exploitation. Abel (2010) has argued that exploitation and coercion is more common in indoor sex work than street sex work in areas where there is no culture of 'pimping'. This may reflect the perceptions of these sex workers that working on the street provided them with increased scope to control their work and avoid being influenced by exploitative and coercive management. The experiences these women described in the indoor sector may, at least in part, reflect the context in which they had worked. Sapphire, for instance, had worked indoors prior to the law reform at a time when sex workers did not have the rights now available to them to challenge pushy and exploitative approaches to management in the indoor sector.

Some findings have suggested that the managed indoor sector, with the fewest incidents of violence, is the safest sector of the industry (Pyett and Warr 1997, 1999; Sanders and Campbell 2007). However, a few women argued that, in their view, it was overly simplistic to consider indoor environments consistently safer when they perceived violence as a risk in both sectors. For instance, Kay explained:

Most people say it is safer but it's not really. Stuff can still happen because when you're in the room and stuff. People can't hear you scream and shit. I've had that happen to mates, you know, something's happened and no one could hear them. (Kay, Christchurch)

Thus risk perception in the street environment was, in some cases, informed by the women's experiences of working both indoors and outdoors. However, these perceptions of risk were sometimes contradictory. The majority of the women said that they would not encourage someone new to the sex industry to begin working on the street. Indoor environments, although constructed as inhibiting individual autonomy, were considered more appropriate environments to learn the tricks of the trade. Rose explained: 'I always say to girls if they are interested in starting work go and work in a parlour first because it makes you familiar with clients ... it's a good environment to learn in'. These contradictory accounts may relate to the diverse risks of violence on the street and the level of skill required to manage these risks in terms of screening clients, establishing and retaining control in the sexual encounter, and negotiating the street environment whilst avoiding conflict with other women. Several women indicated that knowing how to manage the competitive street environment was a key part of violence risk management. Those who were poorly prepared for this were perceived as more at risk. Catherine for instance explained that the street was not an unfriendly environment 'if you manage it the right way'. Kay felt that for new workers it was important to initially 'suss it out a little bit' so as to avoid tensions with already established sex workers.

The complexity of negotiating the street environment coupled with the skills required to manage interactions with clients provides a possible explanation for the perception that street work is not as safe for inexperienced sex workers. However, perceptions of risk were also shaped by experiences of violence while working on the street.

The experience of violence and perceptions of risk

A further dimension to the development of risk perception is the experience of violence, which appeared to have a considerable impact on perceptions of risk. There is a likelihood for behaviours commonly considered 'risky' to become normalised should no adverse experiences occur in the course of engaging in these behaviours (Rhodes 1997). Perhaps not surprisingly then, the experience of violence did result in increased feelings of vulnerability when working on the street. Amy described being attacked by a passer-by whilst she was working on the street early in the morning. The offender was apprehended and jailed for two and a half years. Despite the fact that this offender was *not* someone who had approached her as a client, Amy explained how the attack had a profound impact on her feelings of safety and her perception of risk on the street: 'Because I'm from here I'd always say that it was safe ... But then I got attacked and it changed my whole outlook on it, you know what I mean? Once I got attacked it changed everything and now I don't find it safe at all'. Amy described how, subsequent to this attack, she had reappraised her vulnerability whilst working on the street. This had left her with a realisation that preventing violence is often impossible. She explained:

I never found out how old he was but I think he was 24, or 27 or something ... He wasn't hideous ... Just a yuppie spoiled little rich boy or whatever ... There's no way I expected him to do that at all ... Just because he could have picked up anybody, you know? He wasn't sleazy ... Yeah that's what changed my mind is that I thought I was a good judge of character from working and you just kind of pick up how they are ... And then yeah that changed my whole outlook completely [pause] You just don't know at all ... that's what spins me out. Because I always thought being attacked you'd sort of have warning, like you'd know it's coming ...

But it was just so out of the blue and that's what spins me out. (Amy, Christchurch)

Another woman, Shania, described a similar impact on her perception of risk following an attack by someone who had approached as a client. She explained:

I just didn't expect it ... because he just seemed like a really nice kind of guy and just like snapped, you know? There was no warning, and that part was what freaked me the most because I had been with this person before and I'd done jobs with this person before and nothing like that had ever happened and I had never felt in any way, shape or form [pause] like anything like that could happen ... He just like snapped and I knew [pause] in the way that his voice changed and his demeanour changed and I just knew that I was in the shit ... I think it was more [pause] the fact that it just came from nowhere ... Like this guy well I'd been there before and there was nothing like that. So it made me doubt everything about me, you know what I mean? Because I thought I could tell. I thought I was a good judge of character and things like that. And that completely knocked me for a six and I realised how vulnerable I was. (Shania, Christchurch)

The experience of violence for these women had, therefore, significantly altered their perceptions of risk whilst working on the street and made them feel more vulnerable as a result. The experience of violence can be considered a further dimension that impacts on the development of risk perception.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored perceptions and experiences of violence amongst women working on the streets as sex workers. There were differences and commonalities in how these women perceived the risks of violence in their work. All of the women acknowledged that the possibility of violence was a key risk of working on the street. However, although all of the women acknowledged the risk of violence, this risk was evaluated in diverse ways. A few women dismissed the risks as inevitable. Others identified as tough and street-wise, whilst a small number of women said they did not fear violence because they had a minder who watched out for them while they were working. For a few of the women, the worst possible risks were consciously minimised since constantly reflecting on these possibilities would be detrimental to their emotional wellbeing at work. However, there were several additional dimensions to these perceptions of risk.

Contrasting with social constructions of the street as a place of danger was a perception amongst some women that autonomy could make it safer to work on the street. Street work provided more control over their selection of clients. This contradicts portrayals of street-based sex work as always being characterised by desperation. Whilst the street may be portrayed as an inherently uncontrolled environment, some of the women perceived it as an environment in which they could exert greater control in their work. Perceptions of risk were therefore linked to the way in which some women perceived the street environment in relation to the risk of violence.

However, whilst many of the women conceived the street environment as conducive to their greater safety to some extent compared with indoor work, they also said that they would not recommend street work for people who were new to the industry. This, perhaps, related to the multifaceted nature of risk in street-based sex work. The women managed risks of violence not only from those approaching as clients, but also from passers-by, minders and, in some cases, other sex workers. The perception that street-based sex work was not a safe environment for

those new to sex work may reflect recognition that the management of these diverse risks required the skill and aptitude to manage not only harassment from passers-by and the competitive environment but also the potential risk from those approaching as clients. The ongoing risks of violence were clearly recognised by the majority of the women.

The multi-dimensional nature of violence-related risk in street-based sex work is relevant not only from a criminological perspective but also from a methodological perspective. The insights of the women suggest that perceptions of risk on the street are underpinned by the multi-faceted nature of risk. Whilst survey methodology is the most appropriate method to assess prevalence, questions must be carefully crafted to ascertain the true prevalence, which reflects the diverse nature of risk. Simply asking sex workers on the street questions such as 'do you feel safe?', 'have you experienced violence?' or 'have you been threatened with violence?' could lead to a misrepresentation of the risk of violence in street-based sex work, particularly if used to make inferences around the risk of violence posed by clients. Whilst some women may feel unsafe on the street because they fear violence from clients, others may feel unsafe because they are concerned about being stood over for their money, or they feel threatened by the carloads of people passing by to abuse sex workers. A failure to distinguish between different types of violence not only misrepresents the reality of the nature of risk on the street but also has the potential to be highly problematic in driving misdirected efforts which hope to address the issue of violence towards street-based sex workers.

The perceptions of those women who suggested they were not particularly afraid of violence from *genuine* clients may in part relate to the vast majority of their experiences with such clients as non-violent ones. For outsiders, it is relatively easy to assume street-work is inherently dangerous and to dismiss women's claims to not feel particularly afraid as being the consequence of denial, ignorance, or a low sense of self-worth. However, these women spoke of many of their clients positively and described the interactions they had with them as ordinary. Nevertheless, several women recounted disturbing experiences of violence from a range of perpetrators, including some offenders who had initially approached as clients. The fear of violence may be heightened for those who had experienced violence at work, and this was reflected in the narratives of two women in particular.

Policies directed at regulating the sex industry with the intention of supporting sex worker safety must take account of how violence-related risks are perceived by sex workers themselves. These findings show that a focus on violence perpetrated by clients does not accurately reflect the broad nature of violence-related risk in street-based sex work. Furthermore, the ways in which the women perceived these risks contradict common assumptions about street-based sex workers. To promote the safety of street-based sex workers, the focus must not be on criminalising clients but crucially on changing the culture that devalues women who work on the streets to one that prioritises their safety and wellbeing. Until the lived experiences of sex workers inform the development of prostitution policies globally, efforts to protect sex workers may, paradoxically, render them more vulnerable.

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