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PERPETRATION OF VIOLENCE BY FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: 'WE WILL CRUSH THEIR BONES'

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Abstract

There is a small but important body of literature on female sex workers' (FSWs) violence towards others, but little of that focused on low- and middle-income countries. Drawn from a larger biobehavioural study of FSWs in three cities in Papua New Guinea, we analyse the interviews from 19 FSWs who reported having perpetrated physical violence towards four major groups: (1) ex-husbands; (2) clients; (3) other sex workers and (4) other people (mainly women). Our study demonstrates that FSWs' use of violence arises from a complex set of social, material and gendered circumstances and cannot be addressed in isolation from other aspects of their lives.

Keywords

violence; perpetrator of violence; women; female sex workers; Papua New Guinea

Introduction

Historically, very few studies have investigated the lives of women and girls who perpetrate violence outside the domestic setting. Today, there is a growing body of work in the Global North that looks beyond interpersonal violence to more public forms of aggression (see e.g. Chesney–Lind and Irwin 2013; Arnell 2017; Giordano and Copp 2019), most significantly for this paper, in night-time economy settings (Spence et al. 2009; Lindsay 2012; Swann 2019). There is a dearth, however, of research in the Global South to help understand the specificities of women's and girls' use of violence in other parts of the world (see e.g. Maher and Curtis 1992; Barnard 1993; Davies and Evans 2007; Shannon et al. 2009). There is a small body of work coming out of the African continent (Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza 1998; Adinkrah 2007; Africa 2010). Most of that literature discusses intimate partner violence—usually in retribution for violence toward them, e.g. Pretorius and Botha (2009) examine women who kill their intimate male partner arguing that cultural factors play a part in intimate relationships leading to their perpetration of violence and homicide. There is also some literature about women's participation in armed conflict and terror (Cunningham 2003; Faedi 2010; Lahai 2010; Banks 2019). In this literature, women's violence is most often preceded by familial, community or state violence—often from childhood.

There is a even smaller, but important, body of literature on violence by women who sell or exchange sex (commonly referred to as female sex workers—FSWs) toward others, much of it focusing on those women and girls who sell and exchange sex in poor, urban neighbourhoods in the United States (Arnold et al. 2001; Miller and Decker 2001; Wesely 2006; Chesney-Lind 2007). Unfortunately, there is little research on FSWs in the Global

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South. The only direct example of sex workers' employing violence we could identify was Ayele's work (Ayele 2016) with Ethiopian FSWs.

In this paper, we will discuss violence perpetrated by FSWs in three cities in Papua New Guinea (PNG; Lae, Mt. Hagen and Port Moresby), women who live marginalized and socially distanced lives because of their engagement in 'work' deemed illegal, a remnant of British colonial law (Stewart 2012; 2014). We draw on data from 19 qualitative interviews of FSWs who spoke of using violence against others undertaken as part of a larger biobehavioural study (Kelly-Hanku et al. 2018; 2020a; 2020b). From these interviews we seek to explore the ways in which violence operates and to provide insights into why such violence is perpetrated and sustained. We unpack the manifestations of violence, the complex context in which sex worker violence is rooted and the multiple meanings associated with the violence perpetrated by FSWs in PNG.

Gendered Violence in PNG

> [In PNG] violence is engendered and embodied within a framework of cultural violence that both men and women come to accept as a way of life (McPherson 2012: 67).

Studies of violence committed by FSWs in the Global South is scarce, particularly studies which seek to understand the lived experience of FSWs, as well as the economic, social and cultural contexts in which such violence is committed (Simi and Rhodes 2009; Ayele 2016). While not committed to the absence of violence in pre-colonial times in PNG (Macintyre 2012), there is also a body of work that examines the gendered violence of colonialism in the country and the wider Pacific. Violence has been central to the complex histories of colonialism in the region and an integral part of the social and economic foundations on which colonial relations were built (Jolly 2008). Violence toward women held a central place in colonization and its legacy plays an important role in understanding violence against Pacific women (Jolly 2008; Macintyre 2012).

In order to understand FSW violence in PNG, we need to place it within an endemic culture of violence in that country (Dinnen 2001; Jolly et al. 2012; Kelly-Hanku 2013). This violence is both a product of modernity but is also cultural and traditional in nature (Berndt 1962; Knauft 1990; Roscoe 2014). Violence is often seen as necessary in cultural practices, including e.g. for boys to become men (see e.g. Kelly-Hanku 2013). However, traditional PNG societies were typically small-scale, relatively egalitarian (although patriarchal in most places). Prior to colonization, conflict as a common feature of social life was managed pragmatically though a cycle of dispute and resolution (Dinnen et al. 2011). Beginning in the mid-19th century by Germany in the north and Britain in the south, PNG was one of the last parts of the globe to experience European exploration, exploitation and colonization (Dinnen et al. 2011). The impacts of colonization were experienced unevenly with colonial administrations being more interested in maintaining a semblance of order than in radically transforming local societies and building elaborate systems of governance. Following World War II, the two territories that had been administered separately were conjoined as a single

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administrative and judicial system: The Territory of PNG. The unity of a state was, thus, imposed on indigenous peoples of enormous diversity.

There have been highly uneven and inefficient patterns of development. Wealth generated from mining and logging has primarily benefitted multinational corporations, national and local politicians and a few male landowners (Filer and Macintyre 2006). Social and economic changes and inequalities have been exacerbated by and integration into the international economy. Poverty, at least as defined by a commodity economy, palpably worsened both in some remote regions and in the squatter settlements of towns as development spread (Gibson and Olivia 2002; Cammack 2007).

In the context of enormous social and economic changes, the inequalities experienced by many Papua New Guineans have contributed to widespread violence (Dinnen 2001; Feeny et al. 2012). There are limitations to state authority in PNG, particularly with regard to law enforcement, as well as corruption among those in power (Walton 2016). Thus, people continue to rely upon local methods for managing disputes and maintaining safety, which, in turn, have been increasingly overwhelmed by the pace of change. There are major problems of law and order in urban centres like Port Moresby, Mt. Hagen and Goroka and on major roads like the Highlands Highway. Police responses tend to be as draconian and violent as those in the colonial period (Dinnen 2001). To this end, violence *em nomal ya* (Tok Pisin, one of three official languages of PNG; translation, ‘it’s normal’ (Hukula 2012: 197).

Gender inequality is deeply engrained in PNG (Macintyre 2012; Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016), and this underpins the pervasive legitimacy of gender violence that has been acknowledged in PNG from the foundational studies of the Law Reform Commission around the time of independence (Eves 2008; Zimmer-Tamakoshi 2012). Much of the violence in PNG is perpetrated against women and children (Lepani 2008; Lewis et al. 2008; Luker and Monsell-Davis 2011; Médecins Sans Frontières 2011; ChildFund Australia 2013), especially that violence which accompanies hierarchies of power, of adults over children and of men over women. Also, the patriarchal authority of ancestral religion and charismatic Catholicism here combine to legitimate gender violence, ‘to make violence look, even feel right’ (Eves 2012).

There are no recent (since 1986) official or national statistics on the prevalence and/or incidence of physical and sexual violence against women in PNG. The only recent large-scale study of men’s violence was undertaken in the autonomous region of Bougainville (Jewkes et al. 2017). Of partnered women, 16.0 per cent had experienced physical violence alone, 11.1 per cent had experienced sexual violence alone from their partner and 40.3 per cent has experienced both physical and sexual violence in the last 12 months. The same study also reported that 26.6 per cent had raped a woman previously and 14.1 per cent had participated in a multiple rape (Jewkes et al. 2017).

Violence is frequently legitimized (Lewis et al. 2008) to discipline women and/or to prevent women from transgressing cultural expectations (Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016). In fact, it has been argued that the socialization of women in PNG occurs through ‘a process that is beaten onto their bodies in order that, among other things, they learn a lesson, do their work,

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behave properly, and show the proper degree of obedience to their fathers and husbands' (McPherson 2012: 56). Many authors relate gender violence to changing masculinities in contemporary PNG (Eves 2008; 2012; Jolly 2008; 2012; Macintyre 2012), and most perceive recent social changes of the last several decades as driving uncertainty about what it is to be a man. Macintyre (2012: 180) argues that aggressive masculinity that results in violence is 'simultaneously sociable—for it aims to gain the admiration of other men—and anti-social, in that it is often harmful, illegal and disruptive of social harmony'. Papua New Guinean men view hyper-masculinity, displayed as sexual violence, and desire as men's entitlement to women's bodies (see also Hukula 2012; Lusby 2013).

There is evidence that Papua New Guinean women have traditionally engaged in violence (and still do). For example, as described by Macdonald and Kirami (2017), in the Highlands region of PNG, women even now take part in some tribal warfare. Also, some women are said to have some of the same qualities as a violent man: fighting and having a bad temper. Women demonstrating these aggressive hegemonic masculine attributes are said to exhibit these behaviours in their marriages (Lusby 2013). However, women's violence is often classified and viewed differently to men's violence. Lusby's (2018: 131) work indicates that Papua New Guinean women who fight are 'roundabout women, prostitutes, that kind of woman. The kind who move between men all the time, sleep with one woman's husband one day and then the next, sleep with another man'. Jolly (2012: 4) argues that violent women in PNG are viewed as 'subversive of legitimate male authority and to be acting irrationally or emotionally'.

Sex work in PNG

Sex work in PNG is not a new phenomenon and, in its modern form, dates back at least to World War II where women were offered to white soldiers and, subsequently, business men in Port Moresby (Stewart 2012; see also Drikoré Johnstone's [1995] work on *bisnis-meris*). Sex work in the present day is a direct result of both poverty and economic deprivation and the migration of women from villages into cities (Levnatis 2000). The commoditization of bride price also plays a part in propelling women into sex work (Kelly et al. 2011); so does a desire to be free of family ties or resentment about lack of support (Wardlow 2004; 2006) and flight from violent relationships (Stewart 2012). Sex work is illegal and sex workers are often taken into custody and prosecuted for selling sex (Stewart 2014). Sex work is also mostly informal, on the streets and in bars, and there is debate as to whether those who exchange sex for goods and money are sex workers (Wardlow 2004; 2006; Stewart 2014).

Those engaged in transactional sexual relationships in PNG are more vulnerable to violence because of the illegal nature of their activities and the moral opprobrium they and their means of survival attract (Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016). Stewart argues that Papua New Guinean women who sell sex, 'appearing as both economically independent and powerful, and refusing to submit to the ongoing control of any one man or group of men, are particularly threatening to men' (Stewart 2014: 228). FSWs are already in situations of high risk for both violence and victimization, and they experience a heightened exposure to crimes such as rape and other violence in particularly gendered ways. The notorious Three Mile raid in 2004 in the nation's capital—Port Moresby—saw law enforcement officers swoop on a

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guest house where 40 women and girls who sell and exchange sex were rounded up, publicly humiliated and charged (Coursen-Neff and Bochenek 2005).

This study responds to some of the recent research on sex worker violence, lessening the dearth of research on sex worker violence outside the metropole and in countries where violence is endemic (Ayele 2016). It analyses the complex social, economic and social factors that underpin PNG sex workers' violence.

Methodology

This article reports findings from a qualitative substudy of a biobehavioral survey of 2,092 women and girls who sell or exchange sex in the three main cities in PNG (Port Moresby, Lae and Mt. Hagen; June 2016–December 2017). This study called *Kauntim mi tu* in Tok Pisin, means 'Count me too'. Women and girls born female, who were aged 12 years, were able to speak English or Tok Pisin and had sold or exchanged sex with a man in the last 6 months were eligible to participate in the survey. All staff were trained by Save the Children in child protection policies and practices. All children aged 17 years and younger were referred to child friendly services that were accustomed to and trained in addressing the needs of this population.

This study reports on a subsample recruited from the larger study at the completion of the biobehavioural survey, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 FSWs (aged 13–45 years) who were purposively recruited with the aim of reflecting the diversity of the participants in the larger study (e.g. demographic and behavioural variables, such as the duration of time involved in selling or exchanging sex, HIV status and condom use). As a result, a similar number of women were recruited from each city (Port Moresby, $n = 18$; Lae, $n = 20$; Mt. Hagen, $n = 22$). Prior participation in qualitative research with the study in the last five years was the only exclusion criterion for participation in the present study.

Of the 60 FSWs recruited to the qualitative substudy, 19 reported having committed violence against others and the narratives of these women form the basis of this article. The 19 FSWs were aged between 18 and 45 years old, with an average age of 27.7 years (with three women not knowing their age). They came from a range of provinces, with the majority coming from the Highlands. All but three of the women were divorced or separated, with one in a polygynous marriage and another a widow. The demographic characteristics of the sex workers who had committed violent acts showed little difference to those who had not.

All women provided written informed consent to participate in the qualitative interview. Interviews were conducted at the study site in a private space to ensure confidentiality. The semi-structured interview explored first sexual experience, condom use, initiation of sex work, discrimination and violence, access to health services, reproductive history and HIV testing. These interviews were conducted in Pidgin or English by trained Papua New Guinean female researchers who were also involved in the implementation of the survey in the larger study. On average, interviews took between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Women who participated in the qualitative substudy were reimbursed for their time (PGK25; US$7.40).

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All interviews were digitally recorded and stored on password-protected computers. Researchers at the PNG Institute of Medical Research transcribed the interviews verbatim and, when necessary, translated them into English. All identifiable information was removed and pseudonyms were allocated, and these (together with age and place of residence) are utilized when they are introduced for the first time in the text. Subsequent references to a particular participant do not include this demographic detail.

Both the Pidgin and English translations of the interviews were analysed simultaneously using NVivo v11 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd). Transcriptions were initially coded using an *a priori* coding framework based on the interview guides (Crabtree and Miller 1999) that were designed by three PNG-based researchers. The original coding framework was then inductively adapted to more accurately reflect themes identified in the data. Study data were organized and coded by one researcher (M.R.M.). Coding and analysis were cross-checked with other research team members familiar with PNG culture and language to ensure accuracy and consensus.

This study was approved by the PNG National Department of Health's Medical Research Advisor Committee, the Research Advisory Committee of the National AIDS Council Secretariat, the PNG Institute of Medical Research's Institutional Review Board and the Human Research Ethics Committee at UNSW Sydney, Australia. The study was also endorsed by Friends Frangipani, a peer-led civil society organization representing sex workers in PNG, and reviewed in accordance with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) human research protection procedures and was determined to be research, but CDC investigators did not interact with human subjects or have access to identifiable data or specimens for research purposes. All participants under the age of 18 were provided with referrals to child safety services that were sensitive to the needs of this population.

Findings

The 19 interviews with FSWs across the three sites who had committed violence highlighted the pervasiveness and complexity of violence in their lives. While this article is specifically dealing with their own acts of violence, all 19 women had also been subject to violence throughout their lives. Although no questions about violence in childhood were specifically asked about in the interviews and no specific interview questions about sex workers' own perpetration of violence were asked, the practice of FSW perpetrated violence arose out of the data itself and women's own open admissions of violent acts.

We identified four distinct types of violence perpetrated by FSWs, which will be discussed in detail later. All of these acts were physical rather than verbal. First, most women had fought with their ex-husbands prior to leaving them or with his co-wives or girlfriends. Second, clients were subject to violence perpetrated by sex workers because of non-payment or as retaliation to brutality towards them or their peers. Third, FSWs spoke of beating up other sex workers who transgressed onto their patch as a way of maintaining territory and status. Last, they committed acts of violence against people (mainly women) who verbally abused them because of their means of gaining access to money and gifts—selling or exchanging sex. Alcohol played a part in many of these acts of violence and aggression.

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Violence and Intimate Relationships

All but three of the women we interviewed were divorced or separated from their husbands or partners. Much of the intimate partner violence they describe committing in these prior relationships was part of a cycle of violence towards them. McPherson (2012: 49), writing in the PNG context of West New Britain Province, highlights that, 'Women grow up and enter marriage knowing that their words, behaviours and, indeed, their agency could ignite their husbands' anger and result in abuse'. Fifteen of the women in our study had been abused by their husbands. However, they were not purely passive recipients of aggression. A cycle of violence was present—their husbands beat them and then they retaliated by using machetes, knives and sticks against their husbands and/or their co-wives or girlfriends:

> [My] second husband was a very badly behaved man. He had so many wives; he received all kinds of phone call. When I asked him who was calling, he would say, 'Sssh, they are complainants', he continued until I became wild with anger and I stabbed him and he divorced me.
>
> -Amber, 23 years, mixed Enga and Manus Island Provinces

Sexual jealousy plays a role in intimate relationships in this setting (McPherson 2012) and in abusive behaviour by husbands and towards them. Five women described jealousy and anger around other women married to, or involved with, their husbands. Regina told us that her husband had multiple wives and other girlfriends: 'I was always fighting around with those other ladies … He used to womanize and I used to go and fight with those ladies, damage the car windows and spoil things'. Karu said, 'I saw three women talking to my boyfriend. I got angry and went and I never gave them any chance, I went and beat up the three women; I fought all of them. My boyfriend also got angry and he belted me up, he belted me'.

Two women sought legal redress after fights within their extended families. Mofa described her father-in-law's attempt to rape and kill her:

> [H]e was about to chop me, when I caught the knife as it was overhead. I then returned the knife to him on another part of his body. At that time I had a masculine body so I grabbed hold of him and snatched the knife away and thrust the knife back into him. I walked straight to Mendi and reported the matter.

Philippa also spoke of stabbing her husband's second wife and then reporting the matter to the police: 'I said, "I am the first wife and he married a woman like this and he doesn't take care of the children and it years and years now. I was angry so I stabbed her". They did not charge me or did anything, and I won my case'.

While Papua New Guinean women are taught to accept their subordinate position in the social structure and, within that, physical (and sexual) abuse, not all women accede to this cultural prescription. The FSWs in our study, as elsewhere, exert agency to confront these overarching structures of gendered inequality and marginalization. This form of agency is, as Wardlow (2004: 1018) describes, an 'anger and resistance' to their situation and a desire to act on it, Karu said:

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> I divorced my husband and gave the child back to him, then I went around on the streets, drinking beer in the night clubs, going from hotels to hotels everywhere in Lae city hotels, lodges and guest houses I used to go.

All but two of the women we interviewed had left their relationships and went into sex work to escape husbands and partners. Amber told us, 'The second husband made me angry, and because of the anger, I went out with the girls and drink, and to dance and lure men. Some they give me money, some just buy beer and such'. As Wardlow (2004: 1011) argues, '[they] describe their entry into this social category as triggered by incidents of violence and motivated by feelings of betrayal and anger'. However, it is clear that victimization goes far beyond partner abuse and escaping violent relationships does not necessarily give them the freedom that they desire. Rather, these violent relationships are replaced with social marginalization and fresh violence from and towards clients, other men and peers also selling and exchanging sex.

Violence Against Clients

Violence towards sex workers by clients is both ubiquitous (Maher and Curtis 1992; Shannon et al. 2009; Deering et al. 2014) and normalized (Ayele 2016). As Silbert and Pines (1981: 396) have argued, '"abuses on the job" constitute more than an occupational hazard'. Papua New Guinean women in the sex industry also describe the workplace as a central site of aggression by clients towards them. Being a sex worker in the social conditions in PNG is not easy, but sex workers are not helpless victims of clients and do not take well to bad behaviour, and they fight back. Dixie (21 years and mixed Simbu and Southern Highlands Provinces) explained that she would warn troublesome clients of her feisty nature by saying, '"Find some other girls who always behave, it won't work with me." That's how I usually respond to them when I argue and fight with them'.

Violence towards male clients was often a reaction to poor treatment and occurred for a number for reasons, most commonly reported due to non-payment, non-resistance/opposition to condom use and retaliation to physical or sexual violence towards them. Mayo described instances of non-payment:

> There are some men who take us out without paying. They cling to us the whole night up until morning but they won't give us anything. And when we mention it, they will turn around and smack us. Some of us never take it easy with them. We usually pay back and exchange fists inside the rooms, saying, 'I want my money'. We normally exchange fists and then leave without being paid. Sometimes like after the fight they'll give us K10 or K20 for our bus fares.

Mayo further argued that 'they simply think that we are just FSWs so they can do anything with our bodies. We say "What is this? Is this your private [vagina] at home where you can just release your semen and then leave?"'. This response is interesting for a number of reasons. The conflation of sex work with a lack of agency has often precluded the idea of sex workers as voicing rights-based or feminist concerns (Klinger 2003; Jeffreys 2018). But Mayo's response to this situation is a resistance to being trampled on in her workplace and

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her 'exchange of fists' has developed out of her ongoing experiences of vulnerability and exploitation as a sex worker.

In another interview, Sandra (42 years, Gulf Province) describes going to the toilets with a client who demanded she take her clothes off. She said, '"You give me money first then I will take them off". This continued, and we fought inside the toilet … We were fighting and I held his legs and I said "I will break all your bones"'. For Norris (22 years, Enga Province), getting on the front foot early on with clients is a way of avoiding later violence. She informed us that 'When [clients] see that we are strong enough to fight back with them, they feel scared and they don't become violent towards us'. Fighting back is also described in Ayele's (2016: 168) work on Ethiopian FSWs:

> Some of the bolder women … do not hesitate to hit clients, either pre-emptively or in response to their aggression … Being hit back is at least considered inevitable, sometimes, self-defence is a natural reaction in the women that also preserves their sense of self-worth.

Some violent retaliation occurred as peer support, where women were in close proximity to other sex workers while they were selling sex to a client. If the client resisted condom use or started to hurt a sex worker friend, 'We normally team up and bash the man', said Tania (21 years, Western Highlands).

Stacey (31 years, East Sepik Province) got involved in a violent attack against her fellow FSW because one day she may need that support in return:

> They came and fought her, so I stood up and fight with them because we are one, why should I look on while my other friend receives injury. I must fight for her rights (help fight) because the time would come when I would receive similar treatment. By then I would be assisted.

Norris also described an incident of potential rape of a fellow sex worker, '[when a] man wants to take the woman away, we usually stand together and fight the man to help our sister. We usually help our sister and fight with the guy, so when the guy sees that we get mobilized and he feels scared'. Here, violence was described as an act of sisterhood, not just saving someone in trouble but where great importance was ascribed to looking out for other sex workers and friends. Here, sex workers attach a high value to group solidarity (Swann 2019).

The literature has also shown that sex workers sometimes 'fleece' clients, what Maher and Curtis (1992: 226) describe as: 'vic him before he vics you'. While not commonly reported in this study, Yala (19 years, mixed Hela, Enga and Morobe Provinces) described how she partnered with local street boys to increase the financial rewards of sex work by violently extracting goods from male clients during the sexual encounter:

> I would team up with the boys and we would hold men up at night clubs. If I see that a client had money, then I would lure him outside and into the park, and the boys would come hold us up at knife point. I would pretend and let the boys remove all his money.

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So, while FSWs continuously navigate the terrains of sex work and resist the rampant violence that is almost an expected part of the work, as Ayele (2016: 15) argues about Ethiopian sex workers, 'they do so by applying different techniques; this requires bravery, quick thinking and guile'. Resistance, even violent resistance practiced by sex workers around their place of work, is sometimes about survival itself, amidst stark power imbalances, and, as such, is a forceful statement. Ayele (2016: 170–1) further argues:

> the resistance of sex workers does not fundamentally challenge the status quo of gender inequality in general and the inequality between sex workers and their male clients in particular. However, the fact that sex workers survive and often overcome the violence that is an ever-present part of their work is worthy of note.

Violence Against Other Women and Girls Involved in Selling or Exchanging Sex

Women's violence was also described as pre-emptive, as well as protective. Although women who sell and/or exchange sex often support other women like themselves, when confronted in a violent situation, they sometimes also fight over clients and to keep control over the geographic spaces in which they operate. Others encroaching on these spaces are deemed a direct threat to economic opportunities, to established relationships and accepted (and earned) areas of work. These territorial issues created a particularly vulnerable time for newly arrived women to experience violence from other, established sex workers. From the perspective of the established women, Erika (27 years, mixed Simbu and Southern Highlands Provinces) explained how there is fighting between women, especially if a sex worker or group of sex workers moved into a territory perceived as belonging to another group: 'This is someone else's place, so if you go back to the street you must not act in front of us, and from there we usually bash them up in there'. As Batchelor et al. (2001) argue, territories and boundaries form the social worlds of violent women and girls.

Similarly, Marceline (19 years, Western Highlands Province) shared, 'We are based in town, so when we see some other women come to town to fish, we usually hit them … we'll even take their clothes off and grab their string bags'. For Marceline and her peers, other FSWs were generally categorized in terms of place (Batchelor 2005). Recently arrived in Port Moresby, Pina (27 years, Milne Bay Province) encountered violent opposition because she posed a threat to other women's spaces of work and clients. But Pina was not passive in her response to the perceived threat she posed to others. Having visited one of the nightclubs and learning how to present herself as a woman who would sell sex, some of potential clients started to take an interest in her. Other sex workers began a fight with her but not before she had warned them, 'Oh you are touching the wrong woman'. The fighting women were removed from the club, and the established sex workers stabbed and slashed Pina with a knife. Pina retaliated and assaulted one of the other women. Following this incident, which Pina's mother witnessed, she was encouraged not to continue to sell sex. Pina refused and said she was already used to it, including the violence, and said to her mother, 'We've fought, and we will continue to fight for men, so whoever tries to take my men we will fight'. FSWs in PNG fight for the right to ensure respect, and this need to gain respect was a reason for violence. The social function of violence here was to resolve boundary conflicts

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and to stand up for oneself (Arnell 2017). As Wesely (2006: 318) states, ‘women can depend on no one but themselves for their safety’.

Alcohol and Violence

Drinking alcohol is common in the work culture of transactional sex in PNG (Kelly et al. 2011). Most women meet potential clients in bars where alcohol is used as a strategy to hook clients. Alcohol consumption is facilitated by clients purchasing alcohol for FSWs to signal interest in sexual services (Leddy et al. 2018) and a means to gain courage to sell sex and forget other aspects of a marginalized life. But, at the same time, the literature points to the links between alcohol and violence, both in the PNG context and elsewhere, that (Dernbach and Marshall 2001; Eves 2008) alcohol places women at risk at both physical and sexual violence and fuels violence against other sex workers: ‘I usually beat women when under the influence of alcohol, my thoughts become such that I think I’m the boss [of the other girls],’ shared Mofa.

Marceline described two recent instances of being drunk and getting into fights. In the first incident, she beat up women who tried to steal her boyfriend and, in the second, she was drinking with friends when a woman from Wabag stole money from the bag of one of Marceline’s friends. For Julie (18 years, Madang Province), it is about starting ‘a commotion and all that whenever we are drunk and throw bottles at each other’. So, not all of the violence was motivated by resistance or revenge; in a social environment in which violence and intimidation is acceptable, violence can also be an integral part of a sense of self what Batchelor et al. (2001: 130) call:

> Having a pride in their ‘hard’ reputation and the rewards it could bring … A constant state of being ‘ready for action’ and self-defence, and public displays of weakness (backing down, crying) were regarded as unacceptable

Violence in Retaliation for Verbal Abuse

Sex work in PNG occurs in conditions that are oppressive. The choices sex workers make in relation to violence are shaped by the stigma attached to sex work, and our interviewees described how they used violence or threats of violence in response to community slander against them and their fellow sex workers. This name calling, as Batchelor et al. (2001) argue, is ‘a routine, ongoing and cumulative *process* embedded in everyday experience’ and is condoned and even encouraged by the community (see also Stewart 2012). In reality, most of this slander comes from women: ‘gossiping mothers’ and women who see sex workers as a direct sexual threat that may involve their husbands or partners. Mayo, Abbey, Gretel, Erika and Sandra all discussed bashing women who had verbally abused them. Resisting this abuse and retaliating was reported: ‘I face them straight and I get cross with them, “Why you are gossiping about me, am I your enemy, or have I done something to you and you are gossiping about me”‘ (Sandra). In this sense, roles of victim and perpetrator can be enacted simultaneously, as Abbey (40 years, mixed East Sepik and Southern Highlands) said:

> People are also afraid of us, or spit at us, and we don’t care. When I walk, I dress up and walk by, and if a woman spits at me or says, ‘Oh, two-kina woman, you

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> want to go and look for money and come'. That's it, I go and mobilize my other peers and say, 'You're gonna die'.

Gretel told us, 'I fought with a woman because she told the public that I am a sex worker and used to go around with her husband', whilst Erika described how during busy sex work days, such as Friday, Saturday and Wednesdays on government pay week, women (and, sometimes, men) gather outside the guest house where they work and abuse them or beat them up:

> We usually fight back with them … We usually bash them up. They'll simply come and attack us. Just imagine the commotion usually starts from there. Our plan is that if one of them happens to drop by at the guest house we will actually crush their bones.

Verbal abuse and, sometimes, physical abuse from women in the community is an expression of a social world where the use of intimidation is an acceptable way to deal with sex workers. This climate of verbal abuse played into the chronic exploitation and victimization that FSWs endured. The verbal abuse about their status as sex workers cannot be isolated but must be seen on a continuum of violence.

The Potential for Papua New Guinean Sex Workers to Stop Perpetrating Violence

There was a sense of inevitability in some of the discussions about violence and aggression. For example, Stacey told us, 'I am the kind of woman who starts [fights]'. While there is some reluctance in the feminist literature to ascribe to some women a penchant for violence, there is a growing admission that some women and girls take pleasure in violence. Similarly to Batchelor et al.'s (2001) study, the FSWs we talked to in PNG often spoke of their pride in their reputations as violent aggressors and bullies (Regina described herself as 'Rambo'). Such attitudes are borne out a lifetime of endemic violence endured, as well as perpetrated, by women like Stacey and Regina.

Some participants viewed violence as inexorably leading to murder or death. Philippa talked about getting to the stage 'of murdering someone - the woman and the man as well'. Underpinning many of the women's discussion of violence was what Wesely calls 'deep rage' (Wesely 2006: 308), where violent reactions are borne out of the frustration of having few other options at their disposal to effectively deal with aggressive situations they find themselves in. This may result in resignation as Mofa explained: 'Whether to live or die does not bother me much. If I happen to die, they can throw my dead body anywhere here. I don't bother much about it'.

However, two women talked about stopping violence. For Dixie, it was discussing aggression with Anglicare workers that made her think about the reasons for her aggression and to reflect on how she might get out of the cycle. 'Anglicare advised me to control my temper … They sort of counselled me that's why I stopped fighting. I am starting to control my temper. They only told me to control my temper in order to be happy'. For Mofa, her diagnosis with HIV caused her to rethink the violence in her life, 'I no longer come up with

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such thoughts to fight back with girls. The retaliation in a form of fighting has disappeared. Such behaviour was not good, I think'.

Encouraging sex workers to address strong feelings of anger and frustration that contribute to violent acts requires an understanding of the importance of relationships with others, which are both part of the problem and the solution. However, these can be the starting point for conversations about the limits of violence in a way that moves the debate forward rather than further blaming, stigmatizing and criminalizing sex workers.

Discussion

In this paper, we explored the factors in sex workers' lives that contextualize their perpetration of violence. Similarly to the international literature, our study indicates that that there were a number of factors underpinning their violence. These included childhood physical and sexual abuse, adult victimization, disruptions in relationships and economic disadvantages (Funk 1999; Weizmann-Henelius et al. 2004; Benda 2005; Odgers et al. 2005), as well as economic marginalization, gender inequality, male domination and lack of opportunity (Wesely 2006; Reckdenwald and Parker 2008; Giordano and Copp 2019).

Violence was deeply meaningful in these women's lives (see also Batchelor et al. 2001; Batchelor 2005); it released them from violent relationships; served as revenge for past wrongs; assuaged client violence; assisted in the maintenance of sex worker solidarity; sustained allegiances and enriched personal status. Violence served multiple purposes in their lives. In the context of PNG more generally, the disadvantages, marginalization and violence against women and girls who sell or exchange sex is not unexpected or surprising. The lifelong experiences of violence and lack of economic and personal security these women endure provides the social context for their own perpetration of violence.

The women in our study are significantly economically disadvantaged, with more than half of the sex workers across the three cities living on less than PGK499 (US$207) per month (Kelly-Hanku et al. 2018). With a lower status than other women in PNG, the women who participated in this study were neither respected nor protected within their social and cultural group, having transgressed what is culturally, morally and legally acceptable (Kelly-Hanku et al. 2016). Their sexualized labour operated within a larger informal economy in PNG, where the stigmatized and illegal context of selling sex serves to disadvantage them further and exacerbate the gender and status hierarchies that structure social relations in the country. Consistent with findings elsewhere, violence was perpetrated against these women because of the means by which they seek to survive and earn money (Manning and Bungay 2017; Duff et al. 2018; Erickson et al. 2018). The illegality of their work places women and girls who sell and exchange sex at unique risk for violence. We have described the pervasive and multifaceted nature of violence that the FSWs experienced in this. FSWs survive their social environment but also act upon their environment to secure social and economic security (Lorway et al. 2018).

In the lives of the Papua New Guinean women interviewed for this study, their own perpetration of violence was described as a form of protection and self-defence and a way

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to retain some control in a violent and harsh world. Violence used against them and their own violence was, in the words of Chesney-Lind and Irwin (2013: 19), ‘reactionary and proactive, instrumental and expressive, protective and retaliatory, rational and irrational’. Williamson and Folaron (2001) state that women in sex work have to find non-conventional ways to protect themselves from violence because formal or conventional mechanisms, such as social and legal protections, have failed. The ‘choice’ to be violent, as Rumgay (1999: 119) notes, ‘is made in the context of deep and chronic social and personal disadvantage’.

The voices of these Papua New Guinean women engaged in selling or exchanging sex contribute to a deeper understanding of a subgroup of sex workers who perpetrate violence. This violence occurs within the context of larger male structures of violence, inequality and marginalization. As Kemshall (2004: 221) argues, ‘crude caricatures around “mad or bad” are unhelpful as these divert attention away from the important processes, traumas and dilemmas that underpin these complex acts’. Their violence is engendered by the social context in PNG where violence is extreme and normalized. For these women, ‘offensive violence was a counteractive measure, a practical choice’ (Miller and White 2004: 186).

Violence in PNG arises out of a complex colonial history that tore apart the small-scale societies. ‘Development’ has been highly uneven, social and economic inequalities have increased and poverty deepened (Cammack 2007). This, in turn, has contributed to widespread violence, including rape and murder of women, with police violence being part of the response (Dinnen 2001), and generalized violence against women in PNG is at epidemic levels (Jolly et al. 2012). All of the sex workers had faced violence in the homes and from their intimate partners, as well as from the police and community members. In this way, violence has been normalized and is seen, at times, as a desirable strategy to combat the considerable violence towards them. It is not enough to characterize the participants in our study as only victims or survivors of violence without including the other role these women played in perpetrating violence, including against their own peers. It is important to acknowledge that women’s violence does exist and is present in the sex work community in PNG. We hope that we have shed some light on this issue, illuminating FSWs’ use and management of violence. Some of the sex workers we interviewed acknowledge their violence as being problematic, suggesting the need for non-government organizations and clinic workers to speak openly about alternatives to violence. For sex workers to begin to go beyond violence in their responses would mean utilizing both individual and social forces that would empower them to make choices.

Papua New Guinean FSWs’ use of violence needs to be understood as arising from a complex set of social, material and gendered circumstances and cannot be addressed in isolation from other aspects of their lives. The women in this study did not view themselves as helpless victims; they focused on their ability to make active decisions about their everyday lives albeit in very difficult and complicated circumstances. Figuring out how FSWs can deal with potentially violent encounters in non-violent ways and how they can stop using violence are difficult issues, particularly if these women have little choice other than sex work as a means of making a living. However, the implications would be far reaching.

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