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Sex Work, Beyond the Choices: An exploratory qualitative study of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar

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Sex Work, Beyond the Choices:

An exploratory qualitative study of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar

by

Hnin Su Mon

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

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This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology.

Sex Work, Beyond the Choices: An exploratory qualitative study of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar
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Abstract

This is an exploratory, ethnographic study of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar. I show that neither the victimization nor empowerment discourses are sufficient to analyze situations of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar. There are two parts in my argument. First, I provide vignettes of sex establishments and different ways of organizing sex work. Then I discuss the influence of establishments, at institutional level, on how the female sex workers perceive their work places, and how the women present their bodies. Secondly, I underscore the main reasons why the women engage in sex work, and how they intertwined with other contributing factors such as filial obligations, limited opportunities for decent paying jobs, and limited educational attainment. I also discuss the variance of risk perception among the women. I concluded the paper with some reflection on strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

Introduction

From 2006 through 2011, I worked as a counselor and a behavior change communication officer at Medecins du Monde (Mdm), a France based International Non-government organization, which has been working on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs in Myanmar. Mdm has been working with the key populations of female sex workers, men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, and their spouses. During five years tenure with Mdm, I was well exposed and familiarized with the key populations. But at that time, my main interests are more into public health aspect particularly HIV/AIDS prevention, rights-based interventions, and empowerment issues. When I started learning sociology, I became enthusiastic about looking at the community I was familiar with through a sociological lens; in C. Wright Mill's term, I attempt to see strangeness in the familiars.

On the other hand, I understand the gap between academic studies and the activists/grass-root workers on discussions about female sex workers. For an instance, in 2009, I did an internship with Empower Foundation—a Thailand based organization that promotes human rights for female sex workers—and I met a great woman who was also my supervisor. Once she told me, “Look, those researchers, they came and studied about sex workers. Then they left. We never heard back from them and sex workers they studied never benefited from those research.” She continued, “Also some donor agencies just want the numbers [quantitative indicators related to the program they donated for] from us. *What we have is our stories*. We want them to listen to our stories. If they don't listen our stories, we also don't want their money.” With these conversations imprinted in

my mind, I am going to share the findings and relevant recommendations with MdM and other interested local self-help groups working with the key community. Also, the findings in this paper are from the stories of the women who are generous enough to share their life experiences with me during my one-month stay with MdM in July 2015 and about the places where I hung out with MdM's team.

In this paper, firstly, I reflect on existing discourses on victimization, empowerment, and potential alternatives. I also briefly discuss bodily capital particularly on how the women present their bodies varies based on their potential clients. Then I provide background information on Myanmar, conceptualization of gender and female sex workers in Myanmar cultural context, and about the organization I conducted my fieldwork, *Medicins du Monde*. Next I briefly explain about the methodology. Under the finding section, I portray the settings of different establishments, the ways they organize the business and their influences upon the women's perception of work places, potential risks, and different methods in presentation of their bodies. Moreover, I discuss the reasons of women participating in sex work by highlighting the intricacy of the women's agency, other contributing social factors, and the nature of sex establishments. I concluded the paper with some reflection on strengths and limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Much literature on female sex workers is tendentiously framed in terms of either a victimization discourse or an empowerment discourse. The victimization discourse depicts sex work as forced labor in which all the women—particularly from non-western countries—who engaged in this work were coerced into the sex industry; thus those women are in need of rescue (Smith 2015, 591). This literature also underscores exploitation by pimps, managers, owners, and other third parties in sex industry. It is also framed in term of human trafficking or modern slavery. The overuse of victimization discourse is particularly common in portrayals of female sex worker in non-Western countries. *Half the Sky* by Kristof and WuDunn (2009) is a great example of victimization discourse by lopsidedly using “sex slavery” trope (Sandy 2009, 196). In *Half the Sky*, the authors portrayed the women in sex industry as helpless, voiceless, exploited young women. On contrary, *The right(s) Evidence: Sex Work, Violence, and HIV in Asia* (a multi-country qualitative study conducted in Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka) reported that the majority of sex workers are internal migrants who entered the sex business by choice, not by force (Bhattacharjya & et al. 2015, 6).

Sex workers’ rights activists, labor rights activists, and some other researchers claim that sex work is a different form of work in which women agree to exchange sex for money or material goods (Berg 2012, 693; Brewis & Linstead 2007, 85; Kempadoo 1999, 227; Leigh 1997, 229; Rubin 1995, 249). This suggests that the women in the sex industry are not voiceless victims without choices. Carol Leigh, who identifies herself as a sex worker, created the term “sex work” in the late 1970s and many international

organizations—including World Health Organization—welcome the term and have been using it across the globe (Berg 2012, 693; Leigh 1997, 230). By acknowledging what sex workers do as work, I also use the term “sex worker” throughout my paper. I also use the term establishment or sex establishment referring to “a place where sexual services are provided on the premises that is run by an owner and/or manager who receives a commission for the sexual services provided” (Bhattacharjya et al. 2015, 19).

Sex work as work discourse places economic necessity and, sometimes, social necessity as the locus of the argument. However this discourse may easily lead to “sex-work exceptionalism,” in which sex workers are seen as free from exploitation under capitalism; they are not exempted from exploitation because sex work itself “*is* labor under capitalism,” (Berg 2012, 694-695). Similarly, some researchers and activists highlight the importance of women’s agency but with a caveat. For an instance, Szörényi (2014) warned that too much emphasizing on agency is not enough since it does not address exploitation, violence, protection at working environment, and policies, which are beyond the agency of sex workers. Hence, sex workers need human rights, legal, and social protections as much as other workers do.

This dichotomous treatment of female sex workers either as victims or free-will individuals fails to reflect the contextual situations of female sex workers. Some researchers problematized this treatment as “one-dimensional” perspective and also for neglecting the permeability of individual freedom and structural hindrances (Sandy 2009, 194; Szörényi 2014, 20; Weitzer 2009, 215). In order to avoid this problematic treatment, Weitzer highlights that it is also important to address “the structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction” among the female

sex workers (Weitzer 2009, 215). Similarly, Szörényi (2014) suggested Butler's "new bodily ontology" in which female sex workers can be both victims and free-will agents at the same time. Just like Weitzer, Szörényi cautioned it is necessary to include the structural issues which limit the women's agency, make them vulnerable, and are out of individual's control in addressing sex work in third world countries. These alternative perspectives are more relevant for understanding the sex workers discourse in Myanmar than the victimization and/or empowerment aspect.

Some researchers attempt to categorize female sex workers by types of establishments or types of clients (Hoang 2014; Steinfatt 2002; Than 2011; Weitzer 2009). For an instance, Weitzer (2009, 217) differentiates approximately seven types of female sex workers namely call girl, escort, brothel worker, massage parlor worker, bar or casino worker, streetwalker, and others. Although he categorized in this manner, Weitzer mentions that typography may vary based on the women's "reasons for entry, access to resources for protection, number and type of clients, free to refuse clients and specific sex acts, relationship with colleagues, dependence on and exploitation by third parties, experiences with the authorities, public visibility, and impact on the surrounding community" (Weitzer 2009, 217). However, the nature of these factors are permeable and also the women usually move from one establishment to another, so that categories only reflect temporary status of female sex workers.

Wacquant employs the term "bodily capital" in addressing how boxers practiced and embodied bodily techniques in order to commodify their bodies (Wacquant 2004, 127-149). It is also applicable to how female workers maintain or adjust specific bodily techniques based on where they are working. By applying the concept of bodily capital,

Hoang showed how Vietnamese female sex workers in her study utilized different embodiment techniques to modify their bodies based on their potential clients (Hoang 2014, 516-517). Based on the type of potential clients—either Asian businessmen or Western backpackers—the women adopt and embody two different standards of beauty. The women whose intended clients are Asian businessmen adopt the beauty standards from influential Asian countries—such as South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong—by trying to make their skin lighter, performing plastic surgery, and so on (Hoang 2014, 521-522). On the other hand, the women whose potential customers are Western backpackers present their bodies as stereotypical poor rural women by using strategies such as tanning their skin, dressing modestly, and hiding their wealth (Hoang 2014, 527-528). Hoang mentioned that the later earned less than the former whose potential clients are from influential Asian countries.

In brief, while many literatures view sex workers either as victims or as free-will individuals, some studies contend that the dichotomous treatment fails to reflect the reality of sex work. The techniques women utilize to present their bodies and their earnings vary based on the type of potential clients; but study on how those techniques vary based on where the women work is limited. Moreover, categorization of sex workers is helpful in analyzing how the establishment influences the women's working situations. However, whether the category of sex establishment is the only indicator to address the women's working situations or not requires further exploration.

Background Information

“Since we have to start from zero, if other countries hit one stride, i.e. if other independent countries hit one stride, we have to try four, five or ten strides. Only then will (we) be equal. I want you all (to) understand very clearly that unless (every country) is equal, this country, albeit free, will have to please everyone and (consequently) become a prostitute country.”

Bogyoke Aung San, 13th July 1947, Rangoon.¹

Since Myanmar post-colonial political and socio-cultural era, prostitution has been the indicator of failing government while it was also a decoy for the religion-inclined government to gain support from the public by portraying prostitution as moral corruption (Than 2011, 539). Bogyoke Aung San is the leader who fought against British colony to gain independence for Myanmar and Myanmar people respect and love him as the “Father of the Nation”. During his last public speech—in which he is calling the citizens, to try hard in nation building—Aung San said if they fail to try hard, the country would become a “*pha naing gnan*”, a prostitute nation. This term, *pha*, is a very crude term and widely used pejoratively. The term “whore” might be the closet English word to “*pha*”. It is the term a public figure would avoid to use particularly during a public

¹ Than, Tharaphi. 2010. *Writers, Fighters and Prostitutes: Women and Burma's Modernity, 1942-1962*. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. P. 162. Retrieved on February 10, 2016. <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.559848> Originally from Parliament.

speech, but Bogyoke Aung San chose to do so, and used it intentionally (Than, 2010, 162). Even nowadays, the public media still use his speech to address the government's shortcomings and cultural declinations.

The discussion about Myanmar usually begins with its name, Burma or Myanmar. Currently, many international media are using Myanmar while some still use as Burma. The military regime changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 as Burma refers only to the majority ethnic group. The current government, either name is acceptable.² According to 2008 constitution, the official name is The Republic of the Union of Myanmar. In my paper, I use Myanmar and occasionally use Burma when referring to the time period before 1989. Myanmar is one of the Southeast Asian countries neighboring with Thailand and Laos to the east and southeast, China to the north, India and Bangladesh to the west and northwest, and with Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to the south and southwest.

The history of Myanmar as a nation dates back to the ninth century when the King Anawrahta founded the Pagan dynasty, the first Burmese Empire. Between the Pagan Empire and British colonization, there were a number of smaller and larger kingdoms. Through rises and falls of those kingdoms, British colonization ended the Burmese monarchy in 1885. Myanmar achieved independence from the British colony in 1948. Although a federated state in the constitution, in 1962, a military coup created a monolithic state. This led to international sanctions, economic declines, civil unrests, and armed conflicts in some areas of the country. In 2008, the National Referendum

² State chancellor and chair of NLD party, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi recently mentioned about the name during a meeting with diplomats. Source: <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/aung-san-suu-kyi-addresses-foreign-ambassadors-in-myanmar-04222016163657.html> (retrieved on April 23, 2016)

promulgated a new constitution amid critiques from international media and post-cyclone Nargis crisis. In 2011, Union Solidarity and Development Party—military backed party—won the general election and President U Thein Sein sworn in to take the lead of Myanmar's very first civilian government.

In 2012, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi—Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the leader of opposition party, National League of Democracy (NLD) that boycotted 2011 general election—joined the Myanmar parliament after winning by-election. During U Thein Sein's presidency, major changes in the country include lifting media and Internet censorship, selective permission for protests and assemblies, and increase availability of mobile phone. Previously, mobile phone cost as much as 2,500 US dollars and it eventually went down as low as 1.5 USD. In 2015 general election, the opposition party NLD won majority seats in parliament. In March 2016, NLD nominated President U Htin Kyaw was sworn in. Chair of NLD party, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is going to lead the party and parliament as a state chancellor in addition to acting as a minister of Foreign Affairs and a minister of the President's Office.

According to the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census report, Myanmar has a population of 51 million in which 51.8% are female. Population density of the whole country is 76 persons per square kilometer (km²) while Yangon region, the most crowded region, has population density of 716 persons per km². The 2014 census reports that the mean total household size is 4.4 persons per household and this highlights Myanmar culture of sharing the same household with nuclear and/or extended families. According to Pew survey (2010), approximately 80% of the population identifies as Buddhist. Myanmar has 135 officially recognized ethnic groups with 111 living

languages while Bamar is the majority ethnic group (about 68% of the whole population) and Burmese is the official language of Myanmar. While the nation-wide literacy rate is 89.5%, it varies among different states and regions. Yangon has the highest literacy rate, 96.6%. The census also shows that the male population has higher literacy rate than female population in general. Although there were censuses in 1973 and 1983, 2014 census reports are the most up to date. Although many critics claimed there were questionable issues around data collection strategies, nonetheless the 2014 census is the most reliable and up to date population data currently available.

Conceptualization of Gender and Female Sex Workers in Myanmar

Embedded with Buddhist terms, gender concepts in Myanmar often intricate with non-Buddhism traditional values. As Tannenbaum (1999, 243) cautions that interpreting gender issues in Thailand and Southeast Asia through the lens of Buddhism text and Western theories fail to capture the realities. The same is applicable when it comes to the conceptualization of gender in Myanmar. Harriden (2012, 7) explained how gender in Myanmar is conceptualized around male's spiritual power, *hpoun*, and its relation to political power, *ana*, and influential power, *awza*. Because of collective merit from past lives, male acquired *hpoun*, which presumes men possess higher spiritual status than women. This difference plays an essential role when it comes to mundane interactions between men and women in Myanmar. It is also a common belief that women's bodily fluid such menstrual blood is a threat to men's *hpoun* (Harriden 2012, 43). Consequently

it is a common practice of washing men's cloths separately from women's clothes, particularly those women wear under their waist.

There is also another saying, "*main-ma phyat, pyi pyat*" which implies if women seduce and influence men in power, a nation will be ruined. In some cases, people also use this in referring as if women are threats to a nation. Woman may have influential power over men although this is more prevalent and more acceptable in private household sphere than public sphere (Harriden 2012, 306). Although women may hold covert political or influential power in Burmese history, Harriden (2012, 182) argued that the military regime diminished the women's political and economical status. She argued that the military government's socio-economic shortcomings caused thousands of women ended up in low paid jobs including sex work and domestic work (Harriden 2012, 187, 308).

When expressing about economic, social, and domestic responsibilities, there is a widespread proverb in Myanmar, "When a husband carries the bundle on his shoulder, a wife carries a bundle on her head" (Harriden 2012, 36-37). It seems the proverb is saying men and women are equally responsible for socio-economic and domestic duties. But it has an alternative meaning; men are responsible for making money while women are responsible for domestic duties at home. According to the 2014 census, the proportion of male in labor force participation is 85.2% while female is only 50.5%. This huge disparity may be because the female traditional responsibilities are staying home and performing other unpaid domestic work. A famous moral teaching book, Lokaniti, portrays a well-behaved woman as someone who treats her son as a master—in a manner of how a servant should treat his/her master—and her husband as a god (Harriden 2012,

25). These moral teachings subordinate the status of women and shape the society's expectations on a woman to be caring, nurturing, and self-sacrificing for her family.

In Myanmar, sex work is one of the old occupations. There was even a village of “prostitutes” during seventeenth-century Burma where the society banished and subordinated them (Harriden 2012, 88). Regardless of subordination, the society—particularly during Burmese historical and post-colonial era—also treated female sex workers as “social necessity” by providing sexual services for men while their wives practice celibacy during special religious occasions (Than 2011, 541-542). The sex work community is well hidden and it is impossible to know whether the community is growing or decreasing. It is only possible to estimate. Government/non-government statistics on female sex workers in Myanmar are only on estimations. According to Myanmar National Strategic Plan (MNSP) on HIV and AIDS (2011-2015), it is estimated that there is about 40,000 to 80,000 female sex workers in the country and 5.6% of men (aged between 15-49 years) reported having sex with female sex workers within a year. This estimation is the only publicly available data; there is no other openly available data to judge the validity the figures gathered by MNSP.

Similar to other female sex workers from across the globe, female sex workers in Myanmar also become a public health issue because of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. According to *Global AIDS Response Progress Report (2015)* by National AIDS Programme, Myanmar, HIV prevalence among female sex workers is approximately 6.3% while prevalence among adult populations (age 15 and older) is around 0.54%. The high HIV prevalence puts the sex worker population under the spotlight but with limited focus on social, legal, gender equality, and human rights issues.

The “Suppression of Prostitution Act 1949” is still in practice in which it “provides offences for soliciting, living off earnings made via prostitution, procuring persons to engage in prostitution, owning or managing a brothel, or renting premises for use as a brothel, including violations regarding the aiding and abetting of prostitution”.³ As Harriden (2012, 250) pointed out, this act “punishes” rather “protects” the women who engaged in sex industry.

How do Burmese talk about Sex Workers?

The literacy term for prostitution in *Burmese* language does not have explicit negative connotation, however the common terms indicate that sex workers are stigmatized, reviled, and they suggest they are powerless. The literacy term of “prostitute” in *Burmese* is “*pyi tan sar*” which translates as “a state’s jewel” (Than 2011, 541-542) or “an ornament of a nation”. Although it is a relatively polite term and *Burmese* literature, legislations, and media widely uses this term, it covertly implies female sex workers as an object. A crude term people commonly use not only in referring to female sex worker but also to affront a woman, is “*pha*” or “*pha the*.” People also use the term “*kyat*” or “*kyat ma*” which means “hen.” Like the term “*pha*”, people use it with vicious intention. These are overt terms that refer to sex work and female sex workers but there are alternative more discreet terms.

³ UNDP, UNAIDS, & Pyoe Pin. September 2014. *National HIV Legal Review Report: Review of Myanmar’s Legal Framework and its Effect on Access to Health and HIV Services for People Living with HIV and Key Affected Populations*. Yangon: Myanmar. 34.

Among urban female sex workers, a modernized term or slang is “*za yar*”. It means mathematic table or something complicated; this is socially polite, discreet about sex work, and less denigrating than the other terms. It also implicitly underscores the women’s agency; they are just doing a work, which happens to be a complicated one. During conversations with female workers at MdM’s Drop in Center, some of them distance themselves from other types of sex workers by saying, “They belong to different group, you know, they are *ah kyaw za yar*”. “*Ah kyaw za yar*” means sex workers who usually steal money or belongings from their customers. Another slang female sex workers use is “*john*” which—unlike its English meaning—refers to a freelance street-based sex worker and is also a discreet term. Alternatively, the women also use “*sau*” which is slang for a woman and it has no specific meaning and no relationship with sex work. People commonly use this term, “*sau*,” when referring to a woman in general.

The term “*main ma pyat*” is also a common alternative term with the meaning of spoiled women or immoral women. Although it does not sound as rude as “*pha*”, the usage subordinates women particularly female sex workers. Instead of these way-too-direct terms, entertainment media including songs, movies, and novels in Myanmar also use “*a kway pan*” that means fallen flower as a metaphor. This romanticized and feminized term sometimes applies not only to female sex workers but also to a widow, a divorcee woman, or even a woman who is not a virgin. In Myanmar society, virgins are presumed to be “purer” or “more innocent” than sexually experienced women. When a woman is not a virgin anymore, they believed to be less worthy; they become a flower, which has been plucked and therefore will lose its fragrance and freshness. This term, “*a kway pan*,” in fact, sounds polite, but rather, implies those women are powerless. There

are also similar terms such as “*nya hmwe pan*” which can be translated as “a flower that has sweet smell at night” and “*nyit ngat*” which means “nocturnal bird”. Similar to “*a kway pan*,” although these terms sound polite, it is fair to say that they are still euphemisms.

After Leigh created the term “sex worker” in 1970s, many organizations including World Health Organization welcomed and started to employ it. In Myanmar, many non-government organizations and even government agencies adopt the term sex work/worker and employ the literal translation of sex worker, “*lain lote thar*,” a gender neutral term or “*lain a lote tha ma*,” a term for female workers. The government and non-government agencies also use other variation such as “working girls” or “working women” and “women who make a living by using her body as a resource”. Some self-help groups and community-based organizations in Myanmar also use the term “*kha yay*.” It is the name of a flower (star-flower) that has the ability to keep its fragrance after it falls on the ground and it dries. Burmese literature also uses “*kha yay*” as a trope for someone—usually a woman—who fails in life but who keeps trying hard and is able to endure. Unlike “*a kway pan*,” “*kha yay*” empowers the status of female sex workers. It implies although society perceives them as “impure,” the female sex workers endure to keep their abilities of being a good woman/a nurturing mother/a dutiful daughter/a caring sister. Regardless of these available terms, when I was conversing with female sex workers and peer educators, they predominantly used the term “*za yar*” and only occasionally “*pha*” in a jokingly or sarcastic way.

Medecins du Monde, Myanmar

Médecins du Monde (Mdm) is a France-based non-governmental, non-political, and non-profit health organization. Mdm initiated HIV prevention activities in Myanmar since 1994. Mdm is currently working on HIV and STI (Sexually Transmitted Infections) prevention and treatment activities for the key populations of female sex workers; men who have sex with men, any male regardless of being transgender, gay, bisexual, or self-identify as heterosexual but have sex with other men; and their partners in Yangon Region. They also work with injecting drug users and their spouses in Kachin State. Mdm is also working in Pyapon Township, Ayeyarwaddy Region focusing on strengthening community health system. Mdm is planning to gradually integrate medical care and treatment activities into the government health care system and hand over prevention activities to local non-government organizations.

Mdm's medical activities include the provision of free comprehensive health care consultations, medical treatment, counseling, home-based care, and other necessary medical tests. Mdm provides voluntary counseling and testing for HIV for their clients as well as general health care. Mdm also has its own compact laboratory and pharmacy unit. There is also a medical outreach team to follow up on the patients taking Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and Anti-Tuberculosis treatment. Peer educators also take part in medical team as clinic assistants, ART (Antiretroviral Therapy) adherence counselors, home-based caretakers, and medical outreach team members.

The Mdm prevention team has two main departments: outreach and a drop-in center. Almost every team member on the prevention team is either a current or former

sex worker or men who have sex with other men. The outreach team visits sex establishments and seasonal festivals to provide free condoms, Information Education and Communication (IEC) materials, formal and informal health education sessions and referral services. The team also helps sex workers who want to visit the clinic but have difficulties in accessing transportation. In addition, the group takes part in advocacy meetings and health talks with nightclubs owners, managers, and police.

The drop-in center is a safe space for sex workers where they can rest, watch movies, sing karaoke, shampoo their hair, make nail art, and take part in support groups. There are four different kinds of support groups: people living with HIV support group, men who have sex with men, female sex workers, and legal counseling service. Peer educators take the lead in the first three support groups and a lawyer is in charge of legal counseling. MdM appointed a lawyer to provide legal consultations for the sex workers. There is also monthly workshop for the key populations including their children, their partners, pimps, and managers. The prevention team also provides hotline-counseling service for HIV/AIDS and STI information.

From 2006 to 2007, I worked as a counselor; from 2008 to 2011, I worked as a behavior change communication officer at MdM. Together with other prevention team members including peer educators, my main responsibilities includes designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and disseminating of health education interventions and organizing capacity building trainings. The friendship and mutual understanding I have built over time with my coworkers made this study possible. I also benefit from the knowledge of slangs among the key populations and how to have

respectful and comfortable conversations with female sex workers, which my friends peer educators taught to me during my tenure at MdM.

Methodology

In this study, I use ethnography and semi-structured interviews. I chose these methods for the following reasons. First of all, there are only limited studies available on sociological perspectives of sex workers in Myanmar. The majority of available studies are quantitative with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS related issues and to a lesser degree on human trafficking, gender-based violence issues, and human right issues. Even among limited available qualitative studies on female sex workers in Myanmar, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion are major techniques; application of ethnographic observation is rare. Given the lack of attention to social and cultural context, I chose to do a qualitative exploratory research (Stebbins 2001; 9).

With the approval of MdM Country Coordinator and collaboration of MdM team members, I joined MdM's day and night outreach activities, Drop in Center (DIC) activities including female sex worker and people living with HIV support groups, self-esteem workshops, monthly workshop, and police advocacy meeting. Additionally, I had a chance to observe a meeting in which representatives of local/international NGOs and networks discuss proposed amendments to the "Suppression of Prostitution Act 1949" to a member of the House of Representatives. Although I only stayed with MdM from July 10th through 30th 2015, my familiarity with the nature of MdM's work from my previous work experience at MdM catalyzed my rapport with the observed communities.

During my stay with MDM, I visited two guesthouses, six massage parlors, six street-based places, two teashops, one nightclub, and one lady house (an apartment of women who work at night clubs) for ethnographic observation. Although I am not able to include in my analysis, I also visited some street-based places and beauty salons where transgender sex workers socialize. Based on the availability of the women, I conducted semi-structured interviews and had casual conversations not only with female sex workers but also with managers, pimps, former sex workers, medical doctors, and nurses/counselors. Apart from many short and quick conversations, table 1 shows the list of women I had a chance to engage in lengthier conversations.

The settings of my interviews include private rooms at MDM's DIC, sex establishments with some privacy, and on the benches by the road. I took field notes on the conversations with the community members and drew sketches as necessary. In order to maintain the individuals' confidentiality and given the illegal nature of sex work, I did not record the interviews digitally. I only took field notes and I employed pseudonyms for all the names of people I interviewed with and also the names of sex establishments.

Table 1. List of the Women

No.	Name	Age	Work Place	Work experience	Marital Status	Number of Children
1	Htar Htar	20+	Guest House	2 years	Separated	4
2	Thandar	40+	Teashop	>10 years	NA	NA
3	Mee Mee	40+	Teashop	>10 years	Separated	2
4	Poe Poe	19	Massage	3 months	Divorced	1
5	Lone Lone	22	Massage	3 months	Single	0
6	Thi Thi	25	Massage	3 years	Divorced (Twice)	2
7	Jue Jue	36	Street-based	>10 years	Single	2
8	Wai Wai	42	Guest House	>10 years	Divorced (Twice)	3
9	Thae Thae	30	Guest House	1 month and 4 days	Married	3
10	Phyu Phyu	17	Guest House	1 year	Married (with a pimp, currently in jail)	0
11	Sabei	40+	Night Club	>10 years	NA	NA
12	Thazin	30+	Teashop	NA	NA	2
13	Khetta	26	Massage	5 years	Widow	1
14	Daw Nu	50+	Street Pimp	>10 years	Married	NA

Findings

In this section, I first provide brief vignettes of different sex establishments. Next I discuss how sex work is organized at the institutional level. Then at the women's individual level, I discuss the main reasons why women engage in sex work in relation to where they work, how long they have been working in a specific place, and how the women present themselves differently in different settings. Thirdly, I highlight the women's risk perceptions, which are intertwined with the weakness in macro structural levels such as limited availability of sex-worker-friendly reproductive health services and legislation on sex work. Lastly, I conclude this study with discussions on weaknesses, strengths, and limitations of the study, and some recommendations.

1. Vignettes of Sex Establishments

Guesthouse, Massage Parlor, and Karaoke Lounge

Relax Hotel is situated in the outskirts of Yangon. It is well hidden; the roads are narrow and muddy and if there is a heavy rain it would be difficult to reach. Relax Hotel is a two-story building. It is relatively isolated with only a few houses in the neighborhood and there are bushes and trees nearby. Although it appears to be a hotel—there's a large billboard declaring Relax Hotel—is not a typical kind of hotel providing a place to stay overnight. There is a betel shop right in front of the hotel. When we arrived, there were two men and a woman around fifty years old sitting in the shop. As soon as

the outreach van stopped near the guesthouse, both the men and the woman stared at us with curiosity. The van does not have Mdm logo nor we were not wearing vests with Mdm logo. When the outreach team leader greeted them and asked the name of the hotel owner, the curiosity on their faces disappeared and they resumed their conversation and ignored us.

As we entered the building from the front gate, a young man in his twenties and a man in his fifties welcomed us inside the hotel. Later, I learned that the young one is a waiter and the older is the manager. There are some ledger books, pen tray, and a golden lucky cat with beckoning hand on the reception table at the entrance. Except for a calendar, there were no decorations or posters. There are about eight small rooms in the first floor and there is another floor upstairs. The rooms are very small; only a single bed fits in the space. Each room at the first floor occupies with a woman, a bed, and her clothing trunk. Very thin wooden partitions divide one room from another and each room has its lockable door. About fourteen women are working there and each of them has own room. They use it as their private space and when a client arrives it becomes their workspace.

During the visit, the outreach team talked individually with the women working there for Mdm's service evaluation survey. The purpose of the survey is to monitor the quality of Mdm's services—outreach services, drop in center services, and medical services. I took a set of questionnaires to help the team. I talked with one of the women and filled out her answers to questionnaires listed in the survey form. While we were interviewing four women, we heard the voice of the waiter saying that a client has arrived. The women excused themselves and went to the waiter and stood around the

client. Although all the women seem relaxed and carefree while they were answering the questionnaires, their faces turned serious and worrisome when they heard a client arrived. The client looked at the women standing in front of him from head to toe. But he did not make any comment on the women and he just picked a woman with a gesture of nodding head towards the woman of his choice. The rest of the women came back to us and we continued with the interview. Their faces resumed their cheerfulness.

The women working there looked relaxed and the interpersonal communication among each other is quite friendly, too. On our way back, the outreach team leader explained that the hotel owner, a woman, treated the sex workers very well and maintained a good relationship with the neighbors. The hotel owner provided the women a place to live and food. She even hired somebody to cook for the women working at Relax hotel. There are only a few rules for them and they are able to go out of the hotel whenever they want. I socialized with one of the women, Htar Htar. She made a big bowl of plum salad and was sharing it with us and the other women. She was wearing Myanmar traditional clothing and wasn't wearing any make up. The rest of the women were similar styles of clothing; some of them wore *thanaka*⁴ and some did not, but no one wore revealing clothes or heavy makeup such as vivid-colored lipstick, fake eyelashes, or mascara etc.

Massage parlors are often around the downtown areas and tend to be way smaller than guesthouses. Many massage parlors are apartments, which are divided into small cubicles. One of the massage parlors we visited is an apartment on the first floor. From

⁴ It is Myanmar traditional make up and sunscreen, most women and some men use it. It is yellowish white paste from grinding wood and mixing it with water.

the outside there is nothing to indicate that it is a massage parlor. When the outreach team leader knocked on the door, a woman in her fifties opened the door and welcomed us inside. The room was dark, dimly lit with a red light blub and I could not see very clearly. However, I could smell a curry and feel the air from a fan. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I noticed that the windows were closed permanently with wooden sticks. There were six women seated on the floor, having lunch. We sat down on the floor together with them and talked with them about MdM's HIV prevention and treatment services. Compared to the women from Relax Hotel, the women in this massage parlor are less cheerful. A shirtless man in his twenties smoking a cigarette appeared and stared at us. However, when he realized that we were talking about HIV and STI prevention, he soon left. The majority of other massage parlors are also airless and dark although there are some places with better ventilation and direct sunlight.

Karaoke lounge (KTV) usually provide private rooms with a big TV screen, Karaoke machines, couches, food and beverage services. Not all KTV are sex establishment but many of them have sexual service or escort service. Sometimes, KTV also has a massage parlor. One of the KTVs I visited with MdM team is a good example. It is a four-story building with the fourth floor as a massage parlor and the other three floors are divided into rooms for KTV. Also, there were two groups of women in the same building, one group for KTV and the other for massage parlor. These women only socialize with members of their own group. The way guesthouses run the business is very similar to massage parlors and KTVs. The difference is the primary purpose of the business; massage parlor is for the massaging which does not require any technical sets like KTV requires for Karaoke lounge.

According to Phyu Phyu who is working at a guesthouse, “I don’t know how much the manager takes from a client. What I get is 9,000 Kyat (approx. 8 to 9 USD) per client for one session, which lasts about half an hour.” For Khetta who is working at a massage parlor, “When a client arrives, he must give 5,000 Kyat (approximately 4 to 5 U.S. dollar) at the reception desk for one session. When he enters my room, I ask him 11,000 Kyat (approx. 9 to 11 USD) for a session. My rate is only 10,000 Kyat. But I ask 1,000 Kyat extra for condom; that’s actually for a waiter. The waiters are living with limited wages, so this 1,000 Kyat will be pocket money for them. When the clients ask any additional services, I ask for more money.” According to Khetta, she believes her duty with a client is to have a “regular” sexual encounter, which excludes kissing, hugging, oral, or anal encounters, or different sexual positions and so on.⁵ If a client wants something which deviates from her duty, she asks for more money. But when I spoke with a woman working at a guesthouse, she mentioned that she always refuses oral sex because it is against her spiritual value.

Rules for women working at guesthouses, KTVs, and massage parlors vary from place to place. At one place, the rules were written on a whiteboard stating that if a woman wants to stop working there, she must inform the manager one month in advance. The manager gives the women only two days off per month. The manager and waiter assign those days but the women can request their preferred dates. Because the establishment does not allow the women to leave the premise on any other days, the women have to plan how they want to spend these days off. Some women used their days

⁵ I use “regular sexual encounter” with a caveat because sexual encounter is socially defined and it also varies from one society to another. In this case, Khetta is referring to penile-vaginal intercourse with missionary position.

off to go to bank to remit money to their families, some to visit clinics, some to visit their home if not very far from Yangon, and some to shop and other recreational activities. The women's days off are listed on the whiteboard near their names. Similar to the women from the hotels, women in the massage parlors dress in modest clothing, which are not too revealing. They also do not wear heavy makeup. When a client visits, they also need to stand around him in order to let him select one, although some regular customers just ask for their preferred sex worker.

Night Club

I also joined with the MDM outreach team for night outreach visits. “Domino” club is one of the nightclubs, which MDM has very long and good relationship with. When we visited there, we met the women trying to get ready in a rather small women's restroom at the back of the club. The restroom smelled of makeup, body powder, and deodorant, as well traces of the usual restroom smells. A woman in her fifties was sitting on the floor and she was taking care of the bags and clothes left by the women. One of the women, perhaps in her late teens or early twenties, was putting on blue contact lens, wetting the contact with her saliva and putting it into her eyes. She had trouble putting in the second one, and sighing, started over, wetting it again. As one of the countries influenced by Korean cultural products, the Burmese standard of beauty is derived from Korean actresses and pop singers. Instead of stereotypical Western beauty—blue eyes, blonde hair, and fair skin—the female workers' style leans towards what Hoang called “Pan-Asian” modernity (Hoang 2014, 516). Additionally, nightclubs in Yangon attract

more foreigners, particularly businessman from Asian countries, than massage parlors or KTV.

Some women working at nightclubs have a pimp while others freelance. When I was at Domino club with Mdm team, it was early and not very crowded although some customers were selecting women by asking the pimp to show her group. The fashion show had not started at that time. Inside the nightclub, it was real struggle to have conversations because of the loud music. There is no personal space at the nightclub. Inside Domino club, there is dance floor, a bar, tables with sofas, and private rooms. And smoking is allowed inside the club. When a woman gets a client, they agreed on where to go and leave the club together. When I was working at Mdm, I learned from the women that they paid attention to where they should go with client. Because some women experienced being taken to client's place and being forced to have sex with client's friends. Although police do not raid nightclubs, they had to shut down when there are uncontrollable fights, which are not very frequent.

On the Street

One of the street based places I visited with Mdm team for night outreach is near an abandoned soccer field. The road is not well lit. Four female sex workers and their pimp, a woman in her fifties, were sitting by the road. We parked the Mdm car far from where they are standing and we walked towards them. As peer educators already had a good relationship with the pimp, Daw Nu, so they were not startled to see us. Not far from where the women are standing, a group of transgender is also wandering along the

road. But it is not clear whether they are doing sex work or just having fun. Daw Nu said they also use the old soccer field as temporary space for quick intercourse just like the women she manages use with their clients. The way Daw Nu manages the business is similar to the role of a manager at massage parlor. She talks with the clients first, negotiates the price, deals with the money, and arranges who should go to see the clients. If the clients do not like the woman she chose, she sends another one. She is the one in charge if any police comes by.

When I was having a conversation with Daw Nu, three potential clients in their twenties came to the place where we are standing and talking. They then walked about 30 feet away and were staring at us. Daw Nu walked to them, talked a few minutes with them, and came back. Then she asked three women to go to the men. They walked towards those men. One woman left the place together with a man. The other women came back and shouted at the pimp. One of them said, “They are from my neighborhood! How can I accept them? No way! This is really embarrassing.” The pimp swore at her. Then the first woman also came back and said with half laughter, “No! Hell no! They are our neighbors. I can’t take them as my clients.” Although studies claim that women working with pimp particularly street-based sex workers which have the lowest status might not be able to turn down a client, this event suggests that this is not the case in Yangon, Myanmar. Whether a sex worker can reject a client depends on her assertiveness and her relationship with the pimp.

In my conversation with Daw Nu and she said, “I’ve been working as a pimp for more than 10 years. When a girl gets a client, I ask 5,000 Kyat. I take 2,000 and the girl gets 3,000. The girls are not living in the same place with me. They come from their

homes and meet me here, and work under my management... If a client asks me to have sex with them, they are digging their graves. I'm going to kill them. I never worked as a sex worker. All my life, I am a pimp." It is easy to identify her as a pimp because she is a bit older than the women she manages, she is more assertive and flamboyant, and she is the one who initiate the talk with potential clients.

Lady House

Unlike aforementioned establishments, some female sex workers live together in an apartment and work together either at nightclubs or as freelance. Similar to other sex worker categories, these women may or may not have pimp. Even when they have pimp/manager, he/she is less likely to live with them and these women have relatively more freedom. They also generally have higher earning than the women working at guesthouses, massage parlors, KTVs, or street based venues.

This lady house I visited is an apartment on second floor in the downtown Yangon. The apartment has a veranda, kitchen, shower, and bathroom as well as a room the women use as a bedroom. There is no separate living room and the women use the bedroom as a living room with their mattresses as a place for guests to sit on. There are eight women living here; they work at a nightclub as fashion show model. In the bedroom are eight mats and mattresses with wardrobes and bags of clothes separating the women's sleeping places. I visited there with three peer educators. This was not an outreach visit but a chance to drop off clean laundry for the women. A self-help group under umbrella of MDM provides laundry service with affordable price for the sex workers.

When we entered the room, one woman was having massage, another one was painting her nail while talking on her phone by holding it between her head and shoulder, and a third one had just came out of shower and began to put on make up, and the rest are still lying in their beds. They were getting ready for the fashion show. Unlike other female sex workers working at the nightclub, they dress up at their place and go to the nightclub together. The women have a manager who also owns a teashop but he does not use it as a place for sex work. The teashop is a separate business. The owner lives in a different apartment not far from where the women live.

Teashop

One of the teashops I visited with MDM team is also in downtown Yangon, that evening it was raining lightly. The teashop is on the concrete platform of a narrow street. It is an open space equipped with plastic tables and stools. There were three women sitting at a table. The peer educators immediately recognized one of them, so we walked straight towards them, sat with them, and mingled for a few minutes. Two men in their 20s were keeping an eye on the women. The outreach team leader explained that they are manager's assistants and are responsible for dealing with the teashop owners, waiters, the women, and clients. The owner of the teashop does not participate with the sex work business and as long as the women are buying drink and food from the teashop, the owner is fine with them being there. But it is only true for this specific teashop and there are other teashop owners chase sex workers away when the owner thinks they are trying to find client at the teashop.

2. Organization of Sex Work

MdM categorizes the women based on where they work. These are guesthouses, lady houses, streets, teashops, nightclubs, and others. During the women's initial visit to Drop in Center, MdM's preventive team member interviews them and records basic information in an intake form. The women are not required to provide their real name; they can provide either their nicknames or working names. Most of these work places have a manager, pimp, owner, and one or more waiters/helpers. I use the words "pimp" and "owner" as interchangeable terms in my study. Pimps supervise female sex workers; he/she receives a certain percentage of the money paid to the female sex workers. In brief, both "pimp" and "owner" refer to someone who owns and runs a sex work business.

In some places, the pimp/owner hires a manager to supervise the establishment and the female sex workers while the pimp/owner stays away from the work place. Depending on the size of business, there may be some waiters or helpers who assist the manager. Owners/pimps and managers have an explicit hierarchical relationship with female sex workers. A pimp or a manager can be either male or female, but the majority of pimps at the nightclubs are women. Sometimes, pimps are couples or siblings who run the same business together or sometimes separate establishments.

MdM places massage parlors and KTV in the same as guesthouses because of their similar business organization. All of those places have a reception desk at the entrance to greet incoming visitors. Either a manager or a waiter usually sits behind the desk to welcome and handle incoming clients. After having brief conversation on what

the clients want, the manager or waiter brings the women for the clients to choose.⁶

Regular clients just request their favorite by name. The manager or waiter tells the clients the prices and collects their money.

A guesthouse is a motel type building made up of small rooms. It can be a real guesthouse in which people can stay overnight without buying sex or it can be totally for sex business under covert name of guesthouse. Massage parlors are generally smaller than guesthouses. Not all the massage parlors sell sex but the majority of them do. This is also the case with KTV; they may not sell sex and only provide Karaoke singing rooms but some has sexual services. Sex service in the KTV can also vary from just sitting with clients, holding hands, touching body parts, to a sexual encounter. Generally, female sex workers stay in guesthouses, massage parlors, or sometimes KTV for a significant time period, possibly over the course of a few months to several years, under the supervision of a manager.

Pimps/managers/owners of guesthouses, massage parlors and KTV place often have a set of rules for the women to work there. The rules may be strict such as “no permission to go out of the premises” to as loose as “just don’t fight with each other” and these depend on the nature of pimp/manager/owner. According to MdM outreach team, they have to try really hard to convince some managers to allow the women under his/her management to come and visit MdM, even for clinical services. One solution is for the MdM outreach team to pick up the women and take them to MdM for a medical check up and services. MdM provides lunch and encourages them to join DIC activities. At the end

⁶ At KTV, there are clients who come for sex as well as who come only for Karaoke and other food and beverage services. If a client request a woman to accompany him, he requires to pay the manager as well as the woman. The range of sexual service may also varies and I do not have relevant ethnographic findings or conversations on this issue and this require further study.

of the day, they take them back to where they work. The peer educators are quite skilled at persuading the managers to allow the women to go to MDM. Some places require the women to pay fine/fee for every hour they are gone. The control a manager/pimp exercises over the women depends on the manager/pimp and their relationship with the women.

At one massage parlor, there is a ritual of collective praying—a common practice among Myanmar Buddhists—at six p.m. for a few minutes. I found three massage parlors have relatively large altars decorated with photos and statues of Buddha and other spirit guardians amid fresh flowers, light bulbs, incense, and fruits. As the number of establishments I visited is limited, this relation between the rituals and displays and sex establishment requires further exploration.

Some literature argue that street based sex workers have the highest potential for experiencing violence and are ranked as the lowest type of female sex workers (Brewis & Linstead 2007, 87; Weitzer 2009, 217). In my study, female street workers work either during the day or at night, usually areas where people congregate, such as bus stops, near cinemas, or simply by the road. Because of the public nature of their work place, they are definitely at higher risk of getting unwanted attention from the police or the community. Since some of them work in broad daylight, explicit violence from clients is unlikely. Compared to other kinds of sex workers, street workers have full control over their work.

Teashop category includes women who sit and wait at teashop venues to meet potential clients; this is more common in the teashops that remain open from evening until late night hours. Organization of this category is somewhere between guesthouse/massage/KTV category and street category. Women working at teashop also

work with pimps, managers, or sometimes alongside assistant managers. Teashop owners may or may not have relationships with the women or their manager. The relationship between the women and the manager or assistant manger occurs only under the roof of the teashop. Unlike the guesthouse/massage/KTV category, the women working at teashop have more control over their lives outside of the business hours. Table 2 provides the categories of sex establishment and their characteristics in general.

Table 2. Categories of Sex Establishments

	Type of Establishment	Additional services	Approx. Earning¹	Manager/ Pimp	Clothing and Make up	Public Visibility
Guesthouse	Private building, run the business under the name of “hotel,” “motel,” or “inn” etc.	Room for overnight or hourly stay	Moderate	Always have manager or pimp	Casual or traditional	Private location Low to Invisible
Massage Parlor	Apartment or house, majority does not use “massage parlor” as a business title	Massage	Moderate	Always have manager or pimp	Casual or traditional	Private location Low to Invisible
KTV	Karaoke lounge May or may not directly affiliated with sex workers	Karaoke lounge with private rooms Food and beverages	Moderate	Always have manager or pimp	Casual, traditional, or western/ Pan-Asian	Private location Low to Invisible
Nightclub	Nightclub Not directly affiliated with sex workers	Bar, restaurant, fashion shows and sometimes private KTV rooms	High	May or may not have a pimp	Western/ Pan-Asian	Private location Low to Invisible
Street based	On the street, bus stop, park, cinema, etc.	None	Low	May or may not have a pimp	Casual, traditional, or western/ Pan-Asian	Moderate to High
Tea shop	Tea shops and they do not directly affiliated with sex workers	Food and non-alcoholic drinks	Low to Moderate	Usually have a pimp	Casual or traditional	Low to Moderate
Lady House	Just a resident (usually apartment) in which the female sex workers live Majority of them work at night clubs	None	Moderate to High	May or may not have a pimp	Western/ Pan-Asian	Private location Low to Invisible

¹ This is an approximate earning of a woman per a client per a session (about half an hour to an hour). This may vary depend on the women’s negotiation with the clients. Low=<5000 kyat, Moderate=5000-10,000 kyat, High=> 10,000 kyat

Although working with pimp might make sense for the sex workers with little or no experience, it is a puzzle why the experienced (more than ten years of working

experience) workers still have relationships with pimps and still working under their management. During my observation, I had a conversation with Wai Wai. She has been a sex worker for several years but still working with a pimp. In my interview with her, she said, “When I entered this work, I worked with a pimp in a guesthouse. One day, my friend told me to sneak out and work as *john* (freelance). She told me that money we would get from clients would be all ours. She convinced me and we snuck out. Well, that’s the time I was arrested for the first time in my life. I was sentenced to three months. If I had a pimp, he would take care of it and I won’t need to worry about it. After that event, I decided not to work as *john* again.”

Moe Moe (not in the list of Table 1 because I had only short conversation with her at DIC) also shared her similar experience. She is currently working at a massage parlor. She said, “It is impossible for me to work alone. I’m scared. I’m also afraid if someone I know might see me while I’m finding client. Here (the massage parlor) is very safe for me. I don’t need to worry about anything. Even when a client is not well behaved, I can complain to the manager about him.” These conversations express women feel safe—particularly from police arrest and client violence—by working with a manager/pimp. Additionally, my conversations with different female sex workers also revealed that women working at guesthouses and massage parlors are more likely to stay and work longer in the same place if the manager or the owner has good relationship with them.

If the owner or manger uses violence, the women leave the place sooner. Thae Thae shared her experience of working with an abusive pimp. She said, “When I was working at a brothel before this guesthouse, I had to work under a manager who is about 70 years old. He has facial spasm. And that man never used condom when he had sex. He

had sex with all of us who are working under his management. He never paid us. He also demanded different sexual positions. All of us hated him.” In brief, although some women preferred having a pimp/manager, they leave the place sooner or later if a manager is abusive or violent.

3. Why Sex Work?

“I’ve been working as a sex worker since I was 18. I always work as a freelance... I have two kids but I don’t remember who their fathers are because I got them with clients.”

(Jue Jue, 36 years old)

“I ran away from home after a big fight with my parents. I came to Yangon. As I had no place to stay, I was wandering around downtown Yangon. A woman in her fifties noticed me, and she brought me to her house. Then she sent me to the massage parlor.”

(Lone Lone, 22 years old)

As *The Right(s) Evidence: Sex Work, Violence, and HIV in Asia* (2015) reported, majority of female sex workers I had conversation with entered sex business by their own choice, but there are also some exceptions of the women who were lured into the business. The report also stated that financial issues are the main reason female sex workers enter sex work, primarily to support their dependent family members. But

financial need is not the sole reason; there are other catalyzing factors such as social connections with someone who is in the sex industry, educational attainment, opportunity for employment with fair payment, and filial obligations to support family members.

During the observation at MdM's Drop in Center, I was able to participate in a self-esteem workshop in which I had an in-depth conversation with Phyu Phyu (17 years old). She was working at a guesthouse. Phyu Phyu said, "My dad passed away when I was 6 years old. I left school after second grade. After leaving school, I made money by taking odd jobs like washing, cooking, ironing, and baby-sitting. When I was 10, I started working at a factory that produces plum jam and tamarind juice. When I was 13, my mom passed away too... It was my aunt who sold my virginity to a guy when I was 16 years old..." There is a market for virginity not only in Yangon, but also in other states and regions in Myanmar. Selling virginity is one of the entry points for young women—around 15/16 years old—into the sex industry. There are also social norms around woman's virginity such as "woman should save her virginity until her wedding night" while there is no such norm for men. Also, there is a norm that if a woman is not a virgin anymore, she is not "pure" and might be less desirable for a man to marry her. The relatives, neighbors, friends, and brokers are the ones who persuaded those young women by implicitly or explicitly referring to such norms. And they also benefited commission from the clients.

Similarly, Poe Poe who was 19 years old and was currently working at a massage shared how she started involve in sex work business. When I met her at MdM Drop in Center, she told me that she had been working as sex worker for three months at a massage parlor. She is ethnically Shan and also from Shan state. She said, "a woman

from my neighborhood told me that she would link me with a beer restaurant in Yangon. She said all I need to do is serve beer for customers and I could earn good money. I trusted her but she sent me to a massage parlor.” Unlike Phyu Phyu, Poe Poe has a child and she divorced her husband. She said that the money she made in Yangon went to support her family back in Shan State.

Among 13 women whom I interviewed, nine of them are either divorced/separated or widow with a child or children to look after. Another woman was never officially married but she had two children. During the conversations, the women reported that they had a strong filial obligation to support their family. This is similar to what Parreñas articulated “debt of the soul,” women’s sense of filial obligations for their parents and family member. In her study, Parreñas mentions that one common reason for Filipino migrant workers participating in domestic work at Rome and Los Angeles is “to support the family members” (Parreñas 2001, 111-112). However, the women I had talked with put the emphasize on their children rather than their parents when they are referring to “support family members.” Additionally, among three types of parental care, the women I talked to place the “material care” for their children as a priority over “moral care” and “emotional care” (Parreñas 2001, 117). For moral and emotional care, the women would have require to live together with their children; it is challenging if they are working at guesthouse, massage parlor, or KTV.

Khetta who was working at a massage parlor said, “I have a son. He is one year and six months now. My husband passed away last year... I leave my son with my mom at home. They live in the township (outskirt of Yangon) about an hour away from here. I frequently go there to see him. He is my life. Everything I do is for him.” She showed me

his photos on her phone and continued, “I will never marry again. I won’t let my son live with stepdad. Some clients proposed me. What’s the point? I don’t want them. I want their money, just money! I send about 300,000 to 400,000 kyat (approx. 260 to 350 USD) to my mom and my son... My mom and my neighbors do not know about my work... Although I’m only 26 years old, I don’t know how long I can live. I don’t want to leave my son with nothing.”

Similarly, Htar Htar who was 20 years old and working at a guesthouse said, “I’ve been working in this place for two years now. I’m from southern part of Myanmar and support my mom and siblings who are living there. Also, I have four kids but one of them is living with his dad. We are divorced and he takes care of one kid but I’m supporting the rest of them. My mom is taking care of them now. I can send about 300,000 to 400,000 kyat per month to my family. They don’t know that I’m a sex worker.” I found this pattern of women’s strong obligation to support their family members among other female sex worker I had conversation with.

In addition to filial obligations, limited educational attainment plays an important role; without a good education, it is challenging for them to get a decent paying job. Among all the women I had conversation with, three of them are nonreaders and four of them—only who mentioned their education status—have middle school education. Some of them also brought up that education was a barrier for them to get a job with decent pay. As Sandy (2009) argued, although poverty somehow contributes the women’s decision to engage in sex industry, other important factors such as social relations, educational status, women’s strong obligation to support family members, and limited employment opportunities with decent pay compared to what they earn from sex work,

limited their alternative employment opportunities. And although poverty is crucial factor, it is not an only reason for women participating in sex work.

Some women who were working under a manager said they asked for the phone numbers of clients with whom they are most comfortable. Later, they leave the place and work freelance only with those clients. Some women also mentioned that go to work in a new place and pretend to be new to the sex business so that they can earn a bit more money⁷. A few of them said that they have one or two regular clients that they can rely on them. This means that eventually they can either leave the sex business or reduce the number of client. Another transition is working as peer educator, out reach worker, or peer counselor at local and international organizations particularly those working on HIV prevention and treatment activities, sex worker networking and empowerment, and human rights programs. In those organizations, they are unlikely to face discrimination because they had been sex worker.

4. Dress, Make-up, and Mdm Uniforms

“We are over forty years old now. But clients never know our ages because they see us only in the dark.”

(Thandar)

⁷ The techniques on how the women pretend as a new person to the sex business require further exploration. In my study, I discussed this issue with two peer educators but I did not have a chance to discuss with the women.

Many people, including staff members of non-government organizations, used to say, “oh, she doesn’t look like a sex worker at all” or “I didn’t reckon that she’s a sex worker.” In Myanmar society, people have a rather stereotypical view of a sex worker. A typical female sex worker might be a woman wearing heavy make up such as red or dark red lipstick, bright or thick mascara/eyeliner, fake eyelashes, curled and/or dyed hair, body exposing or tight fitting clothing. People also presume certain behaviors such as having sneaky look around men, going out at night or partying at night-clubs, and being flirty with men are features of sex workers. From my observations and my past experiences of working with the community indicate female sex workers have their own ways of dressing or using make up based on where they work.

Women working at massage parlors, guesthouses, and KTVs were in traditional or causal clothing and used *thanakhar*, light make up, or no make up at all. Some of them were even in their pajamas. What the women wear differs from place to place. For example, the women in Relax Hotel are in causal clothing with no heavy make up although they work throughout the day and night. In some massage parlors, the women are in pajamas or without make up because their work place is busy only at night. Unlike guesthouses and massage parlors, the women working at nightclubs wear clothes that allow clients to see parts of their body and they also wear heavy makeup. Their dress is also quite westernized: mini skirts, high-heels, blue contact lens, and colored hair, etc. Nightclub culture in Myanmar is very western phenomenon and people prejudicially associate nightclubs with sex work.

Only at nightclubs, MdM outreach team wore the vests with big MdM logo, to ensure that people could immediately notice that we are from a non-government

organization. Unlike other places, sometimes nightclubs can be really crowded and the clients can mistake MdM team members as women working at the nightclub. The uniform minimizes potential harassment from clients. The uniform also allows the women working at nightclub to realize that the outreach team members are not their competitors⁸. MdM outreach team avoids using office cars with MdM logo or wearing MdM vest during daytime outreach activities. Most visits to street based sex establishments require discreet visit by the outreach team because of illegal nature and hidden status of the commercial sex work.

5. Risk Perception

Occupational hazards for female sex workers include but are not limited to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI); unwanted pregnancy; physical/verbal violence or abuse by manager/pimp/owner, police or ward authority, client, community member, or even husband/boyfriend; social exclusion and discrimination; financial insecurity; vulnerability to arrest, and limited accessibility of non-judgmental and affordable clinical services. Women's perception of risks varies among the women even those working at the same work place. During conversations with the women, the hazards they emphasized are unwanted pregnancy, police arrest, HIV/AIDS, and other STI.

At one of the massage parlors I visited with MdM outreach team, we were having conversation with the manager. Suddenly, one of the women, who is in her early

⁸ During my study, I did not notice any explicit signs or conversations on competition among women working at other establishments. Even among women working at nightclubs, my observations on micro-interactions of competition are very limited. The existence and intensity of competition among women working at different establishment requires further study.

twenties, jumped out of a rest room and shouted, “I’m not pregnant!” She laughed and shared the news with other women. It was very obvious that she relieved to find out that she was not pregnant. It is possible that she and her client or boyfriend/husband did not use condom for any reason or condom broke, but her worry is more into pregnancy than HIV and STI. Thazin who was working at a teashop said, “Today is the 50th day after I got abortion (with a quack). I stopped working for 50 days already. I’m still having mild abdominal pain but I really need to make money so...” Myanmar is one of the countries that outlaw induced abortions. Although the women can take either daily contraceptive pills or three-monthly contraceptive injections that are inexpensive, some women worry those kinds of contraception might mess up with their hormones, and they might gain weight or their face breaks out.

Htar Htar had been working as sex worker for two years but she took proper precaution and also had regular medical check ups at MdM clinic. She worried about contracting diseases from clients. For Wai Wai who was 42 years old, she believed she is at risk for financial problems. She said, “Now I’m old and can’t get as many client as before... Business is not good anymore... My husband knows that I’m taking antiretroviral treatment [combination of antiretroviral drugs to suppress the replication of HIV virus, to delay the progress to AIDS, and to reduce the risk of HIV transmission to others], but he doesn’t support me at all.” Younger women see their greatest risks as unwanted pregnancy, HIV, and STI while older women worried more about financial security. Only women working as freelance on the street were concerned about being arrested. Freelance workers at nightclub, street based workers who are working with pimp, and women working with manager at other settings showed less concern over

police arrest. But managers mentioned their worries about police raid to their business places as because they can get up to eight years sentence in jail, unlike the sex workers who are likely to be sentenced up to three years.

Conclusion

Findings from the observations and conversations with the women verify that female sex workers are more than the categories in which organizations and researchers framed them. They are not either helpless victims nor workers with full autonomy. Working as a sex worker is not simply the women's choice nor is not simply coercion. Women engage in sex industry because of financial necessity but there are other contributing factors. There are structural issues such as educational attainments; opportunities for decent paying jobs; lack of social welfare support; social norms and expectations for women; and women's strong sense of filial obligations catalyze the women's participation in the commercial sex work.

Moreover, the ways sex establishments organize the business, the characteristics of sex establishments, and the nature of relationships between the female sex workers and their manager/pimp highly influences how they perceive their work place, the ways they present their body capital, their risk perceptions, and also their sense of security. Therefore, analyzing through either the lens of victimization discourse or labor discourse is not enough in explaining the situations of female sex workers in Yangon, Myanmar. Additionally, the degree and severity of controls over the female sex workers vary even within the same type of establishment based on the pimp/owner/manger. Consequently, it is challenging to generalize about which category has more freedom than the other. In addition to the limited freedom at some establishments, the structural factors such as the illegal nature of sex work, limited access of female sex worker friendly reproductive

health care and limited opportunities for upward mobility exacerbate the vulnerability of the women. These findings are the result of exploratory research so, there needs to be further research to see how generalizable these observations are.

Although risk of HIV and STI are occupational hazards for sex work, there are other pressing issues for them such as unwanted pregnancy and supporting their family. Safe abortion is still a big issue because it is illegal in Myanmar. This along with criminalization of sex workers exacerbates occupational hazards among female sex workers. Mdm is a great model in addressing personal and social issues of sex workers. They do not focus simply on HIV; they also give proper attention to psychosocial and legal issues with the help of peer educators. But for a greater impact, policy changes particularly on decriminalization of sex work; educational supports for women; employment opportunities for women with fair payment; affordable and non-discriminatory health services; protection of reproductive rights; and social welfare supports are crucial.

In my initial proposal, I intended to include transgender and male sex workers by contrasting with female sex workers' situations. I did not have enough time to observe transgender sex workers to do this comparison. Moreover, my discussion of female sex workers is not complete; I left out hidden workers such as call girls who contact clients through the phone. Although selling sex through the Internet is common among male sex workers in Yangon, I did not find any specific updates with female sex workers. I also understand that in depth interviews with structured questionnaires will be able to strengthen my findings and I hope to extend it further in the future. My observations and emphasis on embodiment, micro-interactions, and rituals are limited in this study. Also, I

conducted my observations within the Yangon city, so the scope of this study is limited to the urban settings.

Familiarity with peer educators, staff members, and focused population of MdM provided great support for my study. The support of MdM team members and my previous experience with MdM made it possible for this research possible. It also meant I could do a partial ethnography of female sex workers; most studies rely on statistical method. In addition to MdM, SWIMN (Sex Workers in Myanmar Network) also allowed me to access literature on sex worker in Burmese language, invited me to meeting with the senator, and also shared their activities.

I will share the aforementioned findings and recommendations with MdM and other self-help groups, accordingly. The findings from this study underscore the possible further researches on comparative studies between female, transgender, and male sex workers; typography of clients and their perception of beauty; and competition and interaction among female sex workers working at the same space. It will also be beneficial if future studies extend to other townships, increase the number of interviews, and include other community members in the interview.

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