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Cisgender male and transgender female sex workers in South Africa: gender variant identities and narratives of exclusion

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Introduction

This paper examines how identities of cisgender male (here, meaning individuals who were assigned male at birth and presently identify as such) and transgender female (here, meaning individuals who were assigned male at birth but identify as women) sex workers relate to socially imposed constructions of masculinity and femininity, and the implications such identities have in sex workers' everyday lives. We are drawing on a recent qualitative study of sex workers conducted in collaboration with the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) in Cape Town, South Africa. Our aim in this paper is to contribute to a more holistic conceptualisation of gender and sexual identities in understandings of sex workers' health and behaviour that better reflects the lived experiences of individuals who do not conform to gendered social identities.

South Africa provides an illustrative case for exploring the identities of cisgender male and transgender female sex workers because of how gender constructs have been deeply embedded in South Africa's social and political institutions since apartheid, including institutions that align female sexuality with sex work (Ratele 2009). The state is legally permissive of homosexuality and discrimination on these grounds is constitutionally forbidden; yet sexuality as heteronormative (where the 'norm' is defined as sex between a man and a woman) is often socially reinforced (Ratele 2009, 2013; Swarr 2012; Moolman 2013; Morrisey 2013). These heteronormative constructions play a central role in sexual interactions – sex work, in particular – with significant implications for women and gender non-conforming individuals, including men who have sex with men (MSM), and individuals who are assigned male at birth and transition to womanhood (i.e. transgender women). For these non-conforming gender and sexual identities (transgender women in particular), the construction of binary and hierarchical gender categories pose a number of challenges, including a lack of recognition, social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination (Sugano et al. 2006; Bauer et al. 2009; Sevelius 2012). This raises a number of questions we are seeking to answer in this

paper, namely: How do individuals with non-conforming gender identities navigate heteronormative constructions of masculinity and femininity in their profession as sex workers? How does navigating these hostile spaces ultimately affect their identities in a profession that is already deeply marginalised?

Sex work, identity, and health

In South Africa, the primary health concern related to sex work is AIDS given the high prevalence of HIV. Current estimates put the rate of HIV in the general population at 19% (aged 15 to 49) with over 300,000 new infections each year (UNAIDS 2013). Approximately 20% of new HIV infections in South Africa are attributable to sex work (Richter et al. 2013) and half of female sex workers in South Africa are HIV-positive (Breyer et al. 2014). However, the persistent links that are drawn between sex work and HIV in epidemiological accounts of the epidemic not only lead to the further stigmatisation of sex workers, but over-simplify complex issues around how sex and sexuality contribute to the high rates of HIV in South Africa (Wojciki and Malala 2001; Hunter 2010).

In contrast, anthropological and social psychological perspectives draw on first-hand accounts of the reasons why sex workers may not protect themselves against HIV (e.g. through using condoms with clients), highlighting the structural realities that contribute to high HIV rates among sex workers. For example, sex workers are less likely to use condoms because of clients' claims that condoms leave them sexually unsatisfied and are thus only willing to pay a fraction of the price for the service (Karim et al. 1995). In some cases, sex workers are afraid to attempt condom negotiation because they fear violence from clients (Wojcicki and Malala 2001). In addition, given the economic constraints that individuals taking up sex work are often under, sex workers may be forced to choose between economic survival and potential exposure to HIV (Gupta et al. 1996). Sex workers' decisions to have unprotected sex therefore need to be considered within the hierarchal power relations that exist with clients and the structural constraints of poverty.

Transgender women's experiences of sex work adds additional layers of complexity to understandings of sex work in relation to the HIV epidemic in general and the reasons for unprotected sex more specifically. In intimate relationships, transgender women often cite unprotected receptive sex as a means of expressing intimacy and a way of distinguishing between more serious and casual partners or clients (Sevelius et al. 2009). Further, sex work spaces are one of the few opportunities where gender affirmation is most readily accessible to transgender women in sex work, and once again, unprotected receptivity during sex plays an identity-affirming role (Nuttbrock et al. 2009; Sevelius 2012).

The literature about transgender female sex workers is most developed in the Thai context where the sex tourism market attracts clients specifically seeking transgender women. Here, the literature tends to focus on ideas around embodiment with the aim of expanding conceptualisations of gender through positing gender performativity as a legitimate freestanding gender marker (e.g. embodying a female aesthetic and identifying as such, modifying the body through gender reassignment surgery, and performing heterosexual sex) (Ocha 2013; Ocha and Earth 2013). Literature on sex work from other contexts has considered the experiences of MSM and transgender women (often, and incorrectly, together), however, this literature has primarily been concerned with how non-conforming gender identities influence sexual practices (see: Baral et al. 2014 and Decker et al. 2014). This fails to consider the social structures that shape gender identities and the effects of stigma on the health of individuals with non-conforming gender and sexual identities.

Conceptual framework

Hegemonic gender identities

In order to fully consider the implications of non-conforming gender identities for experiences of sex work, we need to first clarify how we are conceptualising gender identities in this paper. In order to do so, we are drawing on Connell's concept of

hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemonic masculinities refer to forms of masculinity that are constructed in relation to both femininities and subordinated masculinities (Connell 1987). It is through the relationship with these hegemonic masculinities that feminine identities are reified and situated within the context of global social and sexual subordination of women by men (Connell 1987; Beasley 2005). Men whose behaviours and presentations mirror hegemonic or idealised expressions of masculinity are praised as 'real men' and rewarded by the overlapping sites and institutions in which hegemonic masculinity is deeply entrenched (Beasley 2005).

The bedrock of these hegemonic masculinities is heteronormative male domination in which claims to masculinity are built around the ownership and control of female bodies, namely through violence or sexual domination and prowess (Huysamen and Boonzaler 2015). Traditionally, unattached women are available to men because so-called 'normal' men are meant to desire sex with young women. The sexual needs and desires of women are rendered irrelevant: femininity is merely a tool for the attainment of masculinity while it is devalued on its own (Shefer et al. 2010; Ratele 2013).

In order to understand hegemonic masculinities within the South African context, it is useful to explore Morrell's thesis of the three major masculine identities in South Africa. Morrell argues that a white macho masculinity was embodied by the apartheid-era minority government, and it is from this colonial masculinity that prohibitive sexual and gender norms became entrenched in South African civil society through legislation (Ratele 2009). A more traditional African masculinity was perpetuated through rural institutions, creating a "patchwork of patriarchies" in black South African homelands. Lastly, a black masculinity emerged from the context of urbanisation, black migration, and townships (Morrell, Jewkes, and Lindegger 2012).

Methods

Participants

This research project was undertaken in collaboration with Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT), a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Cape Town. SWEAT is committed to the advocacy of sex work as legitimate labour, the human rights of sex workers, and the decriminalisation of sex work. The first author was given access to larger sex worker discussion spaces ('creative spaces'), and sought permission from peer educators to observe sessions for smaller demographic-specific support groups (e.g. drug users, foreign men, individuals living with HIV, etc.). The transgender women that participated in the interviews all self-identified as heterosexual and pursued both romantic and sexual relationships with men. There was more sexual variance with the cisgender male sex workers: while they all had male clients, they self-identified as heterosexual, bisexual, and gay.

Data collection

In all, 21 semi-structured interviews were completed with the participants: 6 men and 15 transgender women, all ranging from 25 to 37 years old. Both creative spaces were observed twice, as was one demographic-specific support group – the group for foreign male sex workers. While attendance varied in the support groups, there were core participants who attended consistently. The first author was generally a silent observer in creative spaces and support groups (male spaces in particular). The interview findings were supplemented by field notes from creative spaces and issue-specific support groups.

The study was first approved by the London School of Economics, and the research proposal and consent procedures were thoroughly vetted by SWEAT. Prior to signing the consent forms, participants were exhaustively informed of the research project and interview process. Emphasis was placed on the fact that they could readily refuse to answer questions or withdraw their consent altogether in an effort to create a dialogical rather than an interrogative dynamic in the interviews. In line with SWEAT protocol for remuneration of service users participating in

activities, participants were reimbursed ZAR40 (approximately £2) for transportation.

The interviews varied in length from 30 to 90 minutes, and were conducted in English, recorded, and later transcribed by the first author. They were conducted in a private space on SWEAT's premises, to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Participants were asked questions about the impact of gender identity on their experiences of sex work.

Data analysis

Interviews and focus group discussions were analysed using thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001). Each transcript was initially read bearing in mind theoretical ideas of sex workers' identities pertaining to empowerment or vulnerability. Transcripts were reread to see how these themes specifically manifested in different contexts and depending on the sex workers' genders and sexualities. The textual data initially produced specific descriptions of the various topics discussed by sex workers in the different discussion groups: these quotes serve as testimonies of individual sex workers' experiences with discriminatory institutions and individuals, spaces of vulnerability, or opportunities for empowerment, and served as basic themes. The quotes were grouped together based on common content to create more abstract principles (e.g. specific sites of discrimination) and opportunities for more positive or negative identification. These few organising themes were finally divided into three macro-themes, or global themes, that both fully encapsulate and assert our interpretations of the data. These macro-themes make up the thematic network that summarises key findings about the ways in which cisgender male and transgender female sex workers construct their identities through the navigation of their surroundings. The themes indicate that sex worker identity is constructed through three types of interactions with individuals and institutions, namely through exclusion based on variant or stigmatised identity, empowerment derived from identity, and disempowerment as a result of a stigmatised identity.

Limitations

SWEAT's service users comprise only a fraction of Cape Town's sex workers. Consequently, this limited the demographic of sex workers to poorer sex workers of colour (i.e. non-white individuals), and to those who are more politically active and have relatively better access to advocacy resources, and sexual health and psychosocial support services. To facilitate the creation of more broadly applicable narratives, further research and inquiry involving larger and more diverse samples of either population would be necessary.

Findings

Identities as a means of exclusion

Our data shows how cisgender male and transgender female sex workers are often excluded as a result of their perceptibly 'deviant' identities. Many sex workers attributed their exclusion, at least in part, to their work. In the data, exclusion generally constrained access to four major spaces: public, private, discursive and geographic spaces.

Discrimination in public spaces

Male sex workers often described experiences of discrimination in public spaces:

"In our work industry and for sex workers it's like you meet many things like discrimination, people harassing you, even street people. As you're walking, there's other people that don't like gays."

"In taverns, you can have like a fight with other people. Maybe you just get in the tavern, you look for a client, other guys they can just say 'hey there's no your seat here, we're not gonna give you.' It's like that. Even when you want to buy or in the bank in the queue, someone will just push you. It's like...discriminating."

The enhanced visibility of transgender sex workers, even while not on duty, can make it difficult for them to navigate public spaces without feeling victimised. One

transgender woman noted that *“the community don’t acknowledge [her] as worthy enough to be part of the environment”* and that she has to modify herself *“physically in [her] outer appearance...in order for the community to accept [her].”* Another woman said:

“I don’t walk during the day, I just walk at night – I scare people. You can walk around and people point at you, they say ‘this is a moffie!’”¹

Maltreatment by South African police was a common theme in the data. One man said:

“...the police...they victimise you.....when I’ve been outside just sitting on my corner or somewhere and they’re like ‘come to me’ and poked me and they’ll get condoms. And they’ll ride with me the whole day and night.”

The police also humiliate and abuse the transgender women:

“But from my experiences with the police it’s very bad because they tend to strip you naked in front of other policemen, and then you don’t have any power or any control that...ok since they’re having uniform, you don’t have anything that you can do.”

“You know the police are the most people that make us feel so vulnerable because they know that, first of all, that sex work is criminalised. So, like, we are doing a wrong job. So, like, for instance, sometimes they will take you and drive the whole night catching you in their van without laying any charge against you....And then tomorrow morning, they need you to bribe them. They lie to you, they say ‘ok it’s fine, we are not going to open a case against you, so we want you to give us this much.’...Sometimes if they haven’t, you know, caught you and put you in the van, they just beat you up. You experience police brutality,

¹ *Moffie* is a South African derogatory slang word referring to men who adopt more typically feminine aesthetic and behaviour, including feminine gay men, transvestites/cross-dressers, and drag queens.

unlawful arrest, or they can just say they have caught you for doing loitering.”

It emerged from interviews, support groups, and creative spaces that sex workers experience tremendous difficulty in filing charges or reporting to police when they are victims of thefts or assaults. Instead, they are more likely to be subject to arbitrary arrest or street harassment by police. Sex workers recounted a number of incidences in which police and private security took photographs of homeless people thought to be sex workers sleeping outdoors. They also discussed that they are sometimes coerced into having sex with police to avoid arrest.

Sex workers similarly discussed how they are disrespected in government healthcare spaces:

“...at the normal clinic, local South African clinics, you’ll go through hell sometimes in order just to get normal service and they find out you’re transgendered, they wanna start mocking you from the time you walk in to the time when you’re going out – ‘you’re going to fetch condoms, what are you doing?’ It’s just like that.”

A similar theme of exclusion emerged in discussions with foreign male sex workers. Members of the foreign male support group indicated that they are unable to honestly disclose their sexual history in certain clinics for fear of whorephobic discrimination.² Sex workers from both groups indicated that they felt safer doing so in an alternative care space created in response to poor medical practise and treatment in government-run sexual health clinics. One transgender woman said:

“...here in Cape Town we have like a...hospital which is called Health for Men. But it only treats HIV people, people living with HIV can be treated there for anything and it’s like private care space and you get all the advantages you would get at a private care space, but only particularly for the LGBTI community.”

² Whorephobia, here, is defined as a fear or hatred of sex workers and those (generally women) perceived to be sex workers.

Exclusion from private spaces

Transgender and male sex workers also discussed being ostracised by their families. Specifically, sex workers expressed their fear of being shunned by their families and friends if they divulged their work in the sex industry. *“My vulnerability spaces would be with my family,”* one male sex worker shared. Men in particular feel ashamed at the idea of their family members knowing they have sex with men to make money. The stigma of having sex with other men compounds other ways in which the family might stigmatise them because of their sexuality. One man in a male creative space commented cynically saying: *“How could I tell my family? How can I look at my daughter and tell her daddy fucks strange men for drugs and money?”*

The ostracism that may accompany the disclosure of engagement in sex work can come at the expense of the emotional and psychological well-being of the stigmatised family member (Bos et al 2013). For example, a bisexual male sex worker expressed his difficulty in discussing his work with partners or family members in the following way:

“You get these things mostly in the community. It also affects the families in other ways, like in terms we look if you are like...you stay with a woman, then she won’t accept that you sleep with men or you sleep around. But if you tell, you lose your family and you end up being in a stressful situation. By yourself.”

Exclusion in discursive spaces

The transgender women more actively engaging in politics frequently discussed difficulties in gaining access to platforms in advocacy spaces. The LGBTI community was mentioned as one of these hostile spaces. One transgender woman shared that *“there’s too much animosity within the LGBTI community as well as amongst each other about platforms. That’s the greatest fight within the LGBTI movement.”*

Many of the transgender women also discussed how they were denied access to women-only spaces. More fundamentally, some transgender women expressed a difficulty in reconciling the maleness they were assigned at birth with the more feminine behaviour and expression they presently associate with their womanhood.

That attempted reconciliation is described as being “*excluded by some, but accepted by others*” or the frustration that “*it’s difficult to look masculine but feel more comfortable in feminine spaces.*”

Exclusion from geographic spaces

Many of the discussions in the foreign male support group revolved around vulnerabilities unique to being foreign as many reside in South Africa illegally. One man articulated the existence of “*a double stigma: being foreign and a sex worker and black is very difficult.*” They were more likely to experience discrimination as foreigners by police who detain them for longer periods and threaten them with deportation. A number of men were from Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Kenya, three countries in which homosexuality is criminalised (a few of these men are gay or bisexual), and their inability to claim asylum in South Africa makes them vulnerable to deportation and increases their risk of homophobic violence or imprisonment in their hostile home countries. The men also expressed difficulties in proving their sexuality to Home Affairs in the asylum process. The transgender women from Burundi, Kenya and Uganda shared similar concerns though their more visible non-conforming gender expression placed their vulnerability more firmly at the intersection of xenophobia and transmisogyny³. A Ugandan transgender woman described this intersectionality when someone yelled, “*You are a moffie, you must go back to your country!*” as she was walking down the street.

Empowerment through identity

In the data it was evident that the sex workers’ stigmatised identities were also, at times, sources of empowerment. Sex workers discussed their positive feelings about their identities as transgender women, sex workers, and as advocates of sex work more broadly.

³ Transmisogyny refers to traditional sexist belief in male superiority specifically applied to transsexual and transgender women (Serano 2007).

Positive identity as transgender women

It was apparent that transgender service users of SWEAT's facilities had created their own safe spaces within the organisation. This has enabled them to provide psychosocial and emotional support for one another, and also to carve out a space for their identity within the greater sex work community. As one transgender woman stated:

"...for the seven years that I'm here, transgender sex workers are only accepted by the entire sex worker community for, I think it's two years if not less. But we came here every single week, fighting the same fight, talking the same talk, but they never accepted us, and they never understood us. Until we made a movement and made them understand."

The transgender women discussed how their sense of power and strength comes in part from their identity as transgender and ability to 'pass' as women. Though they recognise and celebrate their womanhood, they are cognisant that some people regard them as men masquerading as women. There is, thus, a validation of their authenticity as women that comes from male sexual attraction and desire:

"One thing that's different from female to men to transgender women is that transgender women are not only doing it for the financial part of it: they're doing it, not because they're promiscuous or anything. They're doing it because it's...yes, validating! So many men of different races and class and from a vast spectrum, they see me as a woman. It's that validation. Whereas for straight women, it's mostly for the money."

Positive identity as sex workers

Another theme arising from the data was the way in which sex work spaces simultaneously recognised the gender and work identities of many transgender women:

"...seriously, [sex work] is the only time I can be transgendered as well as a sex worker."

Another woman echoed a similar sentiment:

“...SWEAT has actually given me the platform to establish myself as a normal human being because of the type of work I do so I’m stigmatised and labelled because I’m a sex worker and I’m a transgendered sex worker.”

The transgender women, far more frequently than the men, expressed a feeling of agency that came from being in sex work spaces:

“When I’m doing sex work, when I’m working....the only time I feel in control and I mean 100% in control is when I’m at work.”

Positive identity as sex worker-advocates

It was apparent in the data that significant agency and empowerment came from sex workers’ involvement with both SWEAT advocacy and the sex work itself. The sex workers have gained knowledge about their human rights and new access to health and legal resources. From this new and empowering knowledge, they have gained a greater sense of self-confidence and an affirmation of their worth and humanity.

This sense of worth combined with tools for better sexual health (e.g. free condoms, knowledge about HIV and other STIs, support groups for both HIV-positive and negative individuals) facilitates their ability to make health-enabling decisions despite a context of less efficacious female sexual negotiation and temptation to not use condoms (Campbell 2000; Ogden 2007):

“...because of me being clued up on health education, I now persist that health boundaries are set. And it’s basically, once again, my education upliftment about what I do creates a platform where I get to be in charge [...] So no matter what you say, you’re gonna put that condom on or you’re gonna go somewhere else no matter how much you pay me...”

In the foreign male support group, they stated their appreciation for the knowledge they have gained in the SWEAT community, one male sex worker saying he “[has] the awareness about how to protect [himself] from STIs and also about safety in general.” Furthering this sense of empowerment is their ability to help other sex workers through SWEAT’s outreach as well contact during their work in outdoor spaces. One transgender woman said:

“...also now I am able to motivate and mobilise other sex workers out there, you know, since SWEAT has just given me this opportunity.”

In addition to promoting health-enhancing behaviour, the SWEAT space is also a more politicised space in which sex workers help themselves and others develop more positive ways of coping and bringing about social change. Sisonke, a SWEAT-affiliated advocacy movement for sex workers *by* sex workers, is one such politicised space in which sex workers can socialise, network, and mobilise. The ability to support one another through the sharing of narratives – as in creative spaces, support groups, or Sisonke meetings – is an important one for many of the sex workers:

“What SWEAT offers me is, first of all, freedom in a way that...freedom of expression, freedom to be, freedom to ignore, freedom to debate when I need, when I work in spaces, even if it’s a one-on-one...”

Another woman shared similarly:

“[I am empowered when] I am talking to other sex workers because we share different things and then we come from different backgrounds – that’s what I’m getting empowered on. Because what I have is totally different from the other sex workers...we have different things that are happening in our daily lives, so I am more empowered when I’m with other sex workers.”

Disempowerment as a result of ‘deviant’ identities

Vulnerabilities linked to masculine identities

The idea that transgender women are not ‘real women’ marks them as warranting correction, and this corrective violence was a fear shared by many of the transgender women:

“And you don’t know what the community thinks about you – if they want to rape or kill you. As it is within our LGBTI community, lesbians are very vulnerable to these hate crimes.”

Out of fear, one transgender woman discussed how she maintains a more masculine aesthetic so she doesn't become a more visible target for transphobic and/or homophobic violence:

"And I dress up when I go to work, I don't dress the way I'm dressing now. But it's just because that gay people are so...we also experience, you know like, people who are so judgemental and people that are always swearing at us for being gay, they don't accept who we are, you know. That's why sometimes I decide to dress like this because there are so many gays out there who were stoned for being gay, they were stoned to death, and some are being stabbed in trains and in taxi rank and stuff. But like this isn't the way I'm feeling ok when I'm dressing like this, I'm just trying to be safe, to keep my life safe."

Given that many transgender of the transgender women had been previously raped, assaulted or robbed by clients, wariness and distrust is warranted, but they have to continue looking for clients to make a living.

"I don't think I really feel safe, especially being a transgendered person, being a sex worker; you don't know what a client that's gonna pick you up, what he has in mind for you."

The matter of gender disclosure can make navigating sex work spaces difficult because male clients have varying attitudes and reactions to discovering women are transgender. Some women disclose their gender when approached or soon after, but with regards to safety, the sooner the client discovers a sex worker is transgender, the safer they may be:

"...but then again you're gonna get those clients that are not gonna hear bullshit from you and they'll just want to hurt you, especially if they find out during intercourse or after...Whereas before intercourse it becomes much better: then you can actually divert him."

Another woman shared a similar response:

Do you tell them off the bat that you're transgender?

Some will see. Some will see that you are trans, but they want you to give the service, you understand? It's like meeting each other

half way. Some others won't figure out that you're trans, some when they figure out they'll be so violent against you.

Many of the transgender women discussed experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness. In one psychosocial support group for the transgender women, a number of HIV-positive women explained that they were not receiving anti-retroviral therapy (ART) because they had difficulty disclosing their status and receiving treatment because of low self-esteem (as well as stigma and shame) accompanying their diagnosis. Attendees of one Sisonke meeting discussed the difficulties some sex workers have maintaining sobriety. The use of drugs and alcohol was mentioned as a common coping mechanism used to deal with life's conditions and/or as a means of increasing sexual performance.

Vulnerabilities linked to feminised identities

Several men discussed the idea of failing to fully embody an ideal version of masculinity: "I feel like less than a man" is a sentiment that was repeated in a number of different forms in smaller group discussions. This was linked to the inability to provide for family dependents by means other than sex work. Successfully playing a provider role is central to masculinity in the South African context, but chances of gaining formal employment to fulfil these expectations are scarce (there is high unemployment in the formal sector, and wages in the few employment opportunities are below the poverty line (Ratele 2008).

Further, many heterosexual male sex workers expressed a feeling of emasculation arising from having sex with other men. In the foreign male support group, heterosexual male sex workers discussed their need to be under the influence of drugs in order to be able to have other sex with men.

Discussion

The results of the study have been organised into three themes: identity as a means of exclusion, empowerment through identity, and disempowerment as a result of conflicting identities. The findings indicate some of the ways in which gender and sexually variant male and transgender sex workers are stigmatised, discriminated

against and excluded in a heteronormative society. Both male and transgender sex workers are frequently maltreated by police and by government health services to the point where many are altogether discouraged from seeking assistance from either. Transgender women are refused access from women-only and advocacy spaces because the authenticity of their womanhood is called into question. Many transgender sex workers, as a result of more visible gender non-conformance, feel vulnerable in public spaces and at the hands of their clients, as well as unwelcome in familial homes as a result of their gender identity. Many men and transgender women alike have difficulty in coping with their work, and others struggle with feelings of loneliness and isolation.

These findings confirm how hegemonic identities essentially delineate “proper” gendered behaviour in South Africa. As the normative gender identities are cisgender and heterosexual in nature, trans femininities and sexually non-conforming masculinities are perceived as outliers: thus, we can conceive of male and transgender sex workers as bearers of “failed masculinities” and “illegitimate femininities,” respectively. As hegemonic masculinity is centred squarely on masculine domination, one key marker of “successful masculinity is the ability to adopt a provider role (Jewkes et al 2012). In expressing that they felt like *“less than a man,”* the male sex workers were expressing frustrations in their inability to provide for family dependents by means other than sex work. While female sex workers carry stigmatised identities for being sex workers, female sex worker/male client pairings still conform to the heterosexual norm condoned by dominant gender constructs. But the exchange of sex for money amongst men contradicts the socially appropriate ideas about the role the male body should play during sex (Moscheta 2013). For these male sex workers, discussions of sex work are centred on financial necessity and gain as opposed to participation solely revolving around sexual pleasure or entertainment, solidifying these masculinities as “failed” (Joseph and Black 2012).

Transgender femininities are seen as “illegitimate” as a result of transgender women’s non-conforming gender identity and presentation. Claims to feminised

agency and victimhood are applicable to the extent that they are women. However, they are not considered “real” women on the basis of essentialist “biological maleness” and/or birth-assigned gender, the presupposition of sex as gender, and the way in which transgender women’s gender and often feminine aesthetic are deemed “artificial” (Serano 2012; Gilden 2013). Transgender female sex workers are excluded and denied access to these spaces of victimhood because violence is seen as a fitting punishment for deviant sexual behaviour and the devaluing of bodies that occurs via engagement in sex work (Bonthuys 2006; Vanwesenbeeck 2008).

The contribution our study makes to the literature is in identifying some of the ways in which sex workers draw empowerment and agency from their identities. For many of the transgender women in our study, sex work represented a reconciliation of their sex work and gendered identities and a validation of their womanhood. They derived a sense of power and sexual agency through their ability to sexually satisfy their clients, a common theme in the narratives of women in sex work (Skafta and Sillberschmidt 2014). But perhaps most notably, many of the transgender women are received as sexually desirable women in sex work spaces while expressing their [trans] womanhood and femininity. This is particularly crucial for confirming these women’s sense of self-worth by demonstrating that they are regarded as they wish (Sevelius 2012). Although several women stated that sex work spaces can offer them much-needed gender affirmation, the dangers of a transgender woman disclosing her status to clients and the vulnerability and potential exposure to violence faced as a result should not be understated. Transgender women “perform” gender in a way perceived as a deviation from the hegemonic gendered norm, and they bear identities frequently marked as illegitimate, inauthentic, and invalid. These markers are those of sexual immorality because of how they actively challenge cisgender and heteropatriarchal constructs and practises (Morrissey, 2013).

Despite experiences of exclusion, the agency of transgender female sex workers is apparent in the reclamation of spaces externally perceived as negative. Through creative and psychosocial support spaces, the transgender

sex workers have created their own advocacy spaces rather than waiting for validation from mainstream feminist or LGBTI groups that gate-keep platforms. From this exclusion, transgender sex workers have empowered themselves by “creating new spaces...and revalorising negatively labelled spaces” (Price-Chalita 1994). This spatial reclamation has the potential to enable sex workers’ autonomy and political engagements, as well as other possibilities for capacity-building and self-realisation (hooks 1990; Cornwall 2001).

While sex work spaces are frequently described as sites of female commoditisation and objectification (i.e. they more readily provide opportunities for a feminized reclamation of identity and empowerment), it is wholly possible for male sex workers to subvert hegemonic gender constructs and redefine masculinity through their sexual non-conformity and participation in sex work. But the sentiments expressed by this particular population of economically marginalized male sex workers in this socio-cultural context do not lend themselves to empowerment and narrative reclamation.

Conclusion

Despite recognition and constitutional protection of all genders and sexual orientations, social norms still condone violence against certain identities in South Africa. They emerge, but are inevitably compared to heteronormative “standards,” which leads to a number of reactions. Many individuals live in fear of reactionary gender and sexuality-based violence or social correction. Others hide their identities from family and friends and/or live in shame, and others still create spaces for themselves in which they can feel comfortable expressing themselves. In order to create policies protective of cisgender male and transgender female sex workers (and by extension, the entirety of transgender and sex worker communities), it is important to expand dominant constructions of gender in order to minimise marginalisation, exclusion, and behaviour constrained by fear of stigma. We believe

that the potential for expanding these dominant constructions rests in attention to the narratives of sex workers themselves, their own understandings of their identities, and the spaces that offer them the freedom to express these identities.

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