Remarkable Variation in the Socio-Spatial Organization of Sex Work and Its Implications for STD/HIV Spread
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The ecological pattern of sex work on the streets involves the tochka, where groups of 15 to 25 young women with their pimps, guards, and drivers wait for clients close to a major thoroughfare. Positions at the highest levels of the social organization of sex work in Moscow are covert and are not visible. Among the identifiable positions are pimps, assistant female pimps, guards, drivers, indicators, the sex workers themselves, and recruitment "pluckers".

Background

The organization of sex work in social and geographic space influences the volume and pattern of sex worker-client contact which in turn impacts the spread of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

Objectives

To systematically compare the social and spatial organization of sex work in 5 sites (Moscow, Russia; Saratov, Russia; Balakovo, Russia; St. Petersburg, Russia and Tallinn, Estonia) where rapid assessments were conducted between 2000 and 2005.

Methods

Focus groups and in-depth interviews with key informants; geo-mapping naturalistic observations and review of available literature in 5 sites in the Former Soviet Union.

Results

In Moscow, Russia, sex work does not have clear boundaries. Whereas some women engage in sex work on a full-time basis, a larger number apparently perform sex work on a part-time basis, intermittently, in addition to other employment. The lowest stratum of female sex workers is located in and around the railway stations, particularly Komsomolskaya Ploshchad, also called the "Square of the Three Railway Stations." Intermittent, truck stop, and railway station sex workers may be the most important groups in the dissemination of STIs.

In Saratov and Balakovo, Russia, the social organization of sex work is variable. Sex work in Saratov/Engels is more differentiated, with more categories of SWs, pimps with well-defined functions, and clearly formed escort services. In Balakovo, sex work is confined to individual girls who are working as freelancers, most of whom are drug users. More minors are involved in the sex industry of Engels than in Saratov, where SWs are primarily adults. In contrast to the visibility of female SWs, male SWs are a more hidden population, and less information is available about them.

The most effective way that sex workers access clients and clients locate sex work is through taxi drivers. Few sex workers stand on the streets and those who do, whereas free standing "pleasure flats" are verbally discouraged by the taxi drivers. Additionally, clients would not be welcomed into a brothel without a character reference from the taxi driver. Thus the taxi drivers serve two functions – that of informants for clients and of gate keepers who screen potential clients for inebriation of disruptive behaviors for the brothels.

Internet brothels operate much the same as Internet shopping for other purchases. Anyone with Internet access can go "on line", type in the electronic brothel's name and then "shop" for a commercial sex worker by scrolling through a catalogue.

Another technological innovation in marketing commercial sex work is the use of print catalogues and cell phone orders. Catalogues are available in some, but not all, taxicabs in the central city and are made available to passengers upon request.

In Tallinn, Estonia, sex work takes place in a descending hierarchy from elite brothels, hotels, nightclubs, dance clubs and strip tease bars, massage parlors, saunas, apartments or "pleasure flats," along the streets, bus stations, truck stops, and to specific highways. Both the police and representatives of organized crime agree that a large portion of sex work in Tallinn is controlled by organized crime.

Taxi drivers are key to the organizational structure of sex work in Tallinn, particularly with respect to the functioning of elite brothels and "pleasure flats." The most effective way that sex workers access clients and clients locate sex work is through taxi drivers. Few sex workers stand on the streets and those who do, usually drug users, are verbally discouraged by the taxi drivers. Additionally, clients would not be welcomed into a brothel without a character reference from the taxi driver. Thus the taxi drivers serve two functions – that of informants for clients and of gate keepers who screen potential clients for inebriation of disruptive behaviors for the brothels.

Conclusions

The socio-spatial organization of sex work is highly variable across local areas even within the same regions: it also changes rapidly over time. Prior to initiation of any epidemiological or intervention projects, the local socio-spatial organization should be assessed.

References: