



“Women trade sex from women in Tanzania”: findings from qualitative formative research with women who have sex with women in Dar-es-Salaam City

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Abstract

Recent studies indicate women are increasingly willing to pay for sex from both men and women. Most of these studies have mainly focused on the developed world and little is known about women’s willingness, reasons, and motivation to pay for sex on the African continent, the East African region and in Tanzania, in particular. We explored paid sex behaviors and practices among women who have sex with women (WSW) in Dar-es-Salaam city, Tanzania. The study was designed as a formative qualitative cross-sectional study conducted in Ilala, Kinondoni and Temeke districts in Dar-es-Salaam region. Study participants included community leaders; and WSW aged 18 years and above, who had had engaged in same-sex sex in the past year or in same-sex relationship(s), and had knowledge of WSW’s lived experiences, among other criteria. Most of the WSW participants affirmed paid sex is a common practice among them with reported reasons and motivations being more-or-less similar to those documented in other parts of the world. Findings show that commercial sex is an arena for behavioral convergences, and this calls for new pathways to comprehend (women’s) behavior, sexuality, commercial sex industry and its implications to women’s sexual and reproductive health and healthcare.

Introduction

Transactional sex (TS) is generally defined as the trading (buying and selling) of sex for material benefit. That is, exchanging money, drugs, food, shelter, or other items for sex. The exchange includes informal bartering by individuals whose primary income is not derived from TS [1]. Available literature on TS suggests that men are the sore ‘buyers’ and women the ‘sellers’ of sex. However, recent studies indicate that women are increasingly willing to pay for sex from both men and women [2-9], although not every woman would admit engaging in this practice and many societies do not recognize this behavior [8,10] leading to the underestimation of their numbers [8] in a given context.

Women who pay for sex have similar characteristics as the general population and they do so for various reasons including: therapeutic treatment; healing from trauma; learning more about sex, exploring one’s sex

orientation, and intimacy [8-10]. Similarly, women pay for sex through different modes: cash or in kind (for instance, food, and shelter). In developed countries, where same-sex sex is legal or tolerated, contacts occur through planned systems as escort or agencies. However, little is known (if any) about this phenomenon in most parts of the globe.

Most of the literature on women who pay for sex mainly focus on the developed world: the United States of America (U. S. A.), Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. Consequently, there is paucity of knowledge about women’s willingness, reasons and motivation to pay for sex in general and from women, in particular, on the African continent, the East African region, and in Tanzania, in particular. It is within this context that the researchers conducted a formative qualitative study with women who have sex with women (WSW) to, among other objectives, explore on paid sex behaviors and practices among WSW in Dar-es-Salaam City, Tanzania.

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Materials and methods

We conducted a qualitative cross-sectional retrospective study in Ilala, Kinondoni and Temeke districts in Dar-es-Salaam City. Dar-es-Salaam City was purposely selected because it is Tanzania's largest and commercial city, harboring persons from different backgrounds and engaging in varied health behaviors and practices. The city was thus projected to allow access to required types of study participants. Study population included community leaders; and WSW aged 18 years and above, who had lived in Dar-es-Salaam for six (6) months or more; had had engaged in same-sex sex in the past year or were in same-sex relationship(s); had knowledge of WSW's lived experiences; and were willing to participate in the study.

We collected data using four key qualitative methods: focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interview (IDIs), observation, and reviewing documents on same-sex (legal) status in the country. We trained research assistants (RAs) on the study objectives and procedures, the vulnerability of WSW, ethical issues around this sensitive study, and proper interaction, and interviewing procedures with the study participants. With permission from the participants, FGDs and IDIs were audio-recorded. In addition, the RAs took field notes, which they expanded on the same day. All tools were administered in Kiswahili; a national language understood by almost everybody in the study area.

We sought and obtained research clearance from Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Dar-es-Salaam Regional Administrative Secretary (RAS), Ilala, Kinondoni, and Temeke District Administrative Secretaries (DAS), and Street authorities granted permission to conduct the study in their respective areas. The process of interviewing neither had harm to nor re-traumatized the study participants. The average duration of the interviews and FGDs was one and half hours. However, as our participants had interest in this study, some IDIs and FGDs took longer time, up to two hours. We transcribed and translated data collected followed by data analysis applying thematic approach where open systematic coding of data in the participants' language and combining emerging emic concepts with preconceived theoretical constructs was followed. The aim was to understand, from the WSW's perspectives the reasons and motivations for paying for sex among members of this group.

Results

We asked our study participants a question: are there women who sell or buy sex among WSW? On the one hand, a few participants were unaware of paid sex among WSW in the city. A participant aged 32, never married, mother of one child and has sex with men, for instance, reported, "I am not sure if there are women who buy sex from fellow women or those who sell sex to fellow women ... There is no way women can buy sex ... However, you should remember that whatever happens between the partners in the room is a top secret between them" (IDI, H, 32 years, 2021).

A participant in the FGD, stated "I don't think women buy or sell sex to each other ... They only support each other in case one needs money to meet her needs like food, rent or makeup" (FGD_1, 2021). Another participant in the FGD, observed, "I never charge any woman for the services I provide ... You know, female same-sex sex is more pleasant than

heterosexual sex ... Men are always selfish and uninterested in their partners' [sexual] satisfactions ... Women are good at this [sex] ... They really know what to do to [sexually] satisfy their partners ... That is what straight women are missing" (FGD_1, 2021).

On the other hand, most of the participants affirmed paid sex is a common practice among WSW. A participant aged 29, never married, a transman, and exclusively having sex with women, for example, stated,

Personally, I often have sex with women for leisure and gratification ... However, there are times I feel attracted to a girl or a woman ... The easiest and luckiest way to get her is by promising giving her money ... Sometimes I have sex with the sex workers ... They are at work and need money ... So, I pay them according to the services they render me (IDI, D, 29 years, 2021).

A participant aged 28, never married, O-level education graduate, and who has sex with men, reported,

Personally, I do not charge women I have sex with ... I charge the men ... However, I have a colleague [a transgender man] who pays women she feels attracted to and desires to have sex with ... She sometimes pays for their makeup, house rent or food ... Many of us [sex workers], accept any customer [male or female] as long as he or she pays dearly (IDI, E, 28 years, 2021).

A participant aged 35, divorced, a FSW, and who switches roles in female same-sex sex [bottom or top], reported,

Yes, there are so many women [FSW] who sell or buy sex ... You know, some of the women need to be enticed by giving or promising them some cash before or after sex ... Almost 99% of the women I have had sex with pay me or I pay them for services rendered ... As the men pay for sexual services we give them, the tomboys too, pay the women in cash or in kind ... Often, married women sexually unsatisfied in their marriages/unions hire us to quench their thirsty [sexual desire] ... They hire us because they don't want to have relationship with men, which could endanger their marriages ... Even if their husbands find us at their homes, they would not suspect that we are lovers ... They pay us for sexual services we offer them (IDI, B, 35 years, 2021).

Another participant aged 46, never married, a tomboy and having sex with men, confirmed on paid sex practices among WSW, saying,

I am one of them ... I have a partner who gives me a call whenever she wants my services ... You know, I play all roles in same-sex relationship, a tomboy or a bottom, depending on the context, to satisfy her ... She usually pays me \$200 ... Most of the sex workers out there have sex with both men and women as long as they pay ... Their role in sex with a woman depends on type of [sexual] service demanded (IDI, G, 46 years, 2021).

Another participant aged 26, never married, a transman, and a university graduate had this to report,

Yes, there are women who sell and buy sex among WSW ... I am one of them ... I have a Kenyan partner who saw my photograph on her friend's status ... She was attracted to me ... She began seducing me to be her partner ... She started sending me pocket money for food, rent and other needs I have ... After a while, she sent me bus fare to Nairobi to [sexually] satisfy her ... Nowadays, she

pays for my travel to and stay in Nairobi at least twice a month ... She pays for my shopping in Nairobi including protective devices I use ... We are in the third year of our relationship ... Paid sex is common among us [WSW] (IDI, F, 26 years, 2021).

A participant aged 27, has O-level education, and has sex with men, stated,

Yes, there are women who pay for and buy sex ... I know married old women who approach the tomboys [relatively young] for sex ... They are not satisfied with sexual services they get in their marriages or unions ... They know tomboys are smart when it comes to sex ... They tenderly service them until they reach orgasm ... So, they contact the tomboys for sexual services ... They set and agree on the charge that a woman pays before or after the game [sex] (IDI, A, 27 years, 2021).

A participant in the FGD, a tomboy, reported,

Sincerely, there are so many women who sell and buy sex ... We use them [we hire them] ... Others use us [they hire us] ... The sex workers accept any client [males or females] as long as one is likely to pay ... Sometime, tomboys in need of sex approach the sex workers for [sexual] services and pay them ... Amount paid is a secret between the two ... Yes, we have sex buyers and sex sellers among WSW in this country" (FGD_1, 2021).

For unestablished reasons through this study, none of the community members and community leaders interviewed was aware of sex buying and selling behaviors and practices among WSW. A street Leader interviewed, for example, stated, "No! No! No! ... I don't think there is any woman who buys sex from women in this area ... All I know is that men buy sex from women." (IDI_K, 60 years, 2021). A Religious Leader interviewed observed, "I don't think Tanzanian women have gone that much far [buying sex] ... God have mercy ... Your findings will inform us on this immoral act" (IDI_I, 43 years, 2021).

Discussion

Like in many African countries, female same-sex relationships and activities are taboos and illegal in Tanzania. Same-sex sex behaviors and practices, therefore, are crimes punishable on conviction by life imprisonment [11-13]. As a result, female same-sex sex activities, including paying for sex are conducted underground. This reality explains, in part, why there is limited information about WSW's behaviors and practices in the country and more so on women's willingness, reasons, and motivations for paying for sex from women. Most of the public are reluctant to believe that women are paying for sex [10,11,14].

Our formative study findings, however, demonstrated that women trade sex from women in this country and their number is perceived rising as in other parts of globe [4,10,15]. This finding directly challenges traditional heteronormative perceptions of female sexual passivity and objectification in general, and specifically in commercial sex settings in Tanzania and beyond. On the one hand, WSW, the tomboys and transgender men (as recognized among WSW in the study area) in particular, buy sex from fellow WSW, the FSWs, and straight women and girls. On the other hand, straight and heterosexual women and girls buy or sell sex to WSW, FSWs and fellow straight or heterosexual women and girls.

Literature shows that women who pay for sex are a varied group (but similar to the general population) in terms of the backgrounds and characteristics [4,8]. Our participants reported women who buy sex in the study area are a diverse group with similar characteristics like the general population: varied ages, single, married, (well) educated, (self- or government) employed, some have children, with stable income compared to sellers, and both residents and foreigners. The implication is that public health interventions targeting this group should be prepared to encounter women of different backgrounds that may have different health needs that require different health education approaches, and social and behavior change communication (SBCC) messages [14].

Feeling fell

Reported reasons and motivations for women's willingness to pay for sex are more-or-less similar to those documented in other parts of the globe [1,6,8,9,16,17]: fantasy; sexual dissatisfaction in marriages or unions; intimacy or emotional connection; pleasure/fun (being totally involved in sex); satisfying own sexual needs; feeling (physically, psychologically, and emotionally) safe than having casual sex; a belief that female same-sex sex is risky-free; learning more about non-penetrative (female same) sex; exploring own sexual orientation; and experimenting with new sex acts (such as oral sex). For the tomboys and transgender men, the need to have a partner to quench sexual desires, feeling more powerful, and increased self-confidence drive them to trade for sex from WSW, FSWs and straight women and girls.

Our participants, however, did not mention that women are buying sex for therapy (dealing with sexual difficulty like vaginismus) or healing from trauma (having history of child abuse or intimate partner violence) [8,10] as is the case in developed countries. However, this does not mean that women paying for sex in this country are not facing these problems. May be the women we interviewed do not perceive a link between these conditions and buying sex or they were mainly the sex sellers rather than sex buyers.

Our study participants reported contacts occur in different ways, including: paying/buying woman's initiatives and ability to negotiate and navigate casual encounters with partners; WSW's networks, where a WSW hooks her colleagues to a client and vice versa; visiting place frequented by WSW; enticing a woman or a girl through befriending or gifts like clothes, money, food, or drinks. We are aware that in developed countries contacts occur through prearranged ways either as escort or agency [8,18]. The difference in the findings could be explained by the legal or tolerable nature of female same-sex sex in many parts of Europe and in the U. S. A., where formal contacts are allowed. However, the fact that prearranged modes were not mentioned, it does not suffice concluding escorts and agencies do not exist [19]. The implication is that recognizing and respecting WSW's networks and modes of communication would benefit implementation of health interventions targeting their same-sex sex behaviors and practices in the country.

Our participants revealed women pay for sex in different ways including: negotiated cash or in kind (paying house/room rent, food, shelter, make up, protection, medical care, giving out second-hand materials, hair dressing and clothes). Unfortunately, our participants could not estimate how much women pay and for which sexual services, which is often a secret between the partners. However, one of them reported

receiving \$200 whenever she served her client, suggesting the female same-sex sex lucrative nature that would attract women in need to engage in paid sex.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our formative study with WSW in Dar-es-Salaam City is an eye-opener, ground-breaking, and the first of its kind contributing to new and original insights into the demand side of commercial sex and its public health consequences in Tanzania. Findings from this study demonstrate that commercial sex is an arena for behavioral convergences where women play masculine, feminine or both roles. This interplay, now than before, demands for new pathways to comprehend (women's) behavior, sexuality, commercial sex industry, and its implications to women's and the general public's sexual and reproductive health and healthcare.

Comprehensive and multidisciplinary (further public health) empirical studies are recommended to explore on women who pay for sex's backgrounds; demographic characteristics; reasons and motivations for paying for sex from both men and women; extent and frequency of paying for sex; similarities and differences between women who pay for sex and their counterparts; measures taken to control potential risks and maintaining safety and sexual health; types of services women seek; meeting places and where/how contacts occur; modes of exchange; backgrounds and demographic characteristics of women who provide (sell) sexual services to women; and the experiences of men, women, and FSWs who provide sexual services to women clients. The goal is to generate data that would facilitate improving healthcare professionals' ability to diagnose, treat, control, and prevent illnesses among WSW and the general public in Tanzania.

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