

# What is their hate about?

Harmful gender norms and violence against male, female and transgender sex workers in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Authors:  
Gabrielle Szabo & Julia Cabassi

**Sex workers experience extreme violence** – at work, in prison and police stations, in their neighbourhoods and in their homes, from family members, police, clients, intimate partners and strangers. This violence is gender-based.<sup>2</sup> Male, female and transgender sex workers are targeted because they challenge traditional gender norms and are denied fundamental human rights – to equal protection under the law, protection from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and to the highest attainable standard of health.

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Violence also contributes to HIV risk. Sexual violence contributes directly to HIV transmission and fear of violence limits sex workers' ability to negotiate condom use. For those who have experienced violence, trauma affects self-esteem, help-seeking behaviour and the will to care for and protect themselves.

Ending gender-based violence is increasingly recognised as a crucial component of the HIV response.<sup>3</sup> Yet gender-disaggregated data is limited. A recent review found that few studies understand the difference between gender and biological sex. Gender is a structurally and institutionally supported system of social relations and socially constructed identity. Without data and research that examines patterns and differences in experiences between genders, there is little scope for understanding how gender shapes risk.<sup>4</sup>

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## Gender Matters

*This article is a gender analysis of one of the first studies of violence against male, female and transgender sex workers,<sup>5</sup> The Right(s) Evidence: Sex work, violence and HIV in Asia – A multi-country qualitative study conducted in Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup>*

Traditional gender norms often echo conservative religious values. They praise strength, sexual experience and aggression in men and empathy, chastity and subservience in women, emphasising women and girls'

roles as mothers and carers. Homosexuality and transgender identity challenge these strict gender roles. Violence is often used to repress sexuality, and punish and control those who do not embody the 'ideal' man or woman.

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These norms are informed by and enforced through laws that criminalize sex work and same-sex sexual acts. Sex work challenges gender roles that seek to control women's sexuality and require men to embody heterosexual masculine ideals. It can be a source of economic independence, yet where poverty and criminalization deny sex workers power over the circumstances in which they work, male sexual entitlement is reinforced.

### **Education, economic independence and entry to sex work**

For participants in The Right(s) Evidence study, harmful gender norms, combined with poverty and poor access to education, had lifelong implications for participants' safety and ability to mitigate risk.

Female participants had lower levels of education than male and transgender participants. Interrupted schooling had long-term implications for female participants' employment options and is consistent with cultural norms around girls' presumptive role as carers and with the low priority given to girls' education in many countries. The comparatively high levels of education among transgender participants appear to reflect the support for education they received as sons, before openly expressing their gender identity. The limited work opportunities many transgender participants described later in life highlight the discrimination that transgender people

experience in seeking employment.

The majority of participants in all countries cited financial independence as a reason for entering sex work.



*Washing and ironing clothes... how could I afford my daily needs?" one woman asked, telling a peer interviewer, "My child needed two cans of milk each week. That's why I asked a friend about another job.*

*- Female participant, Jakarta.*

Most female participants entered sex work in the context of separation from an intimate partner. They were widowed, left with children to care for or forced to leave violent relationships. Some enjoyed their independence but providing for children meant many struggled.

Transgender participants were often forced to leave home as teenagers or chose to move to the city where they could openly express their gender identity, entering sex work to provide for themselves. While some spoke sadly of the loss of family relationships, they also described moving from their hometown as a positive experience.



*When I was thrown out of home, I went to a friend's house. There was a whole group of people there who used to dress like girls. I liked that very much... It was there that I met most of the people I know who are in this field.*

*- Transgender participant, Colombo.*

Male participants generally experienced greater economic freedom – most had no dependents, higher levels of education and did not describe discrimination in employment. While some male participants described periods of financial desperation, male and transgender participants were far more likely to cite non-financial benefits to sex work.

Many men reflected on their entry to sex work as an opportunity to explore their sexuality that was not

available where they grew up – same-sex sexual acts are criminalized in 18 countries in the Asia-Pacific region including Myanmar, Sri Lanka and parts of Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>



*I became involved in sex work because it would give me both money and sexual satisfaction... nobody introduced me. It came from my inner core... I could get money and get pleasure, too. Double advantage!*

*- Male participant, Colombo.*

*Financial power impacts on the way sex workers work. Poorer sex workers, including female participants who were supporting dependents or paying commissions to brokers were less able to refuse high-risk work. Some described agreeing to provide services without a condom or accepting violent clients in exchange for a higher rate.*

### **Work settings in a changing industry**

Where participants worked differed by gender and had clear implications for risk and policy responses. Male and transgender sex workers were more likely to be street-based or do outcall work via the phone or the internet. Female sex workers also worked on the street but were more likely to work in venues and establishments like bars or massage centres than male and transgender participants.

Street-based work was the most common and the most violent work setting. The visibility associated with street work and laws against soliciting in public placed street-based participants at higher risk of violence, including from police. Male and transgender participants were far more likely to be in street-based work than female participants.

Female participants were more likely to work through brokers or in venues and establishments with owners and managers. None of the street-based male or transgender participants used brokers. Experiences with these actors were mixed. Some intermediaries increased protection from violence by intervening or paying bribes to avoid police raids. Others contributed to violence by

denying sex workers payment, paying less than half what the client was charged, restricting participants' movement, and forcing them to provide services to more clients than they wanted to and to work excessive hours, including while pregnant.

The mostly male outcall workers experienced neither the benefits nor the risks associated with owners, managers or brokers. A few reported serious violence when they started outcall work but continued, stating that they had learned only to visit clients where they felt safe. The likelihood is that soliciting via the internet and mobile phones is increasing with the growing availability of such technologies, highlighting the need for interventions among sex workers operating in this changing environment. Over time, female sex workers may increasingly make use of outcall work as a means of avoiding paying a share of earnings to brokers and managers.

### **Gendered physical, economic, emotional and sexual violence, with lifelong impacts**

All but one of the 123 participants in this study had experienced violence. Common experiences among male, female and transgender participants reveal the gender-based nature of the violence. The violence also provides some insight into perpetrators' motivations and the need to address discriminatory laws and harmful gender norms.



*Four policemen opened my clothes, asking, 'Are you a boy or a girl?', and beat me with a long bamboo stick... Some of them slapped my face with their hand... One [policeman] kicked me on my chest, saying, 'Why are you behaving like this?' They hit me, saying, 'Why you are behaving like a girl? You don't have breasts or a hole or anything'.*

*- Transgender participant, Kathmandu.*

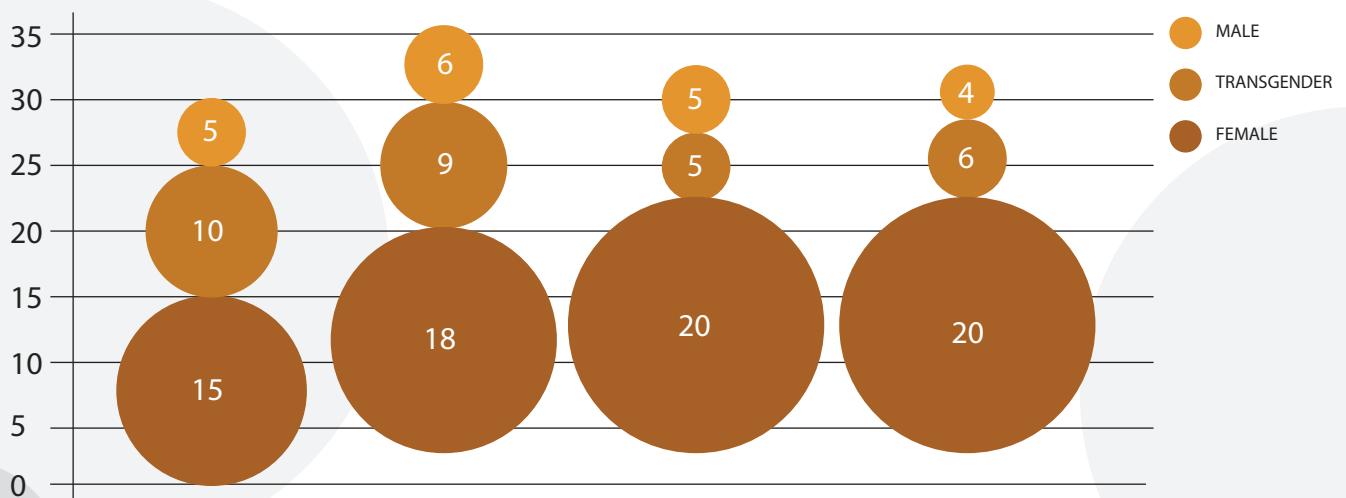
Transgender participants described violence associated with their appearance and directed at their gender expression. In addition to the extortion, rape, gang rape, and beatings experienced by all participants, transgender participants described violence aimed at humiliation, including being mocked and forced to strip in public by police.

Female and transgender participants described attacks on markers of their femininity. Their hair was cut, breasts crushed or bitten, genitals mutilated and their faces hit and burned. These attacks were aimed at disfigurement, enabling perpetrators' control of sex workers' livelihoods and sexuality by preventing their return to work until injuries healed or hair grew back. Transgender participants were also denied the ability to express their gender identity. This violence was often perpetrated by male intimate partners, who increased their control over

sense of entitlement among perpetrators in all countries to punish male, female and transgender sex workers for transgressing gender norms.

Male and transgender participants gave more graphic descriptions of sexual violence than female participants. This may be because the attacks were more brutal or could reflect different gender norms. Female participants described expectations around sexual purity, and that they be sexually available to intimate partners at all times. Experiences with clients who refused to pay and harassment by neighbours suggested that female sex workers were assumed to be sexually available to all men, consistent with the myth that sex workers cannot be raped. Male and transgender participants' graphic descriptions expressed an outrage not present in female participants' accounts and a perception that in describing the assault the perpetrator, rather than the victim, would be shamed.

**Figure 1: Sample size by gender category and site**



female partners by undermining the women's ability to provide for themselves.

Male and transgender participants were more likely to report being raped by a group than an individual, and more likely to have experienced gang rape than female participants. Group violence relies on a shared sense that violence against a particular person or population is justified.<sup>8</sup> Laws criminalizing sex work and same-sex sexual acts, homophobia, transphobia and strictly defined gender roles supported a

### Intimate partner violence

Research that examines sex workers' experiences solely through the lens of their work fails to take into account the impact of violence experienced in other settings. The people-centred approach in this study revealed that the majority of participants in all four sites had experienced violence by an intimate partner. Although intimate partner violence was most commonly reported by female participants (more than three-quarters), more than half the male participants and one-third of the transgender participants also reported intimate partner violence causing severe injuries.

Intimate partners were responsible for some of the most serious injuries reported to this study. In addition to sexual and emotional violence, participants reported being beaten, burned, choked, kicked, slapped or punched in the face, having limbs broken and being stabbed. The most severe injuries were reported by female participants.

The persistence of harmful gender norms surrounding intimate partner violence against women was apparent in statements from female and transgender participants. A few transgender participants characterised their experiences of intimate partner violence as part of being a woman in an intimate relationship with a man. One participant explained,

“*... because the family life a man and woman have is also experienced by us... [He] has bitten me, there are so many things like that. Because for me, truly, he is a man, and because I always behave with a woman's character, I can never lift a hand to him. Because normally a woman doesn't lift a hand to a man.*

- Transgender participant, Jakarta.

The intersection between stigma against sex work and harmful gender norms was particularly clear in the context of intimate partner violence. Involvement in sex work was sometimes the subject of arguments that ended in violence. Male participants reported that intimate partners used laws against sex work and same-sex relations as threats and to extort money.

### Responding to violence in a climate of impunity

The consequences of the violence participants experienced included permanent disability and disfigurement, loss of hearing and sight, HIV infection, infertility and miscarriage, mental illness, self-harm and attempted suicide. Yet reporting of violence to police was low. The Right(s) Evidence found that police and clients were the most common perpetrators of violence and that

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“*I never report ... I am a sex worker. I am all wrong. If I am a holy or right man, I will have the courage to report it to the police”.*

-Male participant, Jakarta.

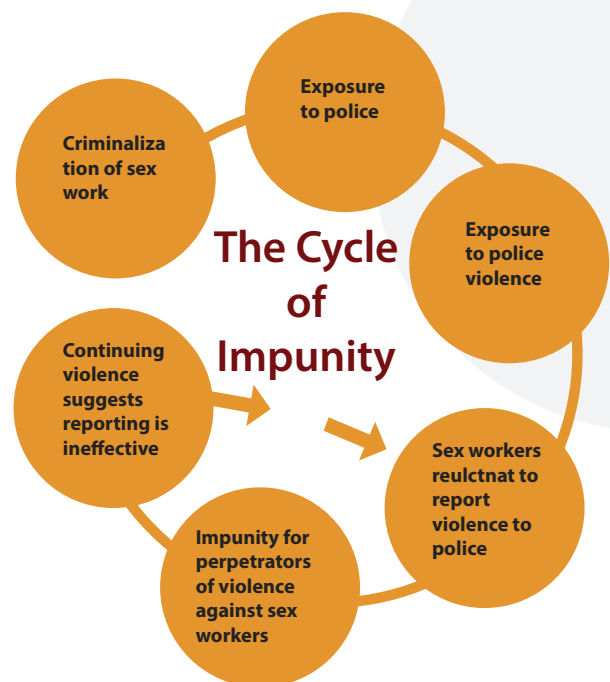


Figure 2: Criminalization of sex workers creates a climate of impunity for violence

Far fewer men reported violence to police, and all were based in Kathmandu where same-sex relations are legally protected. Male participants cited police homophobia and fear of exposure as men having sex with men, in addition to the fear of further violence and arrest cited by other participants. Shame and self-stigma also limited reporting by men in Jakarta.

Despite facing similar disincentives, transgender participants were more likely to report violence, perhaps due to the strength of collectivization within their community. Male and transgender participants in community networks were able to articulate their rights with clarity and pride.



*I heard that there was an organization for us. So I went there. Afterwards, I learned about HIV and condoms and was given awareness about my health issues. I also learned how to educate other persons and learned to lead the life beautifully... I am treated a hundred percent positively there.*

*-Transgender participant, Kathmandu.*

The association between their entry to sex work and the opportunity to openly express their

sexuality or gender identity appeared to create a positive pathway for collectivization. The level of support transgender participants drew from their community was among the most striking gender differences in this study. For male participants who described more isolated work and social settings, formal networks provided an opportunity to connect.

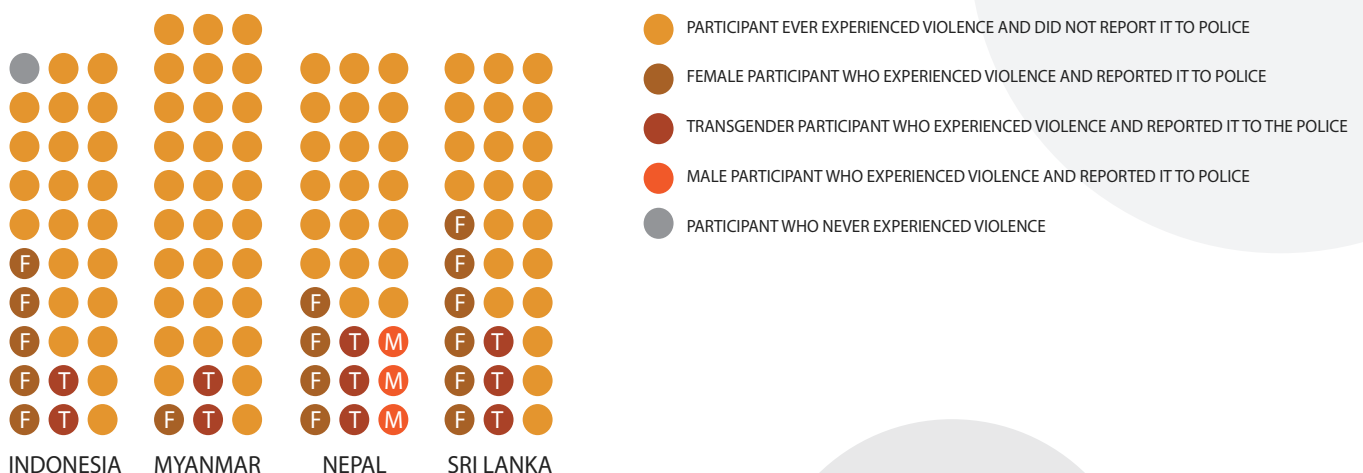
### Understanding gender to improve interventions for male, female and transgender sex workers

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sex workers are described as experiencing a 'double stigma' – as sex workers and as men who have sex with men, or transgender people.<sup>9</sup> Female participants in this study also experienced a double stigma, as sex workers and as women. The violence they experienced in their work occurred within the context of gender inequity and lifelong experiences of violence and other discrimination directed against them as women and girls. Denied autonomy over their lives and bodies, female

**Figure 3: Number of participants reporting experience of violence to the police, by site and gender**



Acknowledgements: Designer Daniel Feary developed the above diagram

participants were left economically vulnerable and at greater risk of violence and HIV.

The distinct experiences reported by male, female and transgender sex workers in this study clearly demonstrate the need to include men and transgender people in research on gender-based violence. But with fresh insights come fresh challenges. We must design research to raise male and transgender voices, yet, in applying a gender

lens, we must not obscure the disproportionate impact that violence continues to have on women and girls. Instead, we must engender public health responses with a clear understanding of gender as part of the human experience. Without a people-centred approach to research, we cannot hope to understand its impact on risk, or to develop policies and programs that effectively prevent and address gender-based violence.

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## End Notes

1. Title based on quote from a transgender study participant in Jakarta.
2. General Recommendation No 19: Violence against Women, as contained in Compilation of General Comments and General Recommendations Adopted by Human Rights Treaty Bodies, 11th Session, 1992. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/recomm.htm>
3. See Decker, MR, et al. Estimating the impact of reducing violence against female sex workers on HIV epidemics in Kenya and Ukraine: a policy modelling exercise. *American Journal of Reproductive Immunology* 2013; 69(1): 122–132. Doi: 10.1111/aji.12063.  
  
Baral, S, et al (2012). Burden of HIV among female sex workers in low-income and middle-income countries: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* 2012; 12(7): 538–549. Doi: 10.1016/S1473-3099(12)70066-X.
- Decker, MR, et al. Violence victimization, sexual risk and sexually transmitted infection symptoms among female sex workers in Thailand. *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 2010; 86(3): 236–240. Doi: 10.1136/sti.2009.037846.
- Deering, KN, et al. Client demands for unsafe sex: the socioeconomic risk environment for HIV among street and off-street sex workers. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* 2013; 63: 522–531. Doi: 10.1097/QAI.0b013e3182968d39.
4. Gruskin, S, et al. HIV and gender-based violence: welcome policies and programmes but is the research keeping up?. *Reproductive Health Matters* 2014; 2: 174-84. Doi: 10.1016/S0968-8080(14)44810-9.
5. All transgender participants had been assigned a male identity at birth but identified as transgender at the time of the study. This report uses the term 'transgender' rather than 'transgender woman' because not all the transgender participants self-identified as women.
6. Bhattaracharya, M et al, *The Right(s) Evidence: Sex Work, Violence and HIV in Asia – A Multi-Country Qualitative Study*. 2015. <http://www.aidsdatahub.org/sites/default/files/documents/new/Rights-Evidence-Report-2015-final.pdf>.
7. UNAIDS, *HIV in Asia and the Pacific*, 2013: [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/2013\\_HIV-Asia-Pacific\\_en\\_0.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2013_HIV-Asia-Pacific_en_0.pdf).
8. Fulu, E, et al. *Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific*. 2013. <http://www.partners4prevention.org/sites/default/files/resources/p4p-report.pdf>.
9. Human Rights Watch. "I'm Scared to be a Woman" – Human Rights Abuses Against Transgender People in Malaysia. 2014. [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/malaysia0914\\_ForUpload.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/malaysia0914_ForUpload.pdf).