Ecologies of security: On the everyday security tactics of female sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights important environmental dimensions of HIV vulnerability by describing how the sex trade operates in Nairobi, Kenya. Although sex workers there encounter various forms of violence and harassment, as do sex workers globally, we highlight how they do not merely fall victim to a set of environmental risks but also act upon their social environment, thereby remaking it, as they strive to protect their health and financial interests. In so doing, we illustrate the mutual constitution of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ in social network formations that take shape in everyday lived spaces. Our findings point to the need to expand the focus of interventions to consider local ecologies of security in order to place the local knowledges, tactics, and capacities that communities might already possess on centre stage in interventions. Planning, implementing, and monitoring interventions with a consideration of these ecologies would tie interventions not only to the risk reduction goals of global public health policy, but also to the very real and grounded financial priorities of what it means to try to safely earn a living through sex work.

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Introduction

Moving beyond individual behavioural risk reduction, contemporary sex work interventions attend to the broader structural-environmental conditions that underpin vulnerabilities to HIV infection (Jana, Basu, Rotheram-Borus, & Newman, 2004; Kerrigan et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2014; Reza-Paul et al., 2012). Greater attention is placed on the broader contextual realities that shape the micro-politics of condom negotiations between sex workers (SWs) and clients. These realities include gender inequality, poverty, discrimination and violence, and prohibitive government policies (Shannon et al., 2009). We also now have a greater understanding of the social conditions that occlude community mobilisation and other community-centred empowerment approaches that...
are crucial for how ‘sex workers … address social and structural barriers to their overall health and human rights’ (Kerrigan et al., 2015).

However, within the context of Nairobi, Kenya, which holds a vibrant sex trade industry (Okal et al., 2013), there is a striking neglect of studies that explore the environmental or structural factors that shape contexts in which SWs become susceptible to infection, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Okal et al., 2011). Moreover, other than Ngugi, Wilson, Sebstad, Plummer, and Moses (1996), there are few published accounts of interventions that have centred their efforts on building community mobilisation networks that strive to create more enabling environments in which SWs can push to improve health outcomes and advocate for larger and lasting social change. By contrast, a preponderance of immunological and bio-behavioural studies dominate the research landscape that pertains to female SWs over the past three decades in Kenya (e.g. see: Chege et al., 2012; Kaul et al., 2004; Priddy et al., 2011), owing to the longer and embedded history of ‘bioexperimental’ HIV research programmes in the country (Lorway, 2016).

Although the HIV epidemic in Kenya, as throughout Africa, has been classified as a ‘generalized epidemic’ primarily affecting adult populations between 15 and 49 years of age, in the last decade global epidemiology has begun to place importance on ‘key affected populations’, including female SWs, given the disproportionate burden of infection they endure (Tanser, de Oliveira, Maheu-Giroux, & Bärnighausen, 2014). For instance, in a respondent-driven sample of 596 self-identified SWs in Nairobi, 29.5% of participants tested HIV positive (Musyoki et al., 2015). This stands in marked contrast to the adult sero-prevalence of 5.9% found in the country (UNAIDS, 2016). In response to the intense vulnerability of SWs in Nairobi, a transnationally orchestrated network of clinic-based interventions was established to connect women to STI testing and treatment services. More recently, Kenya’s Ministry of Health, in close collaboration with local and international public health scientists have begun to strengthen clinically oriented SW outreach programmes to try to address structural-environmental considerations and promote community mobilisation.

This paper highlights important environmental dimensions of HIV vulnerability by describing how the sex trade operates in Nairobi. Although SWs there encounter various forms of violence and harassment, as do SWs globally (see, for example, Lazarus, Chettiar, Deering, Nabess, & Shannon, 2011; Shannon et al., 2008), we highlight how they do not merely fall victim to a set of environmental risks but also act upon their social environment, thereby remaking it, as they strive to protect their health and financial interests. We refer to the findings of a qualitative study that engaged three SW community organisations in a community-centred knowledge production process that attempted to better understand the environmental risks surrounding the sex work industry in Nairobi. Specifically, we highlight the everyday security tactics that they employ to safeguard and protect their economic and health interests, and in so doing we illustrate the mutual constitution of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ in social network formations that take shape in everyday lived spaces. This view adheres to poststructural theoretical perspectives advanced by thinkers such as Bourdieu (1977), who avoids the notion of agency as an innate capacity of individuals existing prior to ‘social structure’ and, instead, advances the idea that agency is socially constructed or ‘recognized’ in and through a field of possibilities.

To make sense of some of the social fields that SWs enter to find clients in Nairobi, we turn to ideas of sexuality and space advanced in human geography (see for example Browne, Lim, & Brown, 2009) – theories that help us to shift attention away from the characteristics of ‘at risk’ individuals and towards the spaces where social and sexual networks actually take shape (also see Sherman, Lilleston, & Reuben, 2011). From this perspective, ‘sexual risk’ is better understood as reproduced through spatial and affective arrangements and networks “resulting from the interaction of bodies in place”, rather than as resulting from external social factors that enable or prohibit ‘rational’ decision making (Brown, 2008, p. 917; Lorway et al., 2011, p. 1091). Although there are clear logics of cost at play in the tactics that SWs employ in their negotiations with clients and those who connect them to clients, the places in which these women work are better characterised as a ‘moral economy’ (Mauss, 1990) – that is, as a field of mutually beneficial social relations and
reciprocities rather than a strictly routinised, coercive, mercantile operation. In other words, to understand the everyday tactics employed by SWs we need to examine the social formation of these mutually interdependent networks that pattern the field of possibilities for SWs to achieve security. These emergent ecologies of security, we argue, speak to current efforts to build structural interventions with local communities.

Methods

Setting

This study took place in the capital city of Kenya, Nairobi, where female sex work has a long history traceable to the colonial period (White, 2009). As a 'defiant form of labour', sex work allowed women to accumulate wealth and property, and avoid forced marriage, hunger, and destitution under a colonial regime that exploited African labour in the extraction of the country's resources (White, 2009). As McClintock (1991, p. 94) explain, 'prostitution' emerged from the context of a disrupted African agricultural system and in resistance to the imposition of colonial wage labour. Today, in a post-colonial era in which Kenyan women have greater access to higher education, sex work provides women with a source of income that allows them to survive the high cost of living in the capital city and high rates of unemployment, which particularly plague younger people (UNDP, 2013). Through sex work, women are also able to capture flows of capital emanating from the tourism industry, which is the country's highest source of GDP (Kibicho, 2012; Omondi, 2003). It should be noted that this study occurred prior to the terrorist bombings in Nairobi and before Kenya's tourism industry took a major hit to al-Shabaab terrorist attacks along the eastern Coastal region.

As 88% of sex work in Nairobi is venue-based (NASCOP and NACC, 2012), occurring in bars and nightclubs, our study focused on sex work taking place in these settings. To understand how social relations form in these spaces, it is first necessary to realise that most staff working there receives low wages, and therefore come to rely upon informal exchanges with SWs to help supplement their income. Second, there is rapid turnover among bar and nightclub staff that has caught the concern of economists (Kaunda, 2006). Network formations between SWs and bar staff, therefore, can be somewhat ephemeral and so female SWs must continually re-employ networking tactics to maintain their physical safety and a steady flow of clients.

Transnational collaborations

Funded by the World Bank, the study was initiated in collaboration with the Kenya National AIDS & STI Control Programme (NASCOP) and their international consortium of partners, including the University of Manitoba, the Gates Foundation, CDC, UNAIDS, PEPFAR, the World Bank, and the NGO and civil society sector. By attempting to characterise how sex work is organised and operates in Nairobi, this study aimed to inform collaborative intervention planning with community-based organisations run by and for SWs, so that they can further mobilise to confront the myriad of social forces that inhibit local HIV prevention efforts. At the time the study began, the activist network known as the Kenyan Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), which served as an umbrella group for male and female sex work collectives throughout the country, was just beginning to form. Some of the key leaders of KESWA were also closely tied to the global networks known as the Network of Sex Worker Projects (NSWP), which grew in visibility and credibility within global HIV policy arenas at the time. KESWA came to serve as a vital partner in the development of this study.

Following the advice of KESWA representatives, we engaged two SWs collectives based in Nairobi – the Bar Hostess Association (BHESP), and the male SW organisation known as Health Options for Young Men against STI and HIV (HOYMAS). Although this study cannot be regarded entirely as a participatory, community-initiated process, it can be considered 'community centric' in the sense that representatives from the international consortium recognised at the outset that sex work leaders must be key partners in the study to ensure that any knowledge produced would inform and be
informed by on-the-ground realities of programme implementation and community outreach work. Agreeing with this logic, sex work leaders came to be centrally involved in the development of the qualitative data collection procedures, the wording of interview guides, the formulation of consent processes and participant recruitment, the collection of data, and the validation of findings. Technical support for the study was provided by the University of Manitoba and leaders from its Sex Workers Outreach Programme (SWOP). Although the study focussed on female sex work, KESWA leaders decided that the project should be jointly undertaken by male and female SWs to foster solidarity between their collectives, which they felt was an important goal because of sharing clients, social space, and health and social justice issues.

**Research training and data collection**

A working group consisting of policy makers, scientists, programme implementers, and sex work activists executed the study. After the working group finalised the protocol and interview guide, they consulted with SW-led organisations based in Nairobi to select a team of community researchers (CRs). Ten SWs were chosen who then received training in the basics of ethical social research, provided by the first author. Two community leaders were chosen to provide supervisory support during the data collection period. The training and data collection process was divided into two phases: (1) participant observation and field note writing in ‘hotspots’ – venues where SWs and clients congregated; and (2) in-depth qualitative interviews to further probe around the knowledge produced during the first phase.

We chose to conduct the study in the municipalities of Starehe and Embakasi, both urban districts, and Westlands and Kasarani, classified as peri-urban to capture a socioeconomically diverse sample of the social spaces in which sex work took place in Nairobi. Nightclubs and bars located in Westlands, for instance, are located in affluent neighbourhoods and attract wealthier patrons and sex work clients, while sex work hotspots in Embakasi, which is surrounded by lower middle income housing and slums areas, attract poorer clientele. Although many also live below the poverty line in Starehe, there is a rich history of local and international humanitarian intervention, particularly in the education sector in this constituency; while the adult population in Kasarani has a lower level of education and widespread gender-based violence in the informal settlement areas (Otsola, 2012). Although extensive geographic mapping in the region classified female SWs according to hotspot typologies (Kimani et al., 2013), the CRs claimed that SWs did not necessarily confine themselves to a singular type of hotspot. One CR explained, for instance, that those who worked on the street, if they were unable to find a client that night, they would sometimes enter a nearby bar or nightclub to try to find a client (or vice versa); or they would contact their taxi driver by cell and head to a hotel; or they might possibly go to a ‘sex den’ (a type of brothel) to find clients. In other words, instead of selecting separate, discrete hotspots for their participant observation, the research team decided it was necessary to group various hotspots together to form clusters of spaces or zones where SWs moved about to conduct their business.

For the first phase, the CRs generated ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1994) of interactions between social actors involved in the sex trade by immersing themselves in the social context of venues. By spending extended periods in bars and nightclubs during different times of the day and different days of the week, they were able to observe networking patterns, flows of customers, and power relationships between people. Composing daily field notes, the CRs documented patterns they observed around how the exchange of food, drinks, drugs, cell phone credit, and other gifts between social actors mediated sexual and social intimacies. Their field notes also recorded what they overheard within the venues to understand what people more generally were chatting about. As Watkins and Swidler (2009) explain, such ‘hearsay ethnography’ enables local researchers to access knowledge as it circulates and re-creates meaning in everyday life.

As the team conducted their participant observational work over a 5-week period, they began to identify and build rapport with individuals who could offer more detailed information on the sex
trade industry. These key informants were identified as regular venue patrons who were knowledgeable of the sex trade dynamics taking place at the venues and they actively participated in the sex work networks. These individuals included female SWs and men who were regular clients or the intimate partners of female SWs, many of whom worked in these venues as bar staff. In-depth qualitative interviews with these key informants delved more deeply into the information produced during the participant observation phase. Employing a purposive snowball sampling procedure, we recruited female and male participants through their networks. A total of 72 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with an equal number of male and female participants. The women ranged in age from 22 to 43 years and their average age was 28 years. Men ranged in age from 19 to 45 years and their average age was 32 years. In terms of relationship status, 12% of the women were in a long-term relationship or married, 22% were separated, while 66% were single/never married. Among the men, 55% were in long-term relationships or married, 12% were separated, 33% were single/never married. Among female participants, 38% completed primary school, 59% completed secondary school, while only 3% had a university education. Among male participants, 17% completed primary school, 40% completed secondary school, while 30% were university educated and 13% had a technical or trade school education.

Safety and ethical concerns

Because sex work in Kenya is ambiguously criminalised through municipal by-laws that give law enforcement officials discretionary power to arrest those ‘loitering for the purposes of prostitution’ (African Grandmothers Tribunal, 2013), to protect the CRs from any harm that could come to them during fieldwork, the two supervisors, both trained paralegals who worked with police to protect SWs rights (see Wolfe, Cohen, Doyle, & Margolin, 2013), regularly touched based with the CRs by cell phone. They also kept track of the venues where they conducted their observations and ensured that they each had a taxi on standby in case there were any crackdowns or police raids. They also had police permission documents for the study and identification cards bearing the NAS-COP logo, to ensure their safety.

Ethics approval was obtained from the research ethics boards in the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Medicine in Winnipeg, Canada and Kenyatta Hospital in Nairobi.

Analysis

A form of group analysis was incorporated throughout the data collection process. Each morning after conducting participant observation, the CRs met as a group with the first author to discuss their field notes and make sense of what they were observing and overhearing, and to identify areas for further follow up. This process served as a rich source of contextualisation; the CRs often debated and probed more deeply into the meaning of what they had observed. This process enabled the first author to compose data summaries, thematic codes, and interpretative schemes to undertake the analysis of the entire data set. In this way, the analysis of the finalised field notes and recorded interview transcripts incorporated the interpretations and inductive reasoning that unfurled during ongoing discussions of the data with the CRs. Thus, our attempt to draw out and explore individual and shared group meanings pertaining to the organisation of the sex trade industry greatly valued and reflected the experiential knowledge of the CRs. This co-learning and co-production of knowledge between the academic researcher and local people align with particular principles in community-based research that are attentive to power imbalances present in conventional social research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011).

Our thematic interpretive analysis of our data – the social practices we observed, the informal discussions we overheard, and the narratives generated during interviews – drew linkages to theories of ‘gift exchange’ elaborated in economic anthropology (Wilk & Cliggett, 2009, p. 153–175). This attention to theory in our analysis enabled us to characterise the power relations that formed
between SWs and other social actors who enable their security tactics. Gift exchange, unlike selling a commodity, produces a moral economy that draws people together into relations of mutual obligation and interest (Mauss, 1990). At the same time, ‘affect theory’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), as discussed in human geography (see for example Brown 2008), helps us to further articulate how particular atmospheres (of pleasure, eroticism, fear, and anxiety) generate ‘ebbs and swells of intensities’ (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2) between the bodies that animate Nairobi nightlife. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010, p. 2) note, ‘affect marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters’, a belonging that continually pulls the body beyond its individual boundedness toward its relational potentiality.

Findings

To convey an understanding of how ‘ecologies of security’ are animated in the context of venue-based sex work in Nairobi, we illustrate two mutually constitutive dimensions. First we depict the continually moving field of desires in which sex work is entangled, drawing upon CR field note depictions. Second, we examine the complex networking practices and reciprocities SWs enact to confront this affective geography. In other words, we demonstrate how ecologies of security take shape in the lived spaces where agentive tactics contend with a changeable and unpredictable environment.

Excitable bodies, affective geographies

The CRs described how the changing atmospheres in sex work hotspots influence the connections forming between people. They depicted the intermingling of erotic and economic pursuits as though they were conditioned by the shifting temporal-sensorial characteristics of the space itself – building anticipation, desire, and expectations.

The club is well set with expensive stylish furniture … painted with a variety of colours bringing out an impression of a country club within the city. The lighting is … slightly dim making someone realize that you are somewhere to relax. Soft music starts playing at around 6pm and goes louder and louder as time goes on …. I noticed the ladies who were seated on my left … One of them confessed to her friend how she was offered a lot of money by her white boyfriend and invested the money in bogus business. She ended up losing her money …. Her friend seemed to have various business ideas, “But why didn’t you buy a plot and develop it? That is what I usually do. Through such investment you can make a fortune within no time,” she said … . I waited to see if they would be distracted by the presence of White men and Asians, but not at any moment.

It was approaching 9 o’clock …. Three Asians had walked in …. The barman noticed and started smiling. He told the waiter in Kiswahili, “Wee chukua order haraka kwa hao,” meaning take the order quickly from them. The waiter smiled back and then approached the two ladies. [The two ladies] confidently sent him to the Asians who said, “It is okay, let [the ladies] take what they want.” The ladies looked excited and started dancing outside. After a while they joined the Asians and the party continued. … I heard the ladies say, “I know they will tell us to book a room here in Westlands!” (Nightclub, Westlands)

Illuminating the social milieu of nightclubs and bars, the CRs portrayed SWs as reacting to the atmosphere of the nightlife with enjoyment rather than with a detached, sedate or reserved business-like demeanor. In this field note except, excitement surrounds the possible earnings of two women in a busy upscale nightclub in Westlands.

Luckily the ‘Wazungu’ White men kept on staring at them …. I saw them beckon the ladies and quickly they joined their table. It was a team of seven, five White men and two African ladies. “I heard you talk about your boyfriend who lives abroad, can you tell me what happened?” one of the men asked. “You White men like marrying us and once you go back to your country, you forget about us,” one lady said. The man held her on the shoulder and assured her that not every White man would do that.

The men ordered for more drinks and … started explaining about themselves, what they do, where they come from and other personal details …. I heard them laughing saying they would like to try Kenyan ladies. “You look beautiful and romantic,” One of them complemented the ladies. The ladies smiled shyly as they sipped their drink … . I saw the barman smile and he said to the waiter who was serving them, “Leo wameangukia, hao wazungu wanakaa matajiri.” (Today they are lucky they have gotten rich White men).”
In a poorer neighbour in Embakasi, fervour builds amid the economic prospects that come with a crowded club. The following CR, who also earns part of her living from sex work, describes how music, clothing, and the animation of bodies through dance, creates an appealing spectacle for her field work observations.

I arrived from the bus and found so many sex workers dressed in mini-skirts looking wow. They are standing along the sides of the road. The motor bike men are so many outside. Very many cars at the parking … I can see sex workers roaming around which makes me think that they are hunting for clients … When entering … the club has loud music and people seem to like it since the dance floor is full. A lady sex worker comes forward and tells me, “hi, leo kuna wasee kumeshona lazima kuwe na wira (today there are so many customers, we must get clients.)” I laughed and told her it was a very lucky day for us. … Today is ladies night and the DJ holds the music and tells the people that within the hour there will be entertainment. I joined the dance floor. I noticed that the sex workers are negotiating prices at the dance floor before they go out. I went near a couple and heard this, “leo twende kwangu” (today we go to my house) … A man joins me for a dance. He tells me, “mrembo uko smart, si twende kwangu nyako” which means (can we go to my house girl?) I smiled at him and I go to my seat. Finally the DJ announces that we are ready for the performance … The last performance was by a lady from Congo, she twists and singing very lovely Congolese songs. On my way out, I saw ladies cat walking. “Wow. Those sex workers have got talent” I told myself. They are real models cat walking with heights, beautiful faces, well-made hair and expensive dresses and miniskirts. (Nightclub and lodge, Embakasi)

Another CR records her own experience of excitement and disappointment with respect to an encounter with a client, the expediency of which was furnished by intense crowding in the nightclub.

I went in the place, today it's very full, no space to pass into the club. I have to squeeze myself to the discotheque hall. So many young men roaming around. The sex workers are smoking while others are holding a drink while standing with good smiles. When I sat, the waitress comes and says, “Hi, somebody wants to sit with you.” I was very happy to get a client within the a few minutes. Here comes a black man bouncing, he seems to have cash. I started thinking of how to approach him. “Hi, I saw you standing at the car park while I was in my Range Rover. “Jesus! Cash flowing today.” I told myself. He ordered for our drinks, he was taking a Jack Daniels and I automatically knew that he was a very rich man. He told me he wants to take me … in the Range Rover … When we entered the Range Rover … I could not believe my eyes. Cash, cash on the dashboard. He told me that he does not have to wear a condom, I have to. Sweating, shock was on me. But he is a very calm and humble man. He takes out a female condom “Wear this; let me show you how to do it.” I told him “No, let me do it myself!” I looked at the expiry date and wore it. It was very painful since I have never done that before. It was my worst experience ever. We finished our business and tell me to go. When going out of the car, the security man tells me that he is very good but can fuck 5 to 7 ladies a night. He told me he had fucked 4 ladies and I was the fifth, but he is very good and does no harm to sex workers. I went in and sat down and continued with my drink. (Bar, Embakasi)

The field notes offer a detailed view of how the connections forming between people are enmeshed in particular affective geographies – that is, in the very social fields where people continually react to each other, and react to the abundant erotic and financial possibilities these spaces provide.

At the same time, an atmosphere of excitement can quickly shift to one of fear and anxiety when disputes break out in these milieus. CRs documented frequent conflicts between SWs and clients, usually regarding issues of payment. The following CR, who was trained as a paralegal and outreach worker for her organisation, describes such a scene in which she felt compelled to intervene:

I heard a scream from the far end basement … When we reached there we found a lady sex worker and her client quarrelling … because of money. The lady sex worker is demanding for more payment since she was fucked without a condom and they had agreed with a condom. I talked to the guy and he calmed down. The lady sex worker still demanding for her payments I also told her to visit a clinic for her safety. I directed her to SWOP clinic and she promised me to give me the feedback. The guy apologized and gave her three thousand for treatment. I advised and counselled him on HIV/AIDS and STIs and he promised me not to repeat that again. (Bar, Kasarani)

Field notes also provided accounts of how fear and panic erupted around periodic police raids.

All of a sudden several young girls dressed in the same luring short skirts ran out of a dark corner. “Askaris” (Swahili for 'police') they screamed in fear. They were running from the police. I got the chance to talk with one of them. “Hapa hakuna biashara ingine, ni kuijuza tu” (Swahili for there is no other business here just selling
ourselves). She told me that they usually bribe the police who then let them continue with their business. “hata wakitupata tukitombana kwa ukuta hawaulizi” (Swahili for ‘even if they found us having sex by the wall they [normally] won’t ask’) she told me.’ (Nightclub, Embakasi)

Although offering a view of the affective geographies inhabited by SWs as highly unpredictable, at the same time CRs noted various patterns of interaction between social actors in different places. Against the socially environmentally contingent background of shifting atmospheres, SWs employ distinctive security tactics in an attempt to navigate such social fields of unpredictability to minimise their economic and physical vulnerability.

The moral economy of sex trade

The sex trade industry across the four municipalities was organised through an interdependent network of social relationships. Various patterns of exchange formed these social networks between SWs, different bar and nightclub staff, and clients. Waiters and ‘barmaids’, in particular, acted as key third party mediators in the initial exchanges between SWs and potential clients, as the following field note excerpt shows:

The approach of men to women here is through waiters, where I could see a waiter sent to a girl. [He] asks her what she takes and the [drink] order comes. After a short time, the girl could move with her drinks to the man and starts negotiating while others could give waiters a note written and walk outside. I could see also others approaching them in the dance floor. (Bar in Kasarani)

Connecting SWs and clients through a third party offers a number of mutually beneficial gains. For instance, female SWs maintain a steady client volume when waiters contacting clients on their behalf; while waiters generally receive compensation for their efforts.

In my case, it is mostly the bartender or the waiters [who connect me to clients]. As I am seated taking my drink, most clients will send the waiters to bring me a drink or tell me to join them at their tables. So the waiters are very helpful … I have so many bartenders as my friends, so I give them my phone number which they call me if they find a client who has money. (Female, Embakasi)

You can make a deal with a waiter in a club where you are a regular. He has your number and so when a client comes in, he can call you and tell you to come to the club and then he introduces you to the client. But there is a percentage cut that you will have to give him. (Female, Embakasi)

If the client is a foreigner or someone who is big, you pay 500 [5 USD] and [the waiters] connect you to these people easily rather than you going to the men and asking them if they want sex. (Female, Starehe)

On the other side of these exchanges, waiters and bar tenders connect clients to female sexual partners, for which they receive a small fee.

The waiters are our friends since you go the club daily to drink, so they tell you who is a sex worker … As you are drinking, and the waiter sees that you have money, he comes and talks to you aside; he asks you if you want company since you are alone and also tells you that you can get a girl to have sex with and it would only cost you around 200 or 100 KES [1-2 USD] and they also tell you if you agree he will get a cut. So the waiters are the ones who mostly connect us since they know we, the customers, are the ones with money. (Male, Westlands)

The barmaids know that a sex worker doesn’t just sit there to have drinks – they are normally hunting, so they connect you … A sex worker is a clever person … they inform the barmaids; so the barmaids know the men who go to look for sex workers – so as they serve you, they tell you that there is a “beautiful lady” you could speak with. So that is how they connect you. (Male, Westlands)

Clients placed great value on bar staff because of the emotional protection they provide, enabling clients to avoid potential offense, rejection, and embarrassment and overcome any shyness in approaching women.

You know if I want a lady for cheap sex, I won’t go directly [to the lady], since I don’t know how that lady is, I don’t know whether she will talk to me or insult me. You know sometimes commercial sex workers are …
rough and harsh due to the work they do, so you might go tell her a certain price and make her angry. So what we do, there are people like bouncers, barmaids, the waitresses working at that club, you could send them ... So you send them at a fee - you can’t just send somebody and you aren’t paying them. So they will bring you the lady but they won’t bargain for you. They will leave you with that lady so you can negotiate. (Male, Starehe)

You know it’s very easy to open up to a bouncer if he is one you are familiar with. It’s easier to open up to a bouncer than it is going to hit on a girl, since not all people can go and hit on ladies even if the ladies are sex workers. (Male, Embakasi)

Bar staff were highly valued in the sex trade industry, and therefore regularly compensated by both female SWs and clients alike, because they performed important screening to ensure their financial and physical protection.

[The bar staff] are the people who show us the people with money and those without. So they warn you when you are with [a potential client] who has no money, because they know everyone who comes to that club, those with money and those without. When you are spending time on a broke person, they tell you nigitee masaa, meaning you are wasting yourself. They are the same people who tell you that one is a policeman so be cautious and don’t steal from him ... There is a [police official] ... known to be a killer and he sometimes comes there pretending to be an ordinary guy ... they give us such information. (Female, Westlands)

So if a client is [at the nightclub] and he is having his drinks, he tells the waiter that he wants a lady for the night who won’t hurt or steal from him. So the waiter will say that he knows someone and will call me, if I am not in the club at the time. So because I don’t want to seem cheap to the client, especially if he is a foreigner, I tell the waiter to tell him to send me a drink if he wants me to join his table. (Female, Embakasi)

What is important to note with the respect to the effect of the multiple exchanges and interactions between SWs, clients and bar staff is how participants characterise third party mediators as friends rather than as strictly a kind of commercial partnership. The role that bar staff play is voluntary, in the sense that their service is not mandatory or enforced upon SWs in these venues. SWs are certainly free to connect with clients on their own, and the field notes suggest that they do so on occasion. Thus reciprocation is not entirely driven by formalised business rules. This is also reflected in the payment system, where SWs and clients are left to bargain the price without the direct interference of bar staff. The compensation that the bar staff receive follows a more informal, collegial honour system of trust and mutual obligation. Furthermore, the vital voluntary security services that staff informally provide to SWs further undergirds the moral economies of trust and mutual benefit that hold these networks together. Third party mediation hinges on local security logics of emotional, financial, and physical safety.

**Beer as currency**

Across all the field sites, clients were commonly expected to provide a drink to SWs as a prelude to connecting with them in the venue. The circulation of beer links together SWs, bar staff, and clients in a manner that follows a gift exchange logic. As articulated by Marcel Mauss, the feeling of obligation to reciprocate after receiving a gift, stems from the fact that a gift is more than the just the value of the object itself; rather, it ‘entails the identity of the giver’ (Wilk & Cliggett, 2009, p. 159). In the case of sex work in Nairobi, the beer itself carries the erotic intention of the client as it passes through the third party mediator who bestows it upon the SW. This gifting of beer through a third party, even before sex is given, entangles the giver in a wider social field of exchanges and connections between people, further charging the affective geographies of Nairobi nightlife.

At one level, beer serves as a form of currency for SWs to accumulate, liquidate or exchange, to compensate bar staff.

With the waiters, what you do is that after you have been given the drink, you send it back and tell the waiter to give you the money and you give him a cut from it. So that if the drink was 220 shillings [2 USD] you tell him to give you 150 [1.50 USD] and he can take the 70 [0.70 USD] on top. So if he returns like ten beers then he will have like 700 [7 USD] from you. (Bar, Embakasi)
Yes of course you must go back to your pockets to give [the bar staff] something little. If you got 2000 [20 USD], you give them 200 [2 USD] and if you returned 4 bottles of beer, two are theirs and two yours. You must cooperate that way so that you continue benefitting from each other. (Bar, Starehe)

Clients were certainly aware of the role of giving beer in persuading SWs to connect with them:

Sometimes if I find there is a lady seated next to me, I get a beer and ask the waiter to take the beer straight to her table. At first she may resist, but when ask for another beer and another, then the lady succumbs. (Nighclub, Starehe)

The first thing, you won’t just take the lady and go have sex with her for free, you must take something from your pockets, maybe two or three beers, and then maybe after that, when you go for sex, you find that there is that fee that you have to pay her, since she is at work, and she won’t dissemble it, she will tell you that that’s her work. (Bar, Starehe)

At another level, gifting beer to SWs is protective for them. While making an expression of interest that may initiate the negotiation process, gifting beer does not commit the SW to sell sex to the client. If a SW were, instead, to charge the client cash to meet and sit with them, this would create a formality that might make the client feel entitled to have sex with the SW (or to have their money returned in the event that the SW refuses to sell sex to them). Connecting through a gift exchange modality, however, enables the SW to more freely explore and decide if she does or does not want to sell sex to the client. At the same time, the way beer can serve as a form of currency ensures that her time is compensated in the event that the client decides not to proceed further with purchasing sex, because, perhaps, he do not agree to the final asking price. Here the gift of beer and other drinks gives freedom and flexibility to SWs to negotiate without becoming bound to the interests of clients.

**Securing safe space**

The moral economy that pervades the sex trade industry in Nairobi creates safe spaces for having sex amid the uncertain and ever-changing conditions of Nairobi nightlife. The female interview participants were asked where they preferred to go to have sex with their clients. Many preferred ‘lodgings’ or rental rooms that were adjoined to some of the bars and nightclubs they frequented.

I prefer right there [at the bar], since at least I will know I am safe; since he might take me to a place and maybe harm me, or leave me in an unfamiliar location. But when I am within [the bar], at least people know me, people will know that I am there; we know each other. So I prefer that place since it’s safer. (Bar, Starehe)

Just within [the club]. If we were drinking at [a bar in Kasarani], we will just go up to a room that he has booked … I would prefer [to go there], but it is up to the client. He may be married [if I go to his home] and the wife may be trying to catch him with someone else. That is how you hear stories like someone went into someone’s matrimonial home …. But then [the wife] came in while they were not aware, she boiled water and burnt her with it. (Nightclub, Embakasi)

Participants consistently reported feeling safest in lodgings because of the presence of security guards who they knew.

I prefer lodgings because if you go to someone’s place anything can happen to you there. Sometimes people are even killed. There are people who really don’t like prostitutes …. There is a lot of security and there are guards at the lodging …. I prefer them because they are more secure …. The security guards, they understand we are prostitutes and they are always there for us …. so we are more secure there. (Bar and lodge, Starehe)

Almost all participants reported that they avoided going to a client’s home as it was seen as being too unpredictable and uncertain with respect to encountering violence from clients and the partners or family of clients.

Another type of place perceived as being safe for having sex was the larger, upscale hotels, as the following participant explained:
I prefer to go the big hotels because it is hard to be treated badly there … I find they have better security. In those big hotels the guy cannot leave without me, because he can’t bribe the person at the gate to let him leave. But in the smaller hotels, [the client] can even kill you or do something bad to you, give out the money, and just leave. That is why I prefer the big hotels. (Nightclub, Westlands)

Despite particular preferences, most SWs said that they had sex in multiple places. One participant explained, SWs often have to choose the location based on the preference of the client who they aim to please, to receive their pay. Another female SW said:

It depends where we are. If we are in a joint with a lodging we would go there. It also depends on the client if he can afford to pay a lodging. If he does not have the money for the lodging we go to uncompleted construction sites and finish our deal there. And others want to spend the night with you; you go with them to their homes and sleep over to the next day. Others have cars, but they do not want to pay for lodgings and so you do it in the car, even in toilets. Others follow you to the toilets, and you complete your affairs there. (Bar and lodge, Kasarani)

For SWs who decided to go off-site or leave the venue in the car of a client, according to the field notes of CRs, bouncers extended their services beyond the defined spaces of the bar or night club to ensure the safety of SWs.

They took more drinks but as they prepared to move to their secret rendezvous the girl excused herself to go to the cloak rooms and on her way she stood with the ‘bouncer’ (the security guard). When she came back, the guy helped her with her bag and they moved like old friends. I saw the bouncer follow them and took out a pen and a paper and scribbled down the guy’s car number plate. (Nightclub, Westlands)

For SWs who were unsuccessful in finding clients inside, they often would exit the venue to join the street trade in the later hours of the night.

I left the place and went looking at how business was going on the streets … I found so many girls on the streets running towards the approaching cars where the man and in some instances the men in the car could pick their choice of girl/girls and the girl/girls could enter the car and they drove off while the ones remaining could be seen writing down the number plates of the cars carrying their colleagues. (Bar and hotel, Kasarani)

Thus, as SWs enter social fields beyond the safe spaces of the venue, such preparedness strategies of peers, nevertheless, emotionally tether SWs to particular moral economic milieus, even after they depart.

**Conclusion**

We have tried to portray how particular ecologies of security emerge from ever-moving affective geographies, in response to the various emotional, financial, and physical vulnerabilities and abundant opportunities that face groupings of social actors that animate the sex trade in Nairobi nightlife. These ecologies of security hinge on the formation of interdependent networks that often follow the logic of ‘the gift’ more than commodification or commercialisation. Bar staff, as third party mediators are crucial to the financial and physical protection of SWs, but generally operate without treading upon the independence of SWs to negotiate the sale of sex with clients. Drawing people together into relations of mutual obligation and interest, these moral economies create cooperative collegial power relations. Beer, as a form of currency that connects people together, enables women and the bar staff to be compensated for the time that they take to entertain clients’ desires. Maintaining the aesthetic of a social relation, the exchange of alcohol as ‘a gift’ affords women the freedom to decide if they will further pursue a transaction with a potential client. These moral economic arrangements are further implicated in the safe spaces where SWs take their clients. When women exit hotspots with clients, the security milieu extends beyond the venues when bar staff and peers track the vehicles of clients.

But what are the implications of our study for global public health? In the era of geographic information systems, epidemiology certainly has become re-enchanted with space, after a significant detour in the mind twentieth century into ‘etiologic frameworks based on characteristics of the
individual’ (Krieger, 2003, p. 384). The renewed spatial focus is indeed reflected in HIV prevention science and its growing concern for geo-spatial disease clusters, and other ecological complexities (see for example: Anderson et al., 2014). Moreover, the deployment of geographic mapping of key populations for intervention planning and resources allocation (Odek et al., 2014) exemplifies the growing reliance on spatially oriented techniques and analysis. Particularly in African countries such as Kenya, the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of HIV-related structural interventions largely relies upon quantitative evidence and indicators (level of condom distribution, number of SWs linked to health services, locations covered by outreach, incidents of violence, and so on) that are decontextualised. Moreover, specialised biological and behavioural surveys, which has become the standard for measuring intervention effectiveness in relation to epidemic progression, although collecting information based on time-location clustering or social network-based sampling procedures, ultimately generate evidence based on aggregates of individual-level behaviours and simplistic assumptions of space that are ahistorical and static in nature. In sum, they tend to ignore the complex, often unpredictable and irregular social connections, and moral economies that exist between people.

M&E specialists might argue that the very simplicity of numerically driven indicators that are ‘isolatable’ from the messier realities of lived experiences of people present a particular pragmatic strength of numerical evidence to cope with limited resources, and the growing demand for accountability among global funders. Our detailed elaboration of local ecologies of security and their role in protecting SWs from violence and economic exploitation is not intended as a call to abandon such routine measurement practices, per se. However, expanding the focus of interventions to consider local ecologies of security, which we advocate for, would involve more direct engagement of communities in the production of intervention knowledge in order to 1) strengthen and build on the effectiveness of pre-existing security tactics while also 2) ascertaining how ongoing intervention techniques interact with (enhance or disrupt) local security socialities. Moving beyond a focus on behaviour change and education (see for example Ngugi et al., 1996), attending to the ecologies of security would place the local knowledges, tactics, and capacities that communities might already possess on centre stage in interventions. Planning, implementing, and monitoring interventions with a consideration of these ecologies would tie interventions not only to the risk reduction goals of global public health policy, but also to the very real and grounded financial priorities of what it means to try to safely earn a living through sex work.

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