

Where the streetwalk ends: fuzzy boundaries and shifting risks among women sex workers in Antananarivo, Madagascar

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An in-depth study of the social organization and hierarchy of women's sex work in the highland capital city of Madagascar has exposed great fluidity in the meanings of sex work and in the boundaries that separate sex work from other relationships and activities. The paper outlined in this abstract will describe these dimensions of women's sex work and examine their consequences for these women's exposure to health risks. Following several months of exploratory work to define the "field" (cf. Bourdieu) of sex work in Tana (shorthand for the name of the capital city, Antananarivo), a small number of women, purposively selected to represent the range of different positions in the sex work field, were identified for in-depth study.

The sex work field was explored primarily through community and expert interviews, informal discussion with about 50 women sex workers in a variety of sex work locations, and in-depth study of 10 women sex workers as well as 10 matched comparison non-sex-working women. Community interviews were semi-structured interviews exploring the meaning of sex work in Tana, conducted in five neighborhoods with 30 men and 30 women. Neighborhoods, and the age-distribution of interviewees within those neighborhoods, were purposively selected to represent the socio-economic and age distribution of Tana. Expert interviews included interviews with public health project leaders who have worked with women sex workers and/or in HIV prevention efforts. Women sex workers were purposively recruited with the help of sex work associations and other programs working with sex workers as well as approached directly in known sex work locations. A few women from each uncovered position were invited to participate in the research as key informants. Finally, ten comparison women were recruited, matched to each woman sex worker based on ethnicity, age, education, and parent's socio-economic status. These women are in some cases sister-in-laws, friends, sisters, or women purposely sampled from similar communities to that of the sex worker informants.

Positions in the sex work field fall into three hierarchically arranged categories based in part on the money earned from each *passage* (trick), but also differentiated by such characteristics as place of work and clothing patterns. Women who earn the most money from a *passage* are at the top of this hierarchy and women who earn the least per *passage* are at the bottom. Interviews with experts and community members uncovered three loosely defined categories of women sex workers: *ambany* (low), *antontoniny* (middle), and *ambony* (high). Occupants of each category negotiate their positions and identities within sets of social and institutional circumstances unique to that position.

Women who are *ambany* (below) (also labeled *bordel* [whore-ish] or *malotoloto* [a bit dirty]) are doubly stigmatized by their position as *mainity* (black), a carryover from their perceived ancestral linkage to slave status based on the old caste system which existed/exists most prominently in Tana. These women are unlikely to be able to marry up and out of their status position. They consider themselves lucky to be able to have sex work as an option other than the begging and stealing that their male counterparts are constrained to choose between. Men who have a temporary source of income will pay to

have sex with an *ambony* woman a few times and then ask if they can become *sipa* (lovers). Women who comply with this more socially accepted label may then find themselves with less income than before; but subject nevertheless to demands for sex and money under threat of physical abuse. Indeed, these relationships often end with greater abuse than these women might endure in a more clearly defined client-provider relationship. Confronted with difficult choices and constraints, *ambony* women move in and out of defining these partners as clients, *sipa* (lovers) or *vady* (spouses).

Women who are *ambony* (above, high) also considered as “*pute de luxe*” (luxury whores) are generally assumed to be from “*la côte*” (coastal areas/ethnicities), though this is not always the case. They are sometimes labeled by the surrounding Tana community as dreamers, or adventurers. They are particularly disliked by the community for their shamelessness about being sex workers, their skimpy clothing, loud mouths, and braided hair, and their enthusiastic consumption of alcohol, but not for the fact that they sometimes “get lucky and find a white husband”. These are the women who *mitady vady vazaha* (look for white husbands) in nightclubs, discotheques, bars and cabarets, and hotel restaurants. They are concerned/consumed with fashion: having the right clothes, the right hair, and the right jewelry. Women who are *ambony* often maintain a similar external appearance whether day or night. They tell the tourists they meet (tourists are their ideal client) that they are training to be hairdressers or are massage therapists. They dance and laugh and flirt, when flirted with, and hope to be asked to come up to the man’s hotel room. They do not discuss the price unless their “client” is very forward with this question. They assume that he knows he should pay for their services. They hope to find fixed clients, men who ask to be accompanied for the duration of their stay in Tana, and some women like being asked to join these men on vacations, to a coastal beach town, and back again. Sometimes these clients become *sipa* (lovers), sometimes these *sipa* become *vady* (spouses). Sometimes these women have more than one *vady*. Although they are identified in community interviews as sex workers, in reality these women seem to play with the boundaries of sex work. Their interest in both money and romance makes for a very fluid understanding of those boundaries.

Women who are *antontoniny* (middle) are generally not *mainty* (black slave descendants). They are extremely cautious about being discovered by their surrounding communities and their families (sometimes inclusive of their own husbands). Their lives are full of contradiction and duality. They are generally, by day, considered or want to be considered “normal” members of their community. They are, however, by night, or when at work by day, the most “professional” sex workers. They are streetwalkers who hang around dark corners at night or near markets during the day. They stand around waiting for a client to approach. They immediately discuss the conditions of a *passage*, and will then be escorted, or will escort their client to a *maison de passe* (hourly rate hotel) where they will provide their service and then return to their corner. These women are serious about making money. They are also most exposed to government restriction and regulation. They are threatened with police raids when they must show their sex worker identity/medical visit cards or *carte blanche* (white cards), which also indicates that they are of age (18 or above). The boundaries are set for them and they respond, generally, by playing by the rules. They live this life and then, often, bring this money home to their husbands and their children. They are less likely to confuse a client and a *sipa* (lover), though on occasion, it does take place.

What are the consequences of the distinctions in these women’s forms of sex work for the risks, health and otherwise, to which they are exposed? This question is in part explained by the comparison women— those who have *sipa* talk about the difficulty of condom use in this kind of relationship, that it denotes distrust to insist on condom use. Condom use with a *vady* is almost unheard of. This is also the case for women sex workers who are less likely to use condoms with *sipa* (lovers) or *vady* (spouses) than

with clients, or even fixed clients. In addition, women sex workers also experience risks more specific to their social positions.

The *antontoiny* women are captured most easily by the local public health as well as law enforcement authorities. They are brought into the system and they are “encouraged” to adhere to it. They are well reached by public health projects and HIV prevention/intervention campaigns. They say they always use condoms. They are also, however, if discovered by their communities, most likely to be shunned as a dirty whore.

The *ambany* (low) women are more easily ignored by the authorities; they likely do not have a national identity card, the first in a line of requirements to get a *carte blanche*. They are less likely to be subject to raids in their poor neighborhoods, working during the day, and not as likely to be identified through any sex work specific clothing patterns or appearances. They explain that if a client says he “needs” to use a condom, then they will use one. A recent spot survey of women generally within this social position showed that 63% tested positive for syphilis (personal communication, Randriamanelina, Mbolatinanirina Janie; May, 2003).

The *ambony* (high) women are mostly not included in law enforcement or public health efforts. They inhabit an ambiguous enough space in sex work that they are often left out of campaigns. However, micro-institutions, like specific nightclubs, sometimes enforce restrictions and requirements on these women (e.g., to get tested for HIV, not other diseases). These women seem to know a lot about disease and are legitimately scared of acquiring STIs, particularly HIV. However, they are not in a place to negotiate as well as women who are more clearly self-defined sex workers. Key informants from this group state they always use condoms... with clients. Distinctions between client and *sipa* and *vady* shift however, and quickly, and these shifts leave plenty of room for vulnerability.

The full presentation will provide a more rich description of the life circumstances for women in each of the social positions, in their own words, allowing for a more complex understanding of the issues they face in their relationships and their work. There are advantages and disadvantages to being labeled a sex worker within the reach of the authorities as opposed to outside of their reach. How women sex workers in each of these social positions shape their lives and how their lives are shaped in reaction and response to institutional and social constraints will be more thoroughly described and discussed. Finally, there will be additional discussion on how HIV prevention efforts —government and donor alike— may be better able to address the needs of some of the women given this more in-depth understanding of sex work, in and beyond the context of Tana.