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Government crackdown of sex work in China: Responses from female sex workers and implications for their health

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Abstract

The Chinese Government periodically enforces anti-prostitution laws through regular police presence in red light districts and through the arrests of brothel managers and sex workers. One of the most intense crackdowns on prostitution occurred throughout China in 2010. Using the 'structure-agency' framework and ethnographic approach, this paper examines the influence of the 2010 government anti-prostitution crackdown on female sex workers (FSWs). We observed 10 red light districts (6 cities and 2 counties) and interviewed 107 FSWs, 26 managers and 37 outreach workers working with FSWs. The findings describe variations in police practices and diverse strategies adopted by FSWs in response to police actions. The strategies include: soliciting sex outside of establishments in less visible channels, increasing the mobility and flexibility of sex work, changing sexual practices, sharing knowledge of how to identify policemen disguised as male clients and building personal relationships with local police. Our study suggests that, rather than disappearing as a result of crackdowns, the terms and content of sex work changed as a result of the FSWs' responses to police practices. Some of these responses potentially increased the health risks associated with sex work, but others laid the foundation for an effective response to police practices.

Keywords

China; female sex worker; anti-prostitution; HIV/STI; violence

Introduction

Increasing visibility of female sex work in China in the era of HIV/AIDS

The extensive scale of sex work in China has been widely documented (Hershatter, 1997; Pan, 1997). Randomised national survey data have shown that around 6–9% of men aged 18–60 self-report ever visiting female sex workers (FSWs), which translates into a very large male population consuming commercial sex (Pan & Huang, 2013). Sex work has been highly visible in the media in the past 20–30 years, in part because of regular anti-prostitution actions and HIV programmes targeting FSWs.

Given the documented increase in sexually transmitted infections (STI) and sexual transmission of HIV among FSWs (Baral et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2009), there have been extensive behavioural studies examining the individual behaviours associated with high risk of transmission and acquisition in sex work (Hong & Li, 2008). There have also been increasing studies describing structural factors such as the economics, policies, work setting, social mobility, gender-based violence and sexual norms that influence HIV risk in the context of sex work (Choi, 2011; Choi & Holroyd, 2007; Huang, 2010; Huang, Henderson, Pan, & Cohen, 2004; Huang, Maman, & Pan, 2012; Kaufman, 2011; Tucker, Ren, & Sapio, 2010; Yi et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2012). While recognising the importance of these structural factors, empirical examinations on how these factors influence FSWs' health and well-being and FSWs' responses to such factors are still lacking. A deeper understanding of such issues will lead to more specific and feasible recommendations for structural level approaches to reduce risk among FSWs.

Brief history of anti-prostitution policies and police actions regarding female sex work

Sex work was claimed to be successfully eradicated through government policing and 'rehabilitation' of FSWs after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Sex work has re-emerged since the late 1970s, when China began its Open Door and Reform Policy. Starting in the 1980s, the Chinese Government began renewed efforts to restrict prostitution. In 1981, the government issued the first Ministry of Public Security Notice Resolutely Prohibiting Prostitution. In 1997, the women's re-education centres that had been established in the 1950s were systematically expanded to house FSWs (Pan et al., 2005). Under the current administrative public security law, women who work as sex workers, and their male clients, can be administratively detained for 10–15 days and can receive fines of up to 5000 RMB (US\$820). They can also be detained in re-education centres for 6 months to 2 years. In theory, when a woman is detained, the woman's family is notified of her detention; however, this does not always happen in practice. Police often apprehend and detain sex workers based on the fact that they are gathering in places that have been identified as sex-work venues, without any additional evidence. One of the most problematic policing practices has been using the presence of condoms as supportive evidence of sex work. Police have detained women on the grounds that they are in possession of condoms when they are approached by police. These practices are particularly problematic because they directly conflict with other state policies and programmes that are designed to distribute condoms for HIV and STI prevention (Huang, 2010).

There have been periodic crackdowns on sex work since the 1980s (Pan et al., 2005) but with different degrees of scope and severity. In 2010, the Beijing Public Security Bureau closed the famous night club *Heaven on Earth*, which was seen as a symbol of the sex industry and was widely known throughout China. This marked the start of one of the most serious efforts to eradicate sex work nationwide since the Maoist era in China. The 2010 crackdown was distinguished from previous efforts in terms of the government's more visible and frequent propaganda on anti-prostitution, the number of police involved, the broad geographic scope, the number of FSWs and managers fined and detained, the extended duration of the crackdown period and the widespread media reporting and public visibility.

The 2010 crackdown resulted in an active public debate about the government's strong intention to eliminate prostitution. The crackdown also raised public health concerns of the possibility that police actions increase the risk of HIV/STI infections among FSWs and undermine prevention work implemented by health providers by driving women underground and making them more difficult to reach with prevention programmes. The 2010 crackdown is an important case for examining the impact of an anti-prostitution policy and actions on the health and well-being of FSWs.

In this context, this paper aims to:

- (1) Describe how the anti-prostitution policy in China was implemented in practice in different sex-work venues throughout China during the 2010 crackdown.
- (2) Explore the strategies that FSWs and managers adopted to deal with these police actions during the 2010 crackdown.
- (3) Discuss the implications of these responses for FSWs' health/HIV-related risks and interventions to address them.

Conceptual framework and methods

Structure–agency framework

Social and structural factors are increasingly recognised as important drivers of the HIV epidemic (Auerbach, Parkhurst, & Cáceres, 2011; Gupta, Parkhurst, Ogden, Aggleton, & Mahal, 2008). Anti-prostitution laws and the unbalanced power relationship between the state police forces and FSWs have been identified as important structural factors that influence the HIV risk environment of sex workers (Auerbach et al., 2011; Rekart, 2005). Understanding sex work in China requires a clear understanding of the political and legal policies and practices that influence the health of FSWs (Tucker et al., 2010).

At the same time, FSWs are not passive participants wholly influenced by social and structural constraints (Choi, 2011; Ghosh, 2002; Ho, 2003; Huang et al., 2004). Indeed, these women are active agents in their interactions with their male clients, managers/bosses and agents of the government (e.g. police, health department workers; Basu & Dutta, 2008; Biradavolu, Burris, George, Jena, & Blankenship, 2009; Ghosh, 2002; Swendeman, Basu, Das, Jana, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009).

In this paper, we propose a structure–agency framework (Giddens, 1984; Parker, 2009) to capture the interactive relationship between structural factors, specifically the anti-prostitution policy and police actions, and FSWs' agency in response to the policies and actions. This paper fills a gap in the literature by describing not just the actions taken by police but also the responses of FSWs to resist the police actions. This paper also provides specific descriptions of the ways that police actions and the FSWs' responses to these actions affect FSWs' HIV risk.

Data collection

We used an ethnographic approach including observations and in-depth interviews with individuals involved in female sex work. We were able to conduct this qualitative research

in 2010 and 2011 during the midst of the government crackdown on sex work through long-term collaborations with community-based organisations (CBOs) that work with FSWs, experienced outreach workers in HIV/AIDS prevention programmes and former FSWs with whom we have developed trusted relationships over a number of years. In total, we observed 10 red light districts in 6 cities and 2 counties, and also we interviewed 107 FSWs, 26 managers of FSW establishments, 13 outreach workers and 24 health providers and volunteers. We also conducted one focus group discussion with representatives from six CBOs to understand their experiences providing services to FSWs during this time.

The research sites were geographically located in the south, southwest and northeast of China and covered a diverse range of capital cities, large metropolitan areas, small cities and counties. We selected sites where we had effective working relationships with FSWs and CBOs that we could build upon. These existing relationships were critical to the implementation of this study. In each site, we purposively sampled different types of sex-work venues for observation and interview recruitment in order to document the police actions and resulting strategies from women and managers in multiple types of venues, including small hair salons, karaoke halls, massage parlours and nightclubs. We also recruited street-based FSWs from known sex-work public areas (parks, squares, etc.).

We used different interview techniques to increase women's comfort discussing topics that are socially discouraged and associated with substantial official and unofficial condemnation. To access the women, we worked through CBOs that were trusted by the women. After being introduced by our key contacts, we talked with the managers and FSWs at sex-work venues. We then worked with the women to select comfortable and convenient interview locations and times. In a few cases where the venues had been shut down, we conducted interviews in other private spaces. Finally, within the context of the interview, we implemented techniques such as using small talk to establish rapport, active listening and engagement to build trust and foster communication and avoiding audio-recording equipment. The fieldwork was primarily conducted by the key authors: two native Mandarin-speaking researchers with over 10 years of experience conducting research with FSWs. Following each observation or interview data collection activity, the authors completed detailed written field notes.

The authors led the analysis and writing. The analysis process started in the field with regular debriefing meetings to discuss ideas that were emerging from the data gathered at each site. We developed topical codes according to the proposal and interview guidelines that were applied to the expanded field notes. As key themes emerged from the data, we identified and applied interpretive codes to the field notes.

The trusting relationships we had established through our previous sex-work research allowed us to successfully enter the field and recruit our key informants in a few weeks. Our previous experience working with sex workers was also invaluable in the analysis and interpretation phase.

This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at the China National Centers for Disease Control. Small gifts or dinners (equivalent of approximately US\$15) were

provided as compensation for key contacts and interviews. The names of the participants and the venues have been replaced to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Findings

Variations in local policing practices

During the 2010 crackdown, we observed that a large number of sex-work venues were closed. The workers were fined and detained and the police patrols of red light districts were expanded. Stories relating to violence and threats both from police and clients were often heard from FSWs, managers and CBO workers. During the 2010 crackdown, while there was increased police action and more severe punishments for FSWs overall, these practices were not uniformly implemented by all police officers. Even during the most intense periods of crackdown activities, we still observed variation in the policing practices across settings. For example, some settings experienced more regular policing patrols and a greater number of sex-work venues were shut down. In general, larger and more economically developed cities experienced more intense police action than smaller and less economically advanced cities and counties. In fact, in a few counties we visited, there was almost no observable influence from the nationwide anti-prostitution policy. Some of the FSWs in these counties told us that they had recently arrived from capital cities, suggesting that FSWs were migrating from cities to counties during this time period.

Even in cities that experienced high police patrolling during the crackdown, the police practices in one administrative district often differed from other districts within the same city. Potential opportunities for FSWs and/or their managers to negotiate with local police were notable, as illustrated by the following story:

A month ago, the local police (in our city) heard that recently, provincial police would come here secretly and evaluate the crackdown work; before they [provincial police] came, they provided a list to the local police with the names and ID card numbers to notify the local police, but didn't tell them the exact date of coming. The local police were afraid of getting bad scores that would influence their work achievements. They [local police] gave this name list to the hotels here and told the hotel managers that when these people check in, inform the other managers to tell the xiaojie (FSW) to be more quiet and stop providing services as the provincial police might pretend to be a client and call a girl to check if there are still xiaojie around in the city. (Yang, a manager in her 30s working in a small hair salon for over 7 years)

This example illustrates that even under strict anti-prostitution policy and heavy crackdown actions in 2010, certain power dynamics existed among the local and central governments. It also demonstrates that the attitude towards anti-prostitution differed in the distinct levels of the police system and across different settings. In several cases, the local government was not driven to eliminate FSWs, but they took actions because of the pressure from the central government. Almost all police officers knew about the local red light districts, and as quite a few of our informants told us, the police just 'close one eye and open one eye'. The informants we spoke with felt that the resistance of some police officers to take action could be explained in part by the economic profits brought in by the sex industry and for reasons

such as the duties of police to control other non-FSW-related crimes. Many informants noted that some police were incentivised to take action because they could financially benefit in a number of ways during the crackdown. As our informants explained to us, police could ask managers and FSWs to provide a 'protection fee' or accept money from FSWs upon arrest to avoid transfer to re-education centres.

The power dynamics between the central and local government, and different attitudes towards anti-prostitution policies and crackdowns among the local police force, provided opportunities for managers and FSWs to negotiate with police to avoid police action even during this period of intense crackdown on prostitution.

Strategies adopted by FSWs and managers to resist the crackdowns—The overarching goal of the 2010 crackdown was to eliminate sex work in China. While the 2010 crackdown created a fearful atmosphere among FSWs, most of the people we interviewed believed that these women would return to sex work even if they returned home temporarily during the crackdown. This was described by Mrs Yang, a former FSW herself who remained in the sex industry as manager of a small FSWs' establishment for over 7 years:

They would come back in 2 months at the latest, they will be back when they use up their savings; I don't believe they would move out of sex work; according to my experience, no FSW would quit the business because of crackdowns.

Another FSW in her 40s, who had a husband who was hospitalised and two school-aged children said: 'I'll go to the dancing hall even it rains cats and dogs'. While the risk of arrest increased during the crackdown, the women developed several strategies to evade police intervention.

Strategy 1: Close the front door while leaving the back door open: Several sex-work venues we visited appeared closed when we first visited; however, when our key contact who knew the managers knocked, the door opened. While the managers were cautious about allowing people into the venue, inside, we found that all FSWs were there and business was continuing to operate prosperously. As the managers explained, before the 2010 crackdown, venue doors were usually open and relatively unguarded. Managers exercised caution in allowing entry for intoxicated individuals or known or suspected police officers but otherwise allowed most clients in the venues. During the 2010 crackdown, they closed their doors and became much more cautious about who they allowed entry. Managers would open the door only for persons they knew well, including regular clients. For one Karaoke site in a small city, the manager closed the front door and installed a monitor through which she could see who was standing outside before deciding whether she would open the door. Madam Yao, another manager of a hair salon with five FSWs, would close the door and wait outside of the venue. When police arrived she would shout loudly to inform the FSWs upstairs.

Strategy 2: Change in the methods of soliciting sex: Prior to the crackdown, sex was commonly solicited by managers or FSWs in venues such as hair salons and massage parlours, while other women solicited sex directly on the street. These venues and street-

based activities were highly visible and as such were subject to police intervention. As a result of the crackdown, women started soliciting sex more commonly through phones and the Internet, meeting clients in more private locations.

Some women stayed at home playing cards while they waited for managers to contact clients for them. The majority of the FSWs we met explained that regular clients became the key supporters of sex work during the heavy crackdown period. Some FSWs expressed that they were temporarily looking for a sexual relationship with a more stable income, called an 'er'nai (second wife)', to avoid the crackdown while still having an income. As one FSW said, 'Almost everyone has some regular contacts, I was even considering to be hired as a second wife (er'nai)'. In addition to providing more stable income, women could meet these regular clients more discretely over the phone and in private locations outside of sex-work venues.

With the help of peer educators from a health programme in one large city, we also observed sex-work solicitation operating through a large (over 100 computers), public Internet bar. As peer educator Mr Yu said, the managers would advertise on websites then clients would show interest by calling or sending a message through the Internet to the managers to bring girls to 'try the table' (to be selected by the male clients). In some cases, the girls themselves would use webcams from the computers, and if the client was interested in her, they would then decide upon a place to meet. These types of new media used to connect with clients were 'safer' in one sense, as women could avoid arrest at sex-work venues. However, as we discuss later, these changes also made sex workers less visible and more difficult to reach by health providers.

Strategy 3: Increasing the mobility and flexibility of sex work: Some FSWs reported that they moved to different cities where they had heard from friends that police actions were not as severe. In several cases, women moved to remote areas such as villages or towns with fewer police actions. As one informant told us:

Because of the heavy crackdowns in X city, we moved to the nearby county; the policy there are still naïve and they don't know how to deal with the hair-salons (FSW venues), and there suddenly emerged more than 10 establishments on that street. (Xiaobu, FSW working in small karaoke bar, in her 20s)

In addition to geographic mobility, mobility across sex-work venues became a way of avoiding arrest while continuing to make money during the crackdown. Prior to the crackdown, our team documented a clear stratification among FSWs regarding the price and size of venues, and we observed that FSWs rarely crossed different tiers of venues to do business (Huang et al., 2004). However, during the crackdown, we observed increased mobility of FSWs across different types of venues. We heard from FSWs who told us that they had worked in middle to low tier hair salons previously but were now working in night clubs or working as escorts or vice versa. Other women worked in one venue at one time of day and another venue at another time of day to avoid police. In one city, we observed a street that was well known for having hair salons, but all of the hair salons on that street were warned to close for at least 3 months. The FSWs in these hair salons closed the businesses and worked as FSWs street-standers at night. Other women found non-sex work

jobs during the day, such as working in supermarkets, but continued to sell sex during off-hours. Women expressed this mobility across different types of sex-work venues and employment sectors as a strategy to avoid police action and continue to make money. However, as a few managers and CBO workers also noted, leaving one's original place of work and moving to a new place could potentially expose them to more health and safety risks.

Another type of mobility that was observed related to changing the places that sex occurred. The two most commonly used venues for sex work were the top floor or back rooms of hair salons or hotels. These two places were the key targets of police actions during the 2010 crackdown. Some managers and FSWs insisted on continuing to do business in these venues, but became more cautious about the use of these spaces, usually closing the front door and being more selective about who they let into the venue, as described above. Other managers found new spaces to reduce the risk of being arrested. One option was renting houses a short distance from the venue, as Manager Li said, 'I used to have 6–7 girls, but now only 2; If the crackdowns continue like this, I'll consider renting houses, if you "turn the corners" a few more times, the police will not be able to follow you'. Manager Li also told us that in some cases, if the client came with a car, FSWs could have sex in the car. As she explained, 'there suddenly appears a new place in the suburb with these kinds of cars'. Some FSWs took the risk of bringing the client to their own apartment, like Miss Liu, a self-employed FSW. Prior to the crackdown, taking a client home would be an uncommon practice based on fear of exposing oneself to the client and potentially one's neighbours. These alternate venues for sex were generally more hidden from policing practices yet posed more risks for women related to safety and privacy.

Changing working hours was another strategy that women used to increase the flexibility of continuing sex work while also avoiding police. Police action took place at different times across settings. In a suburb of one city, we were told that the police often came in the afternoon; therefore, FSWs in a small hair salon there would close their doors at that time but would re-open at night. In another district of the same city, which was also famous for small hair salons, police came in the afternoon and early in the evening, which left the women to open the doors only at midnight. In one extreme example, women solicited clients (mostly retired men) starting at five in the morning. When we arrived at 9 am on that street, some FSWs told us they had already met with 1–2 clients.

Strategy 4: Change in sexual behaviours: The FSWs we spoke with talked about modifying their behaviours to facilitate faster interactions with clients during times of heavy police action. 'Quick sex' (*kuaican*) usually lasted less than 40 minutes, and meant reducing the risk of being arrested by the police, while staying overnight (*baoye*) increased the chance of exposure to the police. We also heard from quite a few managers that some FSWs might be reluctant to use condoms which they believed prolonged sex, especially for older men. Women were also more cautious of accepting condoms from health providers, more careful about hiding condoms (especially for FSWs street-standers) and more careful about disposing of used condoms. These condom-related practices were all related to preventing police from utilising condoms – especially used condoms – as supportive evidence of selling sex.

Strategy 5: Share knowledge of how to identify policemen disguised as male clients:

Women shared strategies with one another to identify undercover policemen. We were told by managers and CBO workers that this practice was more common during the 2010 crackdown than before. As expressed by one FSW, ‘you have to be cautious and smart’. Strategies included being cautious of strangers, and being aware that young men, especially those who asked directly for sexual services at first glance, or looked around the house after entering were very likely to be policemen. During the crackdown, some FSWs and managers helped each other by spreading the information on crackdowns plans, informing each other when the police had arrived and sharing ideas about how to deal with policemen after being arrested. Although small in number, some CBOs in these places would also help facilitate support between FSWs and managers to help avoid arrest and violence from the police or, less commonly, male clients. For example, Zhang, the director of a CBO in a small city, told us that one of the key components of their work was to convene FSWs and managers in support groups to talk about risks and strategies. The CBO would then compile this information into pamphlets and deliver it while doing outreach work. They would also use their local social network to try to learn the local policies relating to the crackdown and share that information with managers and FSWs.

Strategy 6: Build personal relationships with local policemen: Another strategy that FSWs, especially self-employed FSWs, and managers used was to develop better personal relationships with policemen in the neighbourhood through interacting with them at dinner parties, giving them gifts and even offering them money or free sex. A number of managers and FSWs said they would be willing to give, or had already given, 300 RMB (around 50\$US) per month to the police to avoid specific actions of the crackdowns. They believed that these gestures would in turn encourage policemen to inform them when actions were going to take place and help avoid arrest. These better relations with the police meant that women ‘can go to them for help when they are robbed or threatened without being afraid of getting arrested because you are a xiaojie (FSW)’ (Liu, a self-employed FSW). Building better relations with the police was a longer term strategy that many women talked about as reflected in this quote:

Some policies are better than others, not all of them are bad ... you have to acknowledge this and use this ... I understand the government cannot legalise us, right? After all, it (doing sex work) is disgraced and a loss of face (diulian); But please don't crack down so often; it's ok if they crack down occasionally, such as during national holidays or occasions like the Olympic games; we understand that, and we can give them face [be cooperative and considerate] and close the doors during those days; but better to inform us beforehand ... We can even pay some money each month, protection fee, or tax, or whatever you call it. (Wu, Manager in a small hair salon venue and also working as an FSW, in her late 30s)

In some cases, the CBOs also worked as facilitators for better relationships between FSWs and the local police force by inviting police officers to health programmes or by using local social networks to try to change police attitudes and actions through occasions such as dinner parties.

Although such actions may involve bribery and free sex and underpin the unbalanced state and gender-power relationship, FSWs and managers used these actions as temporary strategies to deal with heavy crackdowns.

Discussion

Impact of crackdowns on female sex work in China

Through this analysis, we have described the impact of the police actions during the 2010 anti-prostitution crackdown in China on FSWs and the strategies that women used to respond to the police actions. The Chinese Government initiated anti-prostitution crackdowns with the goal of reducing the size and scope of sex work and ultimately eliminating it altogether. Consistent with other literature that describes the complex relationship between state control and sex work (Choi, 2011; Ghosh, 2002; Tucker et al., 2010), our evidence suggests that the intense police actions had little to no impact on permanently closing sex-work establishments or compelling women to quit sex work. Rather, we observed that women would adjust their sex-work practices or temporarily leave sex work, only to return after police actions subsided. FSWs used strategies such as changing their methods of soliciting sex, changing venues for sex and migrating to other areas to sell sex to avoid police actions.

If we broaden the discussion and look at the effects of the anti-prostitution policy over the last 30 years, the failure of these policies to eradicate sex work seems clear. National household surveys have shown that there is a steadily increasing number of male clients over the past decade who report having ever visited FSWs (Pan & Huang, 2013). Men from a wide range of economic classes, including the newly rich, the middle class and government employees and migrant workers, all report visiting FSWs (Huang et al., 2012; Uretsky 2008; Yang, Latkin, Luan, & Nelson, 2010; Zheng, 2006). Data from our group also illustrate that people have become more tolerant towards sex work in recent years in a social context where finding employment has become more difficult (Pan, 2008).

Rather than driving women out of sex work for good, our research shows that police actions during the 2010 crackdown changed the terms and conditions of sex work in several ways, some of which also have important implications for women's health and safety. In addition to well-documented direct physical violence and threats often accompanied with intense police action (Biradavolu et al., 2009; Huang, 2010; Swendeman et al., 2009; Yi et al., 2012), FSWs were less visible during heavy crackdowns. Being driven underground made it more difficult to insure women's safety from violence and other threats, as well as making it difficult for them to be reached by health providers. Women also changed their behaviour to respond to fears of police presence, including showing a preference for quick sex and reducing condom use which they feared would prolong the sexual encounter. Increasing mobility across venues and locations that are not familiar to them might potentially expose FSWs to greater health and safety risks. Increasing mobility across different tiers of sex work might also bridge different groups of people involved in sex work and expand the sexual network, which could be risky if unsafe sex and STIs/HIV are associated. Relying on regular clients also increases the potential risks of having unsafe sex, based on the previous findings that the prevalence of condom use was usually lower with more stable sexual

partners (Pan, 2008; Wang et al., 2007). These behaviours have direct implications for women's HIV/STI risks. In addition, women feared being found with condoms by police, who were using this as evidence for sex-work activity. As a result, it might increase the possibility for some FSWs to forego the use of condoms with their clients.

Intervention opportunities for female sex work in China

Anti-prostitution policies and the resulting police actions are structural constraints that shape the context of sex work for women in ways that may exacerbate their risk for violence and HIV/STI (Auerbach et al., 2011; Biradavolu et al., 2009; Choi, 2011; Tucker et al., 2010). While the decriminalisation of sex work may be a long-term goal to create a safer environment for FSWs, there is almost no indication that this is a near possibility in China. Therefore, grassroots efforts to protect FSWs in the face of strong anti-prostitution actions are critical. Strategies used by FSWs and managers to resist crackdown actions demonstrate the feasibility and importance of creating a more supportive environment among FSWs. For example, during the crackdown, some FSWs and managers began to help each other by spreading the information on crackdowns plans, informing each other when the police had arrived and sharing strategies to help identify undercover police and deal with policemen after being arrested. Some CBOs were involved in facilitating small-scale support groups and networking among FSWs in the neighbouring areas to share information relating to police actions and how to avoid arrest and violence. Building community among those involved in sex work is challenging because of business competition and a lack of trust among the women, and because people are resistant to gathering in groups to avoid police attention. One of the biggest challenges to community mobilisation among FSWs in the Chinese context is tension between CBOs and the Chinese Government and the sensitivity surrounding human rights-based actions (Kaufman, 2011). Despite these challenges, strategies to mobilise FSWs have worked well in other settings (Basu & Dutta, 2008; Biradavolu et al., 2009; Cornish, 2006; Ghose, Swendeman, George, & Chowdhury, 2008; Swendeman et al., 2009) and should continue to be strategically explored in China (Huang, 2013).

Without the support of the police force, interventions to create safer environments for sex workers may be limited. This research identified variation in policing practices and suggests that there may be ways to build better relationships between the police and those in the sex-work industry. Efforts to train police in ethical and appropriate ways of handling women during arrest and detention, educating and reinforcing sanctions against police who use condoms as evidence of sex work and finding members of the police force who may be more sympathetic to the difficult working conditions of women are critical. These interventions within the police force may be more realistic in smaller cities and in counties where police seem to have more room to interpret and apply anti-prostitution policies. One strategy that was used by some of the self-employed FSWs and managers was to provide bribes to police as a way to build relationships and garner support. While a temporary fix, ultimately, these strategies may enhance the power imbalance between the police and FSWs and further exacerbate violence and extortion.

Using the structure–agency framework, this study provides evidence of the specific and harmful effects of anti-prostitution policy and the police actions on FSWs in China. These data lend support to other studies which have demonstrated the effect of police practices on sex workers' risk (Biradavolu et al., 2009; Blankenship & Koester, 2002). We documented that the FSWs who were affected by these policies and actions were not passive victims in the process. They demonstrated agency in responding to the actions and described numerous strategies that they used to resist and circumvent the intense police crackdown actions. Our paper suggests that rather than disappearing as a result of crackdowns, the terms and content of sex work changed. These changes occurred not so much as a result of policing practices per se but as a result of the sex worker responses to those practices. Some of these responses potentially increased the health risks associated with sex work, but other responses laid the foundation for an effective response to police practices, and a potential improvement in mobilising the community and building more supportive local environments, particularly through responses such as knowledge and information sharing among themselves and initiating better relationships with the local police.

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