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When sex work becomes your everything: The complex linkages between economy and affection among male sex workers in Peru

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Abstract

In Peru, there are few studies on male sex workers (MSWs) and existing studies explore limited sub-groups or offer limited information about MSWs' perspectives. This study provides in-depth perspectives from 40 MSWs who work in downtown Lima (*Cercado*) and in surrounding urban neighborhoods (non-*Cercado*) through interviews on their identities, lives and HIV/STI risks and vulnerabilities. Findings are that entry into sex work links economy and affection, particularly among *Cercado* MSWs. Continued sex work cements this link, making it difficult to exit sex work and establish goals. Ties between economics and affections influence MSWs' perceived HIV/STI risks, vulnerabilities and prevention practices. Although *Cercado* MSWs report higher HIV/STI risks and vulnerabilities than non-*Cercado* peers, they report fewer prevention practices given inability to buy condoms and acceptance of client offers of higher payment, especially clients they feel affection for. MSWs need support to strengthen their self-perceptions and define and pursue their goals in order to improve their HIV/STI prevention practices, health and well-being.

Keywords

Sex work; Males; Peru; Qualitative; Life histories; HIV/sexually transmitted infections

Introduction

Male sex work continues to be underexplored globally, including in Latin America and Peru. Authors attribute this to the “multiple marginalities” of male sex work, primarily the union of two stigmatized topics – prostitution and homosexuality (Altman, 1999; Davies & Feldman, 1997). Bimbi's review of social science research on male sex work delineated four paradigms: the psychopathology of male sex workers (MSWs), first as situated within the individual sex worker and later as situated within the sex work context; typologies of MSWs, including venues, sub-groups, hierarchies, and continuity in and time dedication to

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sex work; MSWs as “vectors” for HIV; and sex work as a legitimate form of work (Bimbi, 2007). There was an earlier review of social science research on sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001) and there have been two compilations of male sex work research (Aggleton, 1999; Morrison & Whitehead, 2007), which include studies from Latin America (Cáceres & Jiménez, 1999; de Moya & García, 1999; Larvie, 1999; Liguori & Aggleton, 1999; Padilla, 2007; Schifter & Aggleton, 1999). The studies in these compilations complement other studies from the Latin American region (Cáceres & Rosasco, 1999; Infante, Sosa-Rubi, & Cuadra, 2009; Marino, Minichiello, & Disogra, 2003; Nureña et al., 2011; Padilla et al., 2008; Padilla, 2007; Perlongher, 1999; Schifter, 1998).

Studies in Peru have explored how different populations of men who have sex with men (MSM) think about aspects of their identities and lives, primarily in the framework of how their identities and lives may contribute to their risks and vulnerabilities to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Studies in Lima include one about the sexual culture, self-representations and behaviors of gay- and non-gay-identified MSM, MSWs and transwomen (Cáceres & Rosasco, 1999; Cáceres & Rosasco, 2000) and another of the sexual roles, identities and practices of individuals with different sexual identities (homosexual; heterosexual; bisexual; transgender) and sexual roles (insertive; receptive; versatile) (Clark et al., 2013). Studies outside of the capital include one on the sexuality-related risks and vulnerabilities of “street guys” and “fast or loose girls” in a lower-income city in coastal Peru (Salazar et al., 2005); the sexual, economic and social interactions between feminized homosexual men and heterosexually-identified MSM (Fernandez-Davila et al., 2008); and internalized homophobia, sexual roles, gender identity, partner relationships and STI-related risk and prevention practices among female-identified homosexual males (Salazar et al., 2006), the latter two in two lower-income urban coastal areas.

A few studies have also engaged MSWs in Peru about their identities and life experiences. Work by Cáceres explored the lives, identities, sex work and prevention practices of MSWs in Miraflores, a middle-income neighborhood of Lima, through interviews and focus groups. This important work represents the first description of male sex work in Peru and provides key initial insights into the population (Cáceres & Jiménez, 1999; Cáceres & Rosasco, 2000). More recent work by Cesar Nureña used ethnography and interviews to describe the places and forms of sex work, the link between sex work and other economic activities, reasons for involvement in sex work, transitions between sex work modalities, and the meanings of “economic necessity” among male- and transgender-identified sex workers in Lima and two jungle cities (Nureña et al., 2011).

The current study took place in Lima, Peru's capital city of 8.5 million (INEI, 2008). The study aimed to provide an in-depth portrait of the perspectives of two sub-groups of MSWs in Lima, those who work downtown (*Cercado*) and those who work in surrounding urban neighborhoods (non-*Cercado*), regarding their present and future identities and lives and their HIV- and STI-related risks and vulnerabilities. This study strove to avoid the paradigms outlined in Bimbi's review of research on MSWs (Bimbi, 2007) and instead engage participants in open-ended interviews about their lives and futures. At the end of each interview, the interviewers introduced the theme of perceptions of HIV- and STI-related risks and vulnerabilities if it had not emerged earlier on, given the high levels of HIV

and other STIs among MSM (Sanchez et al., 2007) and MSWs (Bayer et al., 2010; Valderrama et al., 2008) in Peru.

Method

Study Setting

Peru, located in Western South America, is home to about 28 million people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática [INEI], 2008). The population is distributed across three regions, the coast, Andean highlands and jungle, with one-third of the population concentrated in the department of Lima (INEI, 2008). Lima also accounts for about 58 percent of the HIV/AIDS cases reported to date nationwide (Ministerio de Salud, 2012).

HIV and other STIs disproportionately affect MSM in Peru. According to the most recent available data, men identified as MSM and/or attending MSM venues in Lima between 1996 and 2002 had HIV seroprevalences ranging from 17.8-22.3% (Sanchez et al., 2007), versus 2.4% in clandestine female sex workers (FSWs) in Lima (Perla et al., 2012), less than 1.0% in the general population (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS & World Health Organization, 2009) and 1.0% among female sex workers (FSWs) nationwide (Bautista et al., 2006; Carcamo et al., 2012). Studies of high-risk, low-income groups from urban areas of coastal Peru found that 10.5% of men who have sex with only men had recent syphilis infection (RPR 1:8), compared with 1.5% of socially marginalized heterosexual men and 2.0% of socially marginalized women (Snowden et al., 2010). Recent syphilis prevalence was also lower among FSWs across Peru (1.3%) (Carcamo et al., 2012), when compared to MSM.

Study Participants

Forty MSWs participated in this phase of the study as interviewees. This phase was part of a larger study to describe MSWs' perceptions of their current lives, their futures and their HIV- and STI-related risks and vulnerabilities using interviews and surveys.

Prior to recruitment of interviewees, the study team carried out ethnographic mapping of male sex work in central Lima in order to determine where MSWs offer their services. This ethnographic mapping process was key to locating a diversity of MSWs since they are a hidden population. The first mapping step was interviews with individuals from organizations familiar with male sex work to brainstorm a list of male sex work spaces. The second mapping step was visits to the spaces to carry out participant observation and interviews with owners / managers, personnel and MSWs at each space to describe the space itself and the MSWs and clients at that space. The ethnographic map included 22 physical commercial sex spaces, such as public parks, plazas and streets, gay saunas, pornographic video clubs, bars and nightclubs, as well as MSWs offering commercial sex services through newspaper classifieds, gay websites, chat rooms and "spreading the word" among friends. Physical spaces were mapped in two geographic areas: downtown (*Cercado*), which is primarily low-income; and in surrounding urban neighborhoods (non-*Cercado*), which is primarily middle-and upper-income (APEIM, 2011). The final part of the mapping process estimated the number of MSWs in each space (Bayer et al., 2010).

For recruitment of interviewees, the study team used the information from the ethnographic map to purposively sample interviewees who represent the socio-economic and geographic diversity of MSWs in Lima (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Participants were recruited from the two main geographic areas (*Cercado* and non-*Cercado*) and from the different sex work spaces included in the ethnographic map. Recruiters revisited the spaces included in the map to recruit participants and aimed to ensure that the number of participants from each space was as close as possible to the approximate proportion of MSWs that work at that space relative to the total number of MSWs in central Lima. Since most *Cercado* MSWs work in several locations, particularly those who work on the street and in nightclubs and bars, the public space and nightclubs/bars group was combined. Since many non-*Cercado* MSWs work in virtual spaces, recruiters revisited the gay websites and chat rooms from the ethnographic map to contact MSWs and invite them to participate in the study.

All participants are referred to here as MSWs since they reported self-identifying as male sex workers as part of the inclusion criteria for this study. The sub-groups of MSWs included in the study may use different terms to refer to themselves and others may also use different terms to refer to them. For example, other authors and the co-authors here in previous work referred to *Cercado* MSWs as *fletes*. We are no longer using this word since in our continuing work with this sub-group of MSWs, they have strongly voiced their dislike of the term. Additionally, MSWs may refer to themselves as: *escorts* in virtual spaces; *masajistas* in saunas; and *mozos* or *anfitriones* in porn video clubs, nightclubs and bars (also see Nureña et al., 2011).

Data Collection

Each MSW participated in one interview. The interviewers facilitated the interviews using a semi-structured guide to ask about participants' current lives, futures, and HIV- and STI-related risks and vulnerabilities. For questions about participants' lives, interviewers asked general, open-ended questions about MSWs' lives and perceptions of self 1) overall and 2) domain by domain, including work, education, peers, family, partners, health and well-being. Regarding HIV- and STI-related risks and vulnerabilities, interviewers first briefly explained the difference between risk and vulnerability to participants in a friendly, objective manner using UNAIDS definitions that the research team previously validated with similar populations (Bayer, Paca-Palao, & Garvich, 2011). Then, interviewers asked participants about whether they perceive that they are at risk or have vulnerabilities to HIV and other STIs 1) in general and 2) specifically related to themselves, more proximate factors such as their peers, friends and family, and more distal factors such as broader society and institutions such as the government.

Interviews took place in settings that were convenient and comfortable for the participants. The interviewers were MG and DAD, Peruvian males who are open-minded and non-judgmental and have extensive experience doing qualitative research and implementing social programs with MSM and other populations in situations of vulnerability. The interviews lasted 40-60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Analysis consisted of two stages: holistic-content analysis and matrix construction. Since these interviews were essentially life stories, the first stage employed a holistic-content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Holistic-content analysis was selected as the initial analytic approach instead of grounded theory in order to pay constant attention to each interviewee's overall life and how the themes of interest played a role and played out within each person's individual experience. Since grounded theory is theme-driven, the analysis would have focused more on themes across individuals from the outset, thus losing sight of the individuals' overall experiences. The second stage involved the creation of matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) based on the themes that emerged from the overall experiences of participants. The analysis examined similarities and differences by themes across participants, both within and across *Cercado* and non-*Cercado* MSWs.

Ethics

The University of California, Los Angeles Institutional Review Board and the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia Ethics Committee reviewed and approved this protocol. No study procedures took place prior to having both approvals in place.

Results

Participants were asked very general, open-ended questions about their lives. Despite these universal questions, analysis revealed two main groups of MSWs, which parallel the two sub-groups: *Cercado* and non-*Cercado* MSWs. Three main themes emerged, as presented below. Table 1 shows key participant characteristics, including age, education, sexual identity, socioeconomic status, and key sex work characteristics.

Entry into Sex Work: Establishing the link between economy and affection

Life perspectives and motivations for engaging in sex work—Interviews began by asking participants in an open-ended manner about their lives at present, literally “How would you describe your life now? What is going on in your life?” It is from this moment that the two groups' perspectives diverged. While non-*Cercado* MSWs talked about their lives being “normal” and “average,” some *Cercado* MSWs also used these adjectives, but most described their lives as “bad” or “very bad.” Both groups' narratives focused first on work, only sex work among most *Cercado* MSWs and other types of jobs and sex work among non-*Cercado* MSWs. Non-*Cercado* participants also described their studies, family, friends, romantic partners and leisure activities such as going to the gym. *Cercado* participants did not mention other arenas, focusing overwhelmingly on sex work to survive. *Cercado* MSWs were also less comfortable than non-*Cercado* MSWs with their personal identities. For example, although the majority of both groups of interviewees self-identified as bisexual and almost one in five *Cercado* MSWs self-identified as homosexual (see Table 1), interviewees' self-reported identities and narratives did not always correspond. Overall, non-*Cercado* MSWs were more comfortable with their overall and sexual identities, easily relating and demonstrating confidence in who they are. *Cercado* MSWs, on the other hand, struggled with expressing and demonstrated a lack of confidence in who they are.

Participants' descriptions of their lives led to discussions about their motivations for engaging in sex work. All participants work as sex workers to meet their needs, which were significantly different across the two groups. *Cercado* MSWs' needs are primarily food, water and night-by-night or month-to-month temporary shelter and non-*Cercado* MSWs' needs are long-term stable housing, post-secondary education, gym memberships, and money for leisure time activities such as outings to bars and restaurants. One example that affirms these differences is housing: *Cercado* MSWs join with one or two friends or other sex workers to rent one room by the month or seek out a place to sleep each night, in dormitory-style (several bunk beds per room, several rooms per establishment, and a few bathrooms for all guests) housing that costs just over one dollar per night; and non-*Cercado* MSWs live alone or with friends in apartments that they rent for six months or more.

Well, I'm a man that... I dedicate myself to sports. I like the gym... full gym, full sports, no alcohol, no drugs, no vices... From the time I get up, at 8, I go to the gym until 11... Then I have lunch, a good lunch... Then I go to the Internet [café] to look at different things. I really like to read... They call me to work at events as a waiter, but the payment isn't very good... and you have to save money because, you know, when you live alone... there are always more costs: to pay for your studies... your food... the apartment where you live... I live alone... as of a year and a half ago.

(Alonso, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 21 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewer: What is a typical day like in your life?

Interviewee: Get up... eat breakfast, go to the Plaza [San Martín – one of the main plazas in the Cercado neighborhood of Lima] for a little bit to see if there's anything until noon... If there isn't anything and there's money to eat, you go to eat... If not, you look for someone [a client] who can help you. And then I stay until at least ten at night, sometimes eleven or twelve, until I find something to be able to go have dinner at that time and, well, look for a place to sleep... Most of us [sex workers] stay at... a [shared] house that gives us, for a payment of three soles [about USD \$1.10 in 2010] a day, a place to sleep. It's not in good conditions but at least you have... a roof.

Interviewer: And do you have your things, your belongings there?

Interviewee: Yes. You have to leave them tied up in a bag, in your suitcase, because obviously you can't leave it because it's not a room just for you. It's a room where there are several beds... with bunk beds... and there are all kinds of people. (Juan, *Cercado* MSW, 28 years old, Bisexual)

Time orientation and entry into sex work—The timeframe that the interviewees concentrated on also differed. While non-*Cercado* participants focused on the present (the timeframe introduced by the interviewer) and quickly linked the present to the future, the overwhelming majority of *Cercado* MSWs responded very briefly about the present and then turned to the past.

The emphasis of *Cercado* MSWs' narratives of their pasts was 1) a "critical moment or moments" that led directly or indirectly to their entry into sex work and 2) the introduction to sex work by friends who were usually close friends. "Critical moments" arose due to separation from family; death of a close family member who was often a parent and usually the main breadwinner; abuse and violence in the family; loss of a job; and separation from a romantic partner, the latter in only two cases. Some participants directly linked these critical moments to their entry to sex work while others described how these moments led to intermediate events that later steered them into sex work. The main intermediate events were migration from the provinces to the capital city and participation in the Peruvian Army.

Bryan's story exemplifies an immediate focus on the past in response to the question about his current life, as well as a "critical moment," intermediate event and the role of a close friend in his entry to sex work. Table 2 presents the cases of other *Cercado* MSWs.

Interviewer: What is your life like?

Interviewee: My name is Bryan. I'm 22. I'm from Cañete [a city about 150 km south of Lima]. I was in the Army for two years. I have a brother [a close friend] who used to come [to do sex work in Lima]... and one day I came to look for him... I went to Plaza San Martín. I met a guy... And since I came here to prostitute myself (a prostituirme), my life has changed completely... Sometimes I stay out late on the street. Sometimes I don't even eat... If I do these things, it's out of necessity... I've been in Lima for about three years. Why? Because my dad died. I lived there [in Cañete] with my dad and unfortunately death doesn't warn you and my dad died and I had to come here to Lima... The world I'm in... I don't know... I always say that I'm going to get out and I can't... I have already been there for two years, selling myself (fleteando) and recently I've been... feeling... depressed.

(Bryan, *Cercado* MSW, 22 years old, Bisexual)

Permanence in Sex Work: Cementing the tie between economy and affection

Perceptions of sex work

When engaged about their perspectives regarding sex work, *Cercado* and non-*Cercado* MSWs offered differing views. *Cercado* MSWs stated that sex work is out of necessity and that economics strongly influences the choices they make regarding clients. All *Cercado* MSWs reported accepting nearly all – or all – people who solicit their services and about half mentioned that they or other sex workers they know steal from clients. Most *Cercado* MSWs discussed wanting to stop doing sex work, in almost all cases since *Cercado* MSWs reported a very negative view of sex work or no view of sex work, in that they avoid thinking about sex work. About half of *Cercado* MSWs stated that they don't find sex with men pleasurable, but these same MSWs also expressed fear of starting to enjoy sex with other men.

Interviewer: Do you do anything to try to choose people [clients] who are less risky?

Interviewee: No... I see money and I grab anyone... money is money... My way of thinking is different from someone else's... I don't choose my clients... At that time, don't think about anything... I think about money, about what the client pays me.

(Gian Paul, *Cercado* MSW, 22 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewer: What do you think your life will be like in five years?

Interviewee: Stop being with gays... Cure myself right away, since they make me sick... I want to not like it [having sex with men], to only be attracted to my woman... I'm not happy... I walk around and I see guys with their girls... they're pretty... I admire them... I start thinking, "if they have their girl, why can't I have a girl?"... I can... I don't need to pick up a gay guy (un cabro) to pay me 20, 30 soles [about USD \$7.10-10.70 in 2010].

Interviewer: How do you feel about doing sex work?

Interviewee: Repugnant (Asqueroso)... A gay guy comes along... I put on the condom with my eyes closed... I penetrate him... I imagine that I'm fucking a girl (cachando una germa)... I look at the guy from behind... It makes me sick (me da asco).

Interviewer: How do you decide how much you work in a day?

Interviewee: One guy, two guys, that's it... no more... Really, I can't get it up... I'm not in the mood... to be with a gay guy. No, no more... I stay in my room. (Miguel, *Cercado* MSW, 24 years old, Heterosexual)

Interviewer: How do you feel about working in sex work?

Interviewee: I don't feel good... I don't know... Just because I'm gay doesn't mean that I have to be there, sleeping with one guy, sleeping with another guy. Well, I don't feel good. I only do it for the money, not for any other reason.

Interviewer: What is it that you like the least?

Interviewee: Being with lots of people... Maybe... I'm not at all attracted to the man I'm going to go with [to have sex]... I have to do it just because he's paying me.

(Arián, *Cercado* MSW, 23 years old, Homosexual)

Non-*Cercado* MSWs' views represent a sharp contrast to the perspectives just described. The majority of non-*Cercado* MSWs engages in sex work to enhance their income from other jobs. This group of MSWs affirmed that they select clients based on whom they find attractive, often rejecting older or unattractive clients. Non-*Cercado* MSWs provided positive perspectives on sex work, since they are able to earn supplemental income and since the majority reported finding sex with men pleasurable.

Interviewer: Do you like what you're doing? Do you like sex work?

Interviewee: Yes, yes, I like it... I'm satisfied, feel fine, with what I do... because it's a form of work where I get money for myself... and even more so, because I feel a desire to do it... I don't do it... because it's an obligation.

(Manuel, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 18 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewer: How do you feel about yourself?

Interviewee: Good. Everything is good... I earn pretty good money... There's nothing that makes me uncomfortable.

Interviewer: And [how do you feel] regarding sex work?

Interviewee: Like I said, good... I think there are two nice things... The first is that I'm doing something that I like. When I provide a service, I'm doing something I like, right? I choose the insertive role [el rol de activo] because that's the one I like the most... Second, I'm... earning some money. What else could I want, right?

Interviewer: You enjoy the sex?

Interviewee: Of course. Not with everyone but overall, yes... When I don't like the person... I abstain... When he's very old, I tell him I have to do something else... The fact that they pay me doesn't mean that I'm going to be [have sex] with someone I don't like. It's not like that.

(Carlos, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 32 years old, Bisexual)

Participants' perceptions of sex work are also driven by key differences in the two groups' socioeconomic backgrounds, which influence the dimensions of the sex work market that they are able to access. While *Cercado* MSWs are primarily homeless, have no assets or are low-income, non-*Cercado* MSWs are primarily middle- or high-income (see Table 1). This translates into the two groups being able to access different parts of the Lima sex work market for the following reasons. *Cercado* MSWs are less able to invest in and take care of their physical appearance, including their body (for example, they do not usually work out like non-*Cercado* MSWs do), their clothing and even personal hygiene, and have less developed social skills and less extensive social networks. Thus, *Cercado* MSWs are able to work mainly in the *Cercado* area, which is a low-income area that is frequented primarily by low-income individuals, and primarily on the street. This is in turn associated with *Cercado* MSWs having: lower per-client and overall earnings (data shown elsewhere); and high competition from other sex workers so more time dedicated to sex work in order to secure both their clients and earnings. By contrast, non-*Cercado* MSWs are better able to invest in and take care of their physical appearance and have more developed social skills and social networks. This means that non-*Cercado* MSWs are able to access a higher-income client pool in middle- and high-income areas, primarily in closed venues such as nightclubs, bars, saunas and through the Internet and by cell phone. This in turn means that they have higher-paying clients and higher earnings from sex work, both with less time dedication to sex work since their flow of clients is more constant and predictable.

Permanence in sex work and future goals—*Cercado* interviewees explained that it is very difficult to pursue their desire to leave sex work¹: 1) given *Cercado* MSWs' precarious economic situation and their low earnings from sex work, which leads them to live day-by-day and which means that they are unable to invest in their futures; 2) given *Cercado* MSWs' feelings of affection or even indebtedness to the people who introduced them to sex work or those who are currently their primary clients (*puntos* in Spanish), because of the economic support and affection these primary clients provide; and 3) since sex work is an enormous part of *Cercado* MSWs' – if not their entire – lives. Most *Cercado* MSWs spend significant amounts of time seeking clients and many also spend time socializing with clients – either as part of the process to secure a client or to achieve certain benefits such as a meal, a place to sleep for a few hours, or alcohol.

Interviewer: How do you feel about yourself at the moment?

Interviewee: I feel good, relaxed... This [sex work], I do it out of necessity... because I came from the provinces [to Lima] to look for work but I couldn't find any... so some friends brought me [here to the park – one of the main parks in the Cercado neighborhood of Lima] and little by little I got involved and now I'm okay.

Interviewer: Are you happy?

Interviewee: No, I'm not happy... If it were up to me, I wouldn't want to be doing this [sex work]... This is momentary.... because I'm always thinking about a good job... I don't want to be in the park every day... it's not very recommendable... You start to worry just being there... But... it's the only place... I know where I can find clients.

Interviewer: Where do you see yourself working in the future?

Interviewee: ... As long as they offer me a good job, I can work in anything. ...

Interviewer: Who are your friends right now?

Interviewee: My friends are the guys [other sex workers] I know from work, in the park... Because when I didn't know [about this], I met them. They taught me... They explained more or less how it works and little by little I started to work.

(José, *Cercado* MSW, 31 years old, Heterosexual)

Interviewees also discussed support between MSWs and clients. *Cercado* MSWs reported that all support is unidirectional: for economic support, clients give sex workers money and other material support; and for affection, sex workers give their clients affection and clients in turn feel affection for sex workers, but not the reverse. However, *Cercado* MSWs' narratives demonstrated that feelings of affection can also be bidirectional; in other words, MSWs also feel affection for some clients.

¹It is important to underscore that the co-authors do not have a perspective on whether or not MSWs should continue in sex work; MSWs can and should work in what they deem to be the best option for themselves. Therefore, when exploring MSWs' futures, interviewees asked in an open-ended manner about what MSWs envision they will be doing for work. Participants introduced the topic of exiting sex work.

Interviewee: I have three romantic partners (parejas). I have them in different places... Well, really, they are stable clients (puntos)... They always give me my tip (mi propina). They give me a good tip.

Interviewer: Are they your partners? Do you give them explanations about things?

Interviewee: Yes, of course... I mean, they say, "let's go out this day" and I have to be there with them... I can't say, "no, I can't" because they know that I don't work, that I don't do anything... One of them, I was living with him for a while, about a month... but these people are good people... They're formal... They're not like the everyday gays... They're men with money... They're more discrete (caletas)... I take them to heart, okay... [It's] like they're in love or something like that... I have these stable clients... and it's like I've grown fond of them.

Interviewer: Tell me a little about how you feel about yourself...

Interviewee: ... I have feelings. I'm not bad. I've never robbed my stable clients, I've never hurt them...

Interviewer: And if I ask you whether or not you're happy, what would you say?

Interviewee: No... I don't belong [as a sex worker]... I only do it out of necessity... to maintain a bad habit [doing drugs] that I stopped. Since I stopped, I don't have any reason to still be here. But I'm already involved... It's easy to say, "You know what, I was with you only because I did drugs and I used your money for that. I lied to you that whole time. I don't like you. It makes me sick to be with you"... I don't have the willpower... to tell the people I'm with now.

(Micky, *Cercado* MSW, 19 years old, Heterosexual)

Interviewee: Friendship... only one... only one person that I see every so often.

Interviewer: Why this one person... Why do you consider him a friend?

Interviewee: Why him? Because he's an older... man... Every time... before we go out [have sex], we always talk. He really likes to talk and he gives me a lot of advice... that I shouldn't be a certain way, that there are so many things to do in life, that I can't spend my entire life in the Plaza.

(Moises, *Cercado* MSW, 21 years old, Bisexual)

Despite *Cercado* interviewees' reports on the challenges they and other *Cercado* MSWs would face exiting sex work, they maintained positive expectations for what they can achieve and an interest in having good futures. However, *Cercado* MSWs' exact goals and the pathways they could and would follow to reach those goals were not well-defined. Arián's case below is similar to that of other *Cercado* MSWs: they mentioned wanting other jobs, but either had no ideas about which jobs or had ideas for many, very different jobs. Additionally, they had no concrete plans for achieving employment.

Interviewer: Imagine your life five years from now... in 2015...

Interviewee: If I'm still here... working... at the Plaza San Martín, selling my body... I'll be sick... I'll have to get infected with something... I imagine myself in the corner, lying down... But if I do things right, like I think that I'll do them, I know I'll be much better than I am now... [I'll] have what I want, maybe a room, my things, money... [a job] at a store... selling products for a business... A lot of things are going to come, a lot of surprises... I might meet someone... If I do things right, I'm going to feel good.

(Arián, *Cercado* MSW, 23 years old, Homosexual)

Most non-*Cercado* interviewees did not plan to continue in sex work for long and felt they would be able to leave sex work easily since it represents supplemental (although important) income and since they view sex work as a means to achieve their ambitious future goals. Non-*Cercado* MSWs had clearly defined both their goals and the pathways they needed to follow to reach those goals, primarily by applying their current earnings toward personal investments such as their education or their own businesses.

Interviewer: Do you think that you'll continue doing sex work in the future, for example, in five years?

Interviewee: Not anymore... I know that I'm not going to continue with it because I won't have time... because work as a nurse [he is currently studying nursing] is... you don't have as much free time... I won't have time for anything else.

(Ronald, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 23 years old, Bisexual)

Sex work for non-*Cercado* MSWs is not all-consuming; sex work is something that non-*Cercado* interviewees do on the side. For non-*Cercado* interviewees, the dynamic of achieving clients is usually relatively easy – most non-*Cercado* MSWs have stable clients who call them or they work in a venue with a high potential client volume. Additionally, non-*Cercado* MSWs did not report feeling affection for their clients, even if they were longer-term or stable. Most non-*Cercado* MSWs reported brief, “business-like” interactions with their clients, although a few described social interactions with their clients. However, even when these social interactions took place, this group of sex workers drew boundaries and continued to view clients as clients and maybe casual friends, but not as close friends or romantic partners (as some *Cercado* MSWs did). Non-*Cercado* MSWs also clearly described sex work as work, even if they enjoy it (which many did).

Interviewer: How do you feel about what's happening in your life?

Interviewee: I don't feel depressed or bad about what I do... I look at them as things one can decide to do, that are... part of life. People have different ways [of being], different paths... Mine has taken this direction and I'm not going to feel bad about it... I feel good when I have sex with someone, because I feel desired, I feel liked.

Interviewer: Do you like doing sex work?

Interviewee: Yes. I feel pleasure.

...

Interviewer: What are your goals?

Interviewee: To have [my own] businesses... not one, but several, businesses... I don't know if I'll do sex work, but I'll probably do some things for pleasure.

(Miguel, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 21 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewee: I used to go to gay nightclubs and I would meet people there... That's how I got my stable clients (puntos)... They would ask me for my cell number and I have my contacts there. That's one way of working [in sex work]...

Interviewer: How do your contacts reach you?

Interviewee: They call me on my cell and they say, "I'll wait for you [in this place]."

(Antonio, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 18 years old, Heterosexual)

Perceived Risk of and Vulnerability to HIV and Other STIs and Related Prevention Practices: The continued domination of economics and affections

The distinct influence of economics and affections on *Cercado* versus non-*Cercado* MSWs strongly manifested itself in the sexuality arena and specifically, in the two groups' 1) perceptions of their risk of and vulnerability to HIV and other STIs and 2) practices to prevent HIV and other STIs with clients. These risk/vulnerability perceptions and HIV/STI prevention practices are – according to both groups – inextricably linked. *Cercado* MSWs affirmed that they are at risk of HIV/STIs and immediately mentioned that this is true since they sometimes – and in a significant minority of cases, often – have sex without a condom. *Cercado* interviewees in turn connected non-use of condoms to their vulnerability to HIV/STIs, given that *Cercado* MSWs' lack of condom use is due to their inability to pay for condoms or, more frequently, *Cercado* MSWs' acceptance of clients' requests to not use a condom. This occurs when clients offer a higher payment or when they are stable clients or clients that *Cercado* MSWs know, in other words, people with whom *Cercado* MSWs have some type of affectionate link.

Interviewer: Do you think that you're at risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: Of course... because I'm exposed to all of this. I always do it [have sex] without a condom.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you can do – or that you [already] do – to reduce those risks?

Interviewee: Yes, I always have a condom [with me]... sometimes... and sometimes I don't. Sometimes there aren't any.

Interviewer: Why aren't there any sometimes?

Interviewee: Because there isn't any money to buy one... sometimes they [clients] say to you, "Hey, just like that, without that [a condom]"... "Well, okay," [I say].

Interviewer: And do you accept?

Interviewee: Well, yes, but to do that, they pay you more.

Interviewer: You said that with clients you sometimes use protection... And with people who aren't clients, for example, with a partner or with friends...

Interviewee: No, well... I don't use protection at all (no me cuida nada) because I know they're okay (están bien). Well, I know that what I do isn't okay... Well, I don't know... Sometimes I try to use protection with them too because I could also be sick.

Interviewer: Do you think that you're vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: Yes, because of how I think... because I fall (caigo) really quickly when they say marvelous things... I believe them... so I accept everything they say... They can give me many things that they have... money, clothes, money, money... so okay... I accept... sex, everything... without a condom... Some clients... sometimes they come and say, "Hey, come on, we've known each other a while... years... let's go"... And since I already know them, I accept and I just go [and have sex without a condom].

(Patrick, *Cercado* MSW, 20 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewer: Do you think that you're at risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: Because I'm in this world where this disease [HIV] is dancing around everyone and all of us – everyone who is part of this type of life – is really exposed.

Interviewer: Do you think that you've done something to put yourself at risk?

Interviewee: Yes... For example, have sex, sometimes, without a condom... I've had sex without a condom and that's really risky since I don't know the person...

Interviewer: Did you penetrate them or did they penetrate you?

Interviewee: I've penetrated... sometimes they've penetrated me too, without a condom... Sometimes I try to always have a condom with me and everything else but, well, sometimes I end up without my condoms... and well, I say, that's it... Sometimes a client comes along and says to me, "hey, let's go"... I know him (es conocido)... "No, but I can't," [I say]... and they say, "But why not?"... "I can't, but I don't have a condom," [I say]... "It doesn't matter. I'll buy one," [they say]... and this and that and sometimes the condom doesn't get bought... And I go and have sex (y voy y tiro).

Interviewer: Do you think that you're vulnerable to HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: Vulnerable in the sense that... sometimes I don't have money and... clients say, "You know what? I'll give you this much but without "con" [a condom] (sin "pre")... and I do it [have sex] without a condom... if they raise the price.

(Israel, *Cercado* MSW, 23 years old, Bisexual)

As with their *Cercado* peers, non-*Cercado* MSWs recognized that they are at risk of HIV/STIs. Non-*Cercado* MSWs quickly countered, however, that everyone has some risk and that their personal risk and that of other non-*Cercado* MSWs is not high since they always use condoms with clients.

Interviewer: Do you think that you're at risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: No... I do use protection (yo sí me cuido)... I always use a condom. There are people that pay you to have sex without a condom, and you have to say no because those are the things that ruin you (te desgracian) later... There are people that have asked me to have sex without a condom, "but I'll pay you more," they say.

Interviewer: Do you accept?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Do you like to use protection, to use a condom?

Interviewee: No, I don't like it (laughing)... but I do it because of diseases.

Interviewer: Do you use protection with clients and non-clients?

Interviewee: Of course... with both... I use protection (me cuido)... Even if they offer me money, if I am attracted to them (me gustan), I still use protection.

Interviewer: Do you do anything to try to select people [clients] who are less risky?

Interviewee: Disease... doesn't have a social class, a color. It gets you and that's it... I can't select people... unless I have a little machine (un aparato)... I don't have that... (laughing).

(Boris, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 26 years old, Bisexual)

In contrast to their *Cercado* peers, non-*Cercado* interviewees did not consider themselves to be vulnerable to HIV/STIs. As Luis stated below, non-*Cercado* MSWs obviously engage in sex work for money. However, this group of sex workers' economic "needs" and affectionate ties to clients are not as great as among their *Cercado* peers. Therefore, non-*Cercado* MSWs do not feel that the significant risk associated with not using a condom is worth the additional economic – or affection-related or other type of – compensation.

Interviewer: Do you think that you're at risk of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections?

Interviewee: No. At risk, maybe... but sometimes I don't think so because I always use protection.

Interviewer: Do you use protection with clients?

Interviewee: Yes... with all of them.

Interviewer: And with a stable partner?

Interviewee: I also use protection... condoms.

Interviewer: And with a client that you already know?

Interviewee: In any case, I use protection. I've always used protection. For example, I know a client and I always use a condom.

Interviewer: And with a client you find attractive?

Interviewee: I'd still use one.

Interviewer: Do you do anything to try to select people who are less risky?

Interviewee: No, no, because I really don't know who's sick, right?

Interviewer: Is there something... that makes you more vulnerable to HIV or STIs?

Interviewee: Money I think... It makes me obligated to do what I'm doing right now...

Interviewer: When a client asks you to have sex without a condom and offers you more money, do you do it?

Interviewee: No, I don't do it. That opportunity always arises, but I've never done it.

(Luis, Non-Cercado MSW, 21 years old, Bisexual)

Interviewer: Do you do anything that puts you at risk [of HIV/STIs] or something that reduces that risk?

Interviewee: Yes. I always have a condom [with me].

Interviewer: And if the person offers you double, tripe [the amount]?

Interviewee: Even if he offers me double or triple, I don't do it.

Interviewer: If a girl like [name of famous Peruvian model] comes along and tells you that she wants to have sex but without a condom, and all that you want...

Interviewee: No, no. The truth is that I wouldn't do it. Because I know... that if I get the disease [HIV], money isn't going to cure it. (David, Non-*Cercado* MSW, 23 years old, Heterosexual)

Discussion

The results of this study identify *Cercado* and non-*Cercado* MSWs as strikingly different in their overall lives and sex work experiences and that these differences lead to strong contrasts in their HIV/STI-related risks, vulnerabilities and prevention practices.

One set of findings regards the interviewees' perceptions of self, sex work and sex with other men. *Cercado* MSWs' definitions of self are negative and/or in flux, most likely due to the all-consuming influence of sex work in their lives and the inability to get ahead in life (*salir adelante*) despite working almost always. *Cercado* MSWs entered sex work due to lack of resources to meet their needs and get ahead, but continue in sex work since it enables them to only get by. This is in great part due to the sector of the sex work market they are able to access (low-income clients through primarily street-based sex work). This contrasts with non-*Cercado* MSWs, for whom sex work represents an "extra" or even a hobby and satisfies "needs" that *Cercado* MSWs would consider luxuries. Non-*Cercado* MSWs are able to access higher-income clients in higher-income neighborhoods and venues since they were already doing well when they entered sex work and are now doing better because of it. Two studies, one in Brazil and one in Peru, had complementary findings. A study with male hustlers or *michês* in Rio de Janeiro also described the need for a certain amount of capital to make a good living as a MSW. MSWs who could maintain their appearances and access certain material goods like phones made more money as sex workers than those who had less capital (Larvie, 1999). Nureña explored the different motivations for entrance to sex work and the relative nature of economic "need" in lower- versus middle- and higher-income sex workers in different settings in Peru (Nureña et al., 2011). While *Cercado* MSWs in the current study reported strong dislike of sex work and sex with men and a fear of starting to like sex with men, their non-*Cercado* peers offered positive views of both. In Córdoba, Argentina, street/lower-income MSWs also reported more negative feelings about being sex workers and less comfort having sex with men than independent / higher-income MSWs (Marino et al., 2003). In our study, possible reasons for the contrast are the very different dynamics of sex work across the two groups. For non-*Cercado* MSWs, sex work is a relatively easy way to achieve life's comforts. Non-*Cercado* MSWs enjoy having sex with clients who they access easily and select based on whether or not they find them attractive. For *Cercado* MSWs, sex work is a survival tool. *Cercado* MSWs report not enjoying sex with clients who they work hard to find and who they are obligated to accept since they urgently need money or other goods. Another reason for the contrast between *Cercado* and non-*Cercado* MSWs could be similar to the one proposed for low-income MSWs in Costa Rica: MSWs criticized sex with men to avoid being stigmatized as homosexuals; since they recognized that the line between sex work and homosexuality is thin, they compartmentalized to protect themselves (Schifter & Aggleton, 1999).

Another finding relates to participants' perspectives on their futures and how these views influence their sexual behaviors. Interviewees focused on different time frames, a choice

made by the interviewees not by the interviewers. Non-*Cercado* MSWs did not discuss their pasts and offered positive narratives about their present multi-dimensional lives in which sex work is a lucrative side job that helps them work toward ambitious goals. In contrast, when asked about their presents, *Cercado* MSWs shifted the focus to their pasts and the critical moment/s that led them to sex work. When asked about their futures and specifically about leaving sex work, *Cercado* MSWs wanted to leave sex work, but stated that it would be very difficult because of the influence of sex work in all dimensions of their lives. *Cercado* MSWs could look back or at the present, but it was challenging to look ahead. This poor future outlook may affect *Cercado* MSWs' sexual behaviors, as studies elsewhere have reported that future outlook influences sexual behaviors. A study of South African youth identified that an individual's condom use at last sex was associated with optimism about his or her overall future (Hendriksen, Pettifor, Lee, Coates, & Rees, 2007). Among MSM in the U.S., those with higher scores on the Consideration of Future Consequences scale were less likely to report unprotected anal sex (Appleby et al., 2005).

The third group of findings concerns the relationship between MSWs in Lima and their clients and how this impacts their HIV/STI-prevention behaviors. *Cercado* interviewees described how they "shouldn't" have emotional relationships with their clients and that sex work is supposed to be a business. However, the lines between their personal lives and work and their clients and friends or even romantic partners are blurred. A possible explanation comes from research on MSWs in Central America, which described a dividing line between sex work and homosexuality: romantic love and/or emotional attachment (Padilla, 2007; Schifter & Aggleton, 1999). This line blurs easily if one considers how love is often expressed in low-income populations in Latin America, through what people do for one another. One important act of love is purchasing things or giving gifts (Schifter & Aggleton, 1999). Although non-*Cercado* MSWs actually earn more than *Cercado* MSWs (Bayer et al., 2012), *Cercado* MSWs may feel more emotionally attached to their clients since *Cercado* MSWs depend on their clients for their survival, while non-*Cercado* MSWs look to their clients for supplemental income. A study in the Dominican Republic reported that MSWs tended to feel more affection for clients who were more financially generous, calling into question whether the MSWs' affection was real (Padilla, 2007). These complex economic and affectionate links also impacted the MSWs' prevention behaviors in our study. Specifically, *Cercado* MSWs reported using condoms in an inconsistent manner and described numerous situations in which they would easily accept non-use of condoms with clients. By contrast, non-*Cercado* MSWs described much more consistent condom use with clients. In Costa Rica, low-income MSWs also recognized their HIV-related risks but did not use condoms since their primary concern was survival (Schifter & Aggleton, 1999).

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it did not include minors. During the study, participants – particularly *Cercado* MSWs – mentioned the increased risks and vulnerabilities of underage MSWs. Another limitation is that only MSWs from central neighborhoods of Lima were included since that was the geographic area mapped during the ethnographic mapping that was used as a pre-recruitment tool. Although this study included a larger, more diverse sample of MSWs than past studies in Peru, the study team is currently carrying out extensive

ethnographic mapping to identify additional sex work venues and MSWs. Newly-identified MSWs and minors will be included in future research. The final group of limitations relate to social desirability bias, an issue in all research with individuals. MSW participants may have reported what they perceived that the interviewers, the study team or broader society wanted to hear, not what they actually feel and experience.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates the overwhelming needs of MSWs, and particularly *Cercado* MSWs, in their overall lives and with regard to their sexual health. MSWs in Lima need access to support and resources to strengthen their perceptions of self, define their future goals, and seek out opportunities to meet those goals and improve their current lives and their futures, within or outside of sex work. These changes would in turn lead to increased use of effective practices to prevent HIV and other STIs and to improved health and well-being among MSWs. The study team is currently working together with a core group of MSWs to develop a community center that will provide personal development and HIV/STI prevention activities, vocational training and basic health services for MSWs in Lima.

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Table 1

Socio-demographic and Sex Work-related Characteristics of MSW Participants

	<i>Cercado</i> (downtown) N=23		<i>Non-Cercado</i> (surrounding urban) N=17	
	24 (20-26)		22 (21-25)	
	n/N	%	n/N	%
Age, median (IQR)	24 (20-26)		22 (21-25)	
High school graduate	14/23	61%	12/16	75%
Sexual identity				
Heterosexual	6/23	26%	4/17	23%
Homosexual	4/23	17%	1/17	6%
Bisexual	13/23	57%	12/17	71%
Socioeconomic level of household ¹				
Homeless or no assets	7/23	30%	1/16	6%
Low-income	10/23	44%	7/16	44%
Middle- or high-income	6/23	26%	8/16	50%
Primary sex work location				
Public park or plaza	18/23	78%	4/17	23.5%
Nightclubs or bars			4/17	23.5%
Saunas	1/23	4%	1/17	6%
Pornographic video houses	2/23	9%	0/17	0%
Internet	2/23	9%	8/17	47%
Age at entry into sex work, median (IQR)	19 (17-23)		18 (17-21)	
Years in sex work, median (IQR)	4 (2-6)		3 (1-7)	

¹For the household socio-economic level, we used an assets-based index where basic services were worth 1 point, items that facilitate daily activities were worth 2 points, and luxury items were worth 3 points. Low-income individuals scored 0-5 points, middle-income individuals scored 6-10 points, and high-income individuals scored 11-17 points.

Table 2

“Critical Moments” and Key People in the Lives of Cercado Sex Workers

Name	Age	Narrative
José Luis	18	José Luis is from the jungle and lived with his parents until his third year of high school, at age 15, when they separated and each went to live elsewhere with new partners. José Luis’ parents sent him to live with his uncle, who would drink alcohol and hit José Luis. Hence, a few months ago, he decided to escape to Lima on his own “to try his luck” (<i>a probar suerte</i>). He was working in a public bathroom for his first few months but lost his job and has been working as a sex worker for a few months.
Micky	19	Micky is from the jungle. He lived with both of his parents until age 11 when they separated and he went to live with his father, who produces and deals drugs, and one of his three siblings. Micky came to Lima for the first time when he was 14, with his 29-year old gay male friend who convinced him to travel for better opportunities. As soon as they arrived, Micky’s friend introduced him to sex work and drugs. A year or so later, Micky went home to the jungle and was involved in an assault with some friends in which they killed a police officer. Micky was in juvenile detention for two years. When he was released, he went into the Army for two years. Upon leaving the Army, Micky returned to sex work, which he’s been doing for the past 6 months.
Arián	23	Arián is from the highlands and came to Lima to find work and get ahead without asking his parents – who are poor – for money. Arián had been working selling furniture but his boss didn’t treat him well or pay him. When Arián left his job, his best friend introduced him to the world of sex work and taught him about sex work, which he’s been doing for several months.
Eduard	27	Eduard is from the coast and came to Lima to get ahead. He said that he used to be “calm, transparent and poor... so poor,” but that he decided to pursue technical studies. Eduard had problems paying almost immediately and since his parents are separated, he asked a good friend to lend him money. Eduard’s friend said that he couldn’t lend him money, but that he could introduce him to an older man that could, in exchange for “sexual favors.” This experience – which took place 8 years ago – was Eduard’s initiation into sex work.
Patrick	20	Patrick is from Lima. His father died the previous year and Patrick became very depressed and stopped going to his temporary jobs. Patrick used to go out to gay venues in the center of Lima (not in his neighborhood) to avoid problems with his mother and siblings. Patrick’s acquaintances there started to offer him money in exchange for sex. Patrick has been a sex worker since then, for about one year.