

'I stap long blad' ('It's in the blood'): Sex work, agency, and sexual and reproductive rights in Vanuatu

KATE BURRY and POLLY STUPPLES

Abstract

This article explores the challenges that ni-Vanuatu sex workers face in exercising agency in relation to their sexual and reproductive health rights. It draws on research undertaken with sex workers, middle men, and other male non-sex workers in Luganville, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, in 2016.

Sex work, and sex workers' experiences, need to be understood in relation to the unique socio-political, cultural and legal contexts in which they exist. This article draws on the theory of body work to analyse the challenges ni-Vanuatu sex workers face in exercising agency during transactions, and also to conceptualise the strategies or 'techniques of the self' that they use to protect themselves and maintain boundaries. Body work identifies (and problematises) different ways in which the body is constructed (discursively, socially, commercially) as constituting the self. In analysing the different ways in which ni-Vanuatu sex workers' bodies are framed as constituting their selves, we gain insights into the complex roots of the abuse they experience, and their limits in exercising agency and asserting their sexual and reproductive health rights. In addition, the research identifies re-selfing techniques used by sex workers to establish boundaries that support their well-being, and maintain more complex identities beyond that of the body.

Keywords

Sex work, sexual/reproductive rights, agency, body work, Vanuatu

Introduction

In the urbanising contexts of the contemporary Pacific, where employment opportunities in towns and cities are insufficient, sex work¹ may become an important option for income generation. While many aspects of sex work remain illegal across much of the Pacific, it is certainly prevalent and appears to be increasing (Godwin, 2012; McMillan, 2013; Stolz, Lutunatabua, & Vafo'ou, 2010; Bulu, Gold, & Sladden, 2007). Although sex work can provide an opportunity to earn much needed income via the informal economy, sex workers' agency and rights are often threatened (Amnesty International, 2016; McMillan & Worth, 2011a; McMillan & Worth, 2011b; Stolz, et al, 2010). This may occur through transactions themselves, through relationships with clients and middle men, and through the social norms that support the entitlement of men to sexual access and pleasure, but do not support sex workers to maintain their wellbeing and their human rights (for an in-depth discussion of rights in Vanuatu, particularly in relation to gender, see Taylor, 2008b).

This article explores the different ways in which the agency of sex workers in Luganville, Vanuatu, is both undermined and asserted through their transactions, and the influence this has on the ability of workers to claim their sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). Broadly speaking, SRHR constitute the right to a healthy pregnancy and child birth, and to non-discriminatory access to modern contraceptive and family planning services; as well as the right to prevention of, and treatment for, sexually transmitted infections (STI) and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and the right to safe and consensual relationships (Glasier, Gülmezoglu, Schmid, Moreno, & VanLook, 2006). For sex workers, sexual and reproductive health rights imply the ability to protect

themselves and their bodies from violence, from infection with STIs, from unwanted pregnancies and from abuse – and the right to assert boundaries around their work.

This article is based on interviews conducted with a variety of individuals involved in the Luganville sex industry during 2016 (see method for details). In conceptualising sex workers' challenges to, and assertion of, agency, we draw firstly on literature on agency in Melanesia, followed by the ideas of body work developed through feminist debate over embodied labour in general, and sex work in particular (Wolkowitz, 2006). Examining how the identities of sex workers are socially constructed in relation to their bodies points to the vulnerabilities that ensue from reductive constructions that deny sex workers their identities as complex individuals. We then describe the research methods and findings, situating these in relation to other research on sex work in Vanuatu, and analyse them in terms of body work and the vulnerabilities of sex workers in Luganville.

Agency in Melanesia

To appropriately contextualise our analysis of sex workers' agency, we first consider what agency means in the context of this research, namely Vanuatu in the region of Melanesia. Here we draw primarily on Wardlow's (2006) discussion of 'encompassed agency' amongst the Huli of Papua New Guinea, as well as Taylor and Morgain's (2015) analysis of personhood in Vanuatu. Both concepts consider gender as a key factor in how agency is constructed and perceived in these Melanesian contexts, with gender of course being a complex and composite social construct in itself.

Wardlow (2006) describes agency in Melanesia as 'encompassed' by larger social forces. Her analysis is informed by practice theory, which observes how various historical, sociocultural, economic, and symbolic structures and practices 'produce and constrain particular modes of agency [...] as well as the ways in which these "structures" are changing in the context of wage labour and the commoditization of social relations' (2006, p. 5; see also Ortner, 2006). In Melanesia, individual agency is argued to be shaped by complex communal life and socio-political hierarchies (Jolly, 1994). The capacity for agency, therefore, is always enabled and constrained by socio-political and gendered roles and paradigms (Wardlow, 2006; Jolly, 1994). In this way, agency in Melanesia is argued to be 'encompassed', in that '[people's] capacities for acting on the social order are always already contained within and mobilized for plans larger than themselves' (Wardlow, 2006, p. 12).

Wardlow's (2006) discussion of agency in Papua New Guinea as a kind of social practice or process, which is heavily influenced by gendered power structures, is echoed by Taylor and Morgain's (2015) analysis of personhood in Vanuatu. As Taylor and Morgain (2015, p. 2) explain, '[p]ersonhood [in Vanuatu] is [...] conceptualised as 'engendered' in both senses of the word: as fundamentally entangled with social codes of gender, and as brought forth through specific contexts, moments, practices, and experiences'. Together, these analyses suggest that agency is largely determined by social, cultural and historical norms and values related to gender, and also that gender is 'performed' and enacts certain values, beliefs, and behaviours related to femininity or masculinity.

In Vanuatu, gendered constructions and 'enactments' represent an amalgamation of different influences which are negotiated by ni-Vanuatu. Christianity, for example, has influenced the idealised construction of a 'good woman' as domesticated, modest, and maternal (Jolly, 2001). However, Taylor (2016, p. 2) argues that in Vanuatu, agency exists within a 'broader discursive context by which men express hegemonic ideals of gendered agency, such that entails curtailing the agency of women, their sexual agency especially' often via 'threat of physical, social, or moral retribution'. In other words, male assertion of gendered agency entails that,

while the social and economic lives of men and women are shifting, women's agency remains encompassed by male discourse over the feminine ideal, and what is appropriate female labour, both productive and reproductive (see also Jolly, 1994).

Vanuatu, urbanisation, and sex work

Vanuatu is an archipelago nation in the South Pacific with a population of 289,321 (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2016) and population growth of about 20 live births per day, with 29.6% of the population under 15 years (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Population Division, 2016). Over a hundred indigenous languages are spoken; however, Bislama (an English-based creole language) is Vanuatu's lingua franca, and children who end up in formal education will go on to learn either English or French.

When Vanuatu gained independence from their English and French colonisers in 1980, the capital city of Port Vila, once considered a 'white space', was opened up to ni-Vanuatu, and not just those who had work in the city (Mitchell, 2004). Though echoes of the association between town and 'whiteness' (Mitchell, 2004; Rodman, 1999) still exist, since its independence Port Vila has seen an upsurge in ni-Vanuatu relocating there to find work in the cash economy. Today, many young people have grown up in town and have an expectation of entering the wage economy after leaving school (Mitchell, 2004). Finding paid work, however, is often more of a dream than a reality – especially for the large youth population – resulting in very high unemployment rates and few opportunities to take part in further training (Vanuatu Young People's Project, 2006; Mitchell, 2004). The Vanuatu Young People's Project (2006) states that even for those who are able to gain paid employment of some kind, wages are low, and employees have 'frequently found their conditions of work very difficult' (Mitchell, 2004, p. 366).

In light of the lack of economic opportunities for young people, there has been an 'increase in transactional sex work in Port Vila' (Vanuatu Young People's Project, 2006, p. 56). This shift appears to reflect changes in other parts of Vanuatu. A UNICEF (2010) survey of 510 youth from Port Vila, Malakula, and Tanna, found that 66 (including 22 males) had engaged in commercial sex (i.e., in exchange for money), and 101 in transactional sex (i.e., in exchange for other goods such as alcohol, kava, marijuana, clothes, food, or transport) (p. 13). Significantly, only 39% of those who had engaged in commercial or transactional sex reported using a condom the last time they had sex (UNICEF, 2010, p. 13).

Another qualitative study reported on interviews with 18 female sex workers, and two male sex workers in 2010 in Port Vila, identifying two key ways of working (McMillan and Worth, 2011a). The first was more independent, where sex workers made prior arrangements during the day with clients whom they met later at an agreed time. The second was in small peer groups, often in nightclubs or kava bars, where the transaction took place more or less immediately. The report also stated that some hotel managers had sex workers' cell phone numbers to call when a guest requested sexual services (McMillan & Worth, 2011a). In addition, many of the participants revealed that their first sexual encounter was paid sex and, for some, 'the information that "boys will pay" was one of the first things they learnt about sex' (McMillan & Worth, 2011a, p. 9). Given the almost normalised nature of receiving money for sex expressed by some young people, as well as the vulnerability of young people who struggle to afford life in town, sex work becomes an option for income generation. Disillusionment due to past abusive relationships was also cited by participants as a reason behind engaging in sex work, namely the option of earning money from sex became a better alternative to entering into other relationships, which they believed would likely turn abusive.

Despite its prevalence, the stigma associated with exchanging sex for money/goods is significant, and is connected to the entanglement of gendered norms, modernity, and mobility.

The movement of young women in town is more tightly controlled than that of young men; as Mitchell (2004, p. 367) points out, '[t]oday there is an on-going discourse about women's travel and behaviour in town [Port Vila], often depicted as a new and dangerous development'. Town life is often seen as a threat to *kastom*², and there is concern when women, who are often seen as holders of *kastom*, move into town with its 'modernising' influence (Mitchell, 2004). People who exchange sex for money/goods may be seen as embodying such fears about the mobility of young, urban-dwelling women, exposing these women to various threats to their safety and wellbeing. For instance, women who are perceived to be sexually active or promiscuous, even if the sexual activity was forced, are often vulnerable to further sexual assault (McMillan & Worth, 2011a). This reveals how women can be blamed for social ills that are perceived to be the product of modernisation, including sexual assault (Cummings, 2005, 2008).

Selling sex in Luganville: the current research

This research focuses on the experiences of sex workers in Luganville, the 'northern capital' of Vanuatu. With a population of just over 13,000 people, Luganville has several ports, an international airport, and is currently undergoing a significant expansion of the main port, funded by the Chinese government with the aims of increasing trade, industry, and tourism to the island. It also opened its first major night club, Planet 107, in 2015.

The primary researcher (KB) conducted semi-structured interviews over several months in 2016 with 19 sex workers (16 female and 3 male, aged 16-42); 3 middle men; 1 client; and 1 ex-boyfriend of a sex worker. Having lived and worked in Luganville, and speaking fluent Bislama, the researcher had many connections throughout the community which enabled her to contact people who exchange sex for money/goods, as well as middle men who facilitate transactions between clients and sex workers and take a cut of the earnings. Interviews were held in places suggested by participants; most were in private corners of kava bars (where many people negotiate sex work), and a few were in other private spaces, including a room at the Northern Care Youth Clinic, a sexual/reproductive health clinic.

This research was informed by sex work oriented research methodologies, specifically Dewey and Zheng's (2013) *Ethical research with sex workers: Anthropological approaches*. Accordingly, the researcher was aware that engaging in the exchange of sex for money and/or other goods can involve shame, and potentially trauma, for sex workers due to associated stigma and discrimination. Throughout this research, as well as adhering to ethical research practices of ongoing informed consent, questions were phrased in general terms, for example: 'Why do people start doing this kind of thing [i.e. exchanging money/goods for sex]?' This phrasing meant that interviewees could choose the extent to which they wanted to draw on their personal experiences, or those of others.

Sex work, therefore, was usually not directly named, but was referred to in general terms, for instance, 'mekem kaen ia' ('do this kind of thing'), or spoken about using common euphemisms for exchanging sex for money/goods, such as 'stikim nek' or 'pinim nek' (literally 'poke/put a pin in your neck' – the phrase refers to soliciting for money/goods, referring, in this context, to sex work). Hence, interviewees did not use the term 'sex work', nor did they self-identify as 'sex workers' (see also McMillan & Worth, 2011a; Servy, 2014), but mostly described the actual exchange through slang or euphemism, though often also explicitly.

The research was informed by *talanoa* methodology (storian in Vanuatu), which encapsulates the unique experience of undertaking research in the South Pacific, and describes how interviews should be undertaken in a reciprocal, conversational, and relational way (Vaioliti, 2014). *Talanoa* as research methodology also acknowledges the different dynamics which separate and connect the researcher and the research participants, taking into account

gender, age, social status, and so on, within the ‘created cultural space’ (Vaioleti, 2014, p. 196). The researcher’s identity as a young woman, fluent in Bislama, with a good understanding of the cultural and social context of urban Vanuatu, and her commitment to talanoa, enabled considerable sharing of stories. The researcher transcribed the interviews herself and analysed them according to themes which emerged from discussions, with a focus on how interviewees spoke about agency. She translated all quotes used in this article from Bislama. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identity of interviewees.

Selling sex in Luganville: Research findings

Because life is hard. In order to buy a shell of kava, or food for the house – they can’t afford it. The next option, if they don’t have a job, the next option is you must sell yourself. That’s it. You must make a bit of money out of your body so that you can afford what you want (*John, middle man, 34 years*).

This quote from John reveals some of the key factors that lead people into sex work in Luganville. Confirming similar findings from McMillan and Worth (2011a), this research identified four main reasons for turning to selling sex to earn money: marriage or relationship breakdown; lack of employment/adequate income; lack of parental support; and wanting money in order to participate in social life. People were often reportedly encouraged into sex work by friends or family; through men directly requesting sex in exchange for money, or in exchange for goods such as kava or alcohol; and via the propositions of middle men. In exchange for sex, money or kava/alcohol was mostly given, and often a combination of both money and the purchasing of alcohol and/or kava. How much reimbursement was offered depended on how much money was at the client’s disposal. One participant described how a transaction may look on any given night:

Like, example, suppose we want to drink [alcohol], but we don’t have money. Then I say that I have a friend who would be able to give some money for us to buy alcohol. OK, I ring him, then he will say, ‘You want some money? I have some money here. But if you want money, you come and see me first.’ Jump in a taxi, go anywhere – the bush on the side of the road, you know? Any place where no one can see the two of you. Then, once the sex is finished, you get the money for alcohol, you come back – you can go and drink now at Planet [107, a nightclub in Luganville], enjoy yourself (*Mary, female sex worker, 17 years*).

As indicated in Mary’s account, sexual activity often happened in bush areas nearby, or on a private part of the beach, though wealthier clients sometimes paid for a room in one of the motels in town for a few hours, or for the night. In Luganville, sex workers often did not work alone, and while there was an economic incentive to engaging in sex work, exchanging sexual acts for money/goods was also part of broader patterns of socialisation in town (see also Servy, 2014). Sex workers often became part of a system in which clients made requests to middle men, who then used younger boys as runners to approach sex workers. Runners were often paid in marijuana or kava. Interestingly, middle men spoken to in this research all started out as young schoolboys who would be sent by other, often older, boys to ask out girls, on their behalf, in their class. This experience was shared by other young men, such as family members or close friends of a young woman. The structure of sex work negotiations seemed, therefore, to be overlaid onto existing social protocols, where men tended not to approach women directly, but required a closer male acquaintance of the woman to mediate the initial interaction.

Clients were referred to as ‘big men’ by sex workers and by middle men, and were positioned at the head of the hierarchical male power structure that shapes gender norms and sex work in Luganville. ‘Big men’ are men of high status, associated with power and wealth. Historically, such status was conferred through male grade-taking rituals where men would engage in ceremonial exchanges of traditional valuables (such as mats and yams), and the slaughtering of pigs, to gain a new title and socio-political standing (Jolly, 1994). Although

the context for male authority changed radically with colonisation, it has been argued that ‘big men’ have had more opportunity to take advantage of the radical social, economic and cultural transformations that have arisen (Jolly, 1994). Ni-Vanuatu men, it is argued, have more readily been able to co-opt and control introduced goods, ways and beliefs, and even positions of influence and greater financial reward, such as jobs in the public sector (Jolly, 1994; Taylor, 2008a; Molisa, 1987). Clients of sex workers therefore embody ‘contemporary configurations of masculinities’ (Jolly, 2016, p. 309) in Vanuatu, combining political and social authority, and control over financial resources. For sex workers, this implies their own relative vulnerability and subservience during interactions with clients.

There was an overwhelming perception amongst interviewees that ‘what the client says, goes’. Sex workers felt largely unable to negotiate the use of condoms, and faced the loss of a transaction or the threat of violence as a result of requesting that a condom be used. Going ‘skin-to-skin’ (also referred to as ‘Vanuatu style’ during interviews) was largely seen as preferable to using condoms, which were, by contrast, referred to as ‘modern technology’. As Daisy (female sex worker, 24 years) explained:

I tell them, ‘If you don’t want to [use a condom], then I won’t... we go [and have sex], but you have to use a condom.’ [...] Some, they become cross. I’ve faced challenges regarding this, like, some hit me. One of our big challenges is they don’t want to use [condoms]. They just don’t think! Lots of them pass on STIs. Like, they want to hit me – they can’t control themselves, [or] what they do with their anger.

Every sex worker interviewed for this research had experienced physical and sexual violence; the abuse ranged from having bottles broken over them or having stones thrown at them, to being forced into having sex (some stating that they were too scared to say no to clients), and, at a further extreme, being forced into marriage or pregnancy (with and by clients, as discussed below). The clients’ ownership and control over the money or goods exchanged, and their relative power and status, meant that the wellbeing of sex workers was often marginalised, and their ability to claim their right to sexual and reproductive health severely restricted. Many of these vulnerabilities are, we argue, intensified by the ways in which the relationship between sex workers’ bodies and their selves are framed through discourse and social norms, in essentialising and dehumanising ways.

Sex work as body work

Body work is defined as ‘work that takes the body as its immediate site of labour, involving intimate, messy contact with the (frequently supine or naked) body, its orifices or products through touch or close proximity’ (Wolkowitz, 2002, p. 497). It encompasses sex work as well as other forms of domestic care work, and is a particularly feminised form of labour.

Body work is associated with the feminisation of poverty, in that it mostly describes the type of work taken on by women with a level of economic and social vulnerability. Body work also has class and racial implications (particularly in the international context), as more privileged women (often white, educated women from industrialised countries) are increasingly taking up other, usually better-paid, employment. Thus, migrant women from poorer countries often enter to fill the gaps left by more affluent women who are no longer available for the unpaid domestic work which previously would have been expected of them (Wolkowitz, 2002).³ Furthermore, Wolkowitz (2002, p. 501) notes that ‘[i]n body work the more general segmentation of the labour market by sex, class and “race” is deeply intertwined with attitudes towards (parts of) the body’. Accordingly, lower status workers are left ‘to deal with what is rejected, left over, spills out and pollutes’ (p.501).

Sex work can be seen as a form of lower status body work, in that it deals with the contentious

realm of sexual relations and the various secretions such acts entail, parts of the body (namely genitalia) that provoke feelings of awkwardness, and the illicit (and often illegal) nature of the labour. At the same time, the body can be conceptualised as a 'safety net' for women of low income and/or education for the production of revenue (Dewey, 2011, p. 164). However, the associated vulnerabilities, the perceived lack of alternatives, and a restricted ability to negotiate the terms of transactions expose significant power imbalances between clients and sex workers, as well as between sex workers and middle men.

These power imbalances are also embedded within gendered stereotypes and social constructions of the body. At the crux of this issue is the body's 'special relation to the constitution of the self' (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 121). Where sex work is concerned, this 'special relation' forms the ontological basis for perceptions of sex workers and, we argue, influences the extent to which they can exercise agency.

Feminist theory has approached constructions of the relationship between the bodies and the selves of sex workers through various analytical lenses, as identified by Wolkowitz (2006). These include the body as text, the essentialised body, the commodified body, the socialised body, the body without organs, and the agential body (Wolkowitz, 2006). We discuss each of these briefly below, before exploring their meaning in the context of sex work in Luganville, Vanuatu, and their salience for understanding the complexities of vulnerability and agency in that context.

The body as text

The body as text refers to the construction of the self as mediated by various discourses relating to the body, parts of the body, or particular bodies. Discourses around sex workers' bodies are complex, as they intersect with constructions around sex, sexuality, gender, disease, morality, propriety, and abuses or states of injury. In relation to dominant social norms in European societies that idealise monogamy, love, and marriage, for example, prostitution has been considered an 'abuse of sex', and the body of the sex worker as a site of sin (Nagle, 1997). The body as text is contextual, relating to specific discourses around bodies in particular places.

The 'essentialised' body

Women's bodies in many contexts may be essentialised as being pure and innocent, reflecting (and reproducing) moralist, patriarchal views (Wolkowitz, 2006). Consequently, the 'essential self' of the female sex worker is seen to be debased, often to the extent that 'it cannot recognise its true interests', so is 'de-selfed' (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 126) or dehumanised. Framed as an essentialised body, then, the sex worker is subsumed and defined as contrary to what women are imagined intrinsically to be, or what women ought to be (Wolkowitz, 2006).

The 'commodified' body

The 'commodified' body points to the 'vexed relation between money and sex' (McClintock, 1993, p. 1). As sex workers exchange sexual services for money and/or other goods, some see the bodies of sex workers as a 'form of property, a legitimate object of trade' (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 128), putting power in the hands of the 'consumer', or client. Alternatively, others argue that sex workers are performing a labour which is separate from the self (Wolkowitz, 2006). Therefore, 'it is not the exchange of money that demeans [sex workers], but the context in which the exchange is made' (McClintock, 1993, p. 2). There are significant implications for power and agency related to different conceptions of the 'commodified' body.

The 'socialised' body

The socialised body describes how social relations and interactions, informed by context-dependent hierarchies and power relations, are both internalised into sex workers' identities and observed in social encounters (Wolkowitz, 2006). Repressive conditions imposed on female sexuality and sexual expression, and the blame associated with divergence from social norms, also play a role in the socialised body/self of sex workers. Through the socialised body, sex workers' autonomy may be seen to vary depending on 'social status, organisation of the sex trade, perception of their rights and biological history' (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 135). The socialised body, then, also indicates the significance of law and policies regarding sex work. Punitive laws regarding sex work increase the vulnerability of sex workers, as they are treated as criminals, and thus have no recourse to justice in instances of abuse.

The 'body-without-organs'

The body-without-organs' highlights the transcendental sphere of sexual fantasy and desire, moving beyond the mere physiology of a body with organs. Moreover, it suggests that 'the pleasures and play of body contact potentially exceed and even transform the discourses and social relations that contain it' (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 137). In other words, the body-without-organs conceives of sex workers' bodies as not bound to the physical and social worlds. Rather, as bodies-without-organs, sex workers enter the realm of sexual fantasy and desire. Research that puts forward this approach often focusses on the ways in which sex workers may gain pleasure from transactions, as a way of potentially shifting the balance of power (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 138). Yet critics warn that such an admission does not and should not negate the structural inequalities and material conditions that so often give rise to sex work and that continue to shape transactions (Wolkowitz, 2006).

The 'agential' body

The agential body refers to the ways in which sex workers 'try to resist objectification by using their bodies to defend themselves' as subjects (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 138). It acknowledges that individual agency may be exercised in transactions, and that workers may adopt protective 'techniques of the self' (see Martin, Gutman and Hutton, 1988; Wolkowitz, 2006) consisting of codes or boundaries of physical access to their bodies, or preparatory routines or rituals, in order to establish a 'psychological context' for their work (Brewis & Linstead, 2000, p. 215). Thus, the agential body highlights the negotiation of power between the sex worker and the client, and how sex workers install self-preservation boundaries, such as refusing to kiss clients, or using drugs and alcohol (as noted in Plumbridge and Abel, 2001, in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context), although the latter represents a more problematic protective mechanism. By applying various distancing techniques during transactions, sex workers may establish some level of emotional management and boundary maintenance, thus preserving the 'self'. Maintaining secrecy around their work may also be seen as a 'technique of the self', to limit who has awareness of their self-as-sex-worker. Self-preservation and re-selving strategies may be adopted to contest each form of body/self-conflation discussed above. Accordingly, the relationship between the body and the self is not completely out of the control of sex workers as they negotiate the terms of their work.

The different ways in which the body is understood to constitute the self (through, for example, discourse and social/economic structures), are important because the ways in which sex workers are viewed ontologically impact the possibilities for them to exercise agency, independently and/or relationally. The following section explores these diverse aspects of

'body work' in the context of sex work in Luganville, and the consequences for workers' ability to assert agency and claim their SHRH rights.

'I stap long blad' ('It's in the blood'): Perceptions of relation of sex work to the self in Vanuatu

Analysing the ways in which the bodies of Luganville-based ni-Vanuatu sex workers were conceived as constituting their selves through gendered discourses (predominantly negotiated and controlled by men) shows that sex workers are regularly disempowered by diverse conceptions of the body/self. Through these processes they can be argued to be 'de-selfed', and this undermining of their personhood is tied to the limited ability sex workers seem to have to exercise agency around transactions. It also suggests that they cannot altogether surpass the limits of their 'encompassed' agency; rather, the parameters of this encompassment are re-negotiated, yet remain controlled by men. This discussion will primarily concern female sex workers (as the largest group of participants) and discuss the sex industry in Luganville along gendered lines, including insights from the male non-sex worker participants. While we would argue for a similar approach that engages deeply with the gendered assumptions which underpin male sex workers' experiences, these issues are beyond the scope of this article.

The heading of this section includes a phrase that was used throughout interviews, along with others in a similar vein, which revealed a common perception that sex work was somehow innate to women who engaged in this form of labour – that it was 'in their blood'. Furthermore, it was noted that sex work could, as John (middle man, 34 years) put it, 'get used to your blood', so it could also *become* a part of someone through other influences (such as one's peers engaging in sex work and encouraging one into it), and through the irresistible lure of money. Similarly, Tim (ex-boyfriend of a sex worker, 24 years) stated that sex workers 'become infected with it [sex work]; they can't control themselves', a framing which explicitly undermines agency, and relates to the discourse of pollution in relation to women's blood, discussed below. Such comments indicate a widely held assumption that, particularly for women, sex work was either inborn, or could become an essential part of themselves and their bodies, even when they engaged in sex work due to financial vulnerability.

The discursive construction of sex work being 'in the blood' of ni-Vanuatu sex workers is an example of how the body can be framed as a constitution of the self through text or discourse about the body, which in this case is largely constructed by men. It also demonstrates how discourse can construct an essentialised conception of sex workers. This is exemplified in the stigmatising phrase 'woman blong rod' ('woman of the road'), a euphemism for sex work commonly used in Vanuatu. Interestingly, Mitchell (2002; see also Cummings, 2008) notes how 'woman blong rod' is an inversion of the phrase 'rod blong woman' ('the path of women'). 'Rod blong woman' refers to a woman's journey according to kastom, and how, through marriage, and reproductive and productive labour, she is to uphold and ensure the upkeep of kastom. This reveals two essentialised dichotomous framings of women in Vanuatu, as either 'good' kastom, Christian women, or 'bad' women who have been corrupted by foreign ways (Jolly, 2001).

The reference to 'women of the road' also overlays long-standing social constructions that associate women's mobility with deviance from social norms and with promiscuity. This connection has been made elsewhere by ni-Vanuatu men, European explorers and those involved in the historic migration of ni-Vanuatu for work on plantations from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century (see Jolly, 1987).⁴

In exploring such discursive constructions of sex workers that essentialise women's bodies, which were evident throughout interviews for this research, we can gain insights into the complex ways in which ni-Vanuatu sex workers are potentially 'de-selfed' (Wolkowitz, 2006,

p. 126). Such essentialising constructions are arguably tied to historical taboos associated particularly with women's reproductive blood, and Christian notions of feminine modesty, maternity and domesticity. Beliefs around the potency of blood associated with women's reproductive bodies, which is often thought to cause illness in men (Jolly, 1994), become more problematic when we consider the burden of responsibility for sexual and reproductive health. As Jolly (2001, p. 198) argues: 'Women are still feared as a source of pollution, not just the pollution of their reproductive bodies but of introduced diseases (especially venereal diseases and HIV/AIDS) and the heat and dirt of money.'

Throughout interviews for this research, it was revealed that clients rarely accepted the use of condoms; yet, ironically, sex workers were explicitly blamed for the spread of STIs/HIV. Perhaps this conviction is linked to a belief that transmissible illnesses are innate to women's reproductive bodies. Furthermore, as sex work was seen to 'infect' the blood of the women who undertake this work, STIs/HIV could be perceived as the consequent illnesses which can be passed on to male clients.

Essentialising constructions of women are also informed by Christianity, in that sex workers may be framed in opposition to an idealised, modest Christian woman. Though Christian values may be important in ni-Vanuatu women's articulations of their human rights (Jolly, 2005), indigenised Christianity in Vanuatu seems to exclude sex workers. Sex workers may be deemed to be lacking in the essential constituents of 'good women', such as being 'hard working, modest, and faithful' (Jolly, 2001, p. 198).

The 'commodified body' was found to be complex, as it related to perceptions of sex workers' bodies during transactions, and appeared to be influenced by the incursion of wage labour and capitalist perceptions of individual possession in Vanuatu. Importantly, the discursive meaning of sexual transactions observed through this research seemed to be largely controlled by men (middle men and clients), whether they were viewed as a compensation-like payment for the 'gift' of sexual pleasure, or a commodity transaction where the client was purchasing, and therefore in possession of the exchange (Jolly, 2015; Servy, 2014). While the perception of the 'gift' of sexual pleasure in the exchange process was mentioned, in this research interviewees mostly talked about people as 'selling themselves', alongside similar phrases such as 'selem ass' ('sell your ass') and 'selem bodi' ('sell your body'). In this way, while the gift economy (Jolly, 2015; Servy, 2014) complicates understandings of what exchange processes mean, and may still play a role to varying extents in exchanges of sex for money/goods, ni-Vanuatu sex workers seemed to be predominantly associated with a commercial transaction, with their bodies as objects of trade. This understanding, evident during interviews, impacted the ability of sex workers to claim their rights, to the extent that, according to interviewees, police would no longer take action on violence against sex workers once money (or other goods) had been given.

The strong association between money and power means that sex workers often had a significantly reduced claim (due to the threat of sexual or physical violence) over their sexual and reproductive health rights after payment had been made. John (middle man, 24 years), for example, shared a story of a sex worker who was paid to have sex by six young men who had returned from the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in Aotearoa/New Zealand. These six young men had sex with her one after the other, even past the point where she was obviously in pain and had eventually passed out. When asked why these young men did not stop, or why he did not stop them, John replied: 'Because they gave money to have sex. They had already paid. That's it. You understand?' The rights of the sex worker were ignored, and her wellbeing was considered only after each of the young men had got his money's worth. Such violence was seen to be permissible because the (de-selfed) body it was inflicted upon was seen as a less than human object, as it had been paid for.

Sex workers' understandings of themselves were also informed by social interactions and social hierarchies. Thinking about ni-Vanuatu sex workers in terms of the 'socialised body' involves considering gendered relations within their social environment. Vanuatu has a long history of male-male relations, for example during exchanges of wealth as part of masculine grade-taking rituals, and in political negotiations and interactions between male colonisers, plantation owners, and missionaries, and ni-Vanuatu men (Jolly, 1987, 1994). The middle man structure of the sex industry, along with perceptions of clients as 'big men', reveals a continuity of these male-male relations and exchanges of goods and wealth. Here men are in positions of either already assumed power, or potential power. Sex workers, on the other hand, seem mostly to be ascribed status by male clients (i.e., by being in high demand), while they have limited control over the wealth for exchange and the terms and conditions of transactions. In sex workers' social interactions with middle men and clients, as described by interviewees, their agency seemed to be encompassed by their socially constituted position, which was defined primarily by these men. A sense of social stigma was also brought about through sex workers' often violent encounters with the wives of clients, whose social status was likely more reflective of gender norms associated with 'good' women (Jolly, 2001).

Here our analysis of ni-Vanuatu sex workers' agency differs from Wardlow's (2006) argument that 'pasinja meri' (women who exchange sex for money/goods in Papua New Guinea) move beyond being 'encompassed' by exercising 'negative agency' – that is, 'the refusal to participate in bridewealth transactions or to stay in a marriage' (p. 14). While the financial reward of sex work may have provided some level of independence for the ni-Vanuatu sex workers interviewed (for example, via the purchasing of clothes, accessories, kava, and alcohol) beyond their duties to the clan, their agency was more complex, and remained (explicitly and implicitly) circumscribed by the discursive power of middle men and clients.

The 'socialised' bodies of sex workers are also partly defined by their legal position. In Vanuatu, while sex work in private is legal, sections 101 and 148 of the Penal Code list the following as offences: 'procuring, aiding or facilitating the prostitution of another person'; 'sharing in the proceeds of prostitution whether habitual or otherwise'; 'being subsidised by any person engaging in prostitution'; and 'soliciting for immoral purposes in a public place' (Godwin, 2012, p. 177). Thus, the restrictive conditions under which sex workers may legally operate 'drive them into the illegal sector and unsafe situations' (Harrington, 2010). Kastom law (traditional justice systems which still operate widely in Vanuatu) also has punitive conditions for sex workers. Interviewees described how, if discovered, sex workers would be punished in traditional courts, and might be required to provide compensation payments, due to their interference in clients' marriages. This suggests that ni-Vanuatu sex workers are penalised and lack recourse to justice where they experience maltreatment. They are further 'de-selfed' by lacking legitimacy as legal individuals, entitled to recognition of their full human rights.

The 'body-without-organs' relates to the pleasure, fantasy and desire aspects of sexual interactions as part of transactions, and how these aspects inform how sex workers are conceived, and think about themselves. Pleasure and desire are also informed by social constructions around gender. Here, the body-without-organs relates to contemporary configurations of masculinities, where money is a key medium through which men can exercise authority and express virility (Jolly, 2016). In addition, the phrase used by multiple interviewees, that clients are 'using their bodies', reveals how sex workers may think about themselves in relation to sexual satisfaction as a socially constituted male entitlement. Consider, for example, Mary's (female sex worker 17 years) conviction that 'us women, we must do something to make him feel good'. While some of the sex workers interviewed also derived sexual pleasure from transactions, one even stating that she insisted upon it, many found sex with clients rough,

rushed and painful, and relied somewhat on alcohol or kava to cope with sexual transactions.

These diverse ways in which ni-Vanuatu sex workers' bodies were constructed as a constitution of their selves are problematic, as they essentially deny the complex personhood of sex workers and, by implication, their full human rights. While the economic vulnerability of sex workers was also acknowledged during interviews, with the body as a financial 'safety net' (Dewey, 2011, p. 121), the discussion above reveals ni-Vanuatu sex workers to be positioned at a difficult nexus. They are positioned in contrast to essentialist gendered paradigms of ni-Vanuatu women, yet at the same time bound to social norms and gender hierarchies, and male fantasies related to masculine virility. This space is further complicated by assumptions of labour and exchange that are embedded within capitalist economics.

Sex workers' attempts to assert their agency face numerous challenges. Clients seem to control financial and socio-political forms of power, and patriarchal discourses and social norms continue to reduce the identities of sex workers to their bodies, denying the complexity of their lives and identities, and the structural circumstances that lead to financial vulnerability. Sex workers' own understandings of themselves, as they relate to these dominant values and paradigms, were also found to be complex. These are discussed below, particularly in relation to how they understand, articulate, and are able to assert their rights.

'I spoil their thoughts': the complexity of agency for ni-Vanuatu sex workers

This section discusses the strategies and intimate negotiations of power that the sex workers interviewed adopted to establish boundaries in their interactions with clients. It acknowledges that agency is complex and often contradictory (Wardlow, 2006). Interviewees protected themselves partly through the covert manner in which they undertook their income-earning activities, limiting who had knowledge of their work, and therefore limiting their vulnerability to accusations and abuse. Some sex workers were also able to negotiate condom use with clients, asserting boundaries around physical access to their bodies (Brewis & Linstead, 2000). Several sex workers said they made condom use a condition of the sexual transaction, and some used rhetoric, insulting the client's level of schooling, if he said he did not want to use a condom. Another interviewee explicitly stated that she insisted that the transaction not be rushed so that she also could also derive enjoyment. Using the interaction to gain sexual pleasure can be seen as an assertion of agency.

However, interviewees also described limits to the extent of agency, and some very serious instances of abuse. Anne (female sex worker, 37 years) described being forced to become pregnant so that her client could maintain his exclusive claim over her, and Susan (female sex worker, 20 years) told a story about a friend who was forced into marriage with a client for the same reason. These cases reveal complicated entanglements of sex work with broader gendered expectations of female actions/labour (productive and reproductive) as part of larger social projects (Wardlow, 2006; Jolly, 1994). Sex workers also described continuous limits to exercising their agency with regard to condom use, often facing violence or the loss of a transaction for insisting on this. Deception over payment was also a common issue for sex workers, for example, clients 'promising' to pay an amount after the sexual activity had concluded, then leaving before paying, or paying less than originally stated. This deception from clients over payment reveals the limits to sex workers' ability to negotiate the economic conditions of transactions. One female sex worker interviewed, who also had a disability, spoke about some clients lying about their employment and 'promising' to return after their payday to pay her, but not following through. This was described as unjust and as causing feelings of humiliation.

In addition to these considerable challenges, it appeared that many sex workers internalised a sense of responsibility or culpability in relation to male desire, evident in the quote by Anne that heads this section. This self-blame, which appeared to be internalised by the sex workers interviewed, speaks to the broader social discourse of the ‘culpability’ of these women in undermining the path of *kastom* and their place within it, and associated ‘cultural loss’ (Cummings, 2005, p. 54). It is also apparent in instances of sexual assault against them: as Cummings (2005) observes, in Vanuatu, ‘disrespect [of *kastom*, including with regards to modest dress] incites rape’ (p. 54). This gendered discourse around modernity and social ills again speaks to the complexities of the agency of sex workers in Vanuatu, as this discourse of blame implicitly circumscribes sex workers’ agency during transactions, as well as explicitly excusing the harassment and assault perpetrated by clients.

The sex workers interviewed also often articulated that men were helpless when it came to their sexual urges, as Daisy (female sex worker, 24 years) explained: ‘they [men] can’t control themselves. They don’t care. [...] They’ll just think about sex.’ There was a perception that sexual satisfaction was owed (even before payment had been made), and that sex workers felt they had to display humility in the face of the sexual entitlement of the men they interacted with (even in the face of violence). A couple of participants, for instance, spoke about how their vaginas ‘made men crazy’, leading to men losing accountability for their actions during transactions.

The self-perception of sex workers was, therefore, highly complex. On the one hand, many workers expressed some conviction over their need to protect their sexual/reproductive health (even if doing so was very difficult). Yet there was also an element of pride in relation to their ability to satisfy male desire, and perhaps by extension contribute to modern socio-economic and masculine structures:

There are men who work, they’re tired, so they need to relax. Then there are some who don’t work; they need money. This is the time when they use us for this kind of thing, for meeting these kinds of men (*Rose, female sex worker, 28 years*).

In addition to a sense of self-blame for men’s behaviour, there was also a sense of internalised humiliation, as sex workers tried to make sense of their working lives while being situated outside dominant gender norms. Furthermore, ni-Vanuatu sex workers could be perceived as embodiments of long-held male fears over women’s mobility and access to modernity, suggesting that they ‘must perforce become “prostitutes”’ (Jolly, 1987, p. 127). Sex workers do not fit the dominant patriarchal notions of *kastom* and Christian women, perhaps bringing about feelings of inferiority, or not being worthy of equivalent levels of treatment.

Conclusion

Sex work is prevalent in Luganville, and this may reflect similar situations in other urbanising contexts in the Pacific region. In these contexts, women’s bodies may be a resource or financial safety net, but their involvement in sex work brings with it numerous vulnerabilities and, in some cases, the threat of severe, life-changing abuse or disease.

The research discussed in this paper, conducted with ni-Vanuatu sex workers, middle men, and other male non-sex workers, reveals how ni-Vanuatu sex workers are encouraged into sex work, yet how various social, cultural, economic constructions and norms place serious restrictions on their ability to manage boundaries and assert their own agency in interactions. The theories of body work help us to analyse the various ways in which the sex worker is ontologically constructed as her body, and is thereby de-selfed or divested of full personhood. These dehumanising processes are co-constitutive of dominant gender norms that marginalise sex workers, reify male desire and power, and reduce the ability of sex workers to assert their

agency and claim their sexual and reproductive health rights.

In Luganville, these processes of de-selfing include being positioned as lacking in the essential constituents of ‘good’ women of kastom and of the church, and reinforcing social and moral fears around women’s mobility and access to modernity, relegating ni-Vanuatu sex workers to the moral margins of society. Sex workers are also understood as a commodified body, where ‘the transaction is rendered more akin to buying alienable commodities in a store’ (Jolly, 1994, p. 137). This reduces workers’ capacities to make claims on the transaction (as the goods purchased), and seems to underscore the demands of men (who have paid) to act as they wish. Men, it seems, may use their financial authority and socio-political positioning during sexual transactions to express masculinity and virility. Sex workers, conversely, seem to be perceived as corrupted women who are used discursively to reinforce patriarchal anxieties, their ‘corruption’ so innate to their being that a consideration of their wellbeing and consent seems to be largely discounted.

Sex work industries cannot be considered in isolation from the always gendered contexts in which they operate. Sex workers undertake sex work for a variety of reasons, and they ought to be able to exercise agency in relation to decisions that affect their health and wellbeing. Understanding the complex ways in which sex workers are constructed in particular contexts can raise awareness about the challenges they face and, it is hoped, better inform ongoing dialogue about their rights and well-being.

Ultimately, establishing a clear distinction between sex workers and the labour they perform seems to be a key factor in the assertion of their rights, both as complex individuals and as workers. Ni-Vanuatu sex workers need to be recognised in relation to their multiple capacities and roles, for example as mothers, as homemakers, as Christians, and as women and men of kastom. In addition, establishing a distinction between sex workers and their labour would likely entail supporting sex workers’ ‘self-recognition as workers’ (Kabeer, Milward & Sudarshan, 2013, p. 250), with the right to set boundaries and conditions around their labour. Although such processes may be mediated by the complexities of ‘encompassed’ agency, supporting the recognition of sex workers’ complex personhood would be *re-humanising*, to the extent that they could not be reduced to, for example, commercialised bodies, or stereotypical tropes. This could enhance their capacity to take action that supports their health and wellbeing, and it could encourage clients and middle men to respect their rights.

KATE BURRY works in sexual and intimate partner violence prevention, research, and advocacy in Aotearoa/New Zealand. She is also in the early stages of setting up a peer-to-peer support network for sex workers in Vanuatu. This article builds on the research, arguments and analysis discussed in her Master’s thesis, ‘Selling Sex in Luganville’ (2017).

POLLY STUPPLES is a lecturer in Human Geography at Victoria University of Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Her research spans social and cultural geography, critical development studies and political ecology and she has an abiding interest in culture, power and gender. She supervised Kate Burry through her Masters research and collaborated with her in developing and writing this article.

Notes

1. The authors recognise that ‘sex work’ and ‘sex workers’ may be seen as terms associated with individualised and Western views of labour. The participants in this study did not refer to themselves as ‘sex workers’. While recognising these terms to be insufficient to explain the complex behaviours and fields of social relations that shape such interactions in the context of contemporary Vanuatu, we have kept using the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘sex workers’ because they reflect transactions (either for money or for goods) that have a primarily economic motivation. In addition, we see our work as in dialogue with other studies within the region (e.g. Servy, 2014) that also adopt these terms.

2. Kastom refers to ni-Vanuatu values, beliefs, practices/traditions, and ways of life, which vary from one community to the next. However, rather than describing every kastom in Vanuatu, kastom is often used as political rhetoric to differentiate what is distinctively ni-Vanuatu from what is foreign. It is argued that this 'insular conception of kastom' (Douglas, 2002, p. 17) has largely been arbitrated and controlled by ni-Vanuatu men (Jolly, 1994), including 'in support of arguments against women's participation in the public sphere' (Douglas, 2002, p. 17).
3. Poorer women employed in the body work of other more privileged women is not, of course, a new phenomenon (consider, for example, wet nursing).
4. For instance, while the male majority who made up migrant labour forces were seen to be motivated by 'a potent brew of the enticements of the exotic and the frustrations of the familiar', for the minority of ni-Vanuatu women who left for work on plantations, the 'emphasis was on their status as sexual beings' (Jolly, 1987, p. 124). Even though there is evidence that ni-Vanuatu women labourers' sexual relations with ni-Vanuatu and European men are 'more suggestive of rape than prostitution' (Jolly, 1987, p. 126), the discursive construction of ni-Vanuatu women labourers seems to have been devised largely by men (ni-Vanuatu and European alike) in an essentialised, sexualised manner.

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