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Author

Choudhury, Shonali M.

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Where Are the Voices?

Moving Beyond HIV in the Lives of Female Sex Workers

by Shonali M. Choudhury

Tijuana promises different things to different people. Throughout Mexico people in difficult circumstances dream of moving to the US-Mexico border in search of better economic opportunities and the chance to be closer to the American dream. Men of means from the United States and other countries flock to Tijuana in search of new and exciting sexual adventures. At the crossroads, we find women working in the sex industry in order to give their families a better life and at the same time servicing men seeking sex.

Women working in the commercial sex industry in Tijuana find themselves in a precarious

social position because they are violating the norms of sexual purity demanded of “good women” in order to provide for their children. Grounded in feminist constructivism, my research studies the process of forming a positive self-image and negotiating health in the lives of establishment-based female sex workers in Tijuana. In this research I find that the women working in the commercial sex industry have a strong drive to form a positive self-image as a way to manage their lives and challenge notions that they are women of little to no value. Social interactions both inside and outside the world of commercial



sex are central to shaping the self-image of women working in the commercial sex industry and their capacity to take control of their lives and health. My research suggests that the key processes that contribute to a positive self-image amongst female sex workers in Tijuana include being a good mother, having supportive sisterly relationships with women, managing relationships with men, legitimizing sex work, and rejecting the victim label.

My research concludes that public health interventions that aim to improve the health and well-being of female sex workers should take into account their existing strengths and resources. Programs should incorporate the reinforcement of values that are central to most women working in the commercial sex industry. The importance of supportive female figures in their lives can be replicated in a community health model in which sex workers are trained to be “promotoras” (big sister community health workers). Interventions that target sex workers should also take

into account their own holistic concepts of mental and physical health because narrowly targeting reproductive health undermines their positive self-image as women of value rather than sex objects.

The inspiration for working on this research project came from a class on health in Latin America at the UCLA School of Public Health. For this class I wrote a critical literature review of what has been labeled a “public health crisis” related to female sex workers and HIV in Tijuana. In the preparation of this paper, what struck me was that the voices of women were lacking from most of the discourses on the topic. Researchers were quick to assume that women working in the sex industry are to blame for HIV crossing over from high-risk populations to low-risk populations or that female sex workers are helpless victims caught in a lifetime of desperation. I asked myself how we could possibly talk about a public health crisis and not involve the “public” or the community.

As a doctoral student in the Department of Community Health

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Sciences in the School of Public Health with a subconcentration in Women’s Studies, I decided to use my training and my dedication to issues related to community and women’s health to address the significant gaps in the literature in regards to the health and well-being of women working in the commercial sex industry in Tijuana.

As a resident of Southern California, the US-Mexico border is a significant part of my social world. Although prior to this

research project I had spent vast amounts of time in Mexico, I had never been to Tijuana. I decided to embark on an adventure, and I drove my car to the border and crossed into Mexico by foot. Crossing the border was a very interesting experience. You walk a few feet and cross through a turnstile gate and all of a sudden you are in a very different world. Although the process of crossing the border is relatively easy and you are not

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asked for any documentation of citizenship, you are greeted by men in fatigues and masks carrying semi-automatic weapons. The military and police are not worried about illegal immigration into Mexico but rather are responding to the government call for a crack down on drug trafficking. One's confidence that their presence is making the city safer is shattered by the news stories about corruption within law enforcement.

Once you move past the guns, you encounter a hodgepodge of bars and craft vendors desperately seeking your patronage and the US dollar. Walking down the main street, if you look closely, you can see women standing on the corners luring men with as simple a sign as a wink. At first the environment seems shocking and unfamiliar. But things change when you get to know your surroundings and the people in the community.

Through the nonprofit organization the Bi-National Center for Human Rights, I was able to make contacts in the community, and I started talking to women working in the sex industry. Engaging in these conversations changed everything. I was no longer in a strange environment but rather just sharing life stories with other women. Prior to officially starting the research project, I had many informal conversations with these women to find out about their lives, their concerns, and their priorities. Hearing their stories helped me realize that as public health scholars, we cannot forget about the faces and voices of the people and communities with whom we work. As I continued to gather data through in-depth interviews, I learned a great deal about the lives of these women that was not uncovered in other research with this community. My research reveals how women working in the sex industry are engaged in a constant struggle to form a positive self image. By engaging with the community I developed a model for public

health action that starts from the voices of the women rather than making judgments about their lives and health priorities. While HIV is an important factor in their lives, it is only part of a larger struggle to live fulfilling lives and provide the best life possible for their children and families.

Shonali M. Choudhury finished her Ph.D. in May 2009 at the UCLA School of Public Health with a concentration in Community Health Sciences and a subconcentration in Women's Studies. She specializes in health promotion among marginalized women, reproductive health, and the application of feminist research methods in public health. For her dissertation research she spent extensive time working in the field with women working in the commercial sex industry in Tijuana, Mexico. She was awarded the Elizabeth Blackwell, MD, award in June 2009 for her paper "As Prostitutes, We Control Our Bodies": Perceptions of Health and Body in the Lives of Establishment-Based Female Sex Workers in Tijuana.