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"At your own risk" : narratives of Zimbabwean migrant sex workers in Hillbrow and discourses of vulnerability, agency, and power.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the self-representations of cross-border migrant, female sex workers in Johannesburg and compares these representations to those created by public discourses around cross-border migration, sex work, and gender. With a focus on issues of agency, vulnerability, and power, the study questions the impact of prevalent representations of these women by others on their individual self-representations. The participatory approach of this study builds on previous participatory research projects with migrant sex workers in Johannesburg and employs creative writing as a methodology to generate narratives and thus adds to literature about alternative methodologies for reaching currently marginalised and under-researched groups. Organisations such as Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) and Sisonke Sex Worker Movement have worked with sex workers to generate digital stories for advocacy; however, academic research employing storytelling as a methodology has not been done with migrant sex workers in South Africa. While existing evidence indicates that cross-border migrant, female sex workers are often marginalised by state and non-state actors professing to assist them, this study emphasizes the voices of the women themselves. Over the course of three months, I conducted creative writing workshops with five female Zimbabwean sex workers in Hillbrow, Johannesburg; the women generated stories in these workshops that became the basis for one-on-one unstructured interviews. I compared the self-representations that emerged from this process with the representations of migrant sex workers that I determined from a desk review of the websites of organisations that contribute to trafficking and sex work discourses in South Africa.

With the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Bill close to becoming law in South Africa and the prevalent assumption that systemic trafficking problems are related to the sex industry and irregular migration, developing a better understanding of migrants involved in sex work in South Africa is particularly important. Furthermore, a national focus on reducing and even preventing immigration—and the stigma attached to migrants—adds urgency to the elucidation of the lives of migrants. This study investigates how female Zimbabwean sex workers in Johannesburg—often positioned as vulnerable and sometimes misidentified as trafficked—see themselves in a country increasingly concerned with issues of (anti-)immigration and (anti-)trafficking. Furthermore, sex work is criminalized in South Africa and social mores

attach stigma to prostitution. Contrary to assumptions that all sex workers are forced into the industry or foreign sex workers trafficked into the country, the participants in this study spoke of active choices in their lives—including choices about their livelihood and their movement—and describe their vulnerabilities and strengths. Perhaps the most striking similarity between participants was the women's acknowledgement of the dangers they face and the decisions they make, weighing risks and gains. This recognition of agency ran through the six key themes that I generated through thematic analysis: Conflicting Representations of Sex Work, Stigma and Double Existence, Health and Safety, Importance of Independence, Morality of Remittances, and Mobility. Throughout the analysis, I argue that the participants in the study present themselves as aware of the dangers they face and calculating the risks. The participants responded enthusiastically to the creative writing methodology—through their stories, discussions, and interviews, they portrayed a complex, at times ambiguous, portrait of migrant sex workers in South Africa. While recognizing their double vulnerability—as illegally engaging in sex work and, often, illegally residing in South Africa, they also emphasized their strength and agency.