Tainted Identities, Masculinities, and Sex Work: A Qualitative Study of Male Sex Workers and Key Informants in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Research Article

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Abstract

Introduction: Despite historical knowledge of "sugar mummies" who purchase sex from young men, there remains a significant gap in research on male sex workers in Zimbabwe. This study suggests that sociology and anthropology can offer valuable insights into this discursive space.

Methods: This research aimed to understand the factors influencing knowledge production on male sex work and the perceptions and manifestations of masculinity among male sex workers and key informants working with male sex work programs in Harare, Zimbabwe. Theoretical frameworks such as Connell's (1987) hegemonic masculinity, Goffman's (1963) ideas on stigma, and Foucault's (1980) concepts of knowledge, power, regimes of truth, and discourse are adopted to illuminate this study.

Results: The findings indicate that Multiple factors contribute to the seeming academic silence on male sex work, including various forms of stigma, funding limitations, the discrete nature of male sex work, and the cultural and legal fabric. These issues are compounded by patriarchy, where such knowledge is seen as destabilising and, thus, marginalised. Existing research on male sex work is largely sensationalised and conducted by traditional and social media. The absence of literature means that stakeholders, researchers, and the general population fail to understand the diversity of people selling sex and address their specific needs of the same.

Conclusion: Future research on male sex work in Zimbabwe should explore emerging issues such as mental health, HIV, economic needs and legality.

Key words: Male sex work, gender, masculinity, power, discourse, Harare Zimbabwe

Introduction

Sex work is a broad and contentious issue that has existed for centuries (Big Alobo, 2023). Sex work is not a new phenomenon, and its historical prevalence is illuminated by the colloquial saying that it is "the oldest profession". Historically, sex work has been known by the derogatory term "prostitution" and has only recently been considered a form of work (John, 2020). The term "sex work" emerged in the 1970s through the prostitutes' rights movements in the USA and Western Europe (Gowen, 2011).

The sex work position asserts that prostitution is a legitimate form of labour that is not inherently harmful (Big Alobo, 2023). The term "sex worker" includes female, male, and transgender adults who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, either regularly or occasionally (WHO Health Organization, 2016). Sex work involves consensual relationships between adults (John, 2020). Despite the term "sex worker" catering to all genders, the focus has predominantly been on female sex workers, their clients, and their occupations (Curtis and Boe, 2023).

Weitzer (2009) notes that literature on sex work has grown significantly, but it remains deficient in several important ways, with most research focusing on female sex workers and neglecting the issue of masculinity. Numerous studies have been conducted on sex work worldwide, but male sex work is often depicted as "pathological" or at "risk" and linked to homosexuality (Bacio and Rinaldi, 2022). Male sex workers are diverse across and within countries and may identify as heterosexual, gay, or bisexual (Baral et al., 2014). Male sex workers are distinct from transgender female sex workers and often do not identify as sex workers, despite offering services mostly to other men (Baral et al., 2014). Male sex workers engage in sex work for various reasons, including financial necessity and personal fulfilment, and terms of exchange can be non-monetary, such as gifts or drinks (Baral et al., 2014). While earlier studies pathologised male sex work, recent attention has focused on structural factors such as poverty and unemployment (Mashumba, 2025). Male sex workers constitute an important subcultural group in anthropology, particularly as a key population in the context of HIV/AIDS (Gowen, 2011). This article bridges the geographic, disciplinary, and academic gaps in sociology, anthropology, and male sex work in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Male sex workers are less visible for several reasons. According to Curtis and Boe (2023), technology plays a significant role in male sex work, allowing some sex workers to be more convenient and anonymous in their interactions with clients. The relative lack of attention to men involved in sex work may be partly explained by the smaller number of male

sex workers, despite their consistent presence in society throughout history. The sex industry has traditionally been characterized by a female supply and male demand (Mashumba, 2025), making it challenging to distinguish male sex work from same-sex relationships. The geographic organisation of male sex work varies across societies, and male sex workers are often less visible than female sex workers (Baral et al., 2014). Male sex work is often discussed in relation to or as a subset of men who have sex with men (MSM), which can create greater anxiety and ambiguity around identity and boundaries. Male sex work is often overlooked because it challenges the boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, particularly when men identifying as heterosexuals engage in sex with other men (Bacio and Rinaldi, 2022). Male sex workers take on a paradoxical role, attracting social fears and anxieties related to trespassing between genders and the conception of the body as a tool for producing male bodies. Few male sex workers identify as sex workers, as sex work may not be a regular source of income and is often viewed as an informal practice to support themselves temporarily (Baral et al., 2015).

Male sex work is often stereotyped and essentialised as feminine, with male sex workers perceived as less structured and organised than female sex workers (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2022; Baral et al., 2015). Sex work has traditionally been discussed as an expression of male dominance over females. The stereotype of a sex worker is often linked to the image of a female, naturally considered feminine (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2022). Males are presumed to have a better chance as a "natural" inhabitant and legitimate occupant of public space, exercising social control. According to Dworkin (1993), prostitution is a way for men to express male supremacy over women's bodies, with the prostituted individual experiencing a specific inferiority as the client feels powerful and brave. Dworkin further argues that society is organized so that men have the power they need to use women as they want. As will be seen in this paper, this narrative not only affords a feminist analysis of sex work but also highlights the fact that men who are clients or sex workers playing a ‘receptive’ role are viewed as giving away their power and thus as downgrading male supremacy. This is rooted in the vestiges of hierarchy in sexual relationships. Male sex workers are often assumed to be homosexual, with hypermasculinity perceived as heterosexuality and non-masculine behaviour as homosexuality (Mashumba, 2025).

Male sex work is often associated with HIV, and the risk of HIV is higher for male sex workers (MSW) than for female sex workers (Baral et al., 2014). However, the focus on HIV often leads to the oversimplification of issues around sex work and sexuality, and male sex workers

are often targeted as men who have sex with men (MSM) (Woensdregt and Nencel, 2020). The vulnerability of male sex workers to HIV is partly due to structural reasons, such as client power and preference, fear of violence, and economic constraints (Samudzi and Manelle, 2015). An HIV lens alone offers a singular conceptualisation of male sex workers' bodies as risky and renders them invisible in broader everyday issues (Woensdregt and Nencel, 2020). Male sex workers experience multi-layered stigma and structural forms of discrimination, and their lives are often at the intersection of two major cultural taboos: sex work and homosexuality (Woensdregt & Nencel, 2020). They face violence and are at risk of being outed, and their socio-cultural representation is often missing in most studies on the subject.

Male sex workers are common in urban and tourist destinations in Thailand. For example, Mashumba (2025) documents the existence of male sex entrepreneurs in Botswana, where sex workers have taken advantage of tourism to seek opportunities beyond limiting contexts such as unemployment, underemployment and poverty. This highlights the political and economic analysis of male sex work as an industry. In Zimbabwe, records of male sex work exist in areas such as Harare, Victoria Falls, and Bulawayo. It is essential for academics and organisations to acknowledge and address the issue of male sex workers, rather than sliding it under the carpet in pursuit of "normal" hegemonic male expectations. Masculinity is often overlooked in sex work analysis, despite its significance in sociology and gender studies (Bacio and Rinaldi, 2022). This paper explores male sex work, an issue that is not well covered in the literature.

Theoretical framework

This study employs Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Foucault's (1980) ideas on knowledge, discourse, regimes of truth, and power as theoretical lenses. Hegemonic masculinity, a cultural prototype idealised and accepted by society (Muparamoto, 2012), is related to femininities and subordinated masculinities. Men who embody hegemonic masculinity are praised for being "real men", while those who fail to live up to these expectations, such as male sex workers, are stigmatised and treated as deviant (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity emphasises risk-taking, danger, and provision as ways to prove manhood, often resulting in toxic masculinities, such as having multiple sexual partners and using violence to assert manhood (Gukurume & Shoko, 2023; Muparamoto, 2012). This form of masculinity is constructed in relation to both femininities and subordinated masculinities, perpetuating gender inequality (Connell, 1987; Jewkes et al. 2015). Foucault's ideas on knowledge and power highlight how certain types of

knowledge are supported by power and constitute discourse, while others are vilified (Foucault, 1980). Discourse has hegemony over other forms of knowledge, erasing the discursive existence of marginalised ones. This lens is helpful in understanding whose reality counts and whose standards of validity are used (Mandizadza and Chavhunduka, 2012).

The concept of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1980) is also relevant, as it relates to how discourses are made to appear, are represented, and are sustained as truth. This perspective reveals how the male sex work literature challenges regimes of truth and power (Suleymanoglu-Kurun et al., 2025). Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) is used to illustrate how male sex workers identities are tainted and how they create strategies to distance themselves from the perceived deviant aspects of their work and preserve their masculinity. Sex work is a form of stigmatised or "dirty" work characterised by physical, social, and moral stigma (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). These frameworks enable a reflection on policy, practice, and canonical struggles around male sex workers, highlighting the need to forge epistemic spaces and decolonise spaces to critically think about and document male sex work in the region. They also explain the hierarchies in knowledge production, funding arrangements, and institutions that enforce certain paradigms while marginalising other forms of knowledge (Elmasri et al., 2023).

Methodology

Participant recruitment

The current study was conducted in Harare, Zimbabwe over three months. Data were collected at places and times convenient for the participants between March and May 2018. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. To be eligible, participants had to reside in Harare, be 18 years or older, be working with organisations that work for and with male sex workers, and identify as male sex workers for key informants and individuals in in-depth interviews, respectively. Three key informants, one from GALZ and two from the Zimbabwe Rainbow community, were recruited, and seven individual male sex, mostly affiliated with the Zimbabwe Rainbow community, were recruited.

Design

This study used phenomenology as a qualitative research tradition. This tradition is premised on the idea that those who have experienced and interacted with a particular phenomenon are better positioned to share insights on the subject. Over a period of three months, the researcher conducted unstructured interviews with male sex workers and key informants, each lasting from 45 minutes to one hour. The discussions revolved around perspectives on knowledge production and dissemination, perceptions of gender and masculinity and male sex work, and particularly factors that influence research

on male sex work as a gender and development issue. This approach enables those who interact with and identify with the phenomenon to share their detailed understanding of the research topic. Conducting individual in-depth interviews and key informant interviews helped triangulate the data and merge perspectives from lived experience and policy perspectives.

Research Setting

Harare was chosen because the researcher lived there and worked with an organisation that serves some of the target groups. Harare was convenient and gave the researcher access to the community owing to prior interactions with the organisations and their members.

Research questions

The research questions focused on respondents' perceptions of and knowledge of gender, masculinity, and male sex work, and factors influencing knowledge production and dissemination on the subject of male sex work.

Ethics

The researcher identified himself as a program officer and community development practitioner and explained the purpose of the study, its instruments, and the potential advantages and disadvantages of participating in the research. All participants approached were comfortable participating and sharing their experiences in English. The researcher shared the basic research questions and written informed consent and explained them to the participants. The researcher provided the participants with an opportunity to seek clarity and ask questions. He explained the right to participate voluntarily and withdraw from the study. Participants were assigned codes instead of names to use on the consent forms, which they signed as proof of consent to the research. This also ensured confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Interviews were conducted at GALZ premises in a safe space. At the time, the Zimbabwe Rainbow community was still emerging as an affinity group hosted by GALZ.

Limitations

The sample size of this research may not warrant generalisation to contexts different from Harare and to subcultural groups that differ from the sample. The researcher, as an employee of one of the community-based organisations, was regarded as both an ‘insider’ and an outsider, and that reflectivity was perceived as a point of ‘privilege’ by some participants. The idea of researching male sex work was brought forward by an individual who indicated during the researcher’s interface with transgender women that "as male sex workers, we are ignored and excluded." This prompted the research and indicated the issue as an advocacy agenda.

Results

The findings are presented thematically, focusing on the participants' understanding of gender and male sex work, factors affecting research and knowledge of male

sex work, and how some male sex workers manage gender expectations and stigma around male sex work.

Demographic characteristics

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 45 years. Only one individual was above 30 years of age during that time. He had immense experience as a manager of issues related to minority groups and male sex work. The remaining participants were program directors, operations directors, and sex workers. Some were married in heterosexual relationships. Some had children and were unmarried. Some were bisexual, gay, or heterosexual. Involvement in male sex work was mainly through referrals, social spaces, and virtual platforms such as Planet Romeo, Grindr, Tinder, Badoo, and Facebook. They had varied educational backgrounds, with some having basic ordinary levels and others having postgraduate degrees. Three were formally employed by two community-based organisations. Some were community volunteers and/or sex workers. Sex work was mainly performed as an income generation and an add-on to some income. Clients varied in terms of gender and sex, with both women and men seeking their services. One identified as scoliosexual and offered services mainly to transgender women and men of diverse gender and sex. Participants identified as 'receptive/bottom','assertive/top', or 'versatile/universal, and roles in sexual activities were fluid and negotiated depending on the sexual service offered, ranging from anal, vaginal, oral, and mutual masturbation to non-penetrative.

Male Sex work as a Failure

Male sex work is viewed as a sign of weakness and a failure to be a breadwinner through traditional routes. It is also seen as a less idealised form of masculinity that regular men should portray. One key informant noted:

> *I think the society programmed it in such a way that men have all the ego and superiority due to patriarchy and masculinity. In such an environment, it is embarrassing and degrading for men to be sex workers, compared to women. A married man may be more embarrassed to tell his family that he sleeps with other men to bring food to the table. Because of ego and masculinity, it is challenging to conduct such research. approaching a male sex worker may be a slap in his face even if he does, as it is shocking and embarrassing if a husband sells sex to feed his family. So, they do it in private to avoid emasculation associated with disclosure as men have pride and male ego".*

Discreetness of male sex work

Male sex work was described as more discreet and not visible to the public. One respondent noted, "*Men in patriarchal societies should display economic independence. Men may not want to be known as sex workers, so researchers and*

organizations can have challenges tracing these men in programs targeting them." Another respondent noted:

> *"Male sex workers are there in Zimbabwe, not only in Victoria Falls but also in Harare and other major cities. When you go and do research on key populations, you may be surprised to find them; the issue is no longer whether they exist or not. It is about accessibility and visibility. Male sex work is not as visible as that of women. These issues are culturally conditioned in nature. Men should not sell sex; if they do, they do it in hiding, as they should still go out there and act as 'men' despite the fact that they may play a woman's role in the backstage.".*

Another respondent added, "It *is generalised that women are sex workers, and the few male sex workers who exist are thus ignored. Only educated individuals can believe they exist the rest can be conservative and deny the reality*..."

Thus, it was noted that out of the few male sex workers, a few were ready to admit that they were into sex work, and the general public was also not likely to believe their existence.

Male Sex Work and Stigma

The study underlines the fact that stigma is one of the factors that explains the seeming academic abstinence on the issue of male sex work. A respondent noted:

> *"Male sex workers are more stigmatised than female sex workers. We are brought up in a society where men buy sex from women, not the other way around. Men buy sex but do not sell sex! Men who engage in sex work are therefore stigmatised and invisible, such that few researchers may penetrate their circles. Because of stigma, they may also not reveal that they are, in fact, sex workers, hence the silence among researchers, as women have been traditionally viewed as sex workers alone*".

Another respondent also highlighted the fact that stigma is not only an issue for male sex workers but also for researchers who may penetrate these circles.

> *"When you choose an area of interest, you should be prepared for the price. Those who work with male sex workers are likely to experience courtesy stigma as people end up questioning their own agendas and sexuality in the process. In such a scenario, few researchers can take the areas seriously, thus making them subjugated. ..".*

"Researchers may be aware of the phenomena of sex work, but maybe that does not count as worth documenting and researching on. Researchers may not have

found the idea of male sex work intriguing enough to publish it in renowned journals. They may also not be willing to research the issue, or they have not yet found willing donors to fund such research because it also goes along with the issue of livelihoods. Who would want to research something that is not funded, and whose families may die of hunger? ".

Apparently, stigma, attitudes toward knowledge around male sex work, and funding affect male sex workers as well as researchers who may have a stigma of association.

Patriarchy, cultural and societal attitude

Research on male sex work is in its infancy because Zimbabwean society is patriarchal, which shapes societal attitudes towards the area of interest. A respondent noted:

> "in *a society such as ours, sex in general is not talked about as openly; what of male sex work? This is difficult to discuss. …imagine a man with a dick (penis) telling someone that he is a sex worker; it is difficult. If you are a man in that trade, who are your clients? Its other men, as there are few women who can go out there to hire men to sleep with them. This makes the issue even complex ..."*

The study underscored the fact that women rarely go out and "buy" sex from men because they have been socialized that it is "uncultural" and unethical for women to seek sex workers and for men to sell sex. This limits the market for male sex workers, who are often marginalised into LGBTI communities. It was revealed that men are gatekeepers in society, and this acts as an impasse in documenting male sex work issues and funding. The culture of silence was also indicated to result in such issues being covertly discussed and neglected by the management. Therefore, such issues act as an impasse in documenting male sex work issues and the funding thereof. This is apparent in the following interview extract.

> *"Mass media and knowledge in general are still much more dominated by men. As such, men can censor information they regard as threatening to their wellbeing as a group, not as individuals. Even in newspapers, some of these cases may be suppressed. Most print media in Zimbabwe are owned by men, and no man would want to lose male customers because his company is revealing that men are sex workers…".*

Homophobia

Male sex workers are stigmatized, discriminated against, and targeted for "homosexual" activities. A respondent noted, *"The other issue is that male sex work is associated with homosexuality, which is still not acknowledged in our society.*". Respondents described how researching and investing interest in the subject area is perceived as condoning and

promoting homosexuality, and such researchers are even likely to be viewed with suspicion as "one of them" and as having encounters with the "beast". One noted that: "*It's a difficult topic to pitch…. Others will ask you if you do not have anything else valuable to research…laughs…people think that we have horns. They think you need to be someone out of this world to talk to us, but we are just like everyone else..".*

Discussion of the Findings

This study established the factors affecting knowledge production and dissemination. male sex work and gender dynamics surrounding the subject. These include culture, stigma, funding, and epistemic validity issues. Gelfand (1981) argues that discourse is not immune to the production of knowledge, which is largely produced through social practices. The hegemonic knowledge that counts as discourse enjoys its existence from the support of the powerful, as long as it does not threaten them. In the case of male sex work, the discourse is often produced through everyday practices that vilify knowledge of male sex work, assuming that sex workers are women. Foucault's power, knowledge, and discourse and regimes of truth elucidate why the discourse of male sex work is relegated in Zimbabwe's academic literature. Lorenzini argues that regimes of truth focus on the relationships between manifestations of truth, while Weir (2008) suggests that regimes of truth relate to how discourses are constructed, represented, and sustained as truth. This concept revolves around who is considered qualified to speak the truth and how truths are linked to the subject who carries them out, ultimately supporting the government of humans. The male sex work literature can be seen as challenging the regimes of truth and power that support them.

Suleymanoglu-Kurun et al. (2025) note that epistemic erasure is the systemic devaluation and exclusion of knowledge, narratives, and identities, which is deeply rooted in traditional systems of knowledge production. This erasure functions by removing resources and categories from communicative spaces, rendering the social identity of speakers of truth erroneous. Dominant groups perpetuate a homogenised understanding of knowledge, stifling the collective potential for innovation and comprehensive problem-solving. Through testimonial injustice, speakers are given lower credibility due to prejudice, and minority groups are pushed to the periphery (Elmasri et al., 2023). Marginalised groups, such as male sex workers, face hermeneutic injustice and are deprived of the ability to give meaning to and intelligibly communicate their experiences to dominant groups. This stifles their capacity to share testimonials of their experiences and subjects them to epistemic erasure and invisibility.

Hegemonic masculinity aligns with normative male ideals, especially in

societies that support gender hierarchies and subordinate, marginal masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It emphasises risk-taking, danger, and provision as ways to prove masculinity. Any failure to conform to cultural stereotypes of manhood runs the risk of being read as a break in one's masculinity (Bacio and Rinaldi, 2022). Samudzi and Manell (2015) discuss how the successful provider role is central to hegemonic masculinity. The hegemonic male provider script is still largely expected of men, making male sex workers strive for it while hiding the emasculated part of this fulfilment as they valued provision and livelihoods, though through what they described as 'unusual' means. This is typical of Durkheim's innovation. The study corroborates earlier studies, such as Van Stepele (2020), which argues that the dominant patriarchal masculinity of breadwinning, heterosexuality, and dominance over women juxtaposes male sex workers as dirty, morally corrupt, and effeminate. This influences how these men view themselves and how they relate to and are treated by others, such as family rejection and shame. The study also found that male sex workers are usually inaccessible as they are believed to shun disclosure and embarrassment arising from taking a perceived ' 'emasculating line of work'. Male sex workers are thus seen as falling outside the hegemonic ideals, but in fact, they portray failed masculinity and hijacking illegitimate femininities (Samudzi and Mannell, 2015).

Male sex workers alluded to how the risk of breaking masculinity manifested in different forms of marginalisation and stigma. Male sex work is perceived as a taboo, hence the reluctance of researchers and academics to work on such issues, as there is a courtesy stigma attached to researching the subject area. Given these issues, it is difficult to work on male sex work, for instance, compared to female in sex work, as society views the latter as "normal." Stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) illustrates the experiences of stigma and how male sex workers create strategies to distance themselves from the perceived deviant aspects of their work and preserve their masculinity. Sex work is often regarded as a form of stigmatised or "dirty" work, characterised by physical, social, and moral stigma (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). These frameworks afford a reflection on policy, practice, and canonical struggles around male sex workers, highlighting the need to forge epistemic spaces and decolonise spaces for critically thinking about and documenting male sex work in the following ways. Epistemic erasure is also linked to capital and patriarchy, and stigma is both a cause and effect of exclusion, leading to disparities (Link & Phelan, 2001). There are different forms of stigma, including courtesy, internalised, and structural stigma. This dovetails Epprecht's (1998) argument

regarding the unsaying of African sexualities. In cultures of silence, issues related to male sex work are often ignored. Connell (1987) argues that in many heterosexual societies, binaries are the order of the day. In the same vein, such organising principles blur understanding of the diversity of sex work as an industry, thus warding off documentation of such issues. Men who embody hegemonic masculinity are praised for being "real men", while those who fail to live up to these expectations, such as male sex workers, are stigmatised and treated as deviant (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In this study, male sex workers are stigmatised, and knowledge about them is perceived as deviant from social practices and esteemed academic discourse. They work clandestinely, fearing accusations of defying the male breadwinner model that vilifies male sex work and epitomises hard work. The stigma they face discourages them from opening up about their profession, partly because hegemonic masculinity is seen as destabilised by subjugated masculinities like those of male sex workers.

Research by Gukurume and Shoko (2023) and Muparamoto (2012) reveals that risk-taking among college male students can lead to toxic masculinities, such as having multiple sexual partners and using violence to assert manhood. In patriarchal societies such as Zimbabwe, same-sex laws are often misinterpreted and used to justify violence against subjugated masculinities, resulting in violence against perceived sexual minorities (Gukurume & Shoko, 2023). Masculinities are constructed in ways that reflect society's poverty, power, culture, and dynamics. The legal context is also important in this regard. Although sex work is not directly illegal in Zimbabwe, several aspects related to it are criminalised, such as procuring, soliciting sex, and running brothels. This renders sex work and its procurement in conflict with law enforcers. Furthermore, sodomy is criminalised in Zimbabwe, which may lead male sex workers to go into hiding for fear of violating the law. Homophobia, stigma, and outright discrimination make research participation difficult, dangerous, and risky (Fried and Shannon, 2008), and above all, to acquire data as they may be under surveillance from uniformed police for such areas of concern (Kuyala, 2014 and 2017). Given the history of raids on organisations such as GALZ and human rights violations by the state and its agents (GALZ 2018 and Muparamoto 2025), research participants can be sceptical. Similarly, it can be reasoned that the police not only limit sex workers' participation in research but also harass outreach research workers targeting such groups as they are viewed as condoning and promoting 'illegality'.

Hegemonic masculinities delineate 'proper' gender behaviour. Subordinated men who might consider themselves as not in power resonate with subgroups of more than one hegemonic masculinity. Men who do not live up to hegemonic masculinity are

'otherised', isolated, and ostracised. Samudzi and Manelle (2015) observes that other forms of masculinities and femininities are reified and subjugated within this context. They elaborated on how men whose behaviour and presentation mirror hegemonic masculinity are praised as 'real' men and rewarded. Hegemonic masculinity regards anything that is not idealised as outliers and thus inadvertently creates 'failed masculinities' and 'illegitimate femininities. Men whose behaviour does not mirror hegemonic masculinity are often excluded as a result of perceived 'deviant' identities and are punished in diverse ways, such as through maltreatment, violence, humiliation, and ostracization by families and in discursive spaces such as advocacy and governance. The issue of male sex work research is also nested and clouded with morality issues, as male sex workers are believed to vilify men's respectability, who are supposed to be breadwinners through means other than selling sex. Accordingly, data regarding male sex workers are patchy, anecdotal, and create disjunctures in conventional knowledge regarding male sex workers.

Cultural attitudes toward male sex work shun the target group, who, in turn, adopt clandestine behaviour. Researchers also become reluctant to deal with the same issue as sex work, especially male sex work, which is "unheard of" and largely taboo. In a context such as Zimbabwe, where sex work has been blamed for degrading the moral fabric of society, male sex workers may go undocumented and ignored in policy and research because of fear of ostracism, stigma, and discrimination. Violence and blackmail may also be spurred by the disclosure of their identities. In the long run, they go undocumented as researchers are also viewed with suspicion by male sex workers. Consequently, this affects researchers' ability to access and collect data on their experiences.

The study also revealed that male sex work is not well documented in academic circles because of its covert nature compared to female sex work. The trade of women's sex can be visible in certain areas, but many male sex workers are not street-based and are often under the radar of the police and other authorities, contributing to their lack of visibility overall, even in research. Using Connell (1987) and Foucault's ideas, one can illuminate that female sex workers assume hegemony over male sex work as the latter discourse is treated with much scorn and derision, especially among men, who above all act as gatekeepers to marginalise such forms of knowledge. Mandizadza and Chavhunduka (2013) argues that knowledge is an expression of power as well as a manifestation of power. Power and Knowledge work hand in hand, such that those with power may define, defend, and protect what they think is revered knowledge and thus categorise what counts as normal and abnormal knowledge into hierarchies of what should

be pursued and funded. In essence, the categorisation of knowledge becomes the subject and yardstick to which all forms of knowledge should conform. Gelfand (1981) argues that discourse is not immune to the production of knowledge that is, by and large, produced through social practice. The knowledge which is hegemonic counts to what Foucault calls discourse. The discourse enjoys its existence from the support that it is given by the powerful as long as it does not threaten them. Women's sex work in this case counts as a discourse that is produced through everyday regular practices and in the process vilifies knowledge of male sex work. Sex work counts as what Foucault called discourse, as the term sex worker is conflated and generalised with women sex workers such that many assume that sex workers are women, though they may be men, transgender, and intersex. The lens also elucidates why the discourse on male sex work is relegated in Zimbabwe's academic literature.

Foucault recognised that knowledge is politically charged and supported by centres of power that determine what counts as knowledge. According to Foucault (1980), concepts such as knowledge, regimes of truth, discourse, and power are relevant for understanding the dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination. He argued that certain types of knowledge are supported by power and constitute discourse, which can have hegemony over other forms of knowledge, erasing the discursive existence of marginalised knowledge. Foucault's concepts of power, discourse, and knowledge highlight the intertwining of knowledge production, dissemination, and acceptance. The issue of funding is compounded by the fact that organisations working with these sex workers are often restricted in their registration and operations, making it difficult to access funding (Fried & Shannon, 2008). Consequently, stymied financial flows result in these issues being under-researched due to underfunding. A sociological analysis within the discursive lens of political economy can be useful for explicating the neglect and underfunding of these issues. An anthropological appreciation is insightful on the otherization of male sex workers and how these are in and of themselves an important subcultural group in anthropology.

The study underlines the fact that knowledge generation on male sex work is given cosmetic attention in academia owing to the fact that it is not mutually exclusive from issues of identity and identity-securing strategies. Foucault recognised that knowledge is politically charged. Admittedly, it is supported by the centres of power. What counts as knowledge is not given but is supported and organised by centres of power. Foucault (1980) identified several concepts relevant to this study. Such concepts

include knowledge, regimes of truth, discourse, and power. Foucault argues that certain knowledge may be supported by power and constitutes what is called discourse. Discourse has hegemony over other forms of knowledge to the extent of erasing the discursive existence of marginalised knowledge. Thus, for Foucault, certain forms of knowledge are vilified while others are idealised and epitomised. Men are generally the gatekeepers of their identities and may tuck away issues that threaten their identity as a group. Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge and knowledge formation are not neutral, but politically charged. The question of male sex work literature is not merely an issue of identity but also of power and discourse regarding epistemology. Individual areas of academic interest are also rendered knowable and worth researching in line with power. Not all knowledge is regarded similarly. This goes through a process of what can be termed epistemological scrutiny, that is, questioning its epistemological status and validity. The purpose of research is not to unravel the obvious but to reveal the hidden, less regular, and unfamiliar aspects of a phenomenon. This is in line with issues of personal values and beliefs. Individuals who do not see the relevance of such research are less likely to invest in these areas.

Provision is one of the core components of hegemonic masculinity. In the context of this study, male sex workers' masculinities fall on a continuum where hegemonic masculinity is tied to breadwinning. Despite fulfilling the provider role through sex work, these men experience shame due to societal expectations (Moscheta 2013). According to Durkheim's concept of anomie, individuals who are constrained may resort to innovation, retreatism, rebellion, or ritualism to pursue societal values. Male sex workers in this research may be seen as innovating by using unconventional means to fulfil the masculine provider role. Such innovations are perceived as threatening to hegemonic ideals and thus relegated as a way of keeping regimes of truth and conventional norms intact.

The exchange of sex for money and the role male sex workers play might seem to contradict the socially ‘appropriate’ ideals of the role of the male body during sex (Moscheta 2013). Heterosexuality is a core component of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, it is a form of masculinity that is ‘not gay’ as it is not ‘female’ (Jewkes et al., 2015). It is a form of masculinity that is culturally idealised, gives a hierarchy to masculinity, and interplays between different men’s identity, ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy. It is a cultural ideal of manhood, which is rewarded to such an extent that even some women’s interest, attention, and efforts might go as far as trying to replicate this ideal. Connell (1987) notes that there is no singular masculinity

but multiple, fluid, and dynamic. Male sex workers affirmed some form of hegemonic masculinity by marrying, fathering, and some by playing the 'dorminant' and 'versatile' roles in sex work encounters as they tried to fulfil the same masculine roles which are central to hegemonic masculinity. Bacio and Rinaldi (2022) observed how male sex workers actively divided and delineated their identities beyond work as a way to distinguish between work as an obligation and what their identity is. The current study found that male sex workers played roles that were both "passive" and "active." Some described themselves as versatile, universal, bottom, or top, which points to how masculinity is situational and needs to be viewed as a continuum rather than in binary terms. The findings point to the fact that viewing identities in essentialist terms, such as the subordination of male sex workers, gays, and bisexuals to heterosexuals, male roles, and women roles, is toxic as it subordinates identities and divides identities into the ideal, good, bad, and those who resemble hegemonic masculinities and those who resemble feminine masculinities.

Conclusion

Male sex work is an important subset that has mostly been ignored in Zimbabwe's sociology and anthropology. Where they have been discussed, they have been framed as a disease burden and a problem to be solved (Baral et al., 2014). This framing regulates male sex workers as risky bodies in need of intervention for HIV, often ignoring socio-cultural issues such as gender, gender hierarchy, masculinity values, expectations and stigma. Drawing on hegemonic masculinity and stigma theory, this paper discusses how gender embodiment by male sex workers is constructed within a heteronormative space and how such embodiments are often misperceived as failed. This was equated to being "fucked" and how such narratives are not only an attempt to defend hegemonic masculinities but also to condemn roles that are viewed as feminine or homosexual. This study highlights the need for more research on male sex work, particularly in Zimbabwe. The paucity of data in this area results in inaccurate and unbalanced data, which can stifle policy and programmatic efforts to address the problem.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that

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Data Availability

Data were collected and analysed in this study from a donor funds project. Data are available to be shared as long as the donor and the organisation which conducted this study are acknowledged.

Disclaimer

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