



The symbolic violence of tolerance zones: Constructing the spatial marginalization of female Central American migrant sex workers in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore how the spatial ordering of sex-work in southern Mexico naturalizes the presence of migrant women in designated “tolerance zones”. Drawing on a feminist approach to ethnographic research in the city of Dominguez, Chiapas, we critically analyze the symbolic powers concealed and enacted through the official discourse of “tolerance” in public health regulations on commercial sex and embodied everyday life of migrant women from Central America. We engage with feminist debates regarding geographies of sex work and oppression to illustrate how tolerance zones mediate and maintain the marginal status of female sex workers who, despite their irregular migration status, are constructed (and view themselves) as bodies in “need of tolerance”. Our analysis of spatial practices that govern tolerance zones illustrates how the discourse of tolerance becomes a vehicle for symbolic violence, naturalizing unequal social relations of power in the lives of migrant Central American women.

Introduction

In Mexico, tolerance first emerged as a discourse to regulate commercial sex work in the late nineteenth century under public health legislation, which spatially segregated commercial sex work through *Zonas de Tolerancia* or tolerance zones. During this period, support for sex work regulation was intertwined with public health concerns and questions of social order (Rivera-Garza, 2001). The zoning of commercial sex work on the outskirts of residential areas enforced a boundary and displacement between commercial sex work and the rest of ‘civilized society’ (Bliss, 1999; Overmyer-Velazquez, 2006; Rivera-Garza, 2001). Public health surveillance of sex work primarily targeted female sex workers (and not, for example, the predominantly male clients) who were required to enroll in a public registry, pay monthly fees to exercise their trade legally and undergo weekly medical examination (Rivera-Garza, 2001). In some states in Mexico, such as Oaxaca, sex workers were also required to submit personal photographs to the public registry, a practice that continued until 1969 (Overmyer-Velazquez, 2006). Public health regulations, thus, framed female sex workers as principal agents of disease and deviance; locating the threat to public health and social order within the bodies of female sex workers (Kelly, 2008; Rivera-Garza, 2001).

During the development of commercial sex work regulation, sex workers have been constructed as either victims of society or a deviant

threat to the social order, while reflecting a moral judgment of working-class women's sexuality in the context of social scarcity (Bliss, 1999; Rivera-Garza, 2001). We consider the historical reliance on public health regulation of commercial sex work in Mexico as a biopolitical technique, wherein the treatment of individual bodies and public health represents a form of social control, segregation, and social stratification (Foucault, 1984). Commercial sex work regulation constructs social identities, bodies, and practices as in need of tolerance. In short, tolerance of commercial sex work regulation offered a promising remedy for an array of Othered subjects and practices, while simultaneously masking how the subjects and objects in “need” of tolerance came into existence as such. Discourses of tolerance are thus “depoliticized,” operating through naturalization of social differences (Brown, 2006). The discursive use of tolerance not only contributed to the naturalization of unequal subject formation, but also reified normative discourses of gender, class, and sexuality in Mexico (Rivera-Garza, 2001).

At present, public health regulation of sex work and the enactment of tolerance zones persist across thirteen Mexican States (Kelly, 2008). Contemporary public health regulation employs epidemiological frameworks of public health as opposed to previous moral constructions of sex work as a social ‘disease’. While Mexico no longer uses photographic registries “to contain and catalogue the bodies and behaviors of the city's dangerous women” (Overmyer-Velazquez 2006, 1752), municipal public health legislation continues to regulate the bodies of

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female sex workers while enforcing spatial restrictions on sex work on the outskirts of urban centers as a state performance to protect the general public against the spread of sexually transmitted “diseases” (Kelly, 2008). Contemporary regulations to protect the public’s health, thus, reinforce the marginalization of sex workers through social and spatial boundaries; practices which scholars argue to be a fundamental means of controlling those who do not conform to dominant norms and practices (Sibley, 1995, as cited in Hubbard 1997).

In Mexico’s southern state of Chiapas bordering with Guatemala, the regulation of bodies and practices in ‘need’ of tolerance is further complicated by the growth in irregular migration¹; an estimated 70% of sex workers involved in regulated tolerance zones in the Chiapas border region are female Central American migrants with irregular migration status. The majority of migrant sex workers originate in Honduras followed by El Salvador, with a small proportion from Guatemala.² Within this region, Central American migrant women from Honduras and El Salvador are colloquially referred to as *quita marido* or husband snatchers, a trope that illustrates how stereotypes of Central American migrant women as hypersexualized objects is embodied at a population level (Cruz Salazar, 2011).

The gendered racialization of Central American women as sexualized bodies with alleged loose morals, naturalizes their participation with commercial sex work, while also erasing the social context of forced migration that compels women to leave their country of origin. The systemic inequalities that Central American migrant women face within Mexico are similarly dismissed, including: barriers to seeking work in the formal or informal economy outside of the sex trade and the basic resources migrant women need to support themselves and their children back home, which shape migrant women’s decisions to participate in sex work (Cruz Salazar, 2011; Fernandez-Casaneuva, 2009).

This article draws on feminist ethnographic research to explore the discourse of tolerance in public health regulations that shape the everyday lives of Central American migrant sex workers in Mexico’s southern border region. Ethnographic fieldwork took place in and around the tolerance zone in the city of “Dominguez,”³ located in the south-eastern border region of Chiapas. Informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1989, 2002) conceptualization of symbolic power, we explored the enactment of the discourse of tolerance in language, symbols, and everyday social interactions, which induce subjects to perform if not embody certain visions of the world rather than others. Our analysis highlights how the discourse of tolerance operates through the spatial distribution and public health practices within the tolerance zone, thus, naturalizing and reinforcing gendered, socio-economic, and migrant inequalities in this border region. We draw upon Bourdieu’s (2002) conceptualization of symbolic violence to theorize how those marked as “tolerable,” such as female Central American migrant sex workers with irregular migration status, perceive the zones of tolerance themselves. How and to what effect does the role of tolerance solidify social inequality and participate in different forms of violence in the lives of migrant women who live and work in this zone? To what extent do Central American migrant women embody the discourse of tolerance (i.e., view themselves as subjects in need of tolerance)?

Our analysis attends to the reproduction of the “Other” as

¹ In the absence of precise statistics on CA migration in Mexico, estimates of CA flows are based on detention numbers compiled by the National Institute of Migration and the Migration Survey of the South Border, EMIF-South (see, for example, Casillas, 2006, Berumen, Narváez, & Ramos, 2012). According to the International Organization on Migration, 400,000 irregular CA migrants cross into southern Mexico each year.

² Recent studies indicate the prominent presence of female migrants from Honduras and to a lesser extent El Salvador and Guatemala in the commercial sex trade (Bronfman, Uribe, Halperin, & Herrera, 2001; Leyva Flores & Quintino Pérez, 2011a). ONU Mujeres (2015) estimates that in Mexico’s southern border region: 32% of sex workers are Mexican, 39% Honduran, 38% Guatemalan, 16% Salvadoran, 5% Nicaraguan, and 1% Panamanian.

³ “Dominguez” is a pseudonym used for the south-eastern city in Chiapas where field research described in this paper was conducted.

structurally inherent to discourses of tolerance (Brown, 2006). We argue that public health regulations of commercial sex stabilize and naturalize the marginalization of female Central American migrant sex workers in the Tolerance Zone in Dominguez. We call attention to the symbolic violence of tolerance that is enacted through this spatial distribution of commercial sex work but also how such spaces mediate the deportability of female Central American migrants whose participation in commercial sex work mitigates the potential threat of the violence of deportation. While Central American migrants are frequent targets of Mexico’s deportation regime, within designated zones female Central American migrant bodies are constructed as in ‘need’ of tolerance, and thus less deportable.

After presenting our research methods, we discuss symbolic power and symbolic violence within the context of tolerance zones and the everyday lives of Central American migrant women in this region. Through an analysis of ethnographic observations and informal and in-depth interviews with various public and private actors within the zone, we illustrate how the spatial marginalization of tolerance zones mediates the experiences and expressions of symbolic violence against migrant women. Through this analysis, we consider how the role of spatial marginalization of sex work in concert with the production of “illegality” converges to further naturalize violence against migrant women from Central America. Our analysis of the concept and enactment of “tolerance” in commercial sex work regulation contributes towards deeper understandings around the discursive and structural oppressions faced by migrant sex workers and engages with broader debates in feminism about the constructed gendering and sexualization of space in geographies of sex work (Sanchez, 2004).

Ethnographic research and discourse analysis

Through a collaboration among authors, this research forms part of a broad research agenda on deportability and the spectrum of violence against Latina migrant women across North America. In this article, we draw from research from a cross-regional comparison of Central American migrant sex workers in Mexico’s southern border region, with emphasis on data collected in the state of Chiapas. This research employed feminist ethnographic methods, reflected in the primacy of looking for women’s experience, with aims to contextualize and challenge the dominant ways in which migrant women are seen as either victims of forced labor (trafficking) or, through epidemiological frameworks (i.e., public health). We sought to identify the nuances of migrant women’s lives along a continuum of resistance, negotiation and coercion (Sanchez, 1997), in an effort to bring to the fore, the ingenuity and everyday resistance of female Central American migrants selling sex.

Data collection methods

Fieldwork data presented in this study took place from June to August 2015 in Dominguez, Chiapas and the surrounding region (the larger study continued to December 2016). Data collection methods involved participant observation, informal interviews, in-depth semi-structure interviews, and discourse analysis of historical and contemporary sex work regulation and public health documents. Participant observation took place in sex work establishments and the public health control center located in the tolerance zone in Dominguez. During fieldwork, the field researcher (first author) took detailed observation notes and conducted 25 informal interviews with public health staff, taxi drivers stationed at the tolerance zone, a former security guard for the tolerance zone, food vendors, convenience store clerks in the tolerance zone and Dominguez tourist police. Seven formal interviews were conducted with public health government directors, Central American consulate members and civil society organizations involved in projects with Central American migrant women working in the tolerance zone with questions focused on interventions, challenges,

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