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The Resilience of Female Sex Workers in the Wake of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
The paper interrogates the resilience of female sex workers in the wake of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. The paper draws literature from global, regional and national perspectives using the resilience theory. Major findings reveal that the COVID-19 lockdown measures have disrupted the livelihoods of female sex workers. Hence, female sex workers have resorted to online sex work and some entrepreneurship. There has also been consistent breaching of the lockdown regulations in a bid to make ends meet. Therefore, the study concludes by recommending the need to extend social protection floors to this vulnerable group.

Keywords
Resilience, COVID-19, social protection, livelihoods, sex work, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The study was based on the following objectives: (a) to assess the challenges faced by female sex workers during the COVID-19 lockdown; (b) to examine the resilience of female sex workers in

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the wake of COVID-19. The article examines the resilience of female sex workers using qualitative inquiry, non-participant observation and document analysis. The paper concludes by proffering recommendations that can be made to extend social protection coverage to female sex workers in times of socio-economic uncertainties.

This paper discusses the resilience of female sex workers in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. On 5 January 2021, Vice-President Constantino Chiwenga introduced a level-4 30-day lockdown following the relaxation of lockdown measures in 2020 which led to increased spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, Zimbabwe re-introduced a 12-hour curfew from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. The lockdown introduced on 5 January meant that only essential businesses could remain open and all gatherings such as weddings ceremonies or religious services were banned, with the exception of funerals, which were limited to 30 people.

According to the Government of Zimbabwe, these essential services were the mining sector, agricultural sector and financial services. Apart from this, only essential services – for example, hospitals, pharmacies and supermarkets – were to remain open with limited hours of operation from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. This 30-day lockdown followed a rampant increase in COVID-19 cases, as cases doubled in the past 2 months from 8374 at the start of November to 14,084 in January 2021 as reported by Rédaction Africanews with Anadolu (2021). Therefore, the re-introduction of the national lockdown by the government meant a destruction of informal-sector livelihoods in Zimbabwe. Due to the re-introduction of the 30-day lockdown, female sex workers have been affected as they were forced to confine themselves to their homes, which suggested a devastating impact on this sector.

However, social exclusion from accessing social protection services has been the major problem affecting female sex workers. Social exclusion is the condition of being linked to a series of processes such as low income, poverty, unemployment, poor education, health problems, housing problems, crime, lack of social protection mechanisms and other antagonistic life stressors (Bradshaw et al., 2004). The argument is that such social exclusion results in deteriorated living standards and poverty (Popay et al., 2012). This is supported by Weiner (2020), who argued that when a disaster strikes, it is the most disproportionate population that is affected the most. Nevertheless, the Zimbabwean government's reaction towards female sex workers has been characterized by hostility, criminalization of the act itself, and punitive measures at the expense of improved social safety nets (Cusick and Berney, 2005). Some proponents have come to a consensus that responding to the plight of female sex workers has the potential to amend their livelihoods and proffer new survival skills.

Bury (2011) also contends that providing social protection to female sex workers requires great understanding of the susceptibilities associated with this group. However, the subject of extending social protection coverage for this group has sparked a debate among social development practioners and policy makers. One of the major drawbacks behind the inclusion of female sex workers in the mainstream social protection floors is that of the act being associated with moral decadence, a perspective which is informed by the African philosophy *Ubuntu* or *Hunhu* (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). In Zimbabwe, questions of morality have been raised as female sex workers are deemed unholy in the context of *Ubuntu*/*Unhu* by Samkange and Samkange (1980). The concept of *Ubuntu* or *Unhu* in vernacular language implies acceptable and morally upright behavior. Such a perspective is only understood from an *Ubuntu*/*Unhu* perspective that forms the social fabric of Zimbabwean society (Chikoko and Chirimumbwe, 2020). It is against this backdrop that this paper investigates the resilience of female sex workers in the wake of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical framework

The study utilized the resilience theory which was propounded by Van Breda (2001). Carlson et al. (2012) defined the 'resilience theory as the ability of an entity to recover or "bounce back" from

the adverse of a natural or manmade threat'. In this case, resilience is measured by how one responds to an adverse shock rather than prior to a shock or threat occurring. Therefore, according to this definition, actions taken prior to a natural or manmade threat do not qualify. However, other definitions consider actions taken prior to a disaster as a subset of resistance and anticipated actions to a foreseen threat as the major building blocks of the theory. Such a definition includes 'the ability of an entity for example an asset, community, region or organization to anticipate, resist, respond to, absorb, adapt to and to recover from a disturbance'. It is therefore prudent to adopt this definition as it includes all aspects, and thus preparedness and action to absorb and react to an adversity.

Basically, there are two types of resilience: community resilience and infrastructure resilience. For the purpose of this study, the community resilience definition and its core tenets will be adopted. To start with, community resilience can be defined as

> the ability to prevent, protect against, respond to or mitigate any anticipated risks or significant threat during terrorists attacks, to adapt to changing conditions, and rapidly recover to a normal or new normal and reconstitutes critical assets, operations, and services with minimum damage and disruption to public health and safety, the economy, environment and national security. (Carlson et al., 2012)

The resilience theory explains one's ability to recover from shocks or stressors. The outcomes in this regard are adaptation, responding to, recovering from, absorbing and reacting to adversities, versus the outputs, which are seen as the capabilities or strengths that one exhibits in the event of natural or manmade threats.

The resilience theory can be illustrated by four different components. Table 1 illustrates the components of the resilience theory:

Table 1. Components of the resilience theory (Carlson et al., 2012).

Anticipate	Resist/absorb	Respond/adapt	Recover
Preparedness	Mitigation	Response	Recovery
Activities take by an entity to define hazard environment	Activities take prior to an event to reduce the severity or consequences of a hazard	Immediate and ongoing activities, tasks, programs and systems that have been undertaken or developed to manage the adverse effects of an event	Activities and programs designed to effectively return conditions to a level that is acceptable

The domains of the resilience theory widely transcend to individual, family, community and policy resilience. The concept of resilience in this study is used to analyse the triumphs of female sex workers in the face of COVID-19. In this study, COVID-19 is the manmade threat which has posed external shocks to female sex workers in the community. Therefore, faced with such adversities, female sex workers lack preparedness to deal with change, activities taken prior to the threat to reduce the implications of COVID-19, a response to sustain their livelihoods in order to make ends meet, and the ability to recover from the manmade threat in this context of COVID-19. The resilience theory has more relevance to this focus as it focuses more on capabilities than vulnerabilities (Chineka and Mundau, 2019). Therefore, such a thrust echoes an emphasis on solutions that offer the desirable conceptual framework for addressing the seemingly insuperable challenges associated with providing social protection to female sex workers. The resilience theory is appropriate when studying downtrodden economies; for example, the Zimbabwean economy. It takes a more developmental approach to focus more on strengths and capabilities than on deficits.

Therefore, given such a vulnerability-prone context, a deficit-oriented approach will not yield any progress, but may rather give rise to despondence (Chineka and Mundau, 2019).

The resilience theory is viewed as a dynamic concept that espagorated on the developmental processes rather than on static processes. The resilience theory is used to explain how society, institutions, people and communities adopt and adapt to life shocks/stressors. According to Masten (2014), the theory is applicable to a comprehensive range of systems varying from children and families to institutions and societies; resilience embraces the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to turbulences that threaten system function, viability, or development. Sen (1999) further supports this line of thinking which perceives the resilience theory as a developmental paradigm. Sen (1999) also comprehends development as subject to the livelihood security of an individual or group.

The resilience theory is all about how individuals are able to deal with copious adversities/life stressors: environmental changes, economic hardships, social stressors or climate change. Adversities in this context denote negative contexts and experiences that have the potential to disrupt peoples' lives. Such adversities include poverty, racism, sudden loss of a loved one, or being a victim of an armed robbery. These types of adversities directly affect individuals and are regarded as internal. However, other adversities may affect systems within the individual; for example, a virus that attacks the immune system, or multiple levels and settings simultaneously: for instance, a natural disaster that affects individual systems of stress, beliefs and behaviors, as well as broader systems of family, school, health care and agriculture. Adverse effects on development may result from experiences that block, exhaust or compromise, or distort the function of adaptive systems that usually foster and protect development. Therefore, the theoretical framework has been specifically chosen by the researchers as the COVID-19 pandemic falls under adversities that affect systems, such as a virus.

Literature review

Globally, female sex workers lack access to basic social protection mechanisms from both the law and socio-economic support systems, as stated by the International Social Work COVID-19 Research (ISWR) Lam E (2020). In light of this, commercial sex work has been socially regarded as unlawful in Zimbabwe until the relaxation of such laws following a public uproar from civic societies and international agencies advocating for human rights. Criminalization of female sex work was the order of the day prior to 2014 in Zimbabwe, as women were dispossessed of their socio-economic rights and were arrested for strolling in the streets during the night in their attempt to survive. Moore et al. (2014) argued that female sex workers are not only vulnerable to the law, but also to health and social problems, pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), violence, exploitation and substance abuse. Moore et al. (2014) therefore agree with ISWR's (2020) notion of the vulnerability of female sex workers. However, Platt et al. (2020) contend that the ability of female sex workers to protect themselves is profoundly encroached on the availability of community sustenance, access to health and social services, and broader aspects of the legal and social environment.

It was only after nine women from Harare were arrested after accusations of solicitation (Busza et al., 2017). Following these arrests, the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) challenged the courts in support of these arrested women. According to these lawyers' arguments, the arrest of these nine women was in defilement of the newly ratified 2013 Constitution's sections 49(1) (b) and 56(1), respectively, which state:

> All persons are equal before the law and have the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres and Right to Personal Liberty . . . which includes the right . . . not to be deprived of their liberty arbitrarily or without just cause.

Therefore, in June 2015 the government of Zimbabwe High Court issued a judgment which gave the green light to the decriminalization of female sex work in Zimbabwe. In as much as female sex work has been legally authorized, it also brought with it novel problems. The problem of sex work is now associated with predicaments which include lack of social protection mechanisms for this group, lack of access to health services and lack of cultural acceptance by society.

According to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSPW, 2020), Lam (2020) and Jozaghi and Bird (2020), as cited in ISWR, Lam E (2020), argued that sex work-led agencies have reported cases of increased discrimination, hardships and harassment due to the criminalization of sex work. In Toronto, Canada, the government has introduced relief programmes for its people during COVID-19, but female sex workers are excluded, as noted by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2020). Hence, lack of consideration for this minority community has perpetuated ignorance and a lack of social protection mechanisms by the government towards female sex workers. Because of stigma, discrimination and criminalization of sex work, female sex workers have responded vehemently through innovative and resourceful ways of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. Such coping strategies have been classified in a two-fold way: support from sex worker organizations, and their innovative ways to resort to online sex work business. However, in as much as some European governments have tried to introduce some relief programs, Lam (2020) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the egregious injustice of social support systems worldwide, exposing the gaps that further marginalize vulnerable groups.

The NSWP and UNAIDS (2020) have provided social support for female sex workers through the provision of emergency funds during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, the UNAIDS (2020) has called for the cessation of attacks on female sex workers at work places and in homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to this, they have also pushed for the provision of adequate health care services. In support of this, Toronto-Based Butterfly: Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network also supported initiatives by UNAIDS (2020). Regardless of the advocacy role played by these female sex work organizations, materialistic support through provision of emergency funding support to female sex workers in Canada has been evident to cushion this vulnerable group in the wake of COVID-19.

The African Sex Work Alliance has proffered guides to female sex workers operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar efforts are also visible in Singapore through Project X, which also provides information to female sex workers on how to manage stress during the pandemic, while Smash in Japan developed a framework for how female sex workers should adjust and cope during the lockdown. Therefore, a global perspective on the resilience of female sex workers shows that support from sex work organizations comes in the form of financial aid and resources. Non-materialistic support is also provided through advocacy against the violation of human rights that discriminates against female sex workers by preventing them from getting aid and health care services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Important knowledge has also been dispatched on how female sex workers should operate; for instance, in the case of Singapore which shows a human rights approach to the plight of female sex workers in the wake of COVID-19.

The Global Fund (2020) report noted that many female sex workers are working in unsafe brothels due to desperation after the lockdown in Kenya. Studies conducted in Kenya indicate a 75% decrease in sex work income during the COVID-19 lockdown. As a result, many female sex workers have been forced to return to their rural villages after failing to muddle through with the situation. Study findings further indicate that due to the desperation of female sex workers to get

money for food and medicines, they now resort to having unprotected sex, due to a shortage of condoms caused by the imposed lockdown. Hence, they are at risk of contracting both HIV and coronavirus, which exposes their vulnerability. The Kenyan Female Sex Workers Alliance (2020), as cited in ISWR's (2020) research, shows that the shortage of condoms has exposed female sex workers to HIV, as 65% of the surveyed population did not have access to condoms and HIV medication because of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Furthermore, studies conducted in Gambia indicate that female sex workers have been affected by the lockdown measures. Loss of income and increased vulnerability due to exposure to HIV are some dilemmas affecting this group. Clients are taking advantage of lockdown to pay less money to female sex workers. As a result, female sex workers risk contracting HIV (NSPW, 2020). In an interview with of one of the female sex workers in the Hawa area in Gambia, one sex worker participant was quoted as saying: 'I don't prostitute myself, I have no money to pay my bills, buy clothes and lead a good life.' Therefore, findings indicate that in Africa, sex work is purely for money; and, due to the pandemic, female sex workers are risking their lives, as they have no other ways to avoid dying of either COVID-19 or hunger.

It is therefore a matter of life or death for female sex workers. However, looking at one side of the coin is to do injustice to this piece of writing, as studies conducted in Senegal indicate that it is the only country in West Africa where sex work is legal and recognized by the law. In Senegal, as long as one is above the age of 21 years, one can venture into commercial sex work. There is also provision of health care, through provision of free condoms and access to health care services (NSPW, 2020). Senegal is the epitome of an ideal society that the community of female sex workers envisages.

A national perspective on the Zimbabwean case presents a plethora of challenges faced by female sex workers due to the 30-day national lockdown. A shortage of clients was due to the limited mobility posed by the curfew (Moyo, 2021). In response to this, female sex workers in Zimbabwe have resorted to online sex work, which they are reported to engage in with their clients mostly through Whatsapp and Facebook. Apart from engaging with clients online, they also trade online through offering clients video calls, erotic photographs and videos. However, not all female sex workers have managed to overcome this obstacle. Some still have challenges in resorting to online business but report calling their clients to their homes instead, as observed by Moyo (2021).

Materials/methods

A qualitative inquiry was used in this paper. Flick (2013) defines qualitative research as an inquiry into understanding social phenomena, thus premised on creating a complex picture, formed with words, reporting in-depth views of participants and conducted in a natural setting. A qualitative inquiry was used to gather in-depth views of informants although results from a qualitative inquiry cannot be generalized to the entire population (Creswell, 2014). The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data can be defined as original and factual data collected whereas secondary data is data that is collected from primary sources as propounded by Saunders et al. (2012). The unit of analysis of the study included female sex workers who operate in the Chikanga area. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study as it targets rich cases for any qualitative inquiry (Groove and Burns, 2002). Purposive sampling is the recruitment of participants with rich cases of information (Saunders et al., 2012). In-depth interviews were also conducted with 10 female sex workers in Chikanga 1 who operate at the nearby shops. According to Flick (2013), in-depth interviews are types of data collection tools used to gather people's thoughts, opinions, views and ideas in particular. The study also used document analysis as a means of data collection. Bowen (2009) points out that document analysis is a form of research in which

documents are construed by the researcher to give a meaning around an assessment or topic. Document analysis was conducted because it is cheap and easy to access (Bowen, 2009). The documents utilized for data collection include academic research papers, newspapers, non-governmental organization (NGO) sources and e-books on social protection. The purpose of using both documentary analysis and in-depth interviews was to merge the findings so that they corroborate to ensure data credibility (Flick, 2013). According to Creswell (2014), the credibility of qualitative data comes from its richness of data which makes it credible rather than focusing on its quantity. Observation was also used to merge findings with documentary and in-depth interviews. Observation is a systematic data collection tool in which researchers use all of their senses to examine the behavior of people in their natural setting (Creswell, 1998). The study used non-participant observation through the utility of fieldwork notes documenting the interaction of female sex workers in the community with other people. The researcher would observe female sex workers and how they operated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Observation was employed as a research method as it provides an important way of gaining an understanding of naturalistic settings and their inhabitants' ways of seeing things (Creswell, 1998).

Presentation of findings

The paper presents findings on the resilience of female sex workers in the second wave of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. The findings of this paper are presented based on the following objectives: challenges faced by female sex workers in the wake of COVID-19 and the resilience of female sex workers. The findings were gathered using document analysis and in-depth interviews in a high-density suburb of Mutare (Zimbabwe). The following were the results of the research.

Resorting to online sex trade

The findings of the study reveal that female sex workers have resorted to online sex trade as a result of a ban on the physical sex trade business. The results indicate that due to the advent of COVID-19, many female sex workers have been left without any source of income since their trade usually takes place during the night at bars and night clubs. However, all these public bars and night clubs have been closed. One of the participants said: 'I no longer go out due to [the] limited time imposed by the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew which has made me to resort to online sex business' (Participant 1). Findings from the study reveal that sex workers have been disrupted and suggest a loss in their livelihoods. Therefore, this has made it difficult for them to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher also probed further to ask about the strategies they were using to ensure continuity of their commercial sex work business, and one respondent said: 'I now use Whatsapp and Facebook but due to expensive data bundles I give my clients my numbers so that they call me when they want my services and they will come home [to] where I stay' (Participant 3). In the same vien, another participant reported: 'I write my phone number on the durawall so my clients can take it and call me when l am available.'

Findings indicate that female sex workers were using online systems to get clients but some shortfalls to this include a shortage of data bundles to get their clients. The researcher also questioned the efficacy of the strategies that they used – whether they would lure customers using these online social media platforms. One participant reported: 'As an online strategy, I use Whatsapp to send nude pictures and at times pornographic videos to my clients. Clients can also pay us through Ecocash and in return [we] will pay them in-kind through send[ing] them our nude pictures' (Participant 10).

Findings from the study also indicate that female sex workers were using online social media platform such as Facebook and Whatsapp to post their home addresses, meeting points and phone numbers on social media platforms to let clients know where to find them when they need their services. One of the participants reported: 'I can post my number on my status and number with a nude picture on my Whatsapp so that clients can easily locate me' (Participant 1). Therefore, findings reveal that some female sex workers resorted to online commercial sex work where they entice their clients online using different social media strategies. However, some female sex workers revealed victimization, fear of harassment through leaking of their nude pictures, and abuse from security officers due to fear of being arrested. One of the participants reported that online sex work has serioulsy affected their income:

> Online business is not paying off because at times [the] network will be poor and some of us won't be having data bundles to send them pictures. Apart from that client numbers [have] reduced due to issues of privacy associated with online sex work business. (Participant 6)

Findings also reveal how female sex workers have resorted to online trade due to COVID-19 as a measure to cope and to sustain their livelihoods during the period of the pandemic. Some participants reported that in as much as online sex work was an alternative to some participants, some responds indicated the stigma that is associated with online sex work. Some of their relatives end up despising them for their trade as it is regarded as highly immoral according to their moral values/culture (*Ubuntu*/*Unhu*). Therefore, this makes them social outcasts to their friends and relatives.

Changing hours of operation

Observation of female sex workers in the researcher's locality reveals that female sex workers in the community have changed their times of business operation. The ideal situation is that they spend the day sleeping and work in the night. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic they have changed completely to operating mid-day rather than in the night. Instead of them going to their checkpoints in the night, they had to spend their day sitting and waiting for their potential clients at the front of their gates to get potential clients who will be passing by. The imposed 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew has shifted female sex workers' operating times. Therefore, they had adapted to new business hours during the day when they hook up with their clients. In-depth interviews with one participant corroborated these observations, as the participant reported:

> Working in the night as we used to do before COVID-19 is no longer profiteering as most of our clients will be indoors observing the lockdown regulations[.] [A]s a result a shift in our operating times has helped us a lot to sustain our livelihoods as we now wait for clients who will be passing by through the gate during the day as opposed to our night routine of doing business. (Participant 8)

Observations from the study reveal a shift of time in female sex work. This has had a significant impact on their livelihoods. However, one participant reported that heavy and persistent rain in January had affected their daylight operations as they were forced to stay indoors. Therefore, restricted mobility caused by persistent rain affected the business of female sex workers.

Consistent breaching of the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. curfew

Findings from the study also show that female sex workers have been consistently breaching the lockdown measures, particularly the curfew that was imposed. Female sex workers have been

frequenting their usual points of operation at around 9–10 pm near the beer halls at Chikanga 1 Spar regardless of the imposed curfew. Some of these female sex workers would continue to operate during the night but at points where they could easily escape the security raids. One participant reported:

> It's been hard for us doing business these late [h]ours as we fear raids from the soldiers or police officers but if I stay at home I don't have anything to eat/money to pay rent come [the] month end so I don't have anything to lose but something to gain by continuing with my business even though it's risky. (Participant 5)

Observation from the study shows that female sex workers – even those who were operating in the community indoors – would also frequent the bars near shops during the night in an effort to get clients. Their movement was confined to their homes so they do not risk being caught unawares by the security officers. Therefore, the study findings show the resilience of female sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic as they had to battle with COVID-19 and poverty. COVID-19 had become a stumbling block to their business operation.

In addition to this, another female sex worker was quoted in the *Sunday Mail* as saying: 'My kids and I will starve to death if I stop. Most of my clients still come for my services, especially at night, but the lockdown has indeed slowed down business.' (Anonymous, 2021) This was reported by an unidentified female sex worker. Therefore, the findings reveal continued resistance from female sex workers as they struggle for survival in the COVID-19 era. Findings also further reveal that what is coercing female sex workers in the streets is not a matter of choice but circumstances beyond their control, as indicated by the following sentiments from one female sex worker who said: 'Since the lockdown in March last year, l have never stopped working. It is not like l am proud of what l am doing, but l have no other option' (Anonymous, 2021) Furthermore, findings reveal that female sex work is not recognized as a profession in Zimbabwe, which in turn makes the workers risk their lives for the sake of food since they are socially excluded from emergency relief funds meant for vulnerable groups in Zimbabwe.

Female sex workers resorted to entrepreneurship

The paper shows that some female sex workers resorted to entrepreneurship as a coping mechanism due to the COVID-19 pandemic which has brought adverse effects to this vulnerable group. Observations made in the local community indicated that one female sex worker in the locality had recently opened a tuck-shop at the home she rents. Findings reveal that it was not only this worker who managed to start a small business, but others also opened small vegetable markets (*Musika*) to sustain them during the lockdown as the crisis continued to skyrocket. In an interview one participant, echoed this: 'Due to the COVID-19 [pandemic] I opened a small shop to assist me in taking care of my family and to ensure there is enough food to eat' (Participant 6). Therefore, the results of the study indicated that female sex workers in Chikanga had resorted to small-scale businesses to ensure food security during the lockdown period. Some female sex workers also took advantage of vegetable produce that was available at their homes and sold it in order to get money to buy basic needs such as food. Therefore, the findings of the study made it plausible to argue that female sex workers were exposed to hardships which made them resort to entrepreneurship. While some female sex workers resorted to entrepreneurship, however, some turned a deaf ear to entrepreneurship. This shows how people react differently to external shocks and stressors.

Increased alcohol and drug abuse

Findings from the study indicated that some female sex workers resorted to substance abuse as a way of coping with reality. The reality was that female sex workers' livelihoods were disrupted due to external forces posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychologists have argued that alcohol is used by some people as a way to relieve stress, and based on these findings, it can be argued that female sex workers also used substances as a coping mechanism. Through observation, the researcher also identified alcohol such as illegal spirits (*Msombodhiya*). This type of alcohol including marijuana (*Mbanje*) has been the most abused substances in the community by female sex workers during the day. According to one participant, 'What else can l do during this pandemic[?] [I]f I doesn't drink I will die of stress[.] [W]ho knows when the pandemic will end' (Participant 9).

Findings from the study show that female sex workers were resorting to drugs and alcohol. The researcher probed further to ask whether such a high intake of alcohol would change their lives. One participant responded:'It is better to drink because when [I] am drunk it gives me confidence to talk to my clients during the day.' This shows that substances have been used by female sex workers as a way to escape reality.

Exposure to HIV during COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed female sex workers to HIV, as reported by one of the female sex workers during an interview. The participant said:

> Let me tell you one thing why many of us don't use condoms, we don't have money, and when you meet a client who offers to give you more money than you usually get, you have sex without protection even when you don't know his HIV status. (Participant 7)

Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic female sex workers were reporting shortage of access to condoms and they were also saying that they can no longer afford to buy condoms as they do not have the money. Documentary findings also reveal that the lockdown has made sex work riskier than before as female sex workers were reportedly unable to buy condoms. Sources where they used to get condoms were closed; for example, illegal brothels and night clubs. Matiashe (2020) indicated that '[s]ome female sex workers[,] because they do not have condoms, they would put up a cloth up their vagina to prevent pregnancy and contracting HIV. After sex they would remove the cloth and wash it for reuse with another client' (Source, 2020). Other findings revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic some female sex workers refused to wear condoms because they could charge more money. The participant echoed this: 'Unprotected sex pays more. So at times we have it despite the risks.'

Exposure to environmental hazards

Female sex workers also resorted to perilous places to meet their clients following the closure of brothels and bars. Observations from the researcher indicates that female sex workers were using deserted community buildings, secluded fields, deserted places and people's backyards where there is plenty of grass, which makes them imperceptible during their acts. Documentary findings from Matiashe (2020) indicated that female sex workers were operating in desolate fields and thereby charging less money, as evidenced by the following findings: 'Charges short time of $2 to an open field which at times she is forced to accept half of it due to circumstances' (Participant 3).

Therefore, documentary findings specify that women were using open fields to meet their clients anywhere in the fields and they just put down a cloth to cover the grass. Interviews with one female sex worker in Chikanga revealed the following: 'I use people's fields just across the road or we get into an incomplete building near [the] spar.' These findings corroborate study findings from documentary analysis showing that female sex workers had resorted to using open fields or desolate buildings in a bid to sustain their livelihoods.

Female sex workers also resorted to underground operations. Findings from the *Sunday Mail* indicated that female sex workers were resorting to rusty broken coaches and disused rail wagons, and the unkempt grass of the National Railways of Harare locomotive yard had once again become a haven. However, life has not been easy for female sex workers as they have to battle for space with drug peddlers and people living in the streets (Kafe, 2021).

Discussion of findings

Study findings reveal that restrictive measures such as the closure of bars and night clubs have been enacted in Zimbabwe to contain the coronavirus. This has caused loss of income among female sex workers, who have been out of work. As a result, commercial female sex workers have been facing a plethora of challenges which include hunger and starvation, failure to access health care services and lack of decent accommodation. These findings can be attributed to the restrictive measures which have seen female sex workers being unable to work normally. The situation confronting female sex workers is further worsened by lack of access to social protection services for female sex workers (UNAIDS, 2018). Because commercial female sex workers are illegal in most African countries, this minority group has been affected by problems such as lack of legal protection from threats to their safety, vulnerability to arrest and abuse, and being without access to health and social services (Kerrigan et al., 2013).

In response to the restrictive measures put in place, findings of this paper show that female sex workers resorted to online sex trade. Social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Facebook were being used for advertisements by female sex workers. The use of social media for female sex workers has also destroyed Zimbabwe's moral fabric since female sex workers have been posting nude pictures and pornographic videos online. These findings can be attributed to the COVID-19 lockdown which has disrupted the normal way of working for female sex workers who normally work during the night in night clubs and bars that have since been closed due the restrictive measures put in place so as to contain the COVID-19 virus. These findings are consistent with Moyo (2021), which stated that in response to the COVID-19 lockdown female sex workers in Zimbabwe have resorted to online sex work in which they are reported to engage their clients mainly through Whatsapp and Facebook. The above findings can also be explained by the resilience theory which states that individuals develop skills to counter experiences that disrupt their livelihoods (Van Breda, 2001).

Findings of the study also show that female sex workers also changed their hours of operation and were working in broad daylight. They had to search for potential clients during the day. These findings were attributed to the imposed 6 a.m .to 6 p.m. curfew which has seen commercial female sex workers shifting their working times as they were unable to work during the night. In addition, study findings show that commercial female sex workers have been constantly breaking the imposed 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew. These findings can be attributed to a lack of social assistance programmes for vulnerable groups in Zimbabwe. Without social safety nets, life has been hard for female sex workers who had resorted to breaking the curfew so as to sustain their livelihood. That is why UNAIDS (2018) advocates for the provision of social protection floors to female sex workers in the face of COVID-19.

In addition, sex work is not considered as a profession and the sex workers' industry is not recognized. As a result, female sex workers were also not able to access labour protection or economic support that would otherwise aid small businesses (Lam, 2020; Platt et al., 2020). The breaking of the curfew and the continued contact with different clients is a risk factor to contracting the coronavirus among female sex workers. Kimani et al. (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbating the existing stigmatization of female sex workers, as novel forms of discrimination were emerging which regarded female sex workers as COVID-19 super-spreaders. Thus, the coronavirus has increased the vulnerability of female sex workers.

Study findings also show that female sex workers resorted to entrepreneurship as a way of sustaining their livelihoods. These findings can be attributed to the COVID-19 lockdown which has seen a number of female sex workers being unable to conduct their work. Bury's (2011) study came to the conclusion that responding to the plight of female sex workers has the potential to amend their livelihoods and to proffer new survival skills. If female sex workers are equipped with entrepreneurship skills and knowledge, this can positively impact in their lives and help them to adapt to change. However, according to studies conducted in Kenya some female sex workers have gone to their rural areas after failing to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. That is why Van Breda's (2001) resilience theory suggests that an individual's coping mechanisms differ from person to person due to the different capabilities and abilities that human beings have.

In addition, there was a fear of contracting the coronavirus and hence female sex workers have started engaging in small income-generation projects, other than sex work business. These findings highlight that female sex workers had adopted innovative and resourceful ways of coping with the COVID-19 lockdown. Along the lines of the resilience theory (Van Breda, 2001), female sex workers have developed innovative ways of coping with the lockdown measures. Study findings also show that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed female sex workers to HIV infection due to lack of access to condoms. The above findings were attributed to the closure of non-essential services such as the civil society organization that assists female sex workers with sexual reproductive health services. These findings are consistent with findings from a study done by the Kenyan Female Sex Workers Alliance (2020) which reviewed how female sex workers have resorted to unprotected sex due to a shortage of condoms caused by the imposed lockdown measures.

Kimani et al. (2020) also further point out that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of the chain of production of female sex workers' services such as condoms and drugs in particular. Such deterioration in the supply chain has exacerbated their susceptibility to both HIV and COVID-19, thereby increasing their vulnerability. Studies conducted by Roots Africa, 2020 and the *Sunday Mail, 2021* in Zimbabwe also corroborate these findings by Kimani et al. (2020). Therefore, female sex workers end up indulging in unprotected sex (Kafe, 2021).

Conclusion

The study concludes that the COVID-19 lockdown has exceedingly interrupted the work of commercial female sex workers, which has a negative bearing on their livelihoods. Henceforth, the COVID-19 lockdown has exacerbated the socio-economic circumstances of commercial female sex workers in the absence of meaningful social welfare assistance programs in Zimbabwe. Female sex workers have been left with the choice either to die of hunger or to contract the COVID-19 virus. Resultantly, female sex workers have been consistently breaking the curfew in order to work during the night, which has exposed them to COVID-19. Commercial female sex workers have also resorted to online sex work which has destroyed Zimbabwe's moral fabric which is premised on the *Ubuntu*/*Hunhu* philosophy.

Recommendations

The study has proffered some recommendations in relation to improving the livelihoods of female sex workers in times of shocks and stressors. The challenges female sex workers face in times of unforeseen contingencies is due to a lack of social protection mechanisms from the government. Therefore, the following recommendations have been suggested:

- There is need to design social safety net programs meant to cushion vulnerable groups (female sex workers included) against the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The government and non-state actors must also target commercial female sex workers for vocational skills training. This can help in building their resilience to adapt to environmental shocks and stressors.
- The government should provide free sexual and reproductive health services to commercial female sex workers during the lockdown period.
- It is also imperative to sensitize commercial female sex workers to the dangers of breaching the COVID-19 lockdown regulations.
- Provision of personal protective materials for sex works (masks and sanitizers) should be made available. All these efforts are aimed at improving livelihoods and adaption skills for female sex workers in the wake of COVID-19.

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