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Vulnerability Factors and Pathways Leading to Underage Entry into Sex Work in two Mexican-US Border Cities

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Vulnerability Factors and Pathways Leading to Underage Entry into Sex Work in two Mexican-US Border Cities

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Introduction

The current wave of interest in human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children has exposed a lack of knowledge about the vulnerabilities and pathways leading to underage entry to sex work in developing countries around the world. This knowledge is necessary for the development of effective and purposefully designed programs to prevent and respond to these deplorable acts. The United Nations Palermo Protocol defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include... the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation.”¹ This definition of “trafficking in persons” considers two major facets: involuntary and underage entry into sex work; the focus of this study is on the second component, underage entry into sex work.

According to the United Nations 2014 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, one in three human trafficking victims is a child and most victims are female²; yet there is a dearth of studies exploring what vulnerabilities might increase the likelihood of underage entry into sex work versus entering as an adult. The majority of this research has been conducted in North America and Asia, and has focused on the health and social consequences of underage entry into sex work. This research has found that girls who enter sex work underage experience serious consequences such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD),³ mental health disorders (i.e., suicidality, anxiety, depression, etc.),⁴⁻⁷ and heightened vulnerability to HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), in addition to other serious sexual and reproductive health consequences.⁸⁻¹²

Experiences of childhood abuse and subsequent running away in adolescence have long been considered primary risks for underage entry into sex work in North America.¹³⁻¹⁶ However, outside of North America, less is known about the factors that create vulnerability to underage entry into sex work. Due to its geographical location, Mexico is a large transit, source, and destination country for trafficked persons.¹⁷ It has been documented that migrants traveling from Central America on their route to the U.S. have been victims of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation within the country,¹⁸⁻²⁰ and more recently, numerous cases of young girls from Mexico being trafficked to the US for sexual exploitation have appeared in the media.^{21,22} Despite all of this documentation, very little empirical research on human trafficking exists in this region.^{23,24}

Empirical data is needed to identify girls who are at-risk in order to develop effective trafficking prevention programs, especially for Latin America, a region that is believed to be one of the largest sources of persons moved across international borders for the purposes of sexual and labor exploitation.¹⁹ To begin to address this need, this qualitative study aimed to explore and understand the vulnerability factors and pathways leading to underage entry into sex work experienced by women currently engaging in sex work in two Mexican-United States border cities.

Methods

Study Settings

The United States-Mexico border, with a total length of 1,969 miles, is one of the most transited international border crossings in the world and home to two of the largest binational conurbations, the sister cities of San Diego, California - Tijuana, Baja California and El Paso, Texas - Ciudad (Cd.) Juarez, Chihuahua.²⁵ The proximity of these cities, constant human mobility, and strong social and economic ties has created the ideal setting not only for international legal commerce and cultural exchange, but also for other activities such as drug trafficking, money laundering, sex work and sex tourism.²⁶⁻²⁹ In Tijuana, commercial sex work is quasi – legal in specific areas of the city referred to as *zonas de tolerancia* (tolerance areas)^{28,30} Female sex workers (FSWs) are regulated by the government and are required to undergo HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) testing on a regular basis in order to obtain sex work permits to work in the *zonas de tolerancia*.³¹ However, these permits are unavailable to minors since the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is illegal under Mexican law.^{32,33} Despite these efforts, underage sex work in the border region and tourist areas is common.^{17,34} In Ciudad Juarez, a permit is not required to work because sex work is not legal and there is no tolerance zone. Their previous tolerance zone was destroyed with the idea of creating a “cleaner” image of the city and moving sex work to the periphery of the city, however, this project was never completed.³⁵ The majority of the sex work and sex workers are concentrated in the city in the *Zona Centro*, which is located in the heart of Ciudad Juarez’s downtown area. The *Zona Centro* is a central commercial zone for the whole city not just sex work.³⁶ The bars and hotels where the majority of sex work is done are scattered between other places of business like markets, hair salons, restaurants, and other retail shops. In both cities, female sex workers (FSWs) operate out of diverse venues such as cantinas, bars, nightclubs, hotels and street corners. It is estimated that there are approximately 9000 female sex workers (FSWs) in Tijuana and 6000 in Ciudad Juarez, attracting male clients from the US and other parts of the world.³⁷⁻³⁹

Data Collection

From August 2013 to October 2014, FSWs with a history of underage entry to sex work were identified and recruited for qualitative interviews

from a study of 602 FWS's in Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez (*Mapa de Salud Study*; R01DA028692 PI: Brouwer). Women eligible for *Mapa de Salud* study if they were ≥ 18 years of age, biologically female, reporting having exchanged sex for money or goods at least 4 times in the past month with at least 4 different clients, agreeing to treatment for any sexually transmitted infection (STI) detected, and residing in Tijuana or Ciudad Juarez with no plans to move out of these cities in the next 18 months. Participants were selected through modified time-location sampling within both indoor and street venues throughout both cities and no more than 15 women were recruited from any particular venue. All *Mapa de Salud* participants completed a questionnaire and biological testing for HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia at baseline. From this sampling frame, we recruited and conducted 20 in-depth interviews with female sex workers (FSWs) who reported a history of underage sex work. Participants for qualitative interviews were identified as entering sex work prior to age 18 via the quantitative survey. Eligible women were interviewed in private study offices by local Mexican field staff with previous experience working with sex workers and other vulnerable populations. The study was approved by institutional Review Boards (IRB) at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (El COLEF) in Tijuana, and Universidad Autonoma de Ciudad Juarez (UACJ) in Chihuahua. Women received US\$20 for their time and travel costs, HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STI) information, free condoms and a small referral card with contact information of different agencies that provide free or low cost health and legal services that our study team had successfully referred participants to in the past. Interviewers were trained according to the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines for research with trafficked women.⁴⁰ The purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and risks and benefits of participating were explained to all participants, and they provided written informed consent prior to commencing an interview. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-taped (identified using only a study-unique identification number), and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Informed by the World Health Organization (WHO) safety and ethical guidelines for conducting research with trafficked women,⁴⁰ and based on our previous experience conducting research with women who were trafficked into sex work (either forced or underage),^{41,42} the interviews loosely followed an open-ended guide, which was iteratively revised as data collection and analysis progressed. Questions elicited women's narratives regarding their childhood, circumstances surrounding their underage entry into sex work, first months during sex work and continuation of commercial sex work

involvement. Given the sensitive nature of the interviews, substantial efforts were undertaken to ensure participants' comfort with the research process prior to, during, and following in-depth interviews.

Eligibility Criteria

As previously described, participants for the in-depth interviews were selected from the *Mapa de Salud* sampling frame. They were identified as entering sex work prior to age 18 via the quantitative survey (e.g., how old were you the first time you traded sex for money, whether that money was given to you or someone else?). A total of twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with women who reported entering sex work underage. We stopped at this number because we reached saturation of themes. The initial data collection, review of first transcripts, and sampling decisions occurred concurrently. This iterative process allowed co-authors to make changes to the interview guide and employ theoretical sampling techniques⁴³ to incorporate emerging themes based on participants' ability to provide comparison on specific factors. Participants were purposively sampled⁴⁴ to capture a range of entry experiences with an oversampling of forced/coerced entry and parent (mother) involvement in sex work.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated by a trained bilingual research team. Co-authors systematically read through transcripts and engaged in line-by-line coding. We then utilized connecting analytical strategies⁴⁵ in order to create lifetime chronologies for each participant that placed participants' entry to sex work within the context of their broader lives. A codebook was developed that incorporated descriptive codes based on interview questions and emergent thematic codes informed by participants' lifetime chronologies. Co-authors then coded transcripts in ATLAS.ti version 6.2 to label emergent themes related to family dysfunction, sexual and physical abuse, and teen pregnancy. Qualitative analysis was led by the first author in conjunction with co-authors, who provided input regarding the identification and interpretation of themes. The constant comparative method was used to describe the content and structure of the data.⁴⁶ The analysis adopted an inductive perspective in which we used participants' language and experiences to identify and understand factors influencing vulnerability and pathways to underage entry into sex work.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Characteristics of the study sample (n=20) were derived from *Mapa de Salud* baseline data collected (Table 1). These included biological testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (e.g., chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis), sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, education), substance use (e.g., age first used injected or non-injected drugs) and other measures. Participants'

median age was 28 (range 19 - 44). Women completed a median of 6 years of education (primary school), 55%(11/20) reported being single or separated and median number of children participants had was two. About one third (30%) tested positive for any HIV/STI. Substance abuse was prevalent, fifty seven percent of the sample reported current alcohol use, of whom 25%reported heavy alcohol use and 33% of the sample reported using illicit drugs (excluding marijuana) such as crystal meth, heroin, crack, etc., at least once in the past six months.

Table 1. Characteristics of female sex workers (N=20) in Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico who reported underage entry into sex work.

Variable	N = 20
Age ^a	28 (19-44)
Marital status: single, separated, divorced ^b	11 (55%)
Education (years) ^a	6 (1-10)
Average household income per fortnight ^c	\$2,500 - \$3,749 pesos ⁺
Birthplace (birth state in Mexico)	
Baja California	3 (15%)
Chihuahua	9 (45%)
Other Mexican state	8 (40%)
City where interviewed	
Tijuana	11 (55%)
Cd. Juarez	10 (45%)
Number of Children ^a	2 (1-6)
Positive for any STI/HIV	6 (30%)
Reported heavy drinking in the past 30 days ^d	5 (25%)
Reported drug use in the past 6 months (excluding marijuana)	7 (33%)

^a Median (range)

^b vs. married or common law

^c before taxes in the past year

^d SAMHSA definition of heavy drinking

⁺Current currency rate equals \$165 - 250 USD

Findings

By design, all the women originally entered sex work underage (either as children or adolescents). The median age of entry to sex work was 14 years of age (range 11-17). Disturbingly, sixty percent (12/20) of the participants reported being forced or coerced into sex work, and of these 7 were transported to another city to begin engaging in sex work. Family dysfunction (i.e., domestic violence

among parents, parent drug use, and neglect), physical and sexual abuse, and teen pregnancy were among the key emerging themes found to perpetuate vulnerability to underage entry. Women's narratives illustrate that these vulnerabilities are manifold and how the pathways leading to underage entry to sex work are complex and often intersect with each other. Each of these themes and how they intersect is further exemplified below using the narratives from the participants themselves. (Note: for ethical and confidentiality purposes, the names of the participants have been changed).

Family Dysfunction

More than half of the participants (16/20) reported some form of threat to their security in their family during their childhood or adolescence. Domestic violence (between their parents) and parental substance use were the most common family issues reported by the participants. Many of the participants reported not wanting to be at home because of the constant violence (domestic violence among their parents) leading them to running away and subsequently drop out of school to escape the situation they were living at home. As Luisa's story below reflects, she had an abusive father and she preferred not to be at home because of the constant domestic violence:

Well my childhood, was sad [...] like my father was a violent person; he would hit my mother a lot [...] I remember that there were lots of fights at home, that my dad would beat my mother a lot [...] so I didn't spend much time at home [...] and I ended up leaving home [ran away] [...] I started to look for work but nobody would hire me because I was underage and the only alternative that I had was this [sex work]. - Luisa, entry at 16, interviewed in Tijuana.

Both domestic violence and parental drug use were often related to physical, educational or emotional neglect. Some experiences of physical and emotional neglect mentioned by our participants where abandonment by one of the parents, inadequate supervision, and marked inattention to their needs for affection while growing up. For example, Alexa was abandoned by her father when she was 5 and her and her sister were left to be raised by her single mother. Below she describes her childhood and the emotional neglect she experienced:

We have things that define us as people or that hurt our soul, I would have liked things to have been different, that my mom would have been with me more [...] my mom had to leave at night to work and left my sister and me alone and my sister got into drugs, and well I was always with the neighbors [...] she would leave me in other houses so I wouldn't be outside, yes it was difficult [...] I was left alone a lot. - Alexa, entry at 16, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

When I was a child, well, um, my parents were together, but they fought a lot and they drank a lot [...] in fact my dad broke my mom's wrist one time in front of us, we were there just watching. They would have fights all the time, they would

break up and get back together [...] when they finally split up my mom used to just leave us there at the house alone, she'd leave us there [...] without food or anything, she didn't care if we ate or not, that was our problem. - Patricia, entry at 14, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

Other women reported educational neglect as girls and being left unattended because their parents had substance abuse problems (i.e., alcohol and illicit drugs) and eventually running away from home, as Carla's story indicates:

My dad was a person that wasn't very hard working and he drank a lot, he had a drinking problem [alcoholic]. I didn't accept my dad the way he was [...] and I hardly went to school, I learned a little bit [...] I hardly know how to read and write, that's all [...] I decided one day simply not to come home from school and I left. - Carla, entry at 15, interviewed in Tijuana.

For other women, the family disfunction, homelessness and lack of social support rendered them vulnerable to exploitation by individuals (i.e., pimp or trafficker) who initially concealed their intentions of exploiting them. In our study, twelve of the 20 participants were forced or coerced into sex work. Alma's story below exemplifies one of the pathways experienced by many women who had a family dysfunction (vulnerability), who decided to run away because of that dysfunction, becoming homeless and entering sex work by means of exploitation:

I was about 8 years old or 9 years old and I was living on the streets [...] I lived on the streets, I ate in the street [...] and then I went to live with a lady that I met [...] I went with her and she gave me a room [...] when I started to develop more [physically develop], the lady told me that since she had given me housing, food and clothes, that I now had to pay her [...] And then came the day that she sold me [...] she sold me to, well, pay herself back what she had given me [...] so she sold me to a guy that was like 60 years old. - Alma, entry at 11, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

As these women's stories indicate, having a family dysfunction made them particularly vulnerable and paved the way for their entry. Of the 16 women who indicated some type of family dysfunction, the majority (10/16) indicated running away from home trying to escape that situation, resulting in homelessness and dropping out of school. Women described being young and poorly skilled due to the lack of education at the time, making it difficult for them to find a job.

Physical and Sexual Abuse

Over half of the participants (13/20) reported experiencing both physical and sexual abuse during their childhood or adolescence. Some of the women indicated that the perpetrators were either living in the home, such as a stepfather or mother's boyfriend, or were part of their community such as a neighbor or a family friend that lived near by. This abuse in the home or

community often led to participants getting kicked out of the house, running away, or moving out in order to escape the abuse. Below are two examples of women who experienced sexual abuse, Natalia was escaping an attempted rape by her mother's boyfriend and Veronica was raped by individuals who lived in her neighborhood:

I was like eleven years old, when he [mother's boyfriend] came home one day drunk and he tried to rape me and that's when I left my house, when I was going to turn 12 years old.- Natalia, entry at 13, interviewed in Tijuana.

I was 10 years old [...] they were like mmm, 16 years old and the other one like 17, around that age [...] we were hanging out [friend] in the neighborhood with other friends [...] it was late, it was already like 1 or 2 am and these guys, they grabbed my friend and forced her [raped] even though she didn't want to [...] I was with her and I started running [...] but a guy grabbed me and forced me [raped] [...] he pulled down his underwear and all and he grabbed me from behind [...] it hurt me a lot, I was crying and crying and I couldn't find what to do. - Veronica, entry at 14, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

Both Natalia and Veronica ended up leaving their home or community to escape that abuse, becoming homeless and then entering sex work. Despite participants' efforts to leave their abusive circumstances behind (i.e., physical or sexual abuse) they often ended up experiencing more violence from other individuals upon leaving home that marked the pathway to their entry into sex work. As Claudia explains below, she left her home because she had an abusive father who constantly hit her and she became an easy target for others to abuse her:

I had to leave my house, because even now I have a mark here, here on my back and here on my waist, that my dad, that day I left my house in the afternoon, mmm, I was taking a shower and my dad arrived and he beat me up really badly [sounds like she starts crying] [...] that same night I fell asleep on the street, walking, and waiting for the next day for sunrise so I could get to where I could take the train to leave to another city. I met a guy on the train on my way there, I thought he was a good guy until then he forced me [raped] and left half of my face destroyed [...] he took me [abducted], he tied me up and covered my mouth, I was locked for about 3 days in a room without food or anything [...] and no one worried about me [...] I mean, I think that even if my family knew, they wouldn't have care anyway about anything [...] when this guy untied me, he told me "I'm going to untie you" he said "and I'm going to let you be here at home, but if you leave [...] I will kill you" he told me. I told him I wouldn't leave that I would stay, but as soon as I had a chance I left. - Claudia, entry at 13, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

Being very young, marginalized and experiencing violence at a young age made Claudia an easy target for further victimization. Claudia's story resonates with similar experiences lived by many of our participants who unfortunately did not receive any health attention or social support after the abuse. It is important to mention that about one third of the women who reported sexual abuse also mentioned drug use/initiation after the sexual abuse /rape and explicitly referred to using drugs as a coping mechanism.

Teen Pregnancy

Half of the participants (10/20) reported teen pregnancy and this ended up playing a major role in their underage entry into sex work. Women described having no social support at all when they became pregnant as teens and in some cases being thrown out of their homes because of their pregnancy. They described having limited work alternatives available to them at that time because they were underage, uneducated and pregnant. As Maria's quote below illustrates, her pregnancy led to the disapproval and abandonment of her family and her partner, indirectly shaping her entry:

I was 15 years old [...] I didn't finish middle school because I was pregnant [...] my parents rejected me and were disappointed when I told them because they never imagined it, my family is Christian, and when they found out my mom treated me de lo peor [very badly] [...] and my partner left, he didn't take care of her [the baby][...] I was left all alone." - Maria, entry at 16, interviewed in Tijuana.

Some women perceived their initial entry to be a decision that they had participated in due to the lack of alternatives available to them. As Camila's story below indicates, even though becoming a pregnant teen was beyond her control (because she was raped) not having any social support led directly to her entry:

"I was raped and I got pregnant, a neighbor raped me. My father instead of helping me he kicked me out of the house; he hit me and kicked me out. I went on the streets [...] I slept in the sidewalks and a woman who owned a bar [...] she picked me up and she sold me [forced her into sex work] [...]. She took me to a bar, I had nothing to lose [...] I really needed my family's help, and well, they didn't help me." - Camila entry at 16, interviewed in Tijuana.

In other narratives, women described meeting a partner who was more than 10 years older than them, and who would show promise of providing things which were not provided by their family (i.e., care, protection, shelter, sustenance). Very often participants reported pregnancy from that relationship with the older partner and subsequent economic need stemming from the pregnancy because they were abandoned by the older partner. The women explained that they turned to sex work as a way to provide for their children. Their economic need, including shelter, food, and money to support dependents, placed them in a situation in

which they were more vulnerable. Other women when were forced or tricked by older partners to go into sex work to repay whatever was provided during their pregnancy or would use children as a way of forcing them to enter sex work. Below is Monica's story, which is one example of this pathway experienced by many of the women in our study:

You are naïve and you are there thinking that you are in love, right? And you leave [home] [...] I was 15 years old, I finished middle school and three months later I decided to leave with him, with my boyfriend [...] I left with him, we lived together for a while and well I got pregnant and then well when he left me [...] that is when I started [sex work] to make money to buy diapers, milk, and all that [...] I had to pay the expenses and it's hard when you don't have an education [...] if you only went to middle school or you can only find a job in a factory, you only make like 600 pesos per week and that's not enough for the milk and the diapers." - Monica, entry at 16, interviewed in Tijuana.

"I was 14 and he was 25 years old [...] after a month of living together I got pregnant and then he left me [abandoned] [...] he was married and had children [...] I came back with my family. They were upset [...] I decided to have the baby and I got a job in the city [...] there I met someone and we became friends for a couple of weeks [...] I told him everything, that I was pregnant and that I was separated from my partner [...] after three weeks he invited me to meet his family to another state, he convinced me and we went, but then he didn't let me come back [...] he said he wanted me to stay and live with him, that he was going to support me. When I was seven months pregnant he started to talk to me about sex work, what it was, and the money that you could make [...] he started asking me if I wanted to work in that [sex work] [...] I told him no many times and would cry [...] after my child was born he told me that he had been supporting me over all these months but he couldn't anymore [...] I felt more than anything obligated because he was my son and not his [...] I ended accepting working in that [sex work]. - Adriana, entry at 16, interviewed in Ciudad Juarez.

Discussion

Our findings begin to lay the groundwork for understanding the potential vulnerabilities and pathways leading to underage entry into sex work in Latin American countries such as Mexico. This study illustrates that family dysfunction (domestic violence, parental drug use and neglect), physical and sexual abuse, and teen pregnancy are key factors shaping girls' vulnerability to underage entry into sex work in these two U.S.-Mexico border cities. It is also clear from the narratives of these women's lives that it is not one specific type vulnerability that leads directly to underage entry into sex work for each individual. It is the combination or junction of these vulnerabilities that creates a pathway that leads to underage entry.

Prior studies have suggested a relationship between lifetime involvement in sex work (not necessary underage entry) to factors such as parental

substance abuse problems.^{47,48} Our findings also illustrate how other family dysfunction vulnerabilities (i.e., exposure to domestic violence, neglect) can directly or indirectly shape future pathways to underage entry.

Among our participants, consequences of early sexual and physical abuse led to running away from home, dropping out of school, and homelessness. The homelessness and lack of social support rendered them vulnerable to underage entry or in some instances to being coerced or forced into sex work. These findings complement prior research conducted in other regions indicating experiences young exposure to sexual and physical abuse and running away as an adolescent are primary risks for the commercial sexual exploitation of children.⁴⁹⁻⁵¹ Furthermore, it is important to mention that not one of the participants received mental health services or professional services of any kind for the abuse they endured. For many this study was their first time disclosing to someone the abuse they had experienced and many participants expressed relief in doing so. These findings suggest the need in Mexico for more effective child protective service programs to identify and assist children who have been victims of sexual or physical abuse in a timely way given their potential implications.

Economic need is often connected to entry into sex work; evidence indicates that when women lack viable alternatives, they are more likely to perceive sex work as a feasible option for income.⁵² In our study, teen pregnancy was the common denominator that gave rise to economic need such as child caring needs (i.e., shelter, food, etc.). Because these women were underage at the time of pregnancy, had low levels of education and were poorly skilled, they had limited employment opportunities. These findings complement prior work indicating the role of limited opportunities for women as drivers of entry to sex work and trafficking.^{53, 54} The Mexican government has gone to great efforts to improve the educational opportunities, and thus the employment opportunities, of young women and girls from lower socioeconomic status with programs such as *Prospera* (previously referred to as *Oportunidades*).⁵⁵ However, these findings indicate that there are other needs that must be addressed (i.e., family issues, sexual and physical abuse) in order to reach these girls or expand their program to target high-risk girls who are suffering from these vulnerabilities as our study revealed.

Although our findings provide insight into the potential vulnerabilities and pathways leading to underage entry to sex work, important study limitations merit attention. Due to the legal and ethical implications of underage sex work, our sample was restricted to women who were at least 18 years of age or older and currently engage in sex work. Additionally, retrospective data on childhood experiences that may have occurred more than 10 or 20 years ago may be subject to recall bias. Likewise, all of the participants were part of a longitudinal study and were identified eligible for in-depth interviews based on the survey measures to establish their entry. However, findings from their qualitative interviews suggest subtle differences in the vulnerabilities and pathways then indicated by the survey measures alone. Even though participants were

purposively sampled to capture a range of entry experiences, because different research techniques yield distinct findings regarding the prevalence and nature of underage entry. Future research using a mixed-methods approach is needed to better triangulate these findings. Furthermore, because participants were part of a larger qualitative study, there was an oversampling of forced/coerced entry and parent (mother) involvement in sex work. Previous studies have documented that individuals who are forced into sex work¹⁰ or had a parent involved in sex work are exposed to more risks (i.e., sexual abuse and homelessness);⁵⁶ research among more generalizable populations is needed.

Conclusions

There is an urgent need for interventions to reduce these vulnerabilities and prevent underage entry to the sex work industry. To the best of our knowledge, no evidence-based prevention interventions aimed at reducing underage to sex work for women and girls are available in this region at this time. Any intervention that would reduce the number of displaced vulnerable young women and girls, or assure that they have alternatives to sex work if they find themselves in difficult situations or without any social support, would reduce the opportunities for underage entry into sex work and for traffickers to take advantage of vulnerable girls. Addressing social issues takes multidisciplinary collaborations between different existing institutions such as child protection services and agencies that assist abused women at the local, state, and federal levels. This study lays the foundation for a wide array of further research to explore these and additional vulnerabilities and pathways leading to underage entry, as well as efforts to provide services to better understand the needs of this vulnerable population throughout Latin America and other developing countries.

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