Reviewer’s report

Title: An ethnographic exploration of factors that drive policing of street-based female sex workers in a U.S. setting - identifying opportunities for intervention.

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Reviewer: Jennifer Toller Erausquin

Reviewer's report:

Manuscript IHHR-D-19-00042 addresses an important and relevant topic for BMC International Health and Human Rights, that of understanding factors that shape the policing of female sex workers in a US city.

On the whole, this was a well-written manuscript, with appropriate data collection and analysis methods given the research questions. The authors did a particularly good job in the discussion, situating the results in relation to other studies of policing and within the specific context of Baltimore. At a few points, I was left wondering if there was complete consensus or perhaps variation in attitudes, attributions, or practices described. The authors should consider where they can add counter-examples or alternative perspectives, as a way of sharing the range of responses within the data. It can sometimes be helpful to indicate whether a code or theme came up for "some" or "most" participants.

The specific critiques that follow are areas where the authors could clarify, explain, or delve deeper in ways that would be helpful both to the reader's understanding and the field (public health inquiry into the lives and needs of FSW).

Specific comments:

Title: Although the goal of the larger research project may be "achieving improved health and human rights," the data collection and analysis described in this paper doesn't directly lead to (nor definitively determine action steps toward) the achievement of improved health of FSW in this setting. There may be an argument around the human rights piece, but I would recommend a title that is more closely related to this study's specific purpose and/or findings.

Abstract: Methods: last sentence: "exploring the more explicitly spatial exercise of police discretion" (emphasis mine) is difficult to understand here. Within the text where you have more room to explain the concept becomes clearer, but in the abstract you may consider language more appropriate to a broad audience.

p.1, lines 2-3: I urge you to define stigmatization and indicate why it is important for the health and wellbeing of marginalized communities. Stigma is important because it creates real or perceived social distance, separating people from resources and decision-making ability that non-stigmatized others have access to. Stigma affects health and human rights.

p. 1 lines 9-10: "...healthcare and other forms of social support..." Please consider whether healthcare is a form of social support or whether it is instead directly a human right.

p. 2-3, lines 37-43: make clear when you shift specifically to a focus on injection drug use rather than substance use generally. Are injection drugs the main substances used by the street-based sex workers in your study?

P. 3 line 50 explain what you mean for the context of the failed war on drugs (would be very helpful for non-US readers)
the long paragraph that starts on line 71 and finishes at line 96 wanders at points. What is the connection to police domestic violence work? (Can you give an example of something that counts as "real policing" and something that does not? How does a "masculine ethos" play out?) p. 5, line 96: I would not refer to a 15-year old publication as "more recent work." It's practically as old as the 1997 citation. I would also not refer to the findings of Chan 2004 as example of "contemporary" efforts. The field of policing—particularly in urban areas in the US—has had a lot of push and pull in the past 5 years.

In general you did a nice job describing the methodology. It would have been helpful around line 192 (or perhaps in the discussion section, in limitations) to comment on what perspectives you likely captures and what perspectives you may have missed with the purposive and opportunistic sampling.

p. 11, line 200: data were (plural verb needed)

p. 12: given the NIMBY-ism described in the quote on p. 13, it may be helpful to comment on the fact that most police officers in this study did not live within Baltimore City.

p. 16 line 105: you refer to "gendered attitudes" of officers without specifically explaining what you mean, and then the representative quotation is from a female officer. There are many layers of potential motivations and meanings here (certainly female officers can take a masculine or paternalistic approach) and it is worth exploring in more detail. Could you provide other examples of "moralistic and gendered attitudes" from male officers? Was the female officer's perspective an anomaly? Further, you cite that same officer in lines 315-317; is this second quote in some way also gendered [reflecting a toughness or presumed impartiality, as if all persons who transgress the law are the same—which might be particularly important for a female officer to state]?

p. 19-20 lines 377-382: how common was the perspective that decriminalizing is an important first step? How many commanding officers mentioned this? Did any street officers, or vice?

p. 25, line 483: here you refer to "gendered and stigmatizing assumptions of police officers" and I am not certain you have specifically described any theme or used a quote to show that that was true—it was implied but I do not think it was made explicit. Clarify if you mean "gendered" because the sex workers are women, or because most of the police officers and police as an institution exhibit hegemonic masculine norms and ideals. What exactly were the potentially stigmatizing assumptions uncovered in this study?

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.
Yes

Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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