

Alcohol use as a work factor among female sex workers in escort agencies

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Abstract – Introduction. The aim of the study was to describe organisational factors connected with alcohol use among female sex workers in escort agencies.

Method. The article is based on the data resulting from ethnographic research conducted between 2007 and 2011. Data collection employed techniques such as observation, unstructured and informal interviews with workers employed in escort agencies and in-depth interviews with female sex workers. Data analysis followed the principles of the Grounded Theory Methodology.

Results. Alcohol use among female sex workers is a social activity connected with work conditions in escort agencies. Quantity of alcohol consumption and drinking patterns depend on the organisational culture of the escort agency, attitudes toward alcohol use of their managers and drinking group norms among co-working women. Most importantly, female sex workers consider alcohol as a substance reducing negative emotions emerging from sex work, facilitating interactions with clients and enabling them to earn extra money.

Key words: alcohol drinking patterns, sex work, ethnography, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive substances are accepted as an important aspect of the commercial provision of sex services both for service providers and for their clients (1, 2). Among all the current organisational forms of sex work, especially escort agencies and nightclubs (3) are seen as places where various kinds of substances are readily available and their consumption is closely bound up with demand for and supply of sex workers' services.

Though alcohol and drugs are a frequent “addition” to commercial sex (4), this subject has not been well studied empirically in research on sex work also in Poland.

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In the Polish studies so far carried out, substance use, mainly alcohol, is treated above all in terms of revealing the causes of sex work. In accordance with to the theories that emphasise the importance of family background and peer-group for the later supply of sex services, researchers took notice of alcohol problems in the women's backgrounds of origin. Results of studies conducted in Poland¹ since the 1960s indicate that in many sex workers' families (44–67%) at least one parent abused alcohol (6–9). Comparison of the character of drinking initiation with control group women revealed marked differences. The sex worker group had experience of alcohol earlier – often while playing truant, running away from home or also in the family home. Spirits were usually drunk on such occasions, while in the case of control group women, first experiences of drinking were of lightly alcoholic beverages, for example at family events (9). Analysing the origins of sex work, researchers emphasised the occurrence of other substances like cigarettes or drugs in sex workers' family households. As Joanna Moczyłowska showed in her study of under-age sex workers, almost one quarter of their siblings used substances, while 13% of mothers abused painkiller medical drugs and barbiturates (10). Other researchers also indicated that involvement in providing sexual services might be a result of substance use. Sex work is in this case a means of gaining the money to buy drugs or alcohol (11–13), or a drug dose may be direct payment for sex (4).

The type of substance, dosage and frequency of use by sex workers were also analysed parallel to studies of the link between sex work and psychoactive substance use. The largest scale survey studies in Poland were conducted under the direction of Zbigniew Izdebski for the The National Centre for AIDS (Krajowe Centrum ds. AIDS) (14). The research sample was 400 women sex workers in 13 large cities and their surroundings. As results indicate, the majority of the study group used psychoactive substances. During one month prior to the study, 74% of women drank alcohol – 13% every day and 35% at least once a week; 21% took sleeping pills or sedatives at least once a week, and 6% at least once a day in the same period. The respondents indicated the substances they most often used in the past to be: barbiturates (37%), amphetamines (35%), marihuana (30%), sleeping pills (25%), cocaine (20%), ecstasy (15%) and heroin (8%) (14). It ought to be noted that the study did not yet include so called “dopalacze” (novel quasi-legal narcotics), which according to my observations are used by sex workers at escort agencies. Numerous studies have also shown that a vast majority of these women smoke cigarettes (9, 14, 15). According to professor Izdebski's team, the studied women smoked on average 22 cigarettes a day, while 11% smoked as much as 35 daily (14).

Qing Li et al (5) provide interesting results showing the link between alcohol consumption and commercial sex services on the basis of an analysis of 70 articles discussing 76 studies around the world. The results confirm that nearly all women sex

¹ There are analogies in the English language literature. As research results in well-developed countries indicate, a given woman's drink problem and her family background/peer group as she was growing up are linked to later involvement in commercial sex (5).

workers drink (5). In the specific studies, from 19% to 77% of women who provide sex services (median 50%) declared they drink either before or during contact with clients (12, 16, 17). Meanwhile, from 17% to 95% (median 56%) admitted to having had sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs in the last six months (5, 16). As the researchers noted, though the scale of alcohol consumption does differ, at least some drink far more than the recommended daily maximum consumption (12).

The mentioned study results show that psychoactive substances are ubiquitous in sex workers' social environments. Also revealed are many possible research perspectives, both in terms of scope of project theme (e.g. the role of these substances in the causes of sex work, individual characteristics of consumption and correlations between given substance use and type of sex work in which a person is involved) and adopted methodological approach. The mentioned quantitative data also make up a background for the solutions that are the aim of this article, which is the presentation of the social context of psychoactive substance, above all alcohol, use by women who provide sex services in escort agencies². The main axis of consideration shall therefore not be individual motives for drinking, but rather environmental and situational factors linked to the availability of alcohol and the norms relating to its consumption at work that influence with whom, where, when and why sex workers drink (5).

This approach allows for the supplementing of the above mentioned research results by revealing the subjects' perspectives and bringing attention to other aspects that are difficult to grasp in quantitative study (e.g. concerning the influence of organisational culture and informal groups on drinking patterns). In order to realise these goals, the research project was planned as a field study based on qualitative techniques and methods.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The ontological basis of this study was the assumptions of symbolic interactionism (18). A consequence of adopting this perspective was the view of drinking as a social activity regulated by interactions taking place between its participants (19). Therefore, the preferred method of research and analysis for this study was on-the-spot observation of drinking (19).

The problematic of alcohol consumption is a fragment of a wider research project concerning the work situation of women who provide sexual services in escort agencies. Its empirical element based on qualitative field research was realised in 2007–2011. This was an ethnographic study project (20) (manner of field study organisation and main data gathering techniques), though the analytical procedures (theoretical sampling, constant comparative method, coding and data analysis procedures and writing and sorting of theoretical memos) were drawn from Grounded Theory

² In the article, I shall concentrate on alcohol consumption and only refer to other psychoactive substances at particular points in the text.

Methodology (21–27). This combination of methods allows the achievement of a synergy effect that encourages the raising of research process quality (28–29).

In a project conceived in this manner, it was necessary to achieve intimate familiarity with the subjects, which became possible thanks to conversations with subjects, spending time with them and observing their activities (30). This approach determined the selection of the data gathering techniques used in the project.

Data for analysis were gathered above all by interview: unstructured (31), in-depth, ethnographic (32) and conversational (21). Use of various kinds of qualitative (not quantitative) interview was in my opinion key to the success of the research project. This allowed for the building of a comfortable atmosphere in which the subject could get used to the researcher and establish ties of understanding and trust (33). They also allowed for the adjustment, confirmation and adaptation of how and in what order questions were posed and their form as regards the subject's competence. This was highly significant as difficult and sensitive issues were raised on many an occasion during the interviews. Interviews were conducted with all the categories of people working at escort agencies (with women sex workers, security, cleaners, barmen, taxi drivers and owners) usually on-site during working hours in one of the rooms. Due to the scope of this article, its basis will be above all 56 unstructured, in-depth interviews with female sex workers. The subjects varied in age from 18 to 56, with the majority being between 20 and 35 years old, as well as in period of employment at the agency (from one month to 14 years) and family situation. The great majority of subjects had had many experiences connected with sex work in the agencies in that city or other cities. All declared that they either used to drink or currently do so while working at the agency. The consumption ranged from the occasional to the very frequent with signs of addiction.

A parallel data gathering technique was observation (21, 28, 29, 34, 35). The core of the data was made up of long-term observation (carried out, with breaks, throughout the course of the project) at one of the escort agencies in a large town supplemented with shorter observations (single or repeated) at other sites. The study organisation was an effect of difficulties in starting the research and convincing the agency management to agree to the presence of the researcher and the conducting of observations. It ought to be noted that though intensive observations were conducted at one establishment, it was thanks to the interviews and additional observations that data on all agencies operating at the time in the town were gathered, and also other establishments operating in other large cities in Poland, Germany and Great Britain.

The observations were overt for agency employees and covert for their clients. In defining the observer's role in categories of participation (32), the peripheral membership principle was adopted; that is, I observed the subjects and entered into close interactions with them, but I did not take part in the core activities of group members. The observations were above all of interactions between agency employees and between them and visiting clients. They were carried out in agency rooms reserved for employees (security guards, managers or in the employees common room) and in freely accessible spaces (agency salon or corridors). This allowed for the observa-

tion of practices associated with the acceptance of alcohol by agency owners and workers, especially in the case of them being reluctant to speak out on the subject in interviews. All observations were systematically noted down (32, 34, 36). The written material gained I treated as parallel and supplementary, which at times shed new light on interview data.

The research also often threw up ethical dilemmas (28, 32, 37) resulting from direct contact with subjects caught up in complicated life situations. Above all, the issue tended to be the necessity of mediating between the researcher's neutrality and (quasi)therapeutic roles often expected by the subjects. The passive observation and analysis of experiences (also those of psychoactive substance use) of women working in escort agencies was difficult for a sociologist, who was unable to offer the women any concrete help. The best solution to this kind of dilemma would seem to be research by a team of interdisciplinary experts who would, apart from realising strictly scientific goals, be able to intervene or take preventative action when necessary.

DRINKING AS AN ELEMENT OF ESCORT AGENCY WORK SITUATION

To understand the social aspects of drinking by escort agency sex workers, it is necessary to consider the agency as an organisation in which patterns of drinking are formed in constant negotiation between three main groups of social actors: agency managers, the women who provide sex services and their clients. Each of those groups has its own norms and expectations as well as justifications and its own explanation for the escorts' drinking. So, how alcohol consumption issues are dealt with at a given agency very much depends on the compromises being constantly renegotiated in the course of everyday interactions related to how much and in what circumstances agency employees are allowed to drink. For a better understanding of this process, in a later part of the article, I shall reconstruct the activities of agency managers and characterise the drinking culture created and maintained among agency workers.

Two aspects of alcohol consumption in escort agencies ought to be considered: the sale of alcohol to clients and its consumption by employees. Though the availability of alcohol for the clients of the majority of agencies and nightclubs is not open to discussion, each establishment differs in terms of level of drinking permission as far as employees are concerned. On the basis of observation and interviews with agency managers, I identified three main types of attitude to sex workers' substance use: encouragement, permission and prohibition.

Encouragement (or coercion) to use psychoactive substances, as far as women sex workers are concerned, is typical of the kind of establishment where they are subject to various kinds of abuse. Analysis of agency owners reveals two types of situation. In the first case, agency managers themselves use and abuse substances, creating a climate of permission for employee use. Managers not so much seek to subordinate employees through their dependency as much as see them as company for the

realisation of their needs of this kind. Drugs use and drinking are often common activities during work hours between clients or together with them. This results in the creation of a particular never-ending party atmosphere attractive to those workers and clients for whom the link between drug or alcohol use and recreation seems to be unbreakable. This way of running agencies may attract workers who abuse substances as they gain easy access to them and participation in the environment favours their consumption. It is worth noting that establishments run in this way rarely prosper. This is as much because of a lack of actual control over agency operations as a result of workers' and clients' sense of distaste at the goings-on, lack of acceptance and eventual avoidance of the place all together.

But it was unpleasant there; the girls were junkies, and the boss also took drugs. Later he cleaned up a bit (...) but the girls messed up the reputation. So drunk and wired, you don't wanna know, they'd wreck the rooms. (...) There was this girl who would just flip if she didn't earn enough for her gear, jumping on the beds and smashing them up (...) Later clients (...) would see that this girl was drunk and that one was stoned and they'd give the place a swerve and business just went down until it just went bust in the end. [R35³]

In the second case, the managers did not themselves use substances; they encouraged employees to do so in order to get more out of their work (see 4). Women under the influence of drugs or alcohol have weaker control over their behaviour (or none at all) and more easily agree to receive a greater number of clients or are not completely aware how much they are actually earning. Establishment managers are able to manipulate them by reducing their owed pay, falsely accounting the number of hours spent with clients or subtracting the costs of supposed losses resulting from their behaviour when drunk.

Particularly dangerous is encouragement (or coercion) to take addictive drugs placing the women sex workers in relations of dependency on agency managers (and at the same time drug dealers). A typical tactic here is offering drugs on credit paid off through work at the agency. Together with the rise in drug consumption by the worker and loss of control over the debt (losing count of actual earnings and expenditure on drugs) the arrears grow to the extent that people running the establishment take all earnings. In this situation, leaving the agency is especially difficult due to the unpaid (and unpayable) debt and easy access to drugs.

As transpires from interviews and observation, coercion or encouragement to take substances ceases when the dependent woman no longer attracts clients and custom, instead scaring them away (e.g. due to her withdrawal symptoms, aggressive behaviour and changed appearance). Management then puts her out of the agency, which does not mean the same measures are not used on other workers as long as agency profits are maximised.

³ In this article, interview quotes were marked as follows: squared brackets for interviewer's comments, dashes for statement fragments in which the speaker was impersonating the voice of another person, names were replaced by "X", "Y" and "Z" and the interview number was in squared brackets at the end of the quote.

Permission. Another approach of agency management is to permit substance use among workers. Especially in the case of alcohol, it is also the most frequent. The basic assumption is that drinking cannot be prohibited at work when earnings are also derived from sale and consumption of alcohol together with clients. All the more so as clients are pressed to buy drinks as a means of generating earnings both for the establishment and the workers. The permissive attitude is also associated with establishment managers' belief that sex workers cannot always cope with the negative emotions accompanying the job without resorting to substance use. So, an over-rigorous prohibition on drinking could discourage workers from an agency and result in their going to establishments with a looser policy on alcohol.

It's tough not drinking and taking drugs. Of course the boss won't allow taking narcotics, but he has to let the booze go. [R50]

So, in the case of this approach we have an ambivalent attitude of agency managers; on the one hand they do not encourage their workers to use substances because of the potentially negative consequences for the establishment (e.g. drunken rows), on the other, the issue is not combatted in the name of maximising profits and keeping staff. If this strategy is not to bring down the establishment, it is essential to agree on certain rules regulating the amount of alcohol and circumstances in which it is consumed. The basic rule in agencies is therefore: *drink, but within the acceptable norm*. The acceptable norm is the specific compromise between the individual needs of each worker, the informal group norms in the team of cooperating women and the level of alcohol consumption that the boss is prepared to accept. This means that women can drink before starting or during work as long as they do not get drunk and cause problems (get into fights or start rowing with clients). So, even if a woman drinks a routine amount of alcohol every day but not so much as to cause her colleagues or bosses any trouble, the situation is seen as normal.

Most drink to stay on the level, I mean stand up on the level. [R33]

Here, it's like this: the boss won't really say anything if you come to work with a beer. X sometimes does that, comes to work, has a beer and the boss don't say nothing. But for sure there can't be people getting drunk at work, definitely not. But if you have a beer like X, it's OK. [R1]

It is therefore necessary to redefine how alcohol is consumed; the amounts and contexts of drinking that are seen as permitted are defined. Having a drink bought at the agency with a client is regarded as an element of the work situation that brings in money for the agency and is acceptable. However, alcohol bought by the worker outside the agency, brought in and consumed alone in secret is seen as a dangerous sign that is to be combatted.

Drinking alone is forbidden. You get chucked out for that straight away. Of course, have a drink with a client, but secretly drinking in the dressing-room? There they drank in company, but getting drunk alone and staggering around the salon? That would be unacceptable. [R53]

It should be noted that in the above statement, having a drink with a client is not actually regarded as “real” drinking. Even if a lot is drunk in this way, it is still “drinking with the client”, and so not seen as anything untoward. This redefinition of how alcohol is consumed may favour its abuse and eventual dependency.

The norms of drinking also depend on the kind of work done at the agency. In the case of establishments open during the day, workers tend to drink less because clients are usually sober and expect the same from women who provide sexual services. The situation looks completely different during the night shift, especially at weekends. Many clients come in straight from the discos and clubs and are already under the influence, want a drink and expect drinking company from the women.

Prohibition. The third approach of establishment managers is prohibition and combatting substance use by workers. As I mentioned earlier, in the case of alcohol, agency managers do not usually expect abstinence from workers or may perhaps make sure they do not break established house rules. Common illegal substances are treated very harshly, especially drugs. Many are concerned that workers using substances may lead to dealing at the agency and frequent police control.

Mr X [agency manager] said: *if I see or hear from a client that you have been taking stuff girls, I'll have you tested.* Anyway, as soon as a new girl starts, he says zero narcotics. [R12]

Drugs are of course not allowed at yy club but she [the agency manager] says: *if you like then do it before you come to work. Bury it under a tree or else, but just don't bring it here. The police will come, find it and there'll be trouble. But if you want, you can.* [R33]

It should be noted that it is the women workers who are subject to these rules. When a client brings drugs to an agency and wants to take them in a room (alone or together with a woman) the decision what to do is left up to the woman. She, concerned to keep her client, will not always be keen to inform him of any ban on drugs or report him to security.

Or they offer drugs and some come and take drugs at my place. I tell them I'm not bothered but I don't take any myself. He says that (...) at home he could never do it with his wife around. He's happy I always let him do it, so he always comes back. As soon as he has some stuff, he's round here. [R9]

The three mentioned agency managers' approaches to workers' substance use marks out a certain general framework in which the activity of the three main social actors (workers, clients and management) takes place. It should be noted that the encouragement, permission and prohibition perspectives on alcohol or drugs might be an important factor influencing the decision to work at a given agency or not. As long as dependent women seek work in agencies where they can satisfy their habit, so will the women fighting addiction avoid such places. Similarly clients may prefer a certain establishment because the approach to substance use there is similar to their individual needs or ideas about visiting this kind of place.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND GROUP DRINKING CULTURE

Agency managers define a given organisation's general politics with respect to employees' alcohol consumption, though the drinking culture generated by the group of employees influences how drinking takes place.

Group drinking culture is a constantly created, recreated and renegotiated collection of patterns defining with whom, in what situations and how much alcohol can be drunk at work at the agency. It is produced through the activities of women working in a certain period of time and place, and changes depending on the make-up of the group⁴, the attitudes of individual women to drinking, their mutual relations and the drinking pattern they have collectively worked out. This culture may fit in, or be at odds, with the approach of establishment managers. It may be homogeneous or not, with differing subcultures promoted by distinct informal workers' groups co-existing alongside each other.

Drinking culture fulfils an important function in group life. Respecting its patterns strengthens the ties between employees. Planning of events, shopping for alcohol, deciding how to deal with employees charged with minding that not too much is drunk allows the building of group solidarity (though the other side of this behaviour is the conflict and rowing that occur due to the influence of alcohol).

From the cloakroom I see how the girls who come here drink. (...) Sometimes I'm gone with a client for a few hours and coming back in the middle of the night, there's the night shift girls drinking vodka together. [R9]

Drinking culture can also be the basis of the divide between "us" and "them"; that is, those who share the same perspective as the agency and who take part in collective activity, and those who, isolating themselves from this kind of behaviour, remain outside the informal group. In the same way, drinking culture may contribute to substance dependency in the social aspect linked to the desire to be part of the group in which drinking is a norm of manners, an integrating element (38). This is especially evident in the case of new employees for whom introduction to the drinking group culture is an element of work-place socialisation, and collective drinking can be a means of gaining acceptance in the new environment.

When Y was still around, the rule was that any new girl would stand a bottle of vodka. She really taught me how to drink vodka, because she and Z really liked a drink. They'd also drink cola and I'd sometimes have Red Bull. So when I'd get home, I'd have really had a sackful and my boyfriend would notice it. *You always come back from the shop all pissed up! What's that all about, then?* I'd say: *so what if the girls have a drink? I did my bit and now I've done it I've had a drink too.* But there are limits to everything. [R53]

⁴ It ought to be noted that women who provide sex services in agencies often change place of work. Women joining an agency or leaving it is a daily event and it also has an influence on drinking culture and the possible emergence of different subcultures.

Drinking culture favours the redefinition of alcohol consumption in large quantities. Observing daily co-worker drinking and getting to know their rationalisations and explanations, a new worker discovers that alcohol is a natural element of agency work, and that other women drink and in far greater quantities than she does. As a result, borders that hitherto marked the acceptable limit of drinking get pushed back, and the frequency of drinking rises, as does the amount of alcohol consumed.

When she comes home for the night she thinks that it's OK because she is not drinking any more, but it is an addiction. If she doesn't go to work for a few days, you can guess what happens. How can she kid herself why she drinks? Because she felt like it? Because she drinks every day? Exactly. [R 37] In the first club where I was they drank more than here. Sometimes they'd fall asleep, and maybe once a month they weren't able to hold a conversation. In this club, there is a girl who drinks far too much, even brings her own. There is usually some drink around. Either the girls buy a bigger bottle together or bring their own small ones. To make drinks for 2 days. (...) But they wouldn't drink to get drunk. Almost every day a few girls have a drink to relax. This is a DIFFERENT type of drinking not about getting drunk and going to sleep. [R33]

Group drinking culture is based on a complex of explanations and justifications that rationalise and justify drinking at work at the agency. They are generated and maintained by the group, transferred to new workers and also shared by all the other agency employees. It should be noted that though they often relate to an individual's impressions or emotions, they have strong collective roots. Below I present selected explanations that serve to underpin certain patterns of alcohol drinking by agency workers.

One of the basic explanations indicated by women for the causes of drinking (and other substance use) is an attempt to cope with negative emotions like fear, guilt, embarrassment and disgust⁵ with the aid of alcohol. As research has shown, psychoactive substances change how a person feels about themselves and the reality around them, and normally a person can use substances to stifle negative emotions and improve their mood (40). Substances also have this numbing effect that, according to my subjects (41), for a moment allows them to forget their situation, to "stop thinking about it". Substances help to forget about the fear that family and friends will find out about the agency work.

The fear is about whether it will come out, about whether you can cope or if that client is going to come or not. The fear is that someone will recognize me in the street, that the husband will find out and I'll lose my children because I work here. You are frightened all the time, and that's why the girls drink - to drown those fears or other frustrations. [R42]

It ought to be mentioned that though "drowning" sorrows and fears may be each individual woman's way of coping, it is legitimised by the group as a correct way of dealing with negative feelings in this situation. Drinking (or other substance use) within the accepted norm does not arouse the concern of other social actors in the

⁵ See negative feedback model as a psychological mechanism of motivation to drink (39).

agency world and is accepted as natural in a highly stressful work environment⁶. However, alcohol (or drug) dependence is treated as crossing a certain border and a loss of “proper” control over how one drinks.

Some girls take the job too personally and it's all about that. Or they are too young, drinking like that 24 year-old, an alcoholic at her age. She's lost the plot and won't last long. I don't wish her ill, but it doesn't look good for the future. Maybe it's also about some personal problems as when it all mounts up, there's no one to talk to about it. That's the way it is. [R53]

Alcohol is an especially tempting way of numbing out negative feelings if the woman has no other available channel for their release. Above all, I mean lack of support from others, lack of opportunity to talk openly, sharing of experiences in a situation in which most of my research subjects concealed their work from their closest family and friends. It should also be noted that women who decide on sex work often find themselves in a difficult financial and family situation, so problems associated with providing sexual services may compound earlier difficulties that originally pushed the woman to the agency.

The start was tough as I get the feeling I couldn't handle it and I started to drink here. I just don't like this job – this is all so hard to swallow. I thought it would be easier if I'd had a drink. Later I realised that I had lost control of it because instead of working I'd go to sleep. (...) I didn't want to drink, so I visited the doctor and got PAT* because I was afraid of becoming alcoholic like most of the girls here, who either drink, take drugs or do junk. Junk, booze and drugs – everyone can see their mind going. They aren't altogether normal. [R28]

* PAT Pharmacological Aversion Therapy/Treatment (subdermal implants)

The above quote presents the dependency trajectory of a woman who, at some point, attempted to limit her drinking. However, it is worth noting that due to the specific nature of the environment and the availability of alcohol in escort agencies, the road to real minimisation of drinking is very hard. On the basis of the data gathered, it is also possible to notice that many women who attempt to limit alcohol consumption substitute it for other psychoactive substances like sedatives or sleeping pills, which they think to be a safe way of dealing with their problems. However, taking antidepressants can lead to disturbances in the area of sex life (42, 43), which can additionally make the escort agency work more difficult.

I CANNOT drink. Somehow I have to cope so that I don't, so I'd rather buy myself some medicine. (...) But, if you are on some chemicals, first of all you are not quite yourself because they change the way you see things a little, and secondly they mess up your libido. I automatically stop being sexual, stop being attractive, being myself, a woman that men want to get their hands on because I just seem to lose all that. I don't know if all medicines are the same, but I know that they made me lose myself (...) Maybe there are medicines that only ease the fear and leave the rest (...) but I have to be careful because I am also dependent on medicines. [R42]

⁶ Women who provide sexual services can be recognized as a specific example of a professional group in which the environmental drinking patterns are stronger due to the many dangers and stigma attached to the work (see 38).

In certain cases there is therefore the risk of falling into a particular vicious circle of getting into one dependence by fighting another. An additional problem is also combining medicines with others or alcohol, and also acquiring prescription only medicines in an illegal manner and taking them without a doctor's diagnosis or supervision.

Another justification for alcohol consumption (and cigarette smoking) is treating it as a catalyst of interaction with clients. The interview subjects explained that drinking is one way of making sexual contact for money easier. The shame, insecurity, and fear that accompany merely presenting oneself to clients so that they would desire to spend money for an hour of company, the necessity of behaving in a way that sex work stereotypes require, which many of the subjects (especially those who had just started agency work) considered derogatory, required drinking "for courage"⁷.

The women have this way because then they are more assertive. Drunk she is more assertive; more open and ready to have her say. [R32]

We also drink to improve our mood, to go to the room relaxed and for everything to go better. Anyway, you know, it's different when you've had a drink; it doesn't hit you as hard psychologically. It's lighter. [R33]

It ought to be noted that substances are used also to dull one's consciousness, to avoid thinking about the main issue of working at an escort agency: the necessity of having sexual relations with numerous men. This is especially important considering the long work hours, the number of clients and their differentiation in terms of behaviour, age, appearance, sobriety or lack thereof and expectations concerning sexual contacts.

I don't think that every girl could cope with this work. That is why those that resort to drink are exactly the ones that can't handle it in one way or the other, with the stress of having to give themselves for money to another man who they don't really know. [R32]

I tell you a lot of girls hit the bottle in this job. Like I say, you can't cope with life here sober. Maybe they don't become alcoholics, but they have to have a drink to make the work lighter. [R20]

Psychoactive substances are supposed to improve the mood in as much as even in negative situations (e.g. experiences of physical violence at clients' hands, pos. 44), despite ambivalent feelings towards a client or the work as a whole, it is still possible to carry on.

I have to be nice even if I don't like something or someone, and I always am. What I think inside is only my business and mine alone and whatever bloke comes along, I'm always nice to him. It's best just to have a drink and then you just do what you have to do. I can't go thinking what he is like. When you go to a doctor, he's got to be nice. I'm not nice then he won't take me and I won't earn. [R34]

⁷ Interestingly enough, according to my interview subjects, clients apply the same drinking strategy before visiting the agency also to get rid of their own fears about it: *During the day the girls get sober ones out of work and that, unless it's one of those cases that drank all night and has started again in the morning. But at night when they come to the club, especially on a Friday night, then they have to have a shot to pluck up courage. You know, it's like «I want it but I'm scared.» I don't know, maybe they imagine that they'll have the gift of the gab or something? Or maybe it's all the girls they have to choose from?* [R23]

Yes, this work is tough on your mind. This is why the nightshift girls start work with a drink, a beer or something to relax and get them through the night, because then they are more open and assertive. A psychologically weak person can become addicted to something here easily just trying to cope with the job. You can't go to bed with anybody, you know. [R5]

A result of seeing alcohol as a medicine for negative emotional states is routine drinking and taking a portion of alcohol to start each working day. This approach may contribute to the generation of a daily group drinking culture at a given establishment to cope with the emotions of each successive hour.

Another justification of sex worker drinking is the earnings motive derived from the particular escort agency work situation in which alcohol is ever-present, and as observations indicate, is for some clients almost as important as the opportunity to have sex. A client rarely wants to drink in the company of an abstinent woman and usually insists she drinks with him.

They get drunk together because these clients like girls who have a drink. [R9]

I also have this steady client here who always comes with a lot of money and has this kind of ritual where he always orders a litre of vodka and we all sit around with him in the salon because he pays us for every glass we drink with him. [R5]

Drinking with clients is in many cases a conscious business strategy planned out and implemented by agency workers, and can be considered from a number of aspects. First of all, offering a drink or a cigarette is an excuse for making contact with a client without being too pushy about proposing sex.

So you go in, take a seat, ask if he wants a drink and the chat starts. He asks: *Would you like to join me?* And then one thing sort of leads to another. [R35]

Sometimes, if you don't have a drink with a client, you don't earn because he just wants to have a drink with you. At first he doesn't like me that much but later when we've had a chat he says: *blimey, you are a nice gal.* [R20]

Time together over a drink gives a woman a better chance of displaying those at first perhaps unnoticed features (openness, sense of humour) that may decide on whether the client buys an hour "in a room". This is especially important in the case of women who, due to their age or appearance, lose out in competition with younger and more attractive co-workers. Even if spending time drinking with a client does not lead to him buying an hour, then at least some extra money is earned from the sale of alcohol. It should be noted that in most establishments the women get a share in what a client spends on alcohol. The amount depends on the agency (research showed from 10% to 50% of the price of a drink) and the type of alcohol ordered. Establishments vary considerably in range of alcohol on offer; while some only have beer, vodka or sparkling wine ("champaign"), others boast a wide selection of expensive liquor, usually at appropriately high prices. Escort agencies have a mark-up of up to a few hundred per cent on other establishments or shops and its sale is one of the sources of profit for agency owners. The larger agencies with a lot of clients sometimes practise the setting of sales targets on amount and type of alcohol, and set earnings and

assess the women's work accordingly. This is another impulse effectively increasing the amount of alcohol drunk at an agency as, taking into account the amount of visitors, the extra money is an important bonus on earnings.

In that agency it was different. There, as soon as a client came in, they'd be all over him (...) The first to sell a drink was already earning 50 or 100 zł on champagne and that. Going there you have to be really rich – you've got to afford the taxi, the room and the very expensive drinks. Here we also earn on booze, but the prices are twice that of over there. [R53]

There are clients who like to sit around with girls who have a few drinks. Also these girls don't earn much on the rooms, but they do at the bar. [R50]

So it is an especially important skill to effectively persuade clients to spend as much as possible on drink. Women invent and develop tactics by observing their colleagues in action either in groups or through intuitive, individual activity. Often, drinking is presented as a necessary element of a good party (18), all the more so that most of clients see buying drink as an obligatory element of a visit to an agency, and the workers try to sustain this.

They can buy champagne, order a cocktail – the drink is almost obligatory as they'll hardly ever say *no* so they have to. When you've got them talking you say *what are we drinking*, and he says *no thanks*, I say *OK, what about one for me?* Of course I say I'll have the cheapest one for say 80, 40 or 30 (...) And once there was a time the client wanted a litre, and the bar wouldn't sell by the bottle, only shots, so he tells her to do a litre in shots. I don't know how many there was, but it was loads and he spent a few hundred złoty! [R33]

From this perspective drinking, especially with clients, is presented in the interviews as at once a necessity and a rational choice. Indeed, it is a much easier way of earning than sex with a client, all the more so that a client very much under the influence is not always able to perform, which is to the woman's advantage.

It's obvious that if he's come in after a few we give him some more. He has a kip and he's happy 'cos he's had a rest and I'm happy 'cos I've earned and I haven't even had to have sex with him. Often he'd be asleep after a girl came back from the shower so she wouldn't wake him up, let him sleep. He's paid, so he has a right to sleep. [R26]

So sometimes you drink four champagnes with a client. It's all money and sometimes you have to drink to earn. [R50]

Sometimes a client came wanting sex but once he's sat down, has had a drink or two, all he wants is sit and drink and all you have to do is sit and talk. You don't at all have to go to a room 'cos like you know, when he's had a drink, it don't stand for him. And it's all money. Sometimes he'll buy a Red Bull or a cola, and then it's just like down the pub. [R48]

An additional motivation to drink together before sex can for some (both clients and sex workers) be the activation of the date or the pub pick-up script to replace the commercial sex. Perhaps it helps both sides of the interaction redefine the situation of participation in commercial sex and soothe the negative emotions involved.

In closing it should be pointed out that the general presence of alcohol in escort agencies results in a large part of clients (especially at night) being under the influ-

ence. They are a relatively easy source of earnings for the sex workers and the agency as they are likely to carry on drinking at the agency and have less control over their spending. As a result, however, with both client and sex worker under the influence, problems in the course of their interaction are likely to arise. A risk of this strategy is the lack of knowledge women have of their clients' drinking habits and behaviour when drunk. It may turn out that instead of being easy money, the client is aggressive and throws a row or will not leave quietly.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Consumption of psychoactive substances is a complex phenomenon and attempts to shed light on it have borne fruit to theories and concepts in many scientific disciplines. In this article I did not consider escort agency workers' drinking from biological, genetic, psychoanalytical and psychological perspectives, though no doubt these could contribute to a wider perspective on the matter. I also did not address psychological propensity associated with personality and temperamental factors favouring drinking behaviour (39). My aim was to draw attention to organisational conditions at escort agencies that could result in shifting borders and a rise in the scale of alcohol consumption by women providing sexual services.

My approach, which separates the category of women working in escort agencies from the population of sex workers as a whole, is justified by the results of studies carried out in other countries. These indicate that the amount of substance consumption is strongly linked to type of sex work⁸. Within its various organisational forms, it is the women working in nightclubs that are especially prone to alcohol abuse, because, in their own view, apart from or even instead of sex, their work is the promotion of alcoholic beverages among drinking clients (5, 16). Studies carried out in the Gdańsk conurbation and Włocławek in the 1980s provided analogous results (45). These confirmed the frequent drinking of women working in clubs who drank to meet "professional" goals and entertain a drinking client or get him drunk (45). Agencies favour drinking as they guarantee the availability of alcohol not only physically, but culturally as well – in the given subculture its consumption is accepted as normal and is approved of. It is also a necessary if not essential part of life (see 46).

The results are in agreement with the views of researchers in whose opinion that while many situational factors correlated with the use and abuse of alcohol are common for the population as a whole (e.g. exposure to alcohol in the family home), it is possible to show those that are unique to the situation of commercial sex (5). The consideration of drinking in exactly this context reveals that both in the studies

⁸ Interesting conclusions relate for example to the link between the type of sex work and type of drugs. As research results indicate, hard drugs are used mainly in street sex work, which is partly connected to dependent persons (especially heroin addicts) being unable to adapt to work regimes, e.g. in clubs (16).

on which this article is based, and those described in the literature, sex worker women emphasised the functional aspects of alcohol consumption at work, indicating that alcohol:

- puts them in a better mood and helps them relax and be more friendly and self-confident (5, 12, 16),
- reduces inhibitions, allows making contact and easier interaction with clients (5, 16),
- aids distancing from negative work-related feelings, reduces anxiety and the combating of physical repulsion towards clients (5, 7, 9, 12, 16),
- aids the silencing of internal conflicts linked with sex work and that with other participants of agency reality (clients, agency managers and the police) (5),
- is a stress management strategy available to sex workers who must cope with depressive states, anxiety about the future, fear that members of the family might find out about what they do and unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease (5, 7),
- is an additional form of earning (5).

It ought to be noted that, as my study indicates, getting involved in drinking during agency work is a form of process. A new worker (irrespective of whether she has had a history of problems with alcohol abuse or not) usually finds herself in an establishment where permission to drink is a norm. While managers turn a blind eye to the sex workers' drinking habits, it is from sex workers' activity that a drinking culture, built up of justifications that support the necessity and rationality of alcohol consumption, emerges. This creates very good conditions for the development of dependence, as at an early stage the effects of drinking are usually seen as positive by the women. A new worker believes that thanks to alcohol she is more confident in contacts with clients, is also able to cope with negative emotions and gain acceptance in the co-worker group. However, as the amounts of alcohol consumed rises, problems appear both with client and co-worker interaction. The worker starts getting in trouble with management, begins to lose clients and to a great extent starts earning to drink and not the other way around. If she does not curtail her drinking, she usually loses her job at the agency. At this point she is usually dependent on a given psychoactive substance, which most often forces her to provide her services at establishments with ever worse work conditions, and in the end on the street. In describing each successive stage of this process, I do not want to say that agency sex-workers are mostly dependent on alcohol, all the more so as, in the long run, management does not approve of alcoholic workers. Nevertheless, providing sex services at escort agencies may be a factor favouring or strengthening frequent and excessive drinking. Alcohol is not only readily available in agencies, but all worker groups accept it. What is more, participation in group drinking culture supplies explanations and justifications favouring continuation of the behaviour. It can therefore reduce the cognitive dissonance perhaps associated with reoccurring episodes of alcohol abuse and the setting in of a daily drinking routine. As a result, the women cease to notice

the negative effects of drinking; ego-defence mechanisms are activated, projection (ascribing one's own motives to other people, a very common occurrence in interviews), fantasizing, (escape from problems and emotions into a world of fantasy and illusion in search of comfort) and even denial (39).

In this article I concentrated on the aspects of the escort agency work situation that may favour alcohol consumption and, as a result, I have not considered other important areas in the matter. One of these is the effects of substance use and their possible link to high-risk sexual behaviour, the threat of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (5, 47–49). As some research indicates, finding oneself under the influence of psychoactive substances increases the risk of physical injury and getting caught up in interactions involving verbal and physical violence. Alcohol consumption immediately prior to sex may also increase the risk of sexual victimisation as it hampers a women's ability to accurately assess a situation (4, 16). An analysis of the English language literature reveals many studies on detailed issues like e.g. the characteristics of various substance consumption in various groups involved in providing sex services (50–52). It would certainly be worthwhile to study this matter also in the case of sex work in Poland.

An interesting subject of further study would be to reconstruct the alcohol-related motivations and behaviour patterns of agency clients. English language client studies show that drinking often takes place before sexual contact (5). This may be linked to an attempt to reduce feelings of shame and anxiety that come with using commercial sex (16), leading to a reduction of inhibition and a greater readiness to take risk (5). Because of the small amount of studies on people who use sexual services in Poland, this kind of research would certainly bring valuable results.

It is also worth noting that many studies described in English are of a practical nature. Their aim was not only to present a selected aspect linked to psychoactive substance consumption in the context of sex work, but also to collect knowledge needed to create preventative and interventional programmes directed to dependency high-risk or dependent sex workers (5). Perhaps similar programmes could be prepared and implemented in Poland. There is no doubt that sex workers often have to deal with the various forms of dependency associated with their specific work environment. A better study of this environment could contribute to an understanding of the situation and perhaps to the development of aid plans for this category of person.

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