Background Female sex workers (FSWs) are vulnerable to sexual, physical or verbal violence in and outside their workplaces. This study aimed to assess the violence that FSWs experienced and its associated factors from a cross-sectional study in Guangdong Province, China.

Methods A cross-sectional study was conducted in seven cities in Guangdong province in 2017. Venue-based sampling method was used to recruit FSWs who were ≥16 years old and worked in mid- and low-end entertainment venues. Data were collected on socio-demographics, sexual behavioral characteristics, as well as types and sources of violence that FSWs had experienced through face-to-face survey. Descriptive analyses and multivariate logistic regression were conducted to assess the prevalence of different types and sources of violence and their associated factors.

Results In total, 1207 FSWs participated in the study with a mean age of 30.7±6.7 years old. 108/1207 (8.9%) women reported having experienced violence by clients or regular partners. Clients were most commonly reported as perpetrators of physical violence (94.4%), sexual abuse (100%), having sexual transmitted infection (STI) symptoms in the past 12 months (aOR = 36.8, 95%CI: 14.2–95.9), having regular partners (aOR = 27.1, 95%CI: 8.8–83.1), having oral sex (aOR = 16.7, 95%CI: 8.9–31.3) and having anal sex with clients (aOR = 78.7, 95%CI: 37.8–163.9) were more likely to experience any type of violence from clients or partners. Having STI symptoms in the past 12 months (aOR = 70.0, 95%CI: 14.9–328.5), oral sex (aOR = 18.5, 95%CI: 8.3–41.5) and anal sex (aOR = 74.7, 95%CI: 30.6–182.3) with clients were also associated with experiencing violence from regular partners.

Conclusion FSWs suffered violence mostly from clients. FSWs who had STI symptoms in the past 12 months, oral or/and anal sex with clients are the most vulnerable to violence. Interventions should address FSWs’ sexual health risks and human rights violation at the same time to ensure a safe work environment.

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