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Femininity work: The gendered politics of women managing violence in bar work

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Abstract

This paper explores how women bar workers manage violence at work. Women bar workers in our study described that the capacity to recognize, intervene, and defuse potentially violent situations was a pragmatic response to the problem of men's violence in the night-time economy. We analyze the gendered norms and expectations at play in how violence in bar work is managed by staff and locate this as a form of "femininity work" extending from the modes of attentive, emotionally-attuned femininity that labor feminist labor studies theorists have described. In a context where hospitality labor already makes complex and often unexamined demands on young workers, the positioning of women bar staff as being more adept at managing violent situations suggests a particularly important demand made of women bar workers, central for understanding the enduring gendered power relations in contemporary interactive service labor.

KEYWORDS

gender, inequality, night-time economy, service labor, violence

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This article explores how women working in hospitality manage violence at work. In the process, the article develops the literature on gender and service labor in new directions, extending a longstanding focus on sexuality and sexual harassment into a consideration of gender and violence. Existing approaches to gender and service labor are focused primarily on the role of (hetero)sexuality in the positioning of women as workers, and how women are enrolled into the labor force in ways that emphasize the value of their physical appearance position them as figures of sexual desire for men and create the conditions for endemic sexual harassment (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016; Pettinger, 2011; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Watts, 2007). Alongside this, whilst the literature on violence at work has highlighted the significance of gendered “feminine” skills for managing aggression in a range of sectors (Alcadipani & Tonelli, 2014; Seymour, 2009; Virkki, 2008; Ward et al., 2020), hospitality workers' experiences of managing violence have received little attention, despite their position in the night-time economy,¹ which is associated with the masculine performances of aggression and violence (O'Brien et al., 2008).

In this article, we extend the discussion of gendered demands of service labor by exploring a novel empirical finding which emerged from a broader program of research on hospitality labor. Here, we discuss findings from interviews with a subset of bar workers, who primarily worked in small “alternative” venues in Melbourne's inner-North which did not employ security staff. Their interviews uncovered a recurring pattern whereby women bar workers were positioned (by themselves and colleagues) as more capable of defusing potentially violent situations before they escalated. This was due to assumptions connected with normative femininity including expected capacities for particular “calming” relational styles and being positioned (again, through normative associations with femininity) as outside of the aggressive dynamics of masculine sociality. In this article, we describe and interrogate this finding and explore the consequences of this positioning for workers. In the previous decades, how to address “alcohol fueled violence” in licensed venues in Australia has been a topic of fierce public concern, despite evidence that the majority of assaults (60%) occur in a residential location (ABS, 2021). Literature on the night-time economy has explored the gendered contexts related to violence amongst patrons (Fileborn, 2016a, 2016b; Hobbs et al., 2007; O'Brien et al., 2008). Our study extends this to focus on how hospitality workers themselves manage violence through analyzing the dynamics of gender, sexuality and service labor in the night-time economy.

The paper begins by discussing existing approaches to gender, violence, and the hospitality industry. Existing studies on gender and service labor have focused on the dynamics of gender-based violence² primarily through analyzing the prevalence of (and experience of) sexual harassment and have not specifically analyzed the related but distinct phenomena of how bar workers manage the broader instances of aggression or the threat of violence they encounter in the bar. Further, existing studies of violence in the night-time economy mainly focus on patrons and door staff and not the experiences of hospitality workers or bar staff specifically. We seek to contribute to and extend those bodies of work interrogating the dynamics of gender and heterosexuality in labor studies and situate our empirical findings regarding how women bar workers navigate aggressive and violent patrons as part of the broader landscape of gender-based violence. In this way, the findings we discuss here show that the expectations for women bar workers to manage patron aggression comprises a particular form of workplace gendered inequality, with the potential to breach physical integrity as an issue of workplace safety, as well as indicating the broader significance of gender-based violence as a problem of epidemic proportions. In Australia, one in three women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and one in five has experienced sexual violence. Ninety-five per cent of people who have experienced physical or sexual violence name a man as the perpetrator of at least one incident of violence (Department of Social Services, 2022).

We develop an understanding of what can be called “femininity work” in hospitality, situating violence as an aspect of the heterosexual and heteronormative logic shaping the social relations of service labor. Our findings and analysis first explores the context and positioning of women as naturally better equipped to handle potential violence, followed by what skills workers use in managing violence, and finally, the consequences, including threats, harassment and violence, women bar staff were confronted with at work.

2 | GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND INTERACTIVE SERVICE WORK

This paper engages with two bodies of conceptual thinking: feminist studies of gender and interactive service labor, and research on violence in the night-time economy, since bar work is a central form of employment in this setting. This section discusses these bodies of work in turn and identifies connections between them in order to frame the analysis of gender, violence, and heterosexuality in the remainder of the article. In particular, we argue that in different ways, both bodies of work are concerned with the dynamics of heterosexuality, although manifesting in quite different ways that come together in women's experience of hospitality work.

A substantial body of feminist theorizing has focused on how gender and femininity are enacted through the disciplinary requirements of work; in particular, through relational and inter-personal capacities of caring (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hochschild, 1983; Pettinger, 2011; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Watts, 2007). A focus on gendered embodiment and personal esthetics, an appropriately feminized interactional style, and the requirement to cope with frequent sexual harassment as "part of the job" have all been described as aspects of service labor for women (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016; Pettinger, 2011; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Watts, 2007). Feminist labor studies theorists have argued that the requirement for women to perform femininity through attentiveness, receptivity, and care takes place through essentializing such relational styles as merely a reflection of their "being women" (Good & Cooper, 2016; Tyler & Taylor, 1998) rather than an outcome of effortful labor (Oksala, 2016). As Adkins (1995) argues, women are employed in service jobs not simply as workers but rather *as women*, and that femininity is thus taken-for-granted and fundamental to the tasks they are allocated at work. "Being women" (or presenting as such) in service work can mean additional, informal tasks are required or demanded, where such tasks are "carried out in the informal realms of interpersonal rather than contractual relations" (Tyler & Taylor, 1998, p. 170). We situate the expectation that women bar staff can, and should, defuse instances of aggression between patrons as a form of "extra" labor which is "expected of women yet is not measured in time or remunerated, and women are not trained in its performance but are expected to be inherently skilled at it by virtue of being women" (Tyler & Taylor, 1998, p. 170). This "extra" labor often takes the form of esthetic "feminine" styles of embodiment, which can be explicitly demanded by managers who are clear that their "front-of-house" staff are hired for their physical attractiveness (Coffey et al., 2018). We argue this "extra" labor can be termed "femininity work"³ as a collection of tacit gendered demands women are required to navigate in service work settings', particularly in bar work.

Heterosexualized gender dynamics are an important theme in literature on the social relations of the night-time economy. Mainstream nightlife has displayed a "hetero-normative logic," informing how gender is enacted (Jensen et al., 2019, p. 358). Following Butler (1990), heteronormativity is understood as creating the conditions for normative binary gender performances and identities. Butler's (1990) theoretical framework conceptualizes how normative binary gender distinctions stem from hierarchical power relations and are relevant for understanding the empirical examples we discuss in this article, such as the essentialized "feminine" associations which position women workers as possessing tacit relational skills in service labor. Numerous studies have described that instances of sexual harassment and/or assault of women patrons such as groping are so commonplace as to be expected and normalized (Anderson et al., 2007; Fileborn, 2016b; Kavanaugh, 2013; Mellgren et al., 2017). Studies of masculinity in this context have focused on "barroom violence," showing that violence is connected to "asserting and defending manhood" (Graham et al., 2010). One study found that logics of male dominance, aggression, and assertiveness where "every male in there is your competition" (Wells et al., 2009) lead to displays of power and dominance over other men. These masculine gender norms emphasizing domination and superiority are also associated with sexual and physical assaults on women (Fileborn, 2016a; Kavanaugh, 2013). Studies of gender performances and understandings of safety on a night out attribute vulnerability to women and fearlessness to men (Day, 2001; Vera-Gray, 2018); however, men's accounts of the night-time economy also highlights the threat of violence from other men (Kavanaugh, 2015). Hospitality venues are therefore sites where the gendered and sexual politics of heterosexuality are expressed in the possibility of violence.

This literature tends to focus on patrons' experiences, rather than that of staff. Women patrons' individual strategies for managing violence including adapting their behaviors to reduce their level of vulnerability when frequenting nightlife settings (Fileborn, 2016a, 2016b; Quigg et al., 2020, p. 7). The strategies women patrons use to navigate safety on a night out are key modes through which gendered identities are performed and produced (Fileborn, 2016b). A study by Gunby et al. (2020, p. 27) found that women patrons navigate and perform femininity in drinking environments through paradoxical acts of "feisty femininity," including subverting, parodying, conforming to, and reproducing heteropatriarchal performances, incorporating the gendered bodily esthetics associated with "heterosexuality" femininity (Carah & Dobson, 2016). Studies have shown how bar staff themselves understand and manage unwanted sexual attention and harassment (Green, 2021), where monitoring and "calling out" problematic male customers was a critical and routine part of their work.

Very little research focuses on how contemporary bar staff are involved in managing violence in the course of their work. Kirkby (1997) traces the historical associations and contexts of women bar workers in Australia, suggesting women were routinely positioned as having a "civilizing" influence on an otherwise unruly male-dominated clientele. Graham et al. (2005) examined the roles and behaviors of bar staff in managing barroom aggression but do not describe whether women bar staff were involved. The only example given describes three male staff ejecting a patron. The broader gendered dynamics of the practice are not discussed; however, the skills needed are described as being "relational," "non-confrontational," and "understanding." Other studies explore the efficacy using bar-staff in bystander intervention programs to prevent sexual assaults but found that bar staff were reluctant to intervene in instances of sexual harassment and would prefer to call on a security guard to eject the perpetrator (Powers & Leili, 2016, p. 695). These studies do not analyze the gendered dynamics of interactive service labor in how staff respond to patrons acting aggressively or volatile interactions between patrons.

The literature on women's experiences of and performances of gender norms in masculinized occupations such as security and police jobs are relevant for understanding the role of essentialized notions of femininity in the way that women are "put to work" to manage violence. Studies of policewomen and those in peacekeeping roles (both male dominated occupations and settings) show that they are seen to possess natural abilities to defuse violence (Hobbs et al., 2007; Pruitt, 2013). Cuadrado (1995) suggests that female police officers are seen as being better at defusing violence through possessing different communication skills which can be effective in deflecting violence through discussion and negotiation. "Women's skills" and capacities here are naturalized and essentialized, and are seen as strategic and useful additions to complement or "balance out" the masculine-dominant fields of policing and security work. One recent study by Sargison (2020) described how women door staff in New Zealand used "femininity to defuse violence," where participants argued that "femininity" and associations of being "calm," non-aggressive, and compassionate meant they were "better suited" to "de-escalate" situations which could otherwise get completely out of control (p. 72). The assumption in this form of work is that women have different, uniquely "feminine capacities" and skills. The problematic and exploitative dimensions of these normative and essentialized gendered expectations have been analyzed in other studies of violence and care work, where women are valorized for continuing to care for others, even in contexts of violence (Baines, 2006; Virkki, 2008). Violence is a significant threat faced by patrons and workers in the night-time economy. In the analysis below, we situate the techniques and normative assumptions guiding how participants who understood violence should be managed at work as part of the broader demands of "femininity work" in service labor.

3 | METHODS

This article draws on interview data from a qualitative program of research exploring employment, labor, and identity amongst young (aged 18–30) hospitality workers across two Australian cities, Melbourne, and Newcastle. The two research sites are evocative of global shifts in the nature of the interactive service economy in its interaction with post-industrial urban transformations. Melbourne is a relatively large "global city" known for the size and

heterogeneity of its night-time economy. Melbourne is marketed as Australia's "cultural capital," a term which captures a heterogeneous array of practices including the substantial underground music scene, urban street-art, and a large range of small or boutique cafes and bars. The hospitality industry in Melbourne is therefore a part of its broader reputation for "niche" consumption. Newcastle is a large regional city, home to a large coal port and the former home of large steelworks, which was a central pillar of the local economy and which closed in 1999. The local government has emphasized (or at least publicly marketed) the importance of services such as the leisure, tourism, and creative industries as part of efforts for urban revitalization.

The research program consists of two interview-based projects conducted between 2017 and 2021. The first was a small pilot project funded by the University of Newcastle, which interviewed 13 bar workers in Melbourne, Australia in 2017. The second is a larger scale project funded by the Australian Research Council between 2019 and 2021 conducted with 32 hospitality workers across Melbourne (in the state of Victoria) and Newcastle (in the state of New South Wales) in Australia.⁴ At the time of writing, these projects have to date interviewed 45 hospitality workers in a range of different bars and cafes. We used a purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit hospitality workers through industry contacts and advertisements via public social media platforms that are used by hospitality workers to exchange information about employment. These include the "Melbourne Bartender's Exchange" and "Newcastle Hospitality Jobs" Facebook pages. Advertisements invited participants to take part in an interview to discuss working practices, working identities, and experiences of work in different parts of the hospitality sector.

This article focuses on the responses of 12 front-of-house bar workers who directly discussed the management of violence in bars. These participants included eight cis women and four cis men, were aged between 21 and 30 years old, and identified their ethnic cultural identity as "White Australian." Participants possessed a range of educational qualifications, from those who had not finished the final year of high school (year 12 in Australia) to those with postgraduate qualifications. These participants worked as bar staff in a range of different types of venues, from large taverns, to small "hip" or "alternative" bars in Melbourne's inner North and Newcastle city. Four of the women acted as both front of house bar workers and managers. Notably, venues the manager-participants worked at were the smaller, fewer "mainstream" venues, which presented an aesthetic in contrast the typical cocktail bar, pub, or "beer barn" atmosphere to be found in other parts of the city or outer suburbs (see Threadgold et al., 2021). This point is relevant in situating the informal systems or processes participants (including managers) relied on when navigating patrons who were interacting in an aggressive or threatening way toward bar staff and/or other patrons.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 h in length. Interviews discussed biographical experiences of work, laboring practices and relationships in different venues and in the sector generally, the relationship between taste, consumption and labor and issues connected with gender and sexuality including sexual harassment. The transcribed interviews were entered into NVivo 11 and coded, then analyzed and developed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) during the course of meetings and discussions between the research team. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 81) articulate thematic analysis as an interpretative process concerned with describing and theorizing how phenomena are socially produced. This analytic approach is based on a post-structural feminist epistemology in which "data" reveal how gender is being performed in a particular context, rather than revealing an essentialized "truth" of gender (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

The post-structural feminist epistemology orienting the analysis in this article requires researchers to locate the ways their own bodies, relations, and gendered subjectivities are also present in the research and relevant to the processes of analysis (Davies & Gannon, 2005). The complex gendered relations at play in these examples, where women staff described feeling "in control" and empowered in ejecting patrons, was a source of significant debate and discussion in the research team. Coffey was formerly employed in fine dining and bar venues for over 10 years while studying at school and university, and her experiences as a young woman in the industry position her as an insider to this research, where she recognized many of the instances described by bar staff in this article. Farrugia and Threadgold, who conducted the many of the interviews together and are cis gendered men. Farrugia has never worked in hospitality, whilst Threadgold worked in bars in London during his youth. The different subject positions and varying levels of experience of bar work held by the research team led to vigorous discussions regarding how the

gender should be theorized and discussed in the article. Through these discussions, we recognized our own gendered subjectivities and experiences in how we “read” the data and sought to highlight the ambivalences and contradictions of gender in managing violence as part of the complex demands workers, particularly women, in this sector must navigate. The following analysis is the result of the understandings we came to agree upon through lengthy discussions throughout the analysis process.

First, we focus on the context and positioning of women as naturally better equipped to handle potential violence. Next, what workers do in managing violence, and the skills needed (intuition), are discussed. The third and final section of analysis explores the consequences, including threats, harassment, and violence, women workers were confronted with at work.

4 | “WOMEN ARE BETTER DE-ESCALATING IT”: GENDERED UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE IN THE BAR

As the literature on violence in the night-time economy indicates, violence is a constant possibility in bars and nightclub, and workers are accustomed to “looking out” for problematic patrons (Powers & Leili, 2018), such that aggression and violence are somewhat naturalized in bar contexts. Managing “difficult” situations is a constant challenge for workers generally and includes difficult interactions with customers who are belligerent, overly rowdy, or who may sexually harass other patrons (Coffey et al., 2018). One of the tasks that workers—most especially women workers—described was keeping an eye on the way that patrons were relating to one another in order to identify potential problems. Patrons behaving aggressively or in a threatening, or volatile way were almost always men, and the general response from staff was to intervene and attempt to “de-escalate” the situation before physical violence occurred. Across our interviews, participants discussed a taken for granted assumption that women bar workers were best suited to intervening in potentially violent situations. Indeed, in interviews, this was so taken for granted that some participants seemed surprised at our interest in talking through this emerging finding. When confronted with patrons behaving aggressively, women and men workers participated in an informal system whereby women bar staff would attempt to defuse potentially violent situations if they were emerging. Women bar staff were seen as more able to successfully resolve a dispute peacefully. Felicity, an experienced bar worker who also worked as a manager, stated “women can de-escalate that situation far better”:

If a guy is in for a bit of argie [looking to fight], the absolute worst thing you can do is send a male bar member to deal with it because they are going to want to flog them. Women can deescalate that situation far better, nine times out of ten. (Felicity)

Participants described two intertwined reasons why this task fell to women workers. The first was that women workers were regarded as having a natural capacity for conflict resolution, and the second was that potentially violent men would be likely to escalate their behavior and become physically violent toward men who intervened, whereas this was not seen as a threat that women workers faced. In other words, women were seen as preferable to men workers for this task, in part because the potential perpetrator would be more likely to “escalate” their behavior toward men bar workers. Finn, a man, explained that there is no explicit plan whereby women staff are asked to defuse male patrons behaving aggressively; it is something which “just happens”:

I think women by nature are seen as less of a threat where if a guy is sort of telling them what to do they'll get aggressive about it. It just happens that way and some people are better at conflict resolution than others as well so there are guys who can be a bit more peaceful in the way they work it out, yeah. (Finn)

Finn explains that while there are some men who are “more peaceful” in their approach to difficult customers, women are less at risk of violence by these male patrons because they are not seen as a “threat” to the aggressor. In this narrative, women workers are positioned outside masculine relations of aggression and competition (Hobbs et al., 2007;

Pruitt, 2013). Participants explain that being other to, or outside of relations of masculine aggression affords women protection from being assaulted and are positioned as less at risk of violence in these settings than their male bar staff colleagues.

5 | SKILLS: WOMEN'S TACTICS AND STRATEGIES FOR AGGRESSIVE MEN

The difficulty that men workers faced in dealing with masculine aggression was described as connected to the forms of sociality available to men workers in their interactions with customers. Stan explained that strategies typically employed by male staff including trying to speak calmly or trying to befriend potentially aggressive patrons would not work with men who were actively looking to start a fight:

Some guys just want to kick off and will start a fight over anything. So, you can try to be their buddy, you can try and get on their side and be concerned and be understanding. But those kind of guys, they can just be like, I'm not your fucking mate, sort of thing, and then, yeah, they'll just boom. It doesn't matter what you do in those situations, you're pretty much fucked. Unless you're a female (staff member), to be honest. Because they're generally not open to punching females—depending on the individual though. (Stan)

Indeed, Skye, said that it would be “terrifying” for male staff to intervene between male patrons because their presence as a man could further inflame the situation:

I think it's a bit more terrifying for men [to manage violence] because the male-to-male interaction can be a bit of a like, sometimes can even incite some to really start arcing up. (Skye)

Moreover, while women are often positioned as objects of sexual desire in hospitality venues (Coffey et al., 2018), their strategies for de-escalating situations with patrons behaving aggressively were not based on sexuality. Instead, women described relatively direct strategies in which they confronted potentially aggressive customers in ways that were described as surprising or unusual for interactions between women and men in hospitality spaces. Jenny, also a manager, recounted examples where she intervened physically by placing her body between aggressive patrons. She explained that men were typically surprised by her intervention in their behavior and that she was protected by this and by the expectation that they “don't want to hurt” her:

Usually it's men in these situations who are causing the aggro [aggression]. They do not expect a small woman to be getting in between them and arcing up at them [becoming angry and confrontational]. I think that's what works for me, is that they are surprised by it and that makes them rethink what they're doing. So they don't expect it. They have to reconsider what they're doing immediately because they don't want to hit me and they don't want me to get hurt because then I can charge them with something or then they're, like, the dude that hit a woman in a pub. Like, they don't want to be that guy and there are very few dudes that will not care about that.

Here, Jenny's strategy is based on a direct intervention, and the gendered notion that for a man to hit a woman is a reputational disgrace (to men) due to the intrinsic vulnerability that is attributed to women. Jenny explains that it is not men's regard for the safety of women that facilitates women's intervention in their behavior and supposedly protects women from the threat of harm but rather their regard for their own position as someone whose status would be lowered by assaulting a woman publicly. Candice, a bar manager, felt that being a woman in the role gave her more “control” in resolving a volatile situation.

You have more control when you're a woman managing a bar... Say for example if there was a fight kicking off or someone was being really aggressive. I could actually step into the situation and be like, no, you need to settle down and get out. I was actually able to grab people or move people or convince

people to leave without the threat of being hit or injured or anything worse than just being called some rude words. It was easier for me to deal with than security or male staff members.

Candice also described situations where she would physically use her body to intervene in aggressive confrontations between men and that it was “easier” and more effective for them to do this than even security staff whose job it is to manage patron and staff safety. This is however an ambivalent and heavily circumscribed form of agency which constitutes an unrecognized and dangerous form of unremunerated labor. Further, being called “rude words,” or verbal abuse, constitutes a form of gender-based violence. Jenny and Candice’s position that male patrons behaving aggressively “don’t want to hurt them” is perplexing given the instances of risk and harm other participants describe and does not align with the literature on prevalence of gender-based violence inflicted on women in all spheres of life, in the home as well as in public settings and workplaces (see Department of Social Services, 2022).

Felicity worked in a venue that did not employ security staff in order to maintain a “fun” atmosphere in the venue:

A big thing here is we don't have security. So when you're coming into the venue you're not being greeted by aggression, you're being greeted by someone who is there to check your ID, make sure you're not intoxicated and is generally smiley and happy.

Felicity associates security guards with an “aggressive” or imposing presence, creating an atmosphere which is not suited to the “bohemian” bar she works in. The type of bar venue where women were more likely to be called upon to manage volatile situations were those which were small-scale, “hip” or “boutique” venues which presented an esthetic in contrast the typical cocktail bar, pub, or “beer barn” atmosphere to be found in other parts of the city or outer suburbs (see Farrugia et al., 2018; Threadgold et al., 2021). Such venues were less likely to employ security staff, which meant that workers (many of whom were also acting as managers in these settings) developed their own informal systems or processes for navigating patrons behaving aggressively. This, however, means that the task of managing potentially violent situations falls entirely to bar staff, with women playing a central and taken for granted role.

In general therefore, women workers were positioned as having the capacity to successfully and peacefully lower the risk of violence in bars, similar to the “civilizing influence” Kirkby (1997) describes historically of women bar workers. We view this practice as highly problematic, illustrating yet another way in which women must navigate inequitable and gendered relations in the workplace which impact their physical safety. In the already-gendered dynamics of interactive service labor which includes pervasive sexual harassment, the task of managing violence constitutes an important and previously unexamined demand for women bar workers. They are put to work in de-escalating violent situations in a way that is unrecognized, unremunerated, and dangerous. Despite the notion that women are excluded from the dynamics of masculine competition that contribute to violence in venues, the task of managing violence itself carries the threat of violence and assault, especially given the endemic prevalence of gender-based violence in Australia (Department of Social Services, 2022).

In the next examples, we discuss the way that workers developed a sense of which situations they could intervene in and “who to avoid,” and the threats to their safety that emerged from performing this unrecognized labor.

5.1 | Intuition: Knowing who is dangerous

Women bar workers explained that learning how to “read the room” and to intuit potential threats and “problems” was a crucial, highly specialized skill in their work. Jenny, a bar worker and manager who felt confident breaking up fights by physically intervening, explained learning how to discern particular men whom she will avoid engaging with, no matter what:

Some men - I usually have an idea of who they are and then I will stay behind the fucking bar and I won't go near them because I'm like, that guy doesn't give a shit if I'm male, female, any colour, whatever. He will just fucking go anyone. So it's about intuition.

Jenny describes developing this sense of intuition by “building up an awareness” of how to read and predict behavior and respond to people from her years of experience in bar work. Similarly, Skye also discussed the significance of intuition in registering a “bad vibe” about patrons as a way of keeping herself safe. On one occasion, she noted this “bad vibe,” and the patron later threatened to punch her.

I had a guy threaten to punch me in the face on a separate occasion. I can't even remember the specifics of the incident but I got a really bad vibe from him. Like yeah, he just made a bunch of weird comments that made me think like this guy's gonna harm someone... I was there by myself... We did have a baseball bat where the kegs were, yeah.

Felicity also described learning how to assess “body language” and sense “threats” as an essential skill which “can't be taught”:

I am able to assess a room and pick out a threat before it becomes a threat. You have to have a gift of the gab in this industry and you've got to have a certain amount of people skills. I can teach anyone to pour a drink, I can't really teach that [ability to assess threats], and that's something that becomes quite apparent with staff, you have either got it or you don't, you have got to be able to talk to people. It's not just verbally, it's body language. If you have got a guy that is about to wind up, you don't go at them with big movements. (Felicity)

Here, Jenny, Skye, and Felicity describe their capacity to recognize and intervene in violent situations as a complex and skillful form of embodied labor; and something they seemed to feel proud of. This requires them to assess the interactive styles and bodily movements of consumers and comport themselves appropriately, extending even to managing their own bodily movements so as not to appear threatening to men who are likely to become aggressive. Such skills are cultivated over a long period of time in the job, learned through watching other colleagues' approaches and incorporating them into their own practice in relating to patrons at work. However, the understanding of these skills in terms of “intuition” reproducing a longstanding tendency for “women's work” to be essentialized as an intrinsic attribute of feminine embodiment, which contributes to the lack of status and recognition (or remuneration) associated with feminized forms of work (Adkins, 1995; Morini, 2007).

6 | CONSEQUENCES: THREATS AND ASSAULTS AGAINST WOMEN BAR STAFF

Despite the strategies they employed for “reading the room,” the threat of harassment and assault was a consistent feature of bar work for women. In one particularly concerning example, Felicity described being followed home, continually harassed, and threatened by a patron she had ejected from the bar:

I have been spat at, I've been followed home... You will occasionally have guys who are actual pieces of shit. I went to kick one guy out for punching someone. He then proceeded to come back multiple times. He stood out the front and he screamed abuse at me for probably an hour and a half. He consistently came back for six months. I was going to make a police report after he threatened to follow me home and rape me. It's just male entitled yuckiness, but it was coming into my workplace and it was coming to a point where he was trying to get physical with me and then trying to get physical with the other staff when they're trying to step in. (Felicity)

Despite women bar workers' best efforts to manage and defuse volatile situations, they cannot avoid bearing the violent impacts of volatile and abusive patrons. Such confrontations carry the implied risk and actual threat of physical

and sexual violence. A male bar worker, Jon, described feeling “uncomfortable” about any form of confrontation, particularly around violence:

We have a fight every now and then. I generally am not the one to deal with that but it is quite confronting. I just - I'm generally pretty meek and violence kind of... I don't know what to do. That's definitely an uncomfortable situation. (Jon)

Unlike Felicity and Jenny, Jon did not want to be involved in dealing with violence and found it “confronting” in the instances he was required to intervene. The level of violence that occurs in some venues is detailed by Vanessa, where “Friday night was fight night”:

The idea of security is laughable because that didn't exist when I first started. Friday night was fight night and we didn't get a security guard until I'd worked there for six years. I'd seen people get glassed in the face. Some guy brought a shotgun down and was threatening people. We had a waitress who was held hostage essentially by somebody before I started there but she quit and I think that's why I got a job - yeah. (Vanessa)

These examples show that the broader gendered context in which women bar staff are impelled to defuse confrontations can be highly volatile and unpredictable, in keeping with numerous other studies of violence in the night-time economy (Anderson et al., 2007; Fileborn, 2016b; Kavanaugh, 2013; Mellgren et al., 2017). Whilst participants did also describe incidents where women patrons had to be removed, the incidents did not carry the same sense of threat or menace (e.g., Felicity described being spat on by a woman, and Candice described a woman standing out the front of the venue yelling abuse).

Given the scale and breadth of gendered violence against women, in domestic and public spaces including the bars they work, and on the street (Fileborn, 2016b), and as detailed by Vanessa, the normalized position that women are “better suited” to manage violence is highly problematic, risky, and exploitative for women bar workers. Participants described learning how to detect and defuse “problems,” including particularly dangerous men, was part of the broader learning process in knowing how to “read the room” and read people. In a context where hospitality labor already makes complex and often unexamined demands on young workers, the positioning of women bar staff as being more adept in defusing violent situations suggests a particularly important but previously unexamined demand made of women bar workers.

The findings presented above show that the capacity to recognize, intervene, and defuse potentially violent situations is positioned as a necessary requirement in the working practices of women bar staff and managers. Women's particular capacities to intervene are positioned as a pragmatic response to the problem of male violence in the night-time economy. This positioning rests on normative gendered assumptions in which the capacity and obligation to manage threatening behavior from male patrons is taken for granted as something women are more naturally able to do. The gendered expectations both of men's capacity for violence and women's obligations to manage it combine to create a particularly noxious environment for women bar workers.

7 | DISCUSSION

The practice of women bar staff being strategically deployed to defuse patrons behaving aggressively before a situation becomes violent has not been documented elsewhere. Whilst other studies of violence in the night-time economy have explored the gendered dynamics of managing safety related to patrons' experiences and those of security and door staff (Fileborn, 2016a, 2016b; Sargison, 2020), this analysis provides the first exploration of how bar workers navigate and understand the gendered dynamics of violence in the workplace. Women workers were positioned

as “more effective” at defusing volatile situations because they are external to both competitive aggression and homosocial bonding between men (Kavanaugh, 2015). However, from the perspective of feminist labor studies, this finding has particular significance in extending our understanding of how gender and femininity are enacted through the disciplinary requirements of work (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016; Hochschild, 1983; Pettinger, 2011; Thomas & Kitzinger, 1994; Watts, 2007). The expectation that women bar staff can, and should, defuse aggressive or violent patrons can be understood as a form of femininity work which is expected of women (Tyler & Taylor, 1998). In these examples, dominant gendered norms such as the assumption that women are more adept at complex emotional and interpersonal management tasks are invoked to explain why women are called on to remove volatile patrons or “de-escalate” instances of violence. The matter-of-fact way women were put to work to defuse fights was presented by participants as a practical and strategic solution to the enduring (and normalized) problem of male violence in public in the night-time economy (Fileborn, 2016a; Green, 2021; Gunby et al., 2020).

The expectation that women staff are “better suited” to manage aggressive patron behavior is concerning given the endemic rates of gender-based violence in Australia (Department of Social Services, 2022). Whilst it is premised on the assumption “most men wouldn't hit a woman,” mobilizing the traditional gender norm of women's inherent vulnerability, the women described instances of threatened or actual violence, including rape threats. Related paradoxical elements of the practice women bar workers described include being in physical danger from aggressive patrons, at other times feeling powerful and “in control,” feeling noble for protecting other patrons and male staff and gaining a sense of reward from being successful in defusing violence. As Wilcox et al. (2021) demonstrate, the organization of work and employment is inextricably linked to domestic violence, where violence against women should not be conceptualized as a domestic or “private” issue that only occurs behind closed doors.

Women bar workers were positioned as having the capacity to successfully and peacefully lower the risk of violence in bars, by men and women bar workers alike. This aligns with findings from studies of women's experiences of working in masculinized occupations such as security, policing, and peacekeeping (Cuadrado, 1995; Hobbs et al., 2007; Pruitt, 2013) where women's “natural capacity” for interpersonal communication is essentialized as a natural feminized trait. In this context, the expectation that women are intrinsically imbued with the capacity to better manage violence constitutes an extension of traditional heterosexual gender norms through the policing and “calming” aggressive masculinity at work (see Fileborn, 2016b; Sargison, 2020). In this context, developing a sense of “who to avoid” becomes a survival skill.

Participants' descriptions reveal the complex process of learning involved in developing the “intuitive” capacities required in their work. Women bar staff and managers described the importance of being continually monitoring for potential “threats,” which enables them to manage smooth interpersonal relations at their workplace. This responsibility and capacity was described by both women bar staff and managers alike. Participants cultivated this intuition as a survival strategy, and consider the capacity to recognize potential threats before they occur to be an important aspect of their work. This finding elaborates on previous findings in which women bar staff described “always scanning, always checking” as an additional embodied sense or register of awareness that was crucial to the job (Coffey et al., 2018). This also aligns with how bartenders in Powers and Leili's (2016) study described the acquired skill of “reading body language” to tell when a woman patron was seeming uncomfortable. In a context in which harassment by customers is considered a routine or regular part of the job and in which employees feel responsible for managing incidents of harassment themselves (Good & Cooper, 2016, p. 449), the additional task of removing these same customers when they pose the risk of physical violence poses significant further risks to women bar staff. These findings illustrate that the gendered expectations both of men's capacity for violence and women's obligations to manage it combine to create a particularly noxious environment for women bar workers.

The gendered norms and expectations at play in how violence in bar work is managed by staff can be seen as an extension of the modes of attentive, emotionally-attuned femininity that labor feminist labor studies theorists have described (Brunner & Dever, 2014; Good & Cooper, 2016), connected to the already-existing ways femininity is essentialized (Adkins, 1995; Tyler & Taylor, 1998) within a heteronormative logic in this setting. Through the expectation that women are “better suited” to manage violence, we have analyzed how femininity is mobilized in the

practice of labor in complex ways that are hitherto unrecognized (and perhaps unexpected) in contemporary analysis of gender and service labor, which have not yet connected the work of managing violence alongside performing feminized caring work in a commodified sphere of the service economy. Locating the gendered dynamics informing women's management of violence in bar work constitutes an important and previously unexamined demand for women workers, which carries the significant risk of violence and assault.

Whilst this study was limited in scope, given the small number of participants presented here, this exploratory analysis can provide the basis for further studies of the broader forms of "femininity work," which may be folded into the working practices in the interactive service labor sector. The gendered dynamics informing how the threat of, and management of, violence is coded as "feminine work" represents significant potential harm for workers. Future work in this area is needed to explore the full extent of hospitality workers' experiences of violence at work and the significance of gender in informing the invisibilized expectations informing working practices. Qualitative studies could further explore not only sexual harassment in hospitality labor, which has been relatively well-documented, but also its intersections with broader patterns of gender-based violence. Extending an understanding of gendered violence and work as an "interface" whereby norms and structures which perpetuate violence against women are maintained (Wilcox et al., 2021) will be useful in future studies of this issue. Wilcox et al. (2021) suggest that organizations need to become responsible and active in addressing the systemic structural and cultural dimensions of violence. This should have particular implications in Australia, where workers have the right to "safe and healthy work conditions" (Australian Government, 2023). In the interactive service sector, including bars and nightclubs, this could mean specific recognition and action to respond to the documented widespread occurrence of gendered violence in the night-time economy and beginning from the specific acknowledgment of the dynamics of men and masculinities (Moore et al., 2021) and their roles in perpetrating violence in the night-time economy.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bar work can be situated as a core aspect of the night-time alcohol and leisure industry, or what is generally termed "the night-time economy." In NSW, Australia (one of the locations of this research), it specifically includes business activities that take place between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. (NSW Government, 2018).
- ² Gender-based violence refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender and can include sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power, and harmful norms (UNHCR, 2023).
- ³ We use the term "femininity work" rather than "women's work" to de-naturalize the relationship between associations between women workers and normative femininity.
- ⁴ At the time of writing, the interview and ethnographic phases of this research were paused due to COVID restrictions; however, the project is ongoing.

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