

Your Friendly Neighborhood Sex Workers: Lessons in Activism and Organizing from India, the Netherlands, and the United States

Abstract

This paper examines the ways that sex worker organizations and activists have worked to positively influence the lives and working conditions of their constituents in countries with varying legal approaches to sex work. By surveying the work of successful sex worker organizations in the Netherlands, India, and the United States, this research seeks to understand both the methodological diversity and the fundamental similarities exemplified by the sex worker organizing efforts. While local political, geographical, and social conditions influence the kinds of services each group has sought to provide, their level of success often corresponded to their emphasis on egalitarian, sex-worker-led paradigms of organizing.

Final Paper

Across city, state, and national boundaries, policies governing sex work and prostitution vary dramatically, as do their impacts on local sex workers. Countries like the United States have maintained its criminalization for decades (Nevada excepted), while the Netherlands have opted to legalize and regulate the industry, with mixed results for sex workers. In many places, prostitution laws are unlikely to change quickly if at all, while in others, policies affecting sex workers continue to change unfavorably. One unfortunate reality of prostitution policies appears to be true: whether or not the practice is criminalized, decriminalized or legalized, the material effects for sex workers across legal contexts can be borderline indistinguishable for one reason or another. (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014)

Prostitution policies tend to fall into the category of ‘morality politics,’ in which a political debate or conversation is both impervious to objective analysis, statistical evidence, or expert testimony and devastatingly subjected to the whims of various cultural, religious, and political forces claiming ownership of the conversation based solely on emotional response. (Wagenaar and Altink, 2012) Beyond its entrapment in morality politics, prostitution debates tend to devolve beyond productivity into whether or not it should be “legal” or “illegal,” without any conversation about the implementation of an effective policy that will help sex workers, as demonstrated by the numerous governments who have decriminalized sex work in an effort to abolish it, rather than protect its participants. (Wagenaar and Altink, 2012)

The apparent hopelessness of this discursive circumstance leads us to the intuitive yet elusive question of *what about the sex workers?* What can sex workers do to improve their circumstance despite being criminalized, over-regulated, or unprotected by their legal context? This is the foundational question underlying the following case studies. By examining groups in India, the Netherlands, and the United States, I hope to uncover the ways in which organizations are able to *successfully* influence the lives and working conditions of sex workers. There have indelibly been a wealth of unsuccessful organizational efforts, but my goal is to illuminate strategies that work and understand *why they succeed*. The question of how sex workers can get the assistance they need is likely the only realistic question to ask.

The countries discussed in this paper have been selected based on their diverse legal approaches to sex work as well as the availability of information about their sex worker organizations. International-level sex worker organizations span the globe and operate with

varying degrees of success, but they will not be discussed in this paper. My goal is to discuss the ways that local organizations are able to effect change for sex workers and determine what can and cannot be abstracted across national, cultural, or political contexts to explain failures or foster successes in other organizations.

India

Sex workers in India currently find themselves trapped somewhere between legality and illegality for their occupational pursuits. While sex work is not formally criminalized at the national level, several activities relating to prostitution are criminalized, including soliciting sexual services or residing in the same home as a person working in the sex industry.

(delhigov.org, no date) Meanwhile, law enforcement is inconsistent at best across and within different cities, jurisdictions, and neighborhoods, creating an unofficial mutual relationship between law enforcement and sex workers in some places. (Cornish et al., 2010) Given this murky legal context, sex-worker-run organizations in India have been exceptionally effective at directly responding to the needs and circumstances of their constituents. While India hosts headquarters for local chapters of larger international organizations, the focus here will be on community-based activism, specific to different geographical and socioeconomic locations throughout India. The local focus of these groups have enabled them to develop unique plans of action and provide services based on the needs of sex workers in their communities. Although their day-to-day activities may vary, these organizations have succeeded in part due to their common foundational principles of self-empowerment, a community-based focus, and sex-worker-led activism.

Like many sex worker organizations internationally, much of India's sex-worker-activism began as HIV/STI prevention and treatment efforts in the wake of the 1980's AIDS panic. In 1992, the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health initiated the Sonagachi Project in collaboration with the Department for International Development (a British international development agency) and other NGO's. (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay, 2007) Hailed internationally as the "model" for effective and sustainable HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, the project itself rapidly expanded beyond its original goals to address a number of other critical issues facing sex workers in Kolkata (home of the largest red light district in its state) and throughout West Bengal. The project led to the creation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC, translating to 'Unstoppable Women's United Committee'), which played a vital role in expanding and redirecting the focus beyond HIV prevention to include sex workers' empowerment, education, and economic stabilization. (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay, 2007; Cornish and Campbell, 2009) DMSC was founded based on the principles of individual empowerment and an egalitarian organizational structure that gave sex workers' voices and priorities both equal say and even precedence over external knowledge brought in by non-sex-worker activists. Its original leadership fostered an environment of non-hierarchical cooperation, implementing programs that would not only accomplish the Sonagachi Project's original goals but also facilitate the eventual passage of leadership from non-sex-worker project organizers to local sex worker activists. (Cornish and Campbell, 2009; Ditmore, 2007) This principled approach to institution building created the foundation for an effective and sustainable organizational structure of by-and-for sex worker service provision and activism.

The Sonagachi Project and DMSC worked in tandem to manifest a significant decrease in the incidence of HIV/STIs and increase in condom use in Kolkata's red light districts. DMSC's expansion beyond a focus on HIV led them to provide other crucial services to sex workers as well, including helping women obtain ration cards, securing their release from the police station when necessary, providing negotiation assistance between sex workers and madams or brothel owners, and developing a savings and credit scheme to "give the women a more stable and flexible financial situation." (Cornish and Campbell, 2009)

The importance of the savings and credit scheme developed by DMSC cannot be understated. Studies demonstrate that economic disadvantage, poverty, and coercion are the leading causes of entrance into sex work for women in India, demonstrating the need for economic assistance. (Saggurti et al., 2011) This has two crucial impacts on women involved in sex work in India: the first, that women working in the sex trade do not feel the need to provide unsafe sex to clients in exchange for higher payment out of economic desperation; and second, that women wishing to exit the sex trade can begin to manifest the financial opportunity to do so. (Saggurti et al., 2011; Cornish and Campbell, 2009) Recognizing the vast necessity of providing economic assistance to sex workers in Kolkata led to the creation of the Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society in 1995 under the umbrella of DMSC. Usha's creation has been deemed "one of [the] most significant steps taken towards [sex workers'] self-determination and empowerment." (Nag, 2005) Usha plays a crucial role in helping sex workers avoid financial slavery at the hands of madams or local moneylenders who would otherwise offer them loans with interest rates as high as 4% a day. In order to encourage economic independence and to avoid exploitative financial relationships, Usha encourages sex workers to save money by

making modest deposits into in-house savings accounts which require lower minimums than local banks, provides easy-access loans at low interest rates, and also runs a “social marketing of condoms” program in which sex workers are trained in basic marketing strategies and sent out to sell condoms to other sex workers at lower-than-market prices. (Nag, 2005)

In addition to the economic assistance programs championed by Usha, DMSC also recognized early on in its organizational development that empowerment and educational opportunities for sex workers and their children were among the most important unmet needs of their constituents. (Nag, 2005; Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay, 2007) This spurred the creation of an adult literacy program which provided sex workers with the critical ability to avoid exploitation by local moneylenders, brothel owners or police, as well as improve their negotiation ability with clients and madams. (Gooptu and Bandyopadhyay, 2007) It also created the strong base of politically savvy sex workers who would go on to take over the efforts of the Sonagachi Project entirely in 1999 and continue to run their local, sex-worker-operated clinics and centers. These educational programs were vital to the DMSC’s eventual independence from non-sex-worker organizing efforts, creating a truly grassroots, community-based service provider. (Cornish and Campbell, 2009)

One unique characteristic of DMSC’s work is that they do not seek to change the overall legal structures of the sex industry in India; the focus is purely on improving the treatment of sex-workers through their interactions with lower-level ‘stakeholders’ who have a material, day-to-day impact on sex workers such as local lawmakers and law enforcement officials. This is in part a tactic to avoid drawing political attention or disrupting the status quo to sex workers’

ultimate disadvantage (Cornish and Campbell, 2009), but also representative of their primary focus on the day-to-day lives and work of sex workers, rather than the virtually obsolete overarching political context.

Today, DMSC continues to provide crucial, community-based healthcare, educational and empowerment programs and economic assistance to approximately 60,000 sex workers in India. They've fostered sufficient legitimacy amongst Indian government agencies to develop their own independent, self-regulatory anti-trafficking committee to combat coercive entrance into the sex trade. (Ditmore, 2007) Their overwhelming influence allows DMSC to counsel nearly every woman entering the sex trade in India before they begin entertaining clients in order to determine whether they've been trafficked or coerced, and to provide diversionary resources when necessary. (Nag, 2005) DMSC's community-based clinics and peer-education centers have spread from Kolkata's densely populated red light districts to other communities throughout West Bengal. Its success has not wavered significantly despite expanding beyond its original location; each new center, while reporting to an overhead DMSC committee, has individual jurisdiction to make decisions and prioritize certain activities or services based on its local constituents and keeping clinics accountable for their services. (Cornish and Campbell, 2009) But while DMSC seems to have created an effective and sustainable model, it is not the only example of sex worker organizing in India.

SANGRAM describes itself as "a voluntary organization that works a[t] the [grassroots] level with a lot of activists, volunteers and paid workers" on primarily HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in rural areas of India. (SANGRAM Official Website, no date) Based in the rural

Sangli district, its population is cited as having the “highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Maharashtra after Mumbai.” (SANGRAM Official Website, no date) The sex-worker-run arm of SANGRAM’s organization, VAMP, has implemented a peer education program similar to that of DMSC and the Sonagachi Project, with the goal of educating sex workers about safer sex practices and distributing free or cheap condoms in areas with higher levels of prostitution. Also like DMSC, VAMP and SANGRAM emphasize the need for sex worker empowerment and community-based organizing, and their programs are tailored to the context of sex work in rural India. (SANGRAM Official Website, no date) For example, since VAMP’s creation in 2000, there has been a heavy focus on educating sex workers and truck drivers on the need for regular STI screening, receiving medical treatment when necessary, and practicing safe sex through condom usage. (Batiwala, 2011) Through community-based centers and clinics, VAMP trained sex workers to build healthy, communicative relationships with truck drivers making regular routes through Sangli, and subsequently educate them about safe sex and healthcare practices. This was a notably successful effort, in large part because the truckers came to view the sex workers as their “friends,” resulting in positive relationships and a decreased incidence of HIV/STI’s amongst highway-based sex workers in Sangli. (Batiwala, 2011)

Beyond HIV/STI prevention and treatment, VAMP engages in other service provision and political advocacy activities designed to meet the needs of rural Indian sex workers. The organization offers a children’s “hostel” to provide housing and childcare when a sex worker cannot do so, supplementary educational opportunities for children whose education has been disrupted or inconsistent, and psychological support through counseling, mentorship, and therapy. (Batiwala, 2011) VAMP has also demonstrated an ability to make some gains through

lobbying local lawmakers and law enforcement officials through “persuasion, protesting, and exchanging favors,” often achieving leniency or even unofficial assistance for their public protests or political advocacy events. (Cornish et al., 2010) Like DMSC, VAMP does not attempt to change India’s criminalization of sex work, but instead dedicate time and resources to manipulating their local political contexts.

The programs implemented by DMSC and SANGRAM/VAMP are uniquely designed to respond to the needs of sex workers in India, often in ways that could not be transposed externally. For example, Usha’s system of local “banks” either goes unnoticed by the larger financial and political establishment or does not violate laws that might otherwise prevent its activities, and VAMP’s efforts to build relationships with and educate truckers would not necessarily succeed in other rural communities. And while they have not constructed a ‘perfect world’ for their constituents, Indian sex worker organizations have made significant economic, health, and cultural gains in their communities.

The Netherlands

The tenuous status of sex workers in the Netherlands demonstrates the inability of prostitution legalization to necessarily improve the lives and working conditions of sex workers, in-turn exhibiting the necessity for grassroots organizations and advocacy efforts. Despite legalizing brothels in 2000 and touting “human rights” and “combatting trafficking” as their underlying motivations, conservative political forces consistently have demonstrated an adamant dedication to abolishing sex work in its entirety. (Outshoorn, 2012) This anti-prostitution undercurrent is reflected in the impact that their seemingly pro-prostitution legislative choices

have had on sex workers themselves, reinforcing the need for sex workers to create their own organizational resources.

There can be no discussion of sex worker organizations in the Netherlands without beginning with the work of the Red Thread, the first and most historically influential sex worker organization in the country. Founded in 1985, the Red Thread played a crucial role in the brothel legalization of 2000 and developing a culture of political activism amongst sex workers in some of the Netherlands' most populous red light districts (including Amsterdam). They provided services and resources for sex workers throughout the Netherlands, including negotiating on workers' behalfs with brothel owners, providing informational resources about businesses and workers' rights, offering an outlet for lodging anonymous complaints about a club, private brothel or window proprietor, and actively visiting facilities to monitor working conditions. (Ditmore, 2007) The Red Thread also implemented a program designed to promote condom use amongst prostitutes working in Amsterdam's infamous red light district windows. Through the window sticker project, sex workers in the red light district were able to display their insistence on condom use with a small sticker on their window. This allowed sex workers to begin their conversations with clients from a position of mutual understanding that condoms would be used, making negotiations easier as well as decreasing the incidence of angry client backlash. (Sandfort, 1998)

The Red Thread eventually expanded to focus primarily on national-level lobbying efforts. During the mid-1990's, the organization joined the Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV, the largest labor union in the Netherlands), making the Red Thread the "primary movers"

in the feminist movement's political push to decriminalize prostitution. The FNV held substantial clout with the Dutch parliament, being viewed as a valuable "social partner" in crafting labor-friendly legislation, which gave the Red Thread and their pro-prostitution agenda a foundation of legitimacy from which to operate on the national political stage by extension. (Outshoorn, 2012; Ditmore, 2007)

Despite developing significant influence in parliament, the organization faced insurmountable financial troubles and was forced to close its doors in 2009, becoming solely an online resource for sex workers in the Netherlands. In 2012, the organization declared bankruptcy and by 2013 the website was taken offline, officially ending the Red Thread's lifespan. (Ditmore, 2007; Outshoorn, 2012) An archived version of the organization's website, although difficult to navigate and almost completely inoperable, shows an entry dated June 18, 2011 describing the organization's attempt to open an account with Rabobank Amsterdam for the purposes of depositing membership fees, but receiving a staunch rejection from the bank because "the Rabobank did not want to do business with prostitutes." The website describes ambiguity about the origins of sex workers' earnings as being the bank's official justification for refusing the organization any financial services. (Red Thread website archive, no date)

The Prostitution Information Center (PIC), founded by former sex worker Mariska Majoor in 1994, has worked quietly for over 20 years to provide informational resources to sex workers in Amsterdam's red light district. Unlike the Red Thread, the PIC has sought primarily to provide informational resources for sex workers, with little to no engagement with parliamentary prostitution politics or expansion to include other types of services. The

organization's blog is regularly updated with current events, petitions relating to prostitutes' working conditions, descriptions of relevant government laws, and information about the center's activities. The PIC's website is very high-functioning, easy to navigate and straightforward, but it's the organization's vegetarian cafe that serves as the heart of the organization's culture and activism. In the PIC's cafe, visitors can enjoy a casual lunch or take an educational tour of Amsterdam's red light district, the funds from which go toward providing sex workers with in-person and online resources about important legal changes and safety information. Other important resources include bi-weekly workshops hosted by Majoor herself in the PIC's cafe. These workshops are designed to educate the workers about their rights and obligations under changing Dutch laws, provide vital tactics for exiting a dangerous situation with a client, how to negotiate with a brothel owner, and other important tips for improving one's working conditions. (PIC Official Website, no date)

Despite being solely an information center for sex workers and offering no additional services or resources, the PIC's activities respond to one of the only unmet needs of Dutch sex workers within their sphere of influence. "Sex workers have been badly informed about the change of law, its consequences and their rights." (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014) Rampant confusion, ambiguity, and misinformation exists about sex workers' rights, legal obligations, and the employee/employer relationship itself since brothel legalization, often at the workers' expense. This misinformation has no small impact on Dutch sex workers. For example, although brothel owners are legally prohibited from regulating the dress, activities, and working hours of their employees, they often unofficially wield such control anyway - a result of both ineffective regulatory efforts and the general ambiguity and confusion about the relationship between sex

workers and brothel owners/window proprietors. (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014) This often has the unintended effect of making sex workers unsure about whether the violence or discrimination they experience on-the-job is technically prohibited by Dutch law, or even unaware that they are improperly filling out relevant paperwork for their taxes. (Outshoorn, 2012; Pitchers and Wijers, 2014)

In the wake of the Red Thread's demise, a number of nascent sex worker organizations have attempted to fill the organization's shoes, although no collective or widespread effort has been manifested to the same extent. PROUD, established in 2015 by PIC's Majoor, is attempting to pick up where the Red Thread has left off. The organization's website describes its focus on providing information and educational resources for sex workers, and their official activities include "producing leaflets and brochures, doing field work and by organizing various projects to inform sex workers about rights, obligations and other matters regarding sex work." (PROUD Official Website, no date) They heavily emphasize grassroots lobbying efforts as key functions of the organization. Since its creation, the organization has hosted and sponsored demonstrations protesting the government's efforts to implement zoning policies and increase regulations on Dutch sex workers, engaged local governments by sending letters to parliament and local governing bodies on behalf of sex workers' interests, and negotiated with both governmental agencies and individual brothel owners and window proprietors on behalf of its members. (PROUD Official Website, no date)

Despite evidence of some successful organizational efforts, Dutch sex worker organizations have often struggled to respond directly to their constituents' most pressing needs.

This inability is often a result of circumstances beyond the control of the organizations themselves. For example, one of the most pressing issues facing sex workers in the Netherlands lies in the licensing regulations put in place in 2000. Municipalities were granted the ability to distribute brothel licenses - indicating the only legal establishments in which sex work can take place - at their own discretion, and often heavily influenced by public opinion (a public with a staunch 'Not In My Back Yard' approach to sex work). (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014) This often means that sex workers are given a very limited number of potential employers in a given city, impacting both their negotiating power and their access to reasonable employers and good working conditions. (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Outshoorn, 2012) Overcoming the challenge of discriminatory licensing policies is, thus far, beyond the control or influence of individual sex worker organizations in the Netherlands as the municipal discretion is protected by Dutch law. Sex workers also struggle from the unfortunate contradiction that while sex workers are meant to have control over their dress code, hours of operation, and ability to refuse a client or request, employers often create unreasonable mandates that overwhelm the sex worker's interests. The ultimate contradiction lies in the fact that governments often refuse to intervene on behalf of sex worker because "the reach of (labour) law does not include sex facilities," due to their perception as falling into the "private" sphere of influence. (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Wagenaar et al., 2013)

The United States

Like much of the Western world in the 1960's and 1970's, the United States experienced a sociopolitical turn toward liberalization in key areas of social policy, including a more widespread acceptance of and identification with feminist values and interpretations of gender

relations. Unlike the Netherlands, however, this cultural shift did not bode well for sex workers in the United States, who were quickly alienated by both mainstream liberals and counterculture feminists. The inadvertent alliance between radical feminists and conservative political forces meant that American sex workers had few allies to turn to in the political mainstream, and attempts at widespread sex worker organizing reflect the ongoing influence of that reality.

It was within this isolated context that former sex worker Margo St. James spurred some of the most influential and widely-known sex worker organizing efforts in American history with the creation of COYOTE (a backronym for ‘Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics’) in 1973. Using a \$5,000 grant from The Point Foundation at Glide Memorial Church, St. James initiated a diverse and relatively successful organizational effort in San Francisco, California. The original goals of the organization focused on protesting injustices and abuses affecting local prostitutes, with a heavy emphasis on ending police harassment and discriminatory law enforcement. (Chateauvert, 2014; Jenness, 1990) COYOTE took an active role in public protesting, including boycotting and picketing hotels where “vice cops” entrapped prostitutes, hosting public “Hooker Conventions”, and extensive public media campaigns designed to reframe the mainstream narrative about prostitution. (Chateauvert, 2014)

Public media campaigns were a foundational aspect of COYOTE’s work. In St. James’s view, it was absolutely crucial to change the perception of sex workers as victims (as per the contemporary feminist narrative) or as “whores” and criminals unworthy of basic legal protections (as per the conservative political narrative) in order to effectively and sustainably shift prostitution policy. Despite the desire for prostitution’s ultimate decriminalization,

COYOTE treated the goal of decriminalization as a “political frame that people instantly recognized” in order to align themselves with other “victimless crimes” being politically reconsidered at the time. (Chateauvert, 2014) COYOTE’s inability to actualize this goal does not, however, make the organization a failure. Its emphasis on the day-to-day abuses that sex workers faced ensured that they could benefit prostitutes no matter the legal context in which they operated.

Much of the organization’s protest of law enforcement policies took place in the court room. Having briefly attended Lincoln Law in San Francisco, St. James brought vital legal knowledge, experience, and connections to the organization’s efforts. COYOTE successfully influenced judges, court officials, and lawyers to the benefit of sex workers being charged with prostitution offenses, resulting in the dismissal of charges against 37 sex workers as well as convincing three judges to offer peer counseling and pre-trial diversion programs for sex workers. COYOTE instigated at least 26 law suits on behalf of individual sex workers in addition to sponsoring class-action law suits, often in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union. (Chateauvert, 2014; Jenness, 1990)

In addition to legal assistance, COYOTE provided sex workers with other basic day-to-day services to ease some of the strain of functioning in a widely stigmatized (and, in some cases, illegal) industry. These services included an emergency hotline for sex workers called “SLIP” (“Survival Line for Independent Prostitutes,”) as well as in-person classes on survival skills for sex workers once they have been arrested and booked in jail. (sJenness, 1990) St. James even earned a private investigator’s license to help gather evidence for sex workers seeking to

press charges against their assailants, given the reluctance of law enforcement officials to do so. (Chateauvert, 2014)

The mandatory 3-day quarantining period for arrested sex workers was a critical issue for COYOTE, particularly as the international obsession with HIV/AIDS took hold of the American sociopolitical psyche in the mid-1980's. (Jenness, 1990) The conventional wisdom that HIV/AIDS was a phenomenon solely affecting homosexual men having sex with men meant that women in sex work received no prevention or treatment assistance from healthcare providers while being simultaneously victimized upon arrest by law enforcement's perception of sex workers as dangerous vectors of venereal disease and HIV/AIDS. (Chateauvert, 2014) This dangerous predicament spurred the creation of several healthcare provision organizations aimed at offering HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment to sex workers, including CAL-PEP, the Boston women's Health Collective, the Emma Goldman Clinic, the Black Panthers' Peoples' Free Medical Clinics, the Tenderloin Free Clinic, and the St. James Infirmary (SJI) in 1999. (Chateauvert, 2014)

The initial work of SJI revolved primarily around providing sex education to COYOTE's constituents through a grassroots, on-the-ground campaign. Volunteers and activists would walk through areas heavily populated by sex workers to distribute condoms, clean syringes, and brochures advertising HIV/STI prevention and treatment services as well as safer sex tips. The non-profit clinic offers "free, confidential, nonjudgmental medical and social services for current and former Sex Workers of all genders," with services ranging from physicals and gynecological exams to HIV/STI testing and treatments, therapy and counseling opportunities, and transgender

hormone therapy programs. (SJI Official Website, no date; Chateauvert, 2014) Despite COYOTE's halt in activity in 2004 (COYOTE Official Website, no date), SJI continues to provide critical health services to sex workers in California, including trainings on building healthy relationships and "Seeking Safety" groups designed to help individuals develop healthy coping skills for dealing with trauma. (SJI Official Website, no date)

Like COYOTE, SJI also emphasizes the vitality of media campaigns combatting the conventional narratives about sex workers that have persisted since the 1980's. Its most recent efforts, manifested in the "Someone You Know is a Sex Worker" media campaign, have received widespread attention for their effective and empathetic approach to reframing public perceptions of sex workers. (SJI Official Website, no date)

COYOTE and St. James Infirmary are only the most widely known examples of sex worker organizations in the United States - and truly the tip of the ice berg, at that. While both provided (and, in the case of SJI, continues to provide) critical services to sex workers criminalized by their local law enforcement and municipal regulations, the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), founded in 2003, demonstrates the capacity for a sex workers' organization to successfully span across city, state, and national boundaries. With chapters in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Phoenix, New Orleans, Las Vegas, and an international outreach arm as well, SWOP comprehensively spans the United States, offering an extensive list of services to local sex workers as well as participating in political advocacy work. The organization emphasizes the need to take a non-hierarchical approach to knowledge, remain cognizant of the power dynamics between sex workers and non-sex-worker activists, and

remaining a sex-worker-led organization so that the priorities, voices, and goals are determined by those directly affected by SWOP's activities. (SWOP Official Website, no date) Its national-level services include an emergency hotline, mentoring and leadership development programs for sex workers seeking to start their own SWOP chapter, and a media outreach and advocacy program aimed at normalizing sex work and the idea of its decriminalization. SWOP takes an active role in collective activism with other organizations, including offering grants and funding opportunities for local sex-worker-led initiatives as well as mental health funding to ensure that sex workers, activists, and grassroots groups are able to provide services to their constituents. (SWOP Official Website, no date)

A major strength of SWOP's structure, however, is its emphasis on community-based service provision and locally-based activism. While operating under the larger national umbrella of SWOP, the organization consists of several geographically and functionally independent chapters throughout the United States (and with several international chapters, including the original SWOP in Sydney, Australia). Each organization provides on-the-ground assistance or and/or advocacy, depending on the needs of its local sex worker constituents and its available resources, with varying degrees of community involvement. For example, while the San Francisco/Bay Area chapter's website appears to have been inactive since 2013, it once hosted a variety of local events, including "Whore's Bath" self-care spa days for sex workers, monthly peer-based sex worker support groups, film viewing events, and writing workshops (SWOPBay.org, no date) SWOP Phoenix maintains an active website with online resources for sex workers including information about how to maneuver an arrest or other run-in with law

enforcement, how to effectively screen a client, and other critical safety tips for sex workers, but has stalled in-person event coordination or service provision. (SWOPPhoenix.org, no date)

While some SWOP chapters have fallen unfortunately silent with inactivity, other branches demonstrate ongoing, vibrant community-based activism. SWOP Chicago, for example, hosts ongoing, weekly “street-outreach” events every Thursday, where volunteers and activists congregate in downtown Chicago to distribute coffee, snacks, condoms, and resource-referrals for sex workers. The chapter also hosts monthly Community Activism Law Clinic meetings, where sex workers have access to “a free, full-service legal clinic,” with legal services ranging from “advice and community legal education to representation.” SWOP Chicago’s website also “does not have the capacity to provide direct health, legal, or counseling services,” but does boast a wealth of informational resources for sex workers seeking direct assistance, as well as informative videos about “staying safe in the sex industry.” (SWOP-Chicago.org, no date) SWOP San Antonio operates a 24/7, volunteer-staffed hotline where sex workers can access direct emergency support, offers peer-led support groups, and distributes “mental health fund[s] to ensure sex workers have access to individual services and group facilitation and mediation.” (SWOP-SanAntonio.org, no date) Some organizations appear to be in their most nascent stages, suggesting an ongoing need for and interest in local sex worker assistance, including SWOP Spokane, SWOP Oklahoma City, and SWOP Boston.

Whether active on-the-ground or seemingly shut-down, what almost every SWOP chapter has in common is an emphasis on online safety resources and information dissemination directed at sex workers. It is difficult to compare the value or efficacy of this strategy to that of

COYOTE's, given the extreme technological and cultural differences that influence the organizational contexts. It does seem, at the very least, a necessary (if not sufficient) strategy given the widespread access to the internet in the United States and the need for individual sex workers to find safety and self-help information.

COYOTE, SJI, and SWOP represent only the most widely known or successful efforts at providing healthcare and other vital services to sex workers in the United States, and there are a variety of other organizations attempting to do the same (with varying degrees of success). A number of sex worker organizations have advocated for some form of decriminalization in which prostitution is no longer a criminal offense and sex workers are able to pursue legal recourse for the violence and discrimination they experience. (Chateauvert, 2014) What becomes clear from the efforts of some of the United States' most well-known sex worker organizations is the emphasis on shifting public opinion away from the conventional prostitute-as-whore or prostitute-as-victim narratives that pervade much of the collective American imagination. Another pattern demonstrated in the activity of sex worker organizations is the de-emphasis of tangible assistance outside of healthcare provision. Despite the fact that sex workers in the United States have historically been women and transgender individuals from often impoverished socioeconomic backgrounds, sex worker organizations do not appear to take an interest in providing material, economic assistance to its constituents. (Chateauvert, 2014)

Conclusion

Sex worker organizations are as diverse in their goals and actions as the constituents they represent, and the variety in focus, priority, and activity demonstrated between Indian, Dutch, and American organizations reflects this fact. In each country, sex worker organizations focused

on distinct priorities: in India, economic assistance programs such as the savings and credit scheme; in the Netherlands, information dissemination and national-level lobbying efforts; in the United States, legal recourse strategies and public media campaigns. The most successful efforts came from organizations that recognized their constituents' unique needs, and those needs varied widely across national context. It would be extremely difficult, if not completely ineffective, to transpose DMSC's economic assistance schemes to the Netherlands, or COYOTE's public media campaigns to Kolkata. In the United States, organizations like COYOTE and SJI take a publicly outspoken approach to disrupting the conventional narrative of sex workers and influencing both public opinion and policymakers. In India, the opposite could not be more true; DMSC constantly works to remain in the shadows of national politics, lobbying only the necessary local actors, and leaving larger legal structures in place.

One particularly interesting conclusion drawn from these case studies is the fact that national-level legislative reform is not a primary goal for many sex-worker-led groups, even if the organizations take a stance on their country's policies. Across all three national contexts, successful organizations do little more than take a stance and engage in basic political advocacy; it is not their primary goal to achieve macro-political reform. While shifting public opinion and avoiding the internalization of stigma and prejudice are certainly on every agenda, there are few influential sex worker organizations seeking the direct repeal or passage of a specific law at the national level. Possibly as a result of cynicism over the slow pace of reform in some places (like the United States) or fear over the rapid pace of reform in others (like the Netherlands), organizational focus remains primarily on providing day-to-day services to sex workers struggling beneath the thumb of public policy, law enforcement, or both.

What these examples of successful sex worker organizing efforts share is far more telling about the nature of grassroots organizations in the context of sex work than their differences. Whether the focus is on HIV prevention/treatment, educational opportunities, information dissemination, or economic empowerment, their efficacy exhibits a direct positive correlation between the recognition of and response to their local constituents' needs and their ability to positively impact sex workers in their communities. The focus on building egalitarian, sex-worker-led organizations that prioritized the voices and needs of its constituents underlies every successful organization discussed thus far and plays a vital role in determining what kinds of programs and services would most effectively benefit local sex workers. Even when an organization originated with an external group's influence or goals in mind, the sustainable and effective organizations are the ones which evolved to being completely sex-worker-led. The emphasis on promoting sex worker leadership is reflected in the similarly common goal of actively rejecting the stigma and victimization that so many sex workers are forced to internalize. In every context, successful organizations have sought to empower and educate (to the necessary extent) their constituents in order to give them the opportunities to navigate their day-to-day activities and work as an independent yet collective unit more effectively.

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