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**Sex Workers:
Perspectives in Public Health and Human Rights**

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Martha E. Kempner, M.A.

Director of Public Information

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All article, review, advertising, and publication inquiries and submissions should be addressed to:

Editor

SIECUS Report

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350

New York, NY 10036-7802

phone 212/819-9770 fax 212/819-9776

website: <http://www.siecus.org>

E-mail: siecus@siecus.org

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FROM THE EDITOR:
SEX WORKERS:
A GLIMPSE INTO PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVES

Martha E. Kempner, M.A.

Director of Public Information

Few issues have the potential to cause as much debate among public health professionals as commercial sex work. Commercial sex work is a broad term that includes street prostitution, massage parlors, brothels, escort services, strip clubs, phone sex lines, and pornography. The term sex workers can refer to anyone who sells sexual services for money.

Historically, public health has focused on sex workers as disease vectors—those who would spread sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and more recently HIV, to the wider population. Interventions, therefore, focused not on the health of sex workers but on their role in shaping the health of society.

Many, including the World Health Organization (WHO), however, suggest that this approach is problematic. They argue that this approach increases the marginalization and stigma already faced by these individuals and as such can breed resentment amongst the target audience, drive commercial sex work further underground, and undermine success.

The WHO believes that interventions can have a positive impact on both the course of epidemics and the lives of those involved in commercial sex work. However, it and others in the public health field are calling for an approach that has as its primary goal the health and well-being of sex workers.

According to the WHO such an approach would follow certain key principles including adopting a non-judgmental attitude, respecting sex workers' human rights, involving sex workers in program development, and recognizing that sex workers are part of the solution.¹

Harm reduction models such as this are often controversial as they seek to improve conditions and health without necessarily eliminating potentially harmful behavior. At the center of this argument as it concerns sex workers is the question of free will. Commercial sex work does not operate in a vacuum but is instead inextricably linked with social and economic issues including poverty, race, class, lack of education, and the low status of women in many societies. By its nature, this harm reduction approach suggests that we respect the choices of individuals who become involved in sex work and focus our efforts on preventing health risks.

Here the public health approach becomes even more mired in the political debate and questions of whether current practices in which most countries make selling sex for money illegal are helping or hurting sex workers and societies.

IN THIS ISSUE

It is against this backdrop of ongoing debate that we present this *SIECUS Report*. It is not designed to settle any of these arguments—no 30 pages could do that. Instead, it provides many first-hand accounts of the issues sex workers face and some interventions that follow a rights-based, harm reduction model.

Two articles, one by Juhu Thukral and the other by Julie Stachowiak and colleagues, present detailed data of studies with sex workers in New York and Moscow respectively. The women surveyed discuss, in their own words, working conditions, relationships with law enforcement, violence, and efforts to minimize health risks.

We then switch to the educators point-of-view as both Esther Corona and Maxwell Ciardullo provide us with first-hand accounts of interventions in which they have participated. Corona explains that she was initially reluctant to become involved but that the program she helped to create was an extraordinary experience for both the sex workers and educators who attended.

And, in her first hand account of efforts to unionize exotic dancers at San Francisco's Lusty Lady, Siobhan Brooks reminds us that sex work is, by its nature, linked to issues of race and social class.

Finally, Melissa Dittmore, looks into a new policy put forth by the Bush Administration that may bring an end to many harm reduction programs by withholding funds from any international organization that does explicitly condemn prostitution and sex trafficking.

SMALL GLIMPSE

Most topics seem smaller or more manageable to me by the time I have finished editing an issue of the *SIECUS Report*. I cannot say the same thing about commercial sex work. It is truly the crossroads of public health, public policy, and human rights and touches on such equally large issues as race, gender, and socio-economic status. Nonetheless I am pleased to be able to provide readers with this small glimpse into such a vast issue. I have learned a great deal and I hope you do as well.

Reference

1. *Sex Work Toolkit: Targeted HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care in Sex Work Settings* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2004), accessed 22 June 2005, <<http://who.arvkit.net/sw/en/index.jsp>>.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: AN ANALYSIS OF INDOOR SEX WORK IN NEW YORK CITY

Juhu Thukral

Director, Sex Workers Project
Urban Justice Center
New York, NY

I started when the father of my child decided to take off with another woman. I was living in the Bronx, couldn't make rent, and [had to] take care of my two children. So, I moved in with my parents. But I couldn't find a job and still have time for my kids. I knew that my boyfriend's friends wanted to get up with me, wanted to sleep with me. I was flirting and said, "I'll fuck you for \$100." They said, "Yeah," and then they asked if I wanted to meet their friends. It was easy money. I didn't have to get up and go to work. I did it when I wanted, and I just had to buy nothing [to do it], no clothes, nothing. And since it was usually friends of people I knew, I felt pretty safe. So, I guess it was really because I had to take care of my kids and I really couldn't pay my bills. When I made enough, I was able to move to the projects and get my own place...[I'd like to leave the work in a] few years, maybe 5 or 6 [more years] until I save money and can go back to school.

—Angie, age 29

Sex work is a term used to refer to all aspects of the lawful and unlawful sex industry. It includes prostitutes, strippers, and dominatrices. Criminalization of prostitution has a severe impact on sex workers, both by inhibiting their ability to create stable lives for themselves, and by creating an environment in which violence against them often goes unaddressed. Sex workers live under the daily threat of arrest, deportation, and violence. These dangers are compounded by the stigma, isolation, and invisibility associated with their work. In *Behind Closed Doors: An Analysis of Indoor Sex Work in New York City*, a recent report from the Sex Workers Project (SWP) at the Urban Justice Center (UJC), we examine the quality of life issues that indoor sex workers face and the impact of how law enforcement approaches this population in New York City.

The title *Behind Closed Doors* refers to the hidden nature of the indoor sex industry (in which solicitation and the sexual exchange occur off the street), and the isolation felt by its sex workers. For the purposes of this study, indoor sex work is defined as any kind of sex work that goes on behind closed doors, as opposed to on the street. This definition includes prostitutes who work in brothels (official or

makeshift), independently in their own homes, and as escorts; strippers and bar patrons who connect with prospective clients in these venues and make dates for later meetings; and dominatrices whose services may potentially be defined as "sexual conduct."

The title of this report also refers to the pervasiveness of the indoor sex industry. Sex workers are woven into most neighborhoods in New York City, and are pivotal in the underground economy, with a large involvement by immigrants and others who are unable to earn a living wage in the mainstream economy.

This report focuses on indoor sex work primarily because, while these sex workers are largely invisible, they face many of the same problems as the more visible street-based prostitutes. The stereotypes of indoor sex workers encompass only extremes of either wealth and glamour or coercion and violence. The true picture reveals a more nuanced reality—the majority of indoor sex workers in this study live surprisingly precarious lives and encounter a high level of exactly the same problems faced by street-based sex workers, including violence, constant fear of police interference, and a lack of substantive support services. In fact, some of these problems are exacerbated by the clandestine, and thus invisible, nature of indoor sex work.

In addition, indoor sex workers also face many of the same problems as other populations among the working poor and recent immigrants, such as unstable housing and an inability to earn a living wage in the mainstream economy. Current law enforcement approaches are problematic because they drive sex workers further underground and alienate them from sources of support and from the mainstream of society. This problem is compounded by the fact that police rarely respond to the complaints of sex workers, even in cases of violence. Finding concrete and reality-based solutions to the needs of this invisible, vulnerable, and marginalized community is imperative to helping them create safe and stable lives.

THE STUDY

The sample of this study includes 52 indoor sex workers. Researchers met sex workers of all genders through direct outreach at a gang clubhouse, through law enforcement officials, at a nightclub, via the Internet, through other sex work-

ers, and through cooperating organizations. Respondents were quite diverse:

- With respect to race and ethnicity, 40% (21 of 52) were foreign-born, representing countries in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe; 27% (14 of 52) of respondents identified as Latino/a; 12% (6 of 52) identified as Asian; 15% (8 of 52) identified as Black; 44% (23 of 52) identified as European Descent; and 2% (1 of 52) identified as mixed race.
- With respect to gender identities, 73% of the participants identified as women (non-transgender); 12% (6 of 52) identified as transgender women; and 15% (8 of 52) identified as men. No transgender men were interviewed.
- The majority of participants were 20–39 years of age. Three respondents did not want to share their age. Four percent (2 of 49) of respondents were younger than 20 years (both were 19 at the time of the interview); 45% (22 of 49) were between 20–29 years; 43% (21 of 49) were between 30–39 years; 4% (2 of 49) were between 40–49 years; and 4% (2 of 49) were older than 50 years.

While the sample is not large, it is extremely diverse, and many of the experiences described by this highly varied group of sex workers are extremely similar. The emergence of significant common themes suggests that the data reflect systemic phenomena and are not merely anecdotal. Additionally, service providers and advocates were able to corroborate much of the information we received and attest to the general reliability of the respondents.

COMMON THEMES

In many ways, the indoor sex workers in this sample were much like many of the working poor. Specific problems faced by respondents included violence, which is often disregarded by police; fear of arrest and its consequences; lack of supportive services; and extreme isolation.

Entrance into Sex Work

Most respondents entered the sex industry in times of financial vulnerability. The vast majority became involved in sex work because they were either unable to find other work or their other work did not pay a living wage. Often, a friend or an acquaintance with contacts in the business vouched that sex work would bring in more money than traditional low-wage jobs. Respondents expressed a willingness at these points in their lives to do anything that might improve their economic situation. Others cited family pressures that coincided with economic pressures. A minority of participants became involved because of drug use or addiction.

For example, Antonio's entry into sex work came from desperation and "goes back to family problems." His family

did not support him. As a result, at age 11, he began working on the street. He came to New York City from Puerto Rico at age 14, was homeless, and did not speak English. Eventually, he was kicked out of a shelter for adolescents: "About a week after I got in a fight and [got] kicked out of Covenant House...I didn't come with the intention to do this...I went to the street to make money. I had a friend from Puerto Rico who introduced me to the scene." In describing his decision to engage in indoor sex work he says, "I moved indoors because of the risk on the street...and I got wiser...started doing movies." He notes that getting arrested was an additional factor that prompted him to move indoors.

Patricia compared sex work to other low-wage occupations, saying:

What a waitress makes in a week can be made within two or three days [in prostitution]...Some people have jobs just to pay their bills, even if they don't want them...They're doing something they don't want to do in exchange for money. I mean, to me, a housewife is a prostitute—she's home taking care of the kids and you give your husband sex and he pays the bills . . . People have the misconception that you have to be on the corner to be a sex worker...When you get in, it is just hard to get out because the money is so easy.

Carmen left a job that might be considered working- or middle-class, but that still did not allow her to make enough money to live comfortably:

I was working as a medical assistant for [an] office...[I] had all the responsibility and worried a lot, but wasn't trained well and took it all personally. [I] wanted a different way of making money [and having a] family life...I looked in the paper, called places, wanted to know what it [sex work] was about. I called 'Class Escorts,' and went in for an interview. I tried one call to see what it was about. I left my day job and would go at night. My first call was a Japanese client. I called the agency for safety, made \$400, [and the] agency got a split. I quit [my] day job. I was happy and I was able to support myself. I didn't feel bad. As time passed, [I] didn't like lying about it...found it hard to date. Eventually, I changed agencies...my rate started at \$1,000 an hour.

Gale, who has worked as an independent escort for ten years, spoke of seeking financial stability through sex work. She started "through friends who were making good money...[I] was looking for work, [and] started indoors." When asked about finding clients, she replied that she "already [knew] them...had a list and had been introduced by friends and knew friends." She also worked on the street and found customers that way, and sometimes in hotels.

Gale is considering advertising and is open to new customers. She prefers working indoors because it is “comfortable [and] private.” She finds the outdoors to be “too cold [and] subject to climate.”

Prior Employment

Many respondents had held or currently held other jobs. These jobs ranged from low-wage labor to well paid career tracks. The low-wage end of the spectrum included such jobs as babysitting, cleaning, passing out fliers, and food service. Freelance work included graphic design and writing, as well as the arts. Respondents in middle-class careers included civil servants, as well as construction and electrical workers. The most well-paid work included real estate and accounting.

The respondents whose experience was largely in low-wage work were not able to earn a living wage in these jobs. For these respondents, it was clear that the economic gain of sex work was the driving factor behind their participation in the sex industry. In fact, 67% (35 of 52) of respondents reported not making enough money to survive in the jobs that they held prior to their involvement in sex work, which included waitressing, food service, retail work, and domestic work.

Housing

Most respondents, 57% (30 of 52), had stable housing, and the majority of those who did not stayed with friends or family or in a shelter. In addition, 43% (22 of 52) of respondents reported having moved three or more times in the past two years, a frequency that is indicative of unstable settlement conditions.

Violence

Respondents experienced violence from many different sources, including customers, traffickers, employers, and the police.

Violence and Robbery From Customers.

Respondents in this study experienced high rates of violence, which interviewers defined as being forced to do something that the respondent did not want to do; having been threatened or beaten because the respondent was a sex worker; and/or having been robbed by a client. Specifically:

- 46% (24 of 52) of respondents have been forced by a client to do something he or she did not want to do.
- 42% (22 of 52) of respondents have been threatened or beaten for being a sex worker.
- 31% (16 of 52) of respondents have been robbed by a client.

The women who worked in the gang house described horrific experiences with violence. Rosalie described a john who “put a gun in my pussy [and made me] fuck his friend while he watched and took pictures. I hate it when they try to take pictures. It used to happen more at the club, not really around here.” Angie suggested that violence is a way of life for some sex workers, saying, “I been real lucky, only getting beat up twice. Most women get their asses kicked all the time. I think it’s because I know most of the guys that come to me, it’s cool that way...I usually don’t have to worry about nothing.”

Louise reported that she was raped once, by a customer who also threatened her. She said, “he was this cokehead rich guy who couldn’t get it up and took it out on me.” Amelia had been forced into “sex without condoms, or oral sex.” Antonio reported that once, a john “put a gun to my head because he wanted to be ‘fucked in the ass.’”

Grace sometimes did things that she did not want to do, but did not consider those incidents as violent, saying that “it’s acting, so it’s easy to do things I don’t want to do. It’s all about acting, so I’ll fulfill a fantasy even if I don’t want to.” However, she did describe an extremely violent incident that required her to go to the hospital afterward: “This guy who was a new customer responded to an ad. He came over and I knew something was wrong right away—he was checking out the apartment. I told him that he had to leave and he said ‘no’—I was really scared. He beat me up, and he tried to rape me. He stole \$500 from me.” The man was eventually arrested, to her great relief.

Sara described a frightening incident, explaining that:

I wasn’t raped, but I took a new client, who came in and had a knife...I was cornered and I was about to be attacked and raped and I was able to coerce him and get him out. I basically tried to befriend him. It sounds bizarre, I did not fight, I completely submitted and gently told him that the cops were outside, and luckily there is a small window and if there had not been a window I don’t know what would have happened. I looked over his head and said, ‘I can see their lights are right outside,’ and he got freaked out enough to leave. Before that, he made me kiss him and I just let him. It was this huge Indian man, with a huge kitchen knife. It was awful. But that’s what you get when you come into this work. I’m still very naive, but much less so now.

She discussed how isolating the incident was, saying that “I couldn’t even tell my boss, because I would have been fired. I didn’t go to the police because it would be coming out about what I’ve been doing.” She added, “I mean, I would have loved to be able to call the cops and 911 when this happened, I would have loved to be able to report this, especially if something more had happened. If I could have

reported this with no questions asked, I would have.”

Other respondents reported violent and frightening incidents that did not always involve the same level of brutality. Dana has been robbed by clients on three occasions. Twice she has been strangled and beaten “when [the] clients tried to get their money back” after she had performed her services. She also reported being threatened four different times by clients. Candace said that “one time someone tried to be violent and I left when he went to the bathroom.” Another time, “a guy pulled a gun on me as a joke,” which she interpreted as a threat. Kate was also threatened by a john who robbed her.

Edward said that occasionally he has a customer who “wants to go further than I do, or doesn’t want to use a condom,” but that he felt generally able to handle these situations. He was also threatened once by a client who did not want to pay. One incident that did stand out in his mind involved another sex worker who “threatened to rob me after he found out I’m an immigrant.”

Sex workers reported having been subjected to violence as a part of the services that they provide. Consider Carmen’s case. While working for an agency, Carmen said that “there was a client who liked to get physical and slap girls” but she also said that “he would tip more.” Some sex workers may be willing to subject themselves to violence if it is perceived to be financially beneficial.

Leticia noted that she gets robbed by a customer “almost every year...it happens once or twice a year.” Scarlett said that she was once in a “sleazy hotel room” with a customer and “he threatened to beat me up.... I lost money because I didn’t get paid.”

When asked if they had been robbed, some of the respondents also reported that they had either not been paid for their services, or had been paid less than what they charged. While this did not include physical violence, respondents interpreted this as being robbed. For example, Amelia reported that she has not been paid for work “millions of times.” Rodrigo echoed this sentiment, saying that “sometimes they will try to pay less” than the agreed-upon amount. Louise has been robbed “twice, counting not getting paid in one instance.” Although they felt that their only recourse was to report this to the police, as one would a robbery, respondents did not report these incidents to the police.

Violence and Coercion From Traffickers or Pimps

Four of the 52 respondents (8%) were trafficked into the country for prostitution. Two of the trafficked women thought that they would be involved in other types of work and did not know that they were going to be involved in prostitution. The other two had worked as prostitutes in their native countries and knew that they were to continue as sex workers in the United States. However, they did not

realize that they would be beaten or threatened, and have their money taken from them. For the women who did not know that they were going to be prostitutes, the act of engaging in prostitution itself was a violent one because they were being forced into having sex with customers against their will.

Whereas non-trafficked respondents were very concerned about violence from customers, the violent experiences that affected the trafficked women more deeply were the threats and assaults from the traffickers themselves. The women told of being threatened, beaten, raped, and having their money withheld by the traffickers as a means of keeping them in line.

Some of the respondents who worked in the gang clubhouse were also involved in violent situations where the gang leader beat them. Additionally, one of these women was working in the clubhouse to pay off a debt for drugs. Other respondents mentioned that while they were not subject to violence or coercion from the people for whom they worked, they did experience the type of worker exploitation that an employee in another industry may experience, such as not getting paid the amount they were owed or were told that they would receive.

Safety Precautions

The vast majority of respondents, 92% (48 of 52), had a standard set of safety precautions that they utilized when working. Common safety precautions included: trusting his or her gut/instinct, screening customers, being aware of surroundings, ensuring that a friend or co-worker knows of their location, seeing only regulars, keeping a weapon or mace on hand, and relying on the house or agency to maintain safety. For 79% (41 of 52) of respondents, the safety precautions included more than trusting their instinct. And, 21% (11 of 52) of respondents specifically mentioned using condoms as a safety precaution.

Police Interactions

Researchers asked how often respondents had “run-ins” with police, meaning interactions that were not initiated by the respondent. Responses were placed on a scale from 1 to 5, where one meant that the respondent had no non-initiated contacts with police, while five meant that the respondent had near-daily or daily non-initiated contacts with police.

A majority of respondents, 63% (32 of 51), reported having experienced run-ins with police. For those who did experience run-ins, 63% (20 of 32) reported the level of interaction as a two, meaning that they perceived their level of uninitiated contact with police as rare.¹

Arrests

Despite the fact that they experience less police interference and a lower rate of arrest than street-based sex workers, indoor sex workers in this study were extremely concerned with and vigilant about the issue of criminal justice contacts. They were fearful of the consequences of arrest, including having a criminal record, stigma, impact on housing and family members, and immigration consequences, such as possible removal from the country. Many indoor sex workers also found their treatment by police during the arrest process to be quite disrespectful and sometimes dangerous.

In total, 47% (24 of 51) of respondents had been arrested in relation to sex work, and 12% (6 of 51) said that they had been falsely arrested at least once. In the vast majority of cases where a respondent had been arrested, 88% (21 of 24), they were offered no services/alternative sentencing by the criminal court. Of the three people who had been offered services, only one received any services that were remotely substantive. This respondent was supposed to have received job training—however, she found that the program was not helpful at all. Two women who had been trafficked into prostitution received services after having been arrested and held in immigration detention. These services were not offered through criminal court as a result of an arrest, but after the women were designated as trafficked persons.

In addition to arrests, 29% (15 of 51) of respondents stated that they had at times been taken into police custody, but then had been released instead of being arrested. For some, this meant that they were issued a summons, and in some cases, they were completely free to go.

Police Violence and Sexual Situations

Fourteen percent (7 of 51) of respondents experienced incidents of police violence, and victims of such violence felt they had no recourse. In addition, 16% (8 of 51) of respondents have been involved in sexual situations with the police.

Reporting Violent Incidents to the Police

Many respondents, 43% (22 of 51), stated that they were open to the idea of asking police for assistance. However, many of these same respondents also expressed strong reservations about how helpful police might be, and despite their openness to the idea of asking for help, they ultimately thought of the police as unhelpful and untrustworthy. In fact, only 16% (8 of 51) of respondents had gone to the police for help, as a sex worker, and found the police to be helpful.

Good Police Interactions

Despite their apprehensions regarding the police, a few participants did have positive experiences with the police, and these experiences can guide police in creating best practices when assisting sex workers who come to them for help.

It is clear that when police view sex workers as legitimate members of society, they are more likely to offer the same level of assistance that they would offer another complainant, and follow through on appropriate procedures. Unfortunately, this willingness to view a sex worker as a human being who may be a crime victim appears to be the result of enlightenment or understanding on the part of individual officers, as opposed to the result of training and best practices issued by the police department.

Immigration Issues

The majority of respondents, 60% (31 of 52), were born in the U.S. and its territories. This number includes one participant who was born in the U.S. Territory of Puerto Rico. The remaining 40% (21 of 52) of respondents were born outside the U.S. and its territories. Participants who were born outside the U.S. and its territories came from a wide variety of countries, including Brazil, Canada, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Thailand.

When asked why they came to the U.S., some respondents referred to the “American Dream,” while others referred to sexual freedom and other cultural forces in the U.S. Respondents indicated that the “American Dream” is inextricably linked to jobs and financial opportunities.

Immigration Status

Of those respondents who were born outside the U.S. and Puerto Rico, 62% (13 of 21) had some form of legal immigration status at the time of the interview, although not all were authorized to work in the country. Thirty-eight percent (8 of 21) were completely undocumented and had no legal status.

It is clear that the decision to enter the sex trade was not always an easy one for the immigrants in the sample. For respondents who did not have legal immigration status or proper documentation, the ability to settle, find housing, and support themselves was compounded by fear of deportation and a lack of employment authorization. This led some participants to look at sex work as their best viable option economically. Respondents in this situation discussed the fact that they could work out of their apartments independently without involving an employer. In addition, many escort agencies and brothels do not check for legal immigration status.

All (14 of 14) of the respondents who were not U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents reported that they wanted permanent legal status to remain and work in the United States. Respondents mentioned a desire to stay here and earn more money, but also stated that permanent legal status would allow them to travel freely between the U.S. and their native countries.

Legal and Other Needs

Many respondents were low-income women and men who were part of the working poor, and were unable to find work that paid them a living wage or that allowed them to maintain a balance between work and family. Transgender sex workers faced additional problems due to discrimination and insensitivity to their gender identity. Immigrant sex workers, especially those who did not have legal status or did not speak English, also faced additional hurdles in trying to find mainstream employment that paid a living wage.

Respondents mentioned numerous areas in which they had needs. These included:

- Healthcare (Comprehensive);
- Counseling (“Someone to talk to”);
- Finding Stable Housing;
- Peer Support (How to be safe and protected in the business);
- Legal Assistance (Criminal, Immigration, Housing, Domestic Violence, Family Law, and Child Welfare issues);
- Immigration Assistance;
- Mentoring in Alternative Employment (If they want to leave the work, it is difficult to learn about viable alternatives);
- Advice on How to Manage Money (Comes in fast and goes out fast);
- Translating Skills to Straight Jobs;
- Language Classes; and
- Accessing Education.

Future Plans and Goals

The majority of respondents, 69% (36 of 52), said that they would like to leave sex work eventually. Many voiced ambivalence about their continuing involvement with the sex industry. However, some explained that they like the work itself. The difficulties of leaving the sex industry are compounded for transgender women and people with arrest records. For those who are working in conditions that are coercive and the sex workers’ safety is threatened, leaving is problematic and potentially dangerous.

Still, many participants used their income from the sex industry to finance goals outside the sex industry, such as education, start-up businesses, and involvement in the arts. Most respondents had goals for the future and sex work was a part of their plan to reach these goals. Many respondents had begun other careers, while others planned on careers in sex work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Not everyone would agree that this population represents a priority among those in greatest need. However, the city administration, police, and residents in some neighborhoods

continue to target the control of sex work. Unfortunately, the chosen methods consume police, court, and other resources but fail to create any appropriate long-term resolution. This report calls for a reasoned, fact-based, and informed debate regarding sex work in New York City.

The following recommendations are based on findings derived from this research and include ideas suggested to the researchers by the respondents themselves. They provide ways that stability and economic security may be achieved among indoor sex workers in New York City, specifically touching upon the ways in which public discussion, criminal justice practices, and programs and services can contribute to this stability.

Public Discussion

Based on these findings, which include the needs and concerns of sex workers, this report recommends an informed and fact-based public discussion and further inquiry to erase the idea that prostitution is merely a criminal justice issue; to focus on the real economic needs of many indoor sex workers, who are part of the working poor; and to find ways for police to be productive in ensuring the safety of sex workers.

Violence and Coercion

Whatever one’s feelings about sex work, no one should be willing to condone incidents of violence to sex workers, or coercion into sex work. In no other occupation does society regularly blame the victims of violence for acts committed against them in the way that it does for sex workers. It is imperative that the police department adopt best practices for dealing with violence against prostitutes and that police officers be properly trained.

Complaints by sex workers should be met with the same respect and regard that would be given to any other crime victim, and complaints must be addressed and investigated by law enforcement agencies without penalty to these victims of violence, even when they were subjected to violence or attempted violence while committing prostitution or other illegal acts. It is critical that police assure prostitutes that they will not be investigated or arrested for illegal behavior if they come forward to report a crime of violence.

Police who commit violence or other crimes against prostitutes must be held accountable for their acts. These acts include sexual assault or abuse, sexual harassment, theft, and extortion of sexual services in exchange for not being arrested. Police leadership must make it known that they take such exploitation seriously. Police and the courts must aggressively investigate and punish police officers who engage in sexual harassment or violence of any kind against sex workers.

Police Interaction with Sex Workers

Policymakers should carefully consider the extent to which they make prostitution a criminal justice priority. It is

important to bear in mind that many in this population are engaging in prostitution in order to support themselves and their families, and could benefit from substantive services and assistance rather than arrest. Where a person has not engaged in a violation of the law, police should not initiate contact.

Arrest statistics are useful tools for government, community members, and advocates, as they inform all invested parties about significant problems and changes in street-related trends. Currently, arrest data are disaggregated by age, race/ethnicity, gender, and borough. We recommend that arrest data be further disaggregated by age and race; race and gender; and gender and gender identity. Furthermore, arrests are often reported as “prostitution-related offenses” and are not disaggregated by individual offense. NYPD should keep these records and make them available to the public, and report them to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

Trafficked Sex Workers

Police must be trained and willing to identify trafficked and other sex workers who are in coercive or violent situations, and to refer them to agencies that can assist them. Sex workers must be made to feel that they can step forward, that there will be a proper response to their victimization, and that they can seek justice on their own behalf.

Trafficked sex workers should not be arrested or held in detention. Instead, they should be directly referred to safe housing, service providers, and attorneys who can assist them. Trafficked persons should not be compelled to cooperate with law enforcement in order to access services and legal immigration status. Many trafficked persons are willing to cooperate in investigations and prosecutions. However, they should not be expected to do so until they are emotionally and financially stable, physically well, and safe. Even those trafficked persons who never feel able to cooperate with law enforcement deserve necessary services and legal protections. The city should create transitional shelters that are similar to domestic violence shelters, but which specifically serve trafficked persons.

Funding streams for anti-trafficking efforts should not restrict recipients’ advocacy on behalf of people in the sex industry. Sex workers and other personalities should be recognized as potential allies in the ongoing struggle against trafficking in persons. Workers and clients in the sex industry have assisted trafficked sex workers in escaping coercive situations, and some trafficked persons return to the sex industry for economic reasons. Therefore, organizations should be able to continue to assist them.

Programs and Services

The city should create funding for peer support networks for indoor sex workers. Such programs will allow those who engage in sex work during vulnerable times in their lives to reach out to others who have more experience and understanding of the risks involved. Such networks would reduce isolation and the fear of stigma, allow for information sharing among sex workers, reduce the likelihood that sex workers will be ill- or misinformed about the law, and also create an environment that is rich for outreach workers to offer assistance.

In addition, the city needs to create and expand desperately needed seamless services for indoor sex workers. Necessary services include mental health and counseling/support; appropriate job training; language classes; financial management assistance; and comprehensive healthcare. Programs that serve sex workers must maintain realistic and flexible hours that reflect the schedules of the target population.

Service providers must train their program staff to be sensitive and open to sex workers. Furthermore, staff must be trained to understand the stigma and discrimination to which this population is exposed, and their consequent fear of seeking help. Service providers must treat sex workers with respect, and serve or refer them to necessary programs as appropriate so that they do not fall through cracks in the system.

Finally, the city needs to secure steady federal, state, and local government funding streams to support these service programs for indoor sex workers, redirecting money from funds for arrest and incarceration as appropriate. While sex workers may be eligible for service programs focused on other populations, such as the homeless, substance abusers, or those with psychiatric disabilities, the specific nature of the problems that they face, including the stigma attached to their occupation and the isolation that it creates and reproduces, means that their needs require additional, special attention.

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1. Audrey, a transgender respondent, stated that “the cops are always a problem” and did not want to discuss the police at all. Therefore, she is not included in sections relating to police interactions.

This article was adapted from a report of the same name published by the Urban Justice Institute in 2005. The report is available in its entirety at <<http://www.urbanjustice.org/projects/index.html>>.

A VIEW FROM THE FIELD: SEX WORK IN D.C.

Maxwell Ciardullo

Public Policy Assistant

SIECUS

Washington, DC

Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS) is a non-profit organization that has over ten years of experience doing outreach to sex workers in the D.C. area. Utilizing a harm reduction model, HIPS provides comprehensive services and unconditional support to assist youth and adults on the street in identifying the skills they need, or already have, to make healthier life choices for themselves. HIPS services include counseling and referrals for sex workers and their families; mobile outreach and education, including training former or current sex workers as peer educators; and client advocacy, such as helping clients obtain an ID card or find emergency shelter. Three nights a week, from 9:00 p.m. until 5:00 a.m., HIPS staff and outreach volunteers distribute safer sex materials and provide education, counseling, clothing, and food to sex workers on the streets through the mobile outreach program.

IT'S NOT ACADEMIC

Before riding in the outreach van, all HIPS volunteers go through an extensive orientation, and I began my training in December 2004. Although I was a new volunteer, I had some academic knowledge about sex work. While studying abroad in Amsterdam, I had the privilege of taking a class on the local and global complexities of prostitution. Class discussions frequently returned to the debate surrounding whether to treat sex workers as independent decision-making agents or as coerced victims.

At the HIPS orientation, we were asked to place the stories of different people exchanging sexual services for money on a continuum from forced to voluntary. While I was aware that a street prostitute working for an abusive pimp has fewer choices in her life than, for example, a high-end male escort, I was willing to argue that even she has some sense of self-determination and perhaps a small amount of power to wield through the manipulation of johns and other pimps.

Many of my views about sex work, even from an academic standpoint, haven't changed, but I came to realize that research and training could only prepare me to a certain extent. I actually had to be out on the van and interacting with these men and women to understand how complex their lives are.

My first time out on the van was a warm and rainy spring night. Early in the night, we pulled up to a cluster of women huddled under umbrellas on one of the strolls. I was expecting the rain to have put everyone in a sour mood, especially people whose livelihood depended on how many johns were out cruising, but the women were laughing and poking fun at each other. Most of these women worked for the same pimp and one of them, who was a bit older, probably in her mid-thirties, seemed to be the leader of the giggling group. After some of the other women had moved away, she joked a bit more with the leader of our outreach team; they seemed like old friends. As she turned her back to the van, she held her umbrella to the side, made a little twirl and exclaimed, "I love my job!"

Despite believing that sex workers are rational decision makers, I had imagined them as depressed and angry women scowling at all who passed. It had not occurred to me that I might be witnessing enjoyable moments—friends frolicking in the rain—in the lives of people who exchange sex for money.

In addition to providing me with a deeper understanding of exactly how sex work functions outside the artificial setting of the classroom or HIPS office, my time on the van has also challenged some of my assumptions. Probably the most commonly held and least challenged assumption is that most sex workers are young women. While I knew enough not to expect to run into the *Pretty Woman* stereotype on the streets of D.C., I was surprised to find that the HIPS clientele is roughly 1/3 women, 1/3 transgender women¹, and 1/3 men. Close to half of these sex workers are over the age of 24, and the overwhelming majority are African American. In D.C., as elsewhere throughout the country, working with sex workers clearly illustrates the pervasive race, class, and gender disparities in our society.

Because our clients already faced so many daily obstacles, I expected them to treat HIPS volunteers with some level of skepticism or, at least, indifference. It didn't make sense to me that our largely African American clientele who were working long hours on the street would want anything to do with a van full of mostly affluent white people (it does help, however, that HIPS volunteers are generally

ready and willing to poke fun at their whiteness). Additionally, I understood that even in cities like Amsterdam, where women pose in windows next to churches and preschools, the stigma of being a prostitute is still a very real aspect of sex workers' lives. I knew that HIPS made over 8,000 contacts a year, but I assumed there would be a large number of people who would never approach the van because they did not identify as sex workers (or as someone who would need our services) or they were afraid to be discovered.

During outreach, my expectations changed quickly, as I learned that HIPS was well liked among the community it served. Clients would run up to the van, stand in line, flag us down, call our hotline and tell us where to meet them, praise our work, and sometimes hang out for a few minutes to chat with us. This is not to say that everyone feels comfortable approaching the van. The men, in particular, often have a much larger social stigma to overcome, and we occasionally have to engage in coaxing conversations just to have them walk away with a few condoms. Still, the overwhelming majority of our clients are happy to see us.

A WILLINGNESS TO RE-THINK

In my limited time on the van, it has become very clear to me that the harm reduction approach we use pays off. Because we meet the sex workers where they are at—both literally with the van, and figuratively with all of the information and services they need, but no judgment—we reach more people and provide more services to make lives safer.

For me, HIPS has been a way to connect my interests in sociology and sexual health with the reality of the gaps in services in my D.C. community. And it has helped me reach the conclusion that you cannot fully comprehend the depth of a situation strictly through policy or academia. Coming face-to-face with the diversity of sex workers' experiences made me re-think many of my assumptions.

I believe that it is this willingness to rethink assumptions and a non-judgmental attitude that are the keys to doing meaningful work with stigmatized and at-risk groups such as sex workers.

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1. Here a transgender woman refers to someone born male who identifies or presents herself as female.

EXOTIC DANCING AND UNIONIZING: THE CHALLENGES OF FEMINIST AND ANTIRACIST ORGANIZING AT THE LUSTY LADY THEATER

Siobhan Brooks

Graduate Student
The New School University
New York, NY

On August 30, 1996, the Lusty Lady Theater in San Francisco made history by becoming the only women-managed strip club in the United States to unionize successfully. Dancers at the Lusty Lady joined Local 790 of the SEIU (Service Employee International Union) to protest racist hiring practices, customers being allowed to videotape dancers without their consent via one-way mirrors, inconsistent disciplinary policies, lack of health benefits, and an overall dearth of job security.¹ Despite this big victory, problems of racism remained at the Lusty Lady.

This article takes a first-hand look at the unionization efforts as well as the issues affecting sex workers of color.

DANCING AT THE LUSTY LADY

To understand the events that took place at the Lusty Lady, it is important to view them in the context of the setting in which they occurred. San Francisco, a predominantly middle-class city in northern California with a racially diverse population that includes significant numbers of Asian Americans and Asians, Black Americans, Latina/os, Mexican Americans, and whites, has a history of activist struggles over race, class, and gender issues as well as politically active gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities. Its North Beach neighborhood, where the Lusty Lady is located, is a tourist area, with many Italian restaurants and strip clubs. Since North Beach also borders Chinatown and the financial district, the Lusty Lady attracted white businessmen from the financial district, Asian men from Chinatown, and Japanese and European male tourists. Its patrons varied from men in their 50s and 60s during the week to a younger, more racially mixed, crowd on weekends. The struggles of the Lusty Lady reflect both the racial demographics of its workers and customers and its location in a city with a long history of organizing among queer communities.

I began working at the Lusty Lady while I was a 22 year-old Women's Studies major at San Francisco State University. Like many college students, I was having financial difficulties. I knew a few women who were stripping to supplement their incomes. They told me about the Lusty Lady peep show, a female-managed strip club that started in Seattle in 1979 and expanded to San Francisco in 1982. I auditioned

and was hired by Josephine, the only Black show director at the time. Dancers were paid \$11 to \$24 an hour, and didn't have to pay stage fees or hustle tips. Shifts were four to five hours long with a ten-minute break every half-hour.

Dancing at the Lusty Lady was very surreal, like dancing in a neon fish tank with its sultry red and green lights. The dance stage was small, with four or five women on stage at a time. Men (and occasionally women) would go into a booth, drop in quarters, and a glass window would rise up revealing a dancer, quite similar to a video arcade. Each quarter bought 10 seconds worth of viewing. The men usually masturbated in the booth. There was also a "Private Pleasures booth," where dancers charged customers \$5.00 (now \$10.00) for three-minute shows. These shows were more intimate, but dancers and customers were still separated by glass. The Private Pleasures booth was more lucrative for dancers, who could make \$60 an hour in this way.

The managers of the Lusty Lady, themselves former dancers, were pleasant. They encouraged open communication and provided snacks for us in the dressing room. Because we danced behind glass and did not have physical contact with customers, it was relatively safe. The male support staff also did a good job of ensuring our safety, escorting us to our cars during late-night shifts. We never had to worry about them sexually harassing us, unlike many women who work in strip clubs. In this way, I felt that the Lusty Lady lived up to its reputation for being a safe, feminist strip club.

RACISM AT THE LUSTY LADY

Within a few months, however, I noticed covert forms of racism by both coworkers and management. First, there were few women of color at the theater. Out of 70 dancers, only ten were women of color. Of these, five were Black, mostly light-skinned, one was part Chinese and Japanese, one was Korean, one was from Argentina, one was part Native American and European, and one was part Indian and French. Yet nonwhite women rarely worked with others of the same race. While white women were allowed to work at the same time, women of color were not. If a Black woman came on stage, she would replace the current Black

woman on stage; the same was true for Asian dancers, Latinas, and so on.

Second, Black dancers rarely performed in the Private Pleasures booth. Like the other Black dancers, I was trained to work in the booth, but was hardly ever scheduled there. When I asked Josephine why Black women didn't work the Private Pleasures booth, she told me that the company lost money on Black women because white customers would rather pay a quarter than \$5.00 to see a Black woman.

I was somewhat surprised by her answer. I had noticed that some white customers would lose interest in my show and walk out in the middle of it, or wave me out of view. I had also heard that when Josephine was a dancer and booth performer, a group of young white customers yelled through the glass that she looked like a monkey in a cage. Although racist comments like that were rare, they reflect on many of the psychological risks that women of color take when doing sex work for white men. However, in spite of some negative encounters with white men, I also knew that other white men enjoyed my show and asked whether I was going to do the booth. And, I had heard from various male support staff that white customers would ask them why Black women and other women of color did not perform in the booth.

In general, the younger, racially mixed weekend crowd at the Lusty Lady preferred to see both women of color and white women, while the white and Asian businessmen preferred to see exclusively white women. The management, however, assumed that the latter group had more money and placed their desires first. When I asked the general manager (a white male) to provide an estimate of how much money the company made and the alleged economic risk of having Black women and other women of color in the booth, he refused to answer. (In fact, it is hard to obtain exact figures as to what owners of strip clubs and porn video shops make per year. We were never able to obtain figures on how much the Lusty Lady made and were forced to rely on estimates based on competitors. According to a U.S. bankruptcy court, the San Francisco-based Bijou Group, Inc., which owned the Market Street Cinema and a chain of DeJa Vu Gentlemen's Clubs, made over \$5 million per year between 1992 and 1994.²)

THE PETITIONS BEGIN

A few months after my meeting with Josephine, a white Jewish coworker wrote a petition stating that dancers who worked the booth should receive a higher commission (at that time dancers kept 30% of their wages while the club kept 70%). She directed the petition to the general show director, June, and posted it in the dressing room. A number of dancers (most of whom were white) instantly agreed that they were being exploited and signed her petition. I felt angered by her petition because if it were to pass, it would

only further widen the wage gap between the races at the Lusty Lady. When Black dancers complained about not being scheduled in the booth, the white dancers were sympathetic, and some were even angry, but most saw the situation as our problem. Unfortunately, because of the society we live in, they could not see that their struggle to acquire a higher percentage of their booth wages was directly related to the practices that excluded dancers of color from the booth and disparities in the workplace in general.

To rectify this situation, I decided to write my own petition, also directed to June, stating that it was unfair that Black dancers were not regularly scheduled in the booth. I posted my petition in the dressing room, and many dancers signed it. Within a few days, Josephine called me into her office and asked about my petition; I told her it was pretty self-explanatory. She then arranged a meeting with the Black dancers, herself, and June. Unfortunately, the meeting was not productive, Josephine and June accused me of calling them racist and blamed me for not being in the booth. They argued that if I had "wanted to work the booth so bad," I should have simply asked. I tried to explain that it wasn't a matter of how "bad" I wanted to work the booth; it was a matter of discrimination. Once again, we asked to see documentation of the claim that Black dancers in the booth would hurt business, but no such documentation was produced. Further, we asked to see the Private Pleasures incomes of the Black dancers in Seattle, and found that Black dancers there did pretty well.

One of the Black dancers suggested that we try rotating Black women in the booth once a week. This was done, but in retaliation for this concession, management called a general meeting about the "misunderstands" of my petition and prohibited the posting of any political literature (especially dealing with the workplace) in the dressing room. Only posting about shift trades and parties was allowed.

Not satisfied with management's response to the racism I was noticing, I filed a racial discrimination complaint with the Department of Fair and Equal Housing to put pressure on the company to hire more women of color. After an investigation, and in an apparent attempt to avoid unionization, the management of the Lusty Lady did hire more women of color, most of whom, initially, were Black.

ISSUES LEADING TO UNIONIZATION

The main issue that led women at the Lusty Lady to unionize involved one-way mirrors. The booths were set up so that customers could see in but dancers could not see out. This allowed customers to videotape dancers without their knowledge or consent. Management was alerted to this situation but did not make the necessary changes in a timely manner.

In response, women at the Lusty Lady teamed up with the Exotic Dancer's Alliance (EDA), a nonprofit organiza-

tion started at the Market Street Cinema in 1992. The EDA began in response to a number of issues, including the requirement that dancers pay stage fees, substandard working conditions, and health and safety issues in the exotic dance industry. Through several court battles, EDA tried to get exotic dancers recognized as employees rather than independent contractors, so they would no longer be forced to pay stage fees, but this is still a site of struggle. In fact, the owners of the Market Street Cinema and other clubs filed bankruptcy in order to avoid paying their dancers back wages due under this judgment.

The racial differences I had already noted continued to play out during the union organizing efforts at the Lusty Lady. It became clear that white dancers and dancers of color had different priorities. The main priorities for white dancers seemed to be the one-way window and, later, the problems of wage and disciplinary policies. Race did not seem to enter into their thinking. In contrast, my biggest concerns were increasing the number of women of color, ensuring wage increases, and instituting a fair disciplinary policy.

After six months of long, tedious negotiations, we voted in our first contract. We received four paid sick days, basic contract language regarding sexual harassment and racial discrimination policies, wage increases, free shift trades,³ and a grievance procedure. Even male support staff, who originally felt uncertain about having a union, voted for the union to support the dancers. With unionization, there was an overall feeling that as a sex worker, one had rights, and one couldn't just be fired without a voice, which had happened frequently at the Lusty Lady. Now we knew that management was required to follow a contract and accept certain procedures, such as just cause policies.

UNIONIZATION AND RACE

For the first four months following the contract vote, the theater had more Black dancers than ever in its 17 year history. I loved dancing with the other Black women on stage. The jukebox now had more of a musical cornucopia (in addition to rock, punk, and country, we had hip-hop and gangsta rap), and, with a variety of beautiful women on stage, I did not feel so racially isolated. The customers, especially customers of color, also loved the racial diversity. However, some subtle problems emerged in the interpersonal relationships between the new Black dancers and white dancers.

Some white dancers were uncomfortable when they were outnumbered on stage by women of color. In the middle of a shift, white dancers would comment about being the only white woman on stage and some would go as far as to block a customer's view of a woman of color who was dancing, sure that the customers only wanted to

look at white women. We tried to explain that these comments were crass, racist, and disrespectful, and that we were outnumbered by white women all the time, but the white dancers insisted that they were not racist, and continued their behaviors.

The jukebox was another site of racism. Dancers were paid \$40.00 to create a jukebox of 50-100 songs, and the jukebox was played the following week. When a Black dancer created a jukebox, it would most often include R and B and gangsta rap, as well as modern rock. When these jukeboxes, played, however, white dancers often complained that they could not dance to the music, or that the music was too violent. Although I understand feminist concerns about violence in gangsta rap, the violence of rap artists like Tupac Shakur is about the legal system or the street; it is not misogynistic. These complaints were voiced in the presence of Black dancers, who, not wanting to deal with further racial harassment, remained silent.

More covert forms of racism included comments that some Black dancers wore too much hair oil and that it smeared the mirrors on stage. There were many incidences in which I saw a white dancer taking a bottle of rubbing alcohol (used to clean the stage) and wiping the mirrors or the pole where a Black dancer was standing. Again, we tried to explain that this could be interpreted as suggesting that the Black dancer was dirty, which could be unnecessarily hurtful; nevertheless, the behavior continued.

After four months, I noticed that many Black dancers had left the Lusty Lady. I asked them why they had left, and their response was that the Lady was just "too white" and that they were working at other clubs that were more "down to earth." I respected their choice to leave, but I was hurt, because the Lusty Lady had the best working conditions of any strip club in the country. The alternative was to work at clubs like the Market Street Cinema, which had a higher percentage of women of color, but also horrific working conditions such as stage fees and, reportedly, coerced prostitution.

Unfortunately, few dancers of color became involved in the union. As a union shop steward, my job was to bring new dancers into the union. We had a cross between an open shop and an agency shop, which meant that dancers did not have to join the union to work, and could enjoy union benefits without being members. Most dancers did join the union, and, whenever there was a new dancer of color, I went out of my way to explain the reasons that we had unionized, stressing the race issues. But I remained the only woman of color who served on the union bargaining committee and worked as a shop steward. I found this very frustrating because I felt pressured to represent all women of color, and often felt like a token. The other women of color said they did not have the time to serve on the bargaining committee, which did consume a lot of time and energy, but I suspected that they

felt that their presence would not make a difference.

Black dancers were also less likely to take advantage of the benefits of unionization. After unionization, when a dancer was fired but felt that her termination was unfair, she was permitted to file a grievance with a shop steward. Few Black dancers did this, however.

For example, two Black women who were close friends worked at the theater for more than a year. They both were tall, friendly, and beautiful. Everyone loved them. At some point, I stopped seeing them at work and assumed they had quit. I later learned that they were fired for calling in sick too many times. Other shop stewards and I were angry that no one had told us earlier, and that they had not come to us. When I called them, they told me that management had insisted that there was nothing the shop stewards could do to get their jobs back. We then met with management to make sure that women of color had equal access to shop steward representation and were given fair treatment.

Ultimately, we insisted on a program of cultural competency training to deal with the problem of racism among dancers and to ensure that all dancers had equal access to union benefits.

THEY ARE RELATED

It is dangerous to separate issues of race, gender, and class from issues of sex work. As an exotic dancer, I have observed that most workers in the sex industry are poor or working-class women. This is especially true in sex clubs with poor working and health conditions. Moreover, the stereotypes that society holds about people of color—for example that Blacks and Latinas, especially light-skinned mixed-race women, are sexually desirable and domineering,

that Asians and Native-Americans are passive, and that Middle Eastern women are exotic—do not enhance our economic status in the sex industry, but rather serve to justify the economic exploitation of women of color. We are still seen as “other” compared to white women.⁴

The situation faced by women of color in the sex industry has a profound effect on the health status, immigration situation, child rearing practices, and future of all communities of color in the United States. It is up to those of us who identify as feminist to take part in the sex-workers’ movement. Sex worker activists need to challenge racism and white supremacy within the sex worker movement, while at the same time activists of color need to challenge sex phobia and sex worker phobia within movements of people of color. Coalitions among sex-worker activists across the racial divide are a difficult, but necessary, aspect of the struggle.

References:

1. For more information about the unionization process at the Lusty Lady, see Siobhan Brooks, “Organizing from Behind the Glass: Exotic Dancers Ready to Unionize,” *Z Magazine* (January 1997): 11-14.
2. Case no. 95-3-3389-TC
3. Prior to unionization, dancers had to find a dancer of their own race and body type to trade shifts or give them away.
4. Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).

AMONG OURSELVES: FEMALE SEX WORKERS CONSTRUCT THEIR SEXUAL HEALTH

Esther Corona*

President

Mexican Association for Sex Education (AMES)

Mexico City, Mexico

In the almost 40 years that I have been working in the sexuality education field, I have worked with all types of populations. I have worked with young and old people, men and women, fishing folk in remote villages in Mexico only reachable by boat, and academicians in important universities. There was one population that I had never worked with, however, in spite of its importance as a so-called “vulnerable group”—commercial sex workers. Although this was in part simply because I had not had the opportunity to do so, because I had not been asked, there was more to it than that. At least in part, it was because from a gender perspective, I felt that any activity that implies the subordination of women, makes sexuality a commodity, is part of a system of exploitation, and frequently involves gender violence, is inherently wrong.

Nonetheless, when I was approached by an international organization to prepare a manual for sexual health promoters and female sex workers, I decided to meet the challenge. I may not be a specialist in the sociology and anthropology of sex work, but I do have a life long expertise in designing interventions that help people discover ways to improve how they deal with and live their own sexuality. I have also worked intensively with health professionals and felt that I could translate that experience into this workshop and manual.

I researched the topic, read some of the available materials, and, with the collaboration of an NGO that had a wide experience working with sex workers, the manual was finalized. The title in Spanish, *Hablando Entre Nos Otras Sobre Salud Sexual* (*Talking Among Ourselves About Sexual Health*), reflects the fact the female sex workers are frequently discriminated against and stigmatized by the rest of society’s women, who feel that sex workers are “the others” as opposed to ourselves.

Although most of the activities had been validated separately, the real moment to test the design came when a regional workshop was jointly organized by the Pan American Health Organization, the Mexican Association for Sex Education, and the Coordinating Committee of the Global AIDS Program. The workshop was intended both for health promoters working within health ministries or

NGOs and female sex workers who are acting as health promoters.

The content of the workshop centered around themes that had been identified as priorities by the sex workers themselves. The women wanted to discuss the meaning of sex work and develop an understanding of sexuality and sexual health. They wanted to explore how a number of topics interrelated with sex work, including human sexual response, eroticism, sexual rights, sexual diversity, gender, gender violence, and self esteem. In addition, they wanted to discuss the health conditions of sex work and learn about HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and their relation to AIDS, pregnancy and delivery, contraceptive methods, condom use, and negotiating condom use in commercial sex work settings. Finally, they wanted to learn how to organize and plan within the context of sex work.

Although the workshop was designed and intended solely for women, two men and 30 women came together for five days from all Central American countries and Panamá. Participants came from ministries of health and local programs involved in the health care of commercial sex workers. Many participants were commercial sex workers acting as health promoters.

LESSONS LEARNED

The 24-hour workshop proceeded according to plan and was very successfully evaluated by participants. Below are just a few of the important lessons we all learned.

- **Working with sex workers is not more difficult than working with other groups.** Too often we have preconceptions about the difficulties and problems of working with groups that include sexual workers. In the case of this workshop, we experienced one of the best groups ever to participate in any training course. The participants were respectful yet open to new ideas and self criticism. They were very interested in acquiring knowledge while at the same time willing to participate in all the exercises. One of the high points of the workshop came when a participant showed a film on the marginal population in San Salvador. As we watched, everybody

realized that the sex workers shown in very sad circumstances in the film were, in fact, the very same women who were in the room participating in this workshop. In any other case, it would have been an awkward situation; this group, however, reacted with great politeness and respect, and the women involved were not embarrassed or humiliated.

- **There is a lot to be learned even from the most disenfranchised groups.** In a mixed group such as the one that participated in this workshop, it would have been expected that the sex workers had been on the receiving end of information and insight provided by the health professionals present. However, the learning experience came mainly from the sex workers. When a role play on condom negotiation was indicated by the program, we did not have an imaginary role play, but rather a real demonstration of how these negotiations are carried out. The real problems, constraints, and limitations of what a sex worker can and cannot do were brought to the group.
- **Socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts are crucial.** The whole phenomenon of sex work shows that the experience of female sex workers cannot be understood if we disregard the socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts. Many of the participants shared their histories; we heard mostly sad stories of incest, con-

flict, violence, almost no schooling and, always, poverty, extreme poverty. In most cases, sex work was the only viable alternative for supporting their children. Almost all of the sex workers in the workshop said they would have chosen other occupations if they had had the opportunity to do so, and certainly that they do not want their daughters to follow in their steps. As much as we need to work on prevention of HIV and STIs, we need to struggle for comprehensive sexual health for all with a full exercise of sexual rights, and to contribute to whatever measures are necessary for the eradication of poverty.

A FEW WORDS SAY IT ALL

As I said earlier, the workshop was extremely well received by participants. Two remarks from sex workers who participated stay with me even today:

All these years I have been called a SEX worker and [it was] not until today [that] I understood what my sexuality is about.

I walked in as a whore and I walk out as a lady, a sexually healthy lady.

- * Esther Corona also serves as the Secretary for the Americas for the World Association for Sexual Health and is currently a SIECUS board member.

HEALTH RISKS AND POWER AMONG FEMALE SEX WORKERS IN MOSCOW

Julie A. Stachowiak PhD, Susan Sherman PhD, MPH, Anya Konakova,
Irina Krushkova MD, Chris Beyrer MD, MPH

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD;

Alena Peryskina MA

AIDS infoshare Russia, Moscow, RF; and

Steffanie Strathdee PhD

University of California San Diego School of Public Health

Sex workers have often been viewed as a bridge population for HIV infection, as they have the potential to have spread HIV to the general population through unprotected sex.¹ Programs often focus on trying to limit or eliminate proximate risk among these women either by attempting to assist them in leaving sex work or by promoting consistent use of condoms during sexual contact.² Much of the available research has focused on the frequency and types of commercial and non-commercial sex, consistency of condom use, and factors related to use or non use of male condoms.³

For interventions to be successful, however, it is imperative to gain an understanding of the broad range of factors that affect individual decision making. Behaviors targeted for prevention must be understood as combinations of factors within and outside of the sex worker's control and are as diverse as: working conditions; how transactions are made; impact of laws, regulations, and enforcement practices; access to health and social services; and religious or cultural impediments to prevention.⁴ In the case of sex work, it is particularly important to examine the continuum of risk, from the time a woman or girl decides to sell sex, to her reaction to situations that put her at risk, and the resulting harms to health.

In order to understand more about the context and health risks of women working in the sex industry, we undertook an in-depth investigation among sex workers in Moscow, Russia. The study examined the experiences of women engaged in street-based sex work in order to determine social and structural factors, including working conditions, the political environment, human rights considerations, levels of gender-based violence, risky sexual and drug using behaviors, and stress levels related to vulnerability to HIV, hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Although it is estimated that between 80–90% of people living with HIV in Russia were infected through injection drug use, sex workers have been identified as a group at high risk for HIV, both by those who seek to help these women, as well as by those who favor more punitive measures to control this “source of infection.”⁵ (In contrast to harsh

penalties levied for drug possession, engaging in prostitution in Russia is not illegal.⁶) Russian accounts of HIV prevalence among sex workers vary widely, with some experts claiming as many as 25–50% are infected with the virus.⁷

The aim of this study was to investigate and describe the reality of the lives of female sex workers in Moscow, especially the behaviors and environmental factors that impact the health of these women.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted among female street sex workers in Moscow, Russia from October 2002 through March 2003. Participants worked either in the center of Moscow or on the road leading to the international airport, Leningradsky Shosse. All of the participants worked in similar structures, run by pimps from the street, as opposed to working in more formal environments such as saunas, bars, hotels, or escort services. Although these other types of sex work exist in Moscow, we focused on street-based sex workers because they are estimated to comprise approximately 80% of the female sex worker population in Moscow.⁸

Sex worker respondents were identified during outreach programs conducted by AIDS infoshare, a Moscow based NGO with considerable experience in sex worker outreach, education, and service provision. Trained staff in pairs performed outreach to various *tochkas*⁹, which had been identified through mapping and were located in different parts of Moscow. During each visit, the teams distributed condoms and brochures that contained information on topics including safe sex, medical facilities, substance abuse, and signs and symptoms of sexually transmitted infections. The women were given the opportunity to ask questions of the staff, either in a group or privately. Women were asked privately if they would be interested in participating in the study.

To be included in the study, participants had to be at least 17 years of age by self-report, and be competent Russian speakers. Thirty-two women consented to participate. All women signed an informed consent agreement and received the ruble equivalent of \$20 U.S.

In order to develop an understanding of how broader contextual factors affect the proximate risks of sex workers, we developed a semi-structured instrument designed to elicit responses on themes across the continuum of risks faced by sex workers. Assessed contextual and structural factors included the financial needs that motivate women and girls to enter into and remain in sex work, as well as how women are recruited into sex work. More direct factors studied included the conditions and structure under which these women are working, such as the relationship between the women and their pimps, interactions among sex workers and clients, and ways they are hired and the demands and expectations of clients. These structural factors, over which sex workers may have little or no control, have direct impact upon well being and behavior, and manifest in direct risk factors such as exposure to violence from clients, relationships with police, alcohol and drug use, and condom use with clients. The final health-related outcome of exposure to these direct risks is the acquisition of HIV and STIs, and participants were also asked about their experience with these infections.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted either at the woman's place of work (*tochka*) or in a café. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Russian into English. To ensure validity, all direct quotes included in this analysis were retranslated from Russian into English by the first author who is fluent in Russian.

Ultimately, there were 32 women in the study, ranging in age from 17–32. Twenty-one of the participants were from Ukraine, five from Belarus, and six women were from Russian towns. None of the women were Moscow natives. Eleven of the women had children. The average length of time in sex work was approximately one year.

MAJOR THEMES

The interviews focused on a number of topics, including how young women were recruited into sex work, the financial needs they faced, their working conditions, violence, and relationships with police. The interviews also addressed condom use, alcohol and drug use, and the women's experience with HIV and STIs. Below we include many of our findings on these topics, often presented in the participants' own words.

Recruitment into Sex Work

In our sample, 30 of the women knew the people who recruited them into sex work. Most recruiters were friends or acquaintances who were currently working as sex workers themselves, or had worked as sex workers in the past and were now higher in the hierarchy, working as *mamochkas*.¹⁰ Several participants mentioned that the people who had

recruited them had received compensation in the form of a lump sum of \$100 to \$200 U.S. for every person recruited, or a portion of the new recruit's subsequent earnings. The following quotes reflect typical accounts of the study participants' entry into sex work; the majority of women indicated willingly entering into sex work, and even coming to Moscow seeking such work:

I came here with my friend. I was coming here deliberately, I knew where I was going...[I heard about this work] from my friend. I asked her myself to take me to this job...She told me that I would work on the street, would get 50 percent, and would share an apartment with her. She promised to pay me every day and not to deceive me...[She described this work] a little better than it really is, but everything was correct...She worked as a girl at first, and then became a *mamochka*. (SW #13)

I had a girlfriend in my home city. She has already been working in Moscow for five years. I met her one year ago, and she told me that she had been working for four months as a prostitute, then she found a way out. She has begun to invite girls into this business and has begun to work as a pimp herself. I knew where I would work. (SW #14)

The two women who did not personally know their recruiters had answered newspaper advertisements in *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, that read, "Girls wanted for high-paying jobs." Both reported that all details, including the fact that the job was in sex work, were given to them upon answering the ad in their home towns.

An additional two women reported that they were not aware that the job in Moscow involved prostitution when they were told of the opportunity in their hometowns. One of them was completely unaware of what type of work it was, saying:

I was invited, they said I would earn good money. Nothing was told about the job itself; what kind of job, what terms, I didn't know that. (SW #29)

The other woman was told that she would work in a café when she was recruited in Minsk, Belarus, discovering that the job was in prostitution only after arriving in Moscow.

Deception was reported frequently, primarily centering on rules, fines and delays, or reductions of payments:

[The recruiter] said this work is not terrible. She said that she would pay for the apartment. She said that we would be brought from the home to the *tochka* and from the spot to the home, we would work 6 hours a day, we would be paid for the additional

hours. She also said that nobody would offend us... I was told I would get my money [immediately], I would be dressed and would be brought to work. I was told I could take a free day when I would want. However, none of this became true. (SW #14)

The women who reported deception had usually changed pimps and were no longer in touch with the people who originally brought them to Moscow. One woman reported that her passport was taken from her and that she was unable to leave that pimp.

Financial Need

Almost all respondents said that sex work was their only source of income. Material benefit from sex work was mentioned by most of the participants early in the interview, as with this woman:

[This job] came up to my expectations very quickly: I bought an apartment for 6,000 dollars, bought all I needed into the apartment, all the clothes, my daughter studies in lyceum, has some private tutors in English, algebra, geometry, I can buy any toys for her. The girl doesn't know any limitations in anything that ordinary people may have. (SW #30)

On average, the participants reported that clients paid \$75–150 U.S. to the pimp or *mamochka*, and that the sex workers received half of the money. However, from the sum that they received, they often were responsible for paying other expenses common to the *tochka*:

If I go out [leave with a client] for 2,000 rubles, then it's 50–50. That includes payment to the *mamochka*, to militia, apartment rent, payment for the car. In the end that comes down to some 20 to 25 percent that I get. (SW #17)

The participants also report paying a large amount of their earnings directly to police to cover fines, usually ranging from 200 to 2,000 rubles each time they are detained, which some report happening weekly or daily.¹¹

In the sample, 24 women mentioned either fully supporting someone financially or sending some amount of money to someone else, usually family members:

Basically, I spend [my money] on my son, my mother, my family, and then on myself. I mean, for myself I only buy the most necessary things for work, the rest goes to my family. Everything. (SW #06)

Well, [I send my relatives] just a little bit. I cannot send them large amounts, because otherwise they will guess where I work. For instance, if I worked at the market, they wouldn't believe that I earn so much working at the market. (SW #08)

Eleven of the participants mentioned having children whom they were supporting.

Working Conditions

In contrast to how sex work operates in other settings, Russian sex workers are usually hired for one price and taken away by the client. There is no length of time specified nor any discussion of the amount or type of sex that is expected, although clients are occasionally told that only certain girls will perform anal sex. The sex worker's vulnerability is apparent from the way her services are sold to the client. The selection process is described as follows:

The rules are not as strict as they were at my second spot where we were not allowed to refuse the client. We come here by 11:00 a.m. The *mamochkas* stand near the highway, and we wait in the bus somewhere farther away—for example, near the garages. The *mamochka* stops the car and names a price. It can vary from 1,500 rubles up to 150 dollars and depends on the girl's appearance. Then the *mamochka* gets into the client's car and they come to the bus. She enters the bus and says the price. Some of the girls come out from the bus. If nobody pleases the client, then another price is announced and other girls come out. If the client likes any girl then she gets into his car. He pays money to the *mamochka*, and the girl does not get to his car until he has done this. (SW #14)

One of the main sources of fear and stress that was frequently mentioned by participants is referred to by the term “hemorrhoid” (so named because anal sex is often, but not always, involved). This refers to the situation whereby a woman is “bought” by a client and taken to a spot where many more men are waiting. This is described in the following two quotes:

The client bought another girl and me and brought us to the stadium. There was a practice session going on. I was taken to a separate room and worked there. The other girl was undressed and taken to the cloak room. The client asked the athletes who wanted to have to have sex with her [the other girl]. All of them raised their hands. She was taken into the room and three people came simultaneously to have sex with her, then another three people, and so on... We were bought at 4 PM and released only at 6 the next morning. Every person that came to the stadium—the friend, the acquaintances, and even the cleaner—came to us. (SW #14)

I had a case where I [was sold] to 27 men... it lasted three days. I was sweating my guts out. They didn't want to let me go at all. (SW #29)

Violence

All but four women in our sample reported physical violence from clients. Many of the women had a fatalistic attitude, saying that it was “part of the job.” Others claimed that violence was a result of her own behavior:

...you need to be tender, to be more correct and careful with clients that you don't know yet, in order to avoid this. I think that violence from client's part is caused by our behavior, maybe we say something rude or do something wrong, then it happens. (SW #03)

As a result of the feeling that they were to blame for violence, this was the area that women were most reluctant to discuss during the interviews.

Fifteen of the women reported violence outside of work (including three of the four who had not experienced violence through sex work). Seven reported being raped by strangers, three were beaten by strangers, two were beaten by friends and boyfriends, and three were beaten regularly by their husbands.

Relationships with Police

A striking aspect of the relationship between sex workers and the police is that of the *subbotnik*.¹² In this context, a *subbotnik* refers to sex provided to militia (police) free of charge (although several participants reported that their pimps paid the police small amounts of money as compensation). The typical *subbotnik* is used as a form of payment from the pimp to the militia officers in order to allow their *tochka* to continue operating in their jurisdiction. One participant described the process as follows:

Recently I went to a *subbotnik*. Three [police] came to our *tochka* and showed their documents. Usually the pimp pays us for the *subbotnik*. This time I was paid only 500 rubles, at my previous *tochka* I was paid 1,500 rubles for *subbotniks*. We went with these guys to the sauna. There was a celebration for the one general. Everything was normal. There was a splendid dinner. Afterwards, we were all brought home. (SW #14)

Most of the women who reported participating in this type of *subbotnik* describe being treated well by the police:

At these *subbotniks* we have a good rest, we like them. We have a chance to drink, to have a rest, to relax. Basically, they treat us well. The militia and the prostitutes exist in the same sphere, they are thick as thieves. I think about half of our girls have boyfriends in the militia. (SW #28)

Many participants also used the term *subbotnik* to describe having sex with the militia in lieu of paying a fine upon being arrested:

I try to look modest and not attract any attention. If the officer wants to check my documents, I always have a condom in my bag. I offer him money or try to “be agreeable.” Then we go into a private room and he offers me “his friendship.” (SW #28)

Most women reported that the police use condoms during sex.

However, participants who reported not participating in *subbotniks* had much more negative things to say about police:

The attitudes [of police] can be different. Usually they are rude, cruel—they think they have the right to beat us. (SW #13)

They are all insane, monsters. As far as I know, [this applies to] militia in general. (SW #04)

Condom And Contraceptive Use

Awareness of the importance of condoms was extremely high among the women, as demonstrated in this typical quote:

Well, even the child knows about condoms now. (SW #21)

Reports of condom use in our sample were also extremely high. All women in our sample reported trying to use a condom for every act of vaginal sex with non-regular clients, with small percentages of clients refusing:

Usually it is a mutual agreement [to use condoms], but some clients insist on sex without any condom. However, I try to use condoms and as a rule they are always used. (SW #21)

Women reported different ways of negotiating condom use with clients, including “telling him what safe sex is about and how you should protect yourself” or asking the client “How can you be sure of me? Who knows? [After that] he doesn't feel like doing it that way anymore.”

All of the sex workers in our sample reported either refusing to have anal sex or using a condom every time they had anal sex—even in the few instances where the anal sex was non-consensual. Most also reported trying to use condoms during oral sex, but actually succeeding only about half of the time. However, with regular clients, condom use becomes more sporadic with eight women reporting not using condoms with regular clients.

Participants also mentioned other methods for protecting themselves from STIs and/or pregnancy. Eighteen women reported using either Miramistine[®], Pharnatex[®], or similar products. These are topical substances that have a base of Nonoxynol-9 or chlorhexadine. These substances are sold over-the-counter in pharmacies as contraceptives, as well as a means of both treating and preventing sexually transmitted diseases. None of these measures was mentioned as an intended replacement for condoms, but rather were

used in addition to condoms or as a back-up in case the condom broke. However, three women mentioned using these agents alone to prevent pregnancy when having sex without a condom with the woman's regular partner.

Alcohol and Drug Use

All of the women in our sample reported drinking alcohol. The reason that most of them gave for alcohol use was to relax. In terms of drinking with clients, most women reported doing so in order to cope with stress, as evidenced in the following quotes:

Because you can hardly work when you were sober...because there are such monsters there sometimes that it stinks. When you have a drink it is somehow easier. (SW #04)

The drinks are not necessary for me, but when you drink you can relax. If I think I need to relax then I should [drink], otherwise I will be nervous and it can provoke the client's aggression. (SW #09)

If the client is normal he will see that the girl needs to relax. Being sober with someone... you just want to crawl and hide. When you have a drink you can feel better. (SW #10)

Two women mentioned that they felt it necessary to drink with clients, as it is socially expected. One of them explained:

If [the client] offers you a drink and you refuse, he may think you are under treatment for alcoholism. (SW #20)

However, the women also reported that they avoid drinking too much or getting drunk, for several reasons:

You shouldn't drink a lot, if you do, anything may happen. It is necessary to control yourself and the client. (SW #04)

[The pimp] does not allow it...[if a sex worker is drunk] the client can say, "why is the girl drunk? She staggers and smells like alcohol. You want to take my money, but you offer bad goods." (SW #09)

I think [stress and alcohol] do not go together. Strong drinks make you relax a little, you know, it may be appropriate for this kind of job. On one hand, it is necessary, since the partners may be unpleasant or the situation may be stressful. Looking from this perspective, maybe it is better to drink excessively. But as for me personally, these two things should not be combined. (SW #03)

Twenty-four participants reported using marijuana. Of these, five reported using it at work with clients, claiming

that it helped them to relax and led to better sex, or that the client insisted:

[The last time that I smoked marijuana] was recently with a client. He asked "who smokes grass? Who will smoke it with me? I'll take a girl for two hours and I'll pay \$100, but I want her to smoke grass with me." (SW #09)

The rest adamantly denied smoking marijuana at work, fearing repercussions from the client:

Well, [we did not use marijuana] on the job, never. In general we used it at home before work, and not so the client might see it. God forbid! You can't do it with the client. (SW #04)

They also hid marijuana use from the pimp, claiming that fines would be levied if they were discovered to be using marijuana or other drugs.

Ten women in our sample reported trying drugs other than marijuana. Only one indicated that she was currently using heroin, and only rarely, as she found it difficult to obtain in Moscow. Another mentioned occasional use of oral amphetamines. Three women mentioned that they had injected heroin in the past, two had snorted heroin, and three had snorted cocaine. Most of them mentioned trying the drugs once or twice and not liking their effects. The three women who reported injecting in the past all mentioned using new syringes, which they had purchased at a pharmacy.

Experience With STIs and HIV

Ten of the women in the sample reported having had sexually transmitted infections in the past. Two had syphilis, two had gonorrhea, two had trichomoniasis, and four did not know or did not remember which specific infection they had.

All but two of these women said that they visited a doctor as soon as they experienced symptoms. One woman was diagnosed with secondary syphilis while in detention. Another woman guessed at a diagnosis of trichomoniasis "because of the smell and discharge" and self-treated with a single-dose antibiotic (Sumamed). She subsequently visited a physician to undergo laboratory testing to confirm that she was no longer infected. Three women specifically mentioned (without prompting) that they were infected with an STI, outside of sex work, by a boyfriend. One woman reported having HIV.

POWER AND CONTROL

The overarching theme that emerged from these data was the real and perceived lack of control these women have over many aspects of their lives, from the decision to enter sex work to the eventual negative health consequences. The data illustrate that in many situations, power lies outside of

the sex worker herself, as much of her behavior is determined by the real and perceived threats posed by others—pimps, *mamochkas*, clients, police.

High rates of unemployment among women in the former Soviet Union, due to economic depression and gender discrimination, have brought these women to the Moscow sex trade seeking income.¹³ These economic factors are compounded by the fact that the majority of women in our sample were financially assisting or fully supporting family members, including the 11 women with children. The fact that people besides themselves were dependent on the income of many of the sex workers must be taken into account when considering programs aimed at cessation of sex work.

Migration for sex work was ubiquitous—none of the women we interviewed was a Moscow resident before entering the Moscow sex industry. High levels of migration have been seen in other populations of sex workers.¹⁴ After these women enter sex work in a foreign city such as Moscow where they are not legal residents, they have less control over their environment and fewer opportunities for finding other employment or accessing government services. This situation can predispose women to violations, such as repeated arrests, *subbotniks*, and physical abuse. In addition, they face a lack of legal recourse. A recent study in ten regions of Russia showed that the lack of legal status is perhaps the largest barrier preventing sex workers from receiving many important services and social benefits, such as free and anonymous medical treatment, a steady job (outside of sex work), protection from the police, lodging (independent from the *mamochka*), and psychological assistance.¹⁵

We found a high level of interaction with the police among these street-based sex workers. Relationships operated at the level of management of the sex venues (pimps and *mamochkas*), with organized entertainment and sex being provided in exchange for protection, and through the complex *subbotnik* system. Apart from reports that the police generally appeared to be more consistent condom users than other clients, and that many women had positive relationships with police, the level of collusion with the sex industry, exchange of sex for protection, and sexual exploitation of these women by police is a clear indictment of the legal and security systems in Moscow. In particular, the degree of control over these women held by both pimps and police, which may serve to further undermine women's agency in sexual and other decision-making matters, suggests that the current system of police engagement may be a key barrier to HIV and violence prevention in Moscow's sex industry.

Once a woman is engaged in sex work, she is vulnerable not only to experiencing violence, but also to being faced with no legal recourse after she has been victimized. As has been shown with sex workers in other settings,¹⁶

several women in the present study showed a tendency to blame themselves for the violence, as well as to believe that if they behave in a certain way, violence will be prevented; this was also the area that they seemed most reluctant to discuss during the interview. Several studies highlight the intersection between violence with clients and intimate partners and increased vulnerability to STIs and HIV. In keeping with the women's experiences in our sample, violence carried out against an individual shows a failure by the victim to positively influence the situation. In contrast, a sex worker who has unprotected sex because a client refuses to use condoms may perceive herself to be successful in preventing violence, even if she becomes infected with an STI or HIV. In other words, she is exercising her "agency" to prevent immediate harm.

When considering the participants' attempts to protect their health, the mention of topical agents to prevent STIs and pregnancy is both disappointing and encouraging. On the one hand, it is heartening that the women are aware that risk of infection exists and that they are taking steps to prevent transmission, rather than completely relinquishing control over their health. This demonstrates a measure of perceived agency. On the other hand, it is disturbing that agents are being marketed and used in Russia that have been proven to be ineffective in preventing many infections, such as gonorrhea and Chlamydia. Preparations containing Nonoxyl-9 in particular could actually enhance the possibility of becoming infected with HIV when applied frequently, as is often the case with sex workers.¹⁷

Our findings suggest that if a safe and efficacious microbicide became available, this population may readily accept it and could gain great benefit from such a prevention method. Given the need for female-controlled methods to prevent HIV/STIs and pregnancies among female sex workers in Moscow and elsewhere, the development of vaginal microbicides should be an urgent public health priority. Until then, more vigorous efforts are needed for Russia to control the promotion and sale of agents marketed as microbicides and for which no efficacy data exist.

An encouraging finding was that the women in this sample seemed to retain personal control over substance use. There were a few mentions of clients insisting on use or forcing women to take drugs, and only a few women reported reluctance in refusing alcohol offered by clients. However, we observed no reports of alcohol or drug use interfering with condom use, as has been shown in studies in other settings.¹⁸ Although many women reported drinking or smoking to cope with stress, none of the women indicated that she used more substances than she was comfortable with. Given the pervasiveness of alcohol use in Russia, the reports of alcohol use in our sample seemed remarkably moderate. In addition, none of the women

reported entering or working in prostitution to maintain a drug addiction, a common reason for becoming and remaining a sex worker in many settings, including parts of the United States.¹⁹

Our findings should bear a number of limitations in mind. The sampling for this study was convenience sampling, drawing from *tochkas* where the NGO partner, AIDS infoshare, had already conducted outreach activities. This potentially introduces a selection bias, in that these women felt comfortable enough to speak to the study team, they worked for pimps who allowed outreach work at the *tochka*, and they had been exposed to prevention messages prior to the study. Additionally, since we sampled women who were involved in street prostitution, our findings may not be generalizable to other kinds of sex workers in Moscow or in other Eastern European settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings suggest that at least some sex workers in Moscow are in need of programs that provide services other than free condoms and HIV and STI prevention messages. Women in this study expressed the need for psychological support to help them to cope with stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems that are exacerbated or caused by their situations; many mentioned that they would normally talk to family members or friends if they were at home, but they felt isolated in Moscow.

Based on our findings, programs addressing violence prevention and helping sex workers cope with being victims of violence would also seem to be a very high priority. As shown in studies of sex workers in other settings, these women are reluctant to seek psychological help or medical attention after being a victim of violence.²⁰ It is therefore crucial that when they do have medical encounters, for any reason, these measures be utilized to assist these women, especially in the area of psychological counseling. One approach to providing necessary counseling may be a peer-based program through which other sex workers provide psychosocial support, which has been shown to be effective in other settings.²¹

Approaches to health promotions that regard these women as complex human beings with hopes and plans for their futures and meet some of the other personal and social needs of sex workers hold out the possibility of success. Elements of programs that address multiple needs of sex workers include clinical services combined with a strong peer education component in order to “emphasize consistent condom use, provide effective treatment for both symptomatic and asymptomatic STIs, and begin to address larger social, economic and human rights issues that increase vulnerability and risk.”²² Our findings also suggest that

other services beyond medical care, such as legal support and child care, are important components in maintaining the well-being of sex workers in Moscow, Russia.²³

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11. At the time of data collection, the conversion rate was approximately 30 rubles to the dollar.
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NEW U.S. FUNDING POLICIES ON TRAFFICKING AFFECT SEX WORK AND HIV-PREVENTION EFFORTS WORLD WIDE

Melissa Ditmore

Core Group, Network of Sex Work Projects
New York, NY

The United States is the largest donor to health promotion efforts in the world (even at one of the lowest percentages of giving based on gross national product), and this has continued with recent funding for both anti-trafficking initiatives domestically and abroad, as well as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Unfortunately, the Bush administration has included little noticed but very politically effective constraints on this funding so that none of this money will go to projects that do not explicitly condemn "prostitution and sex trafficking."

This policy will have adverse effects on international organizations and NGO operations, particularly those promoting HIV prevention using a harm reduction model. This article explores the new U.S. funding policy with an eye to the unintended and adverse global effects it may have on programs addressing sex work and trafficking in persons.

THE POLICIES

The Bush Administration's policies essentially demand that organizations receiving certain funds must have an official position opposing prostitution. These stipulations began with anti-trafficking funds and quickly and quietly moved to HIV-prevention monies.

Anti-Trafficking Funds

Trafficking is modern day slavery, and includes situations involving force, fraud, and coercion to exploit a person's labor or services. Trafficking is usually conceived of as "white slavery" or forced prostitution, but trafficking occurs in all industries, including agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic work, as well as the sex industry. Money has been earmarked in the federal budget for anti-trafficking efforts to prevent modern slavery and to assist people who have suffered in untenable working conditions in the U.S. and abroad. This money is administered through a number of agencies, including the Office for Victims of Crime and the Office of Refugee Resettlement for work in the U.S., and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for work abroad.

The first written notice of the anti-prostitution policy arrived in January 2003, in a cable signed by Colin Powell that was circulated to USAID field officers. This cable

gained widespread notice because it stipulated that all organizations receiving USAID funds should amend their websites to promote abstinence over condom use in the struggle against HIV and AIDS. The cable also included a less-noted stipulation:

ORGANIZATIONS ADVOCATING PROSTITUTION AS AN EMPLOYMENT CHOICE OR WHICH ADVOCATE OR SUPPORT THE LEGALIZATION OF PROSTITUTION ARE NOT APPROPRIATE PARTNERS FOR USAID ANTI-TRAFFICKING GRANTS AND CONTRACTS, OR SUB-GRANTS AND SUB-CONTRACTS

A note within the text of the cable refers to USAID trafficking policy, which was released after this cable, and which used the exact same language. The cable goes on to state:

CAREFUL REVIEW OF ALL PROGRAMS AND PUBLICATIONS SHOULD ENSURE THAT USAID IS NOT PERCEIVED AS USING U.S. TAXPAYER FUNDS TO SUPPORT ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRADICT OUR LAWS OR POLICIES, INCLUDING TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AND GIRLS, LEGALIZATION OF DRUGS, INJECTING DRUG USE, AND ABORTION.

Part of this is repeated on page 9 of "Trafficking in Persons: The USAID Strategy for Response."¹ The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPR), passed later in 2003, restricts anti-trafficking funds to organizations that oppose prostitution.²

PEPFAR Funding

Trafficking in persons is an enormous issue, but it affects far fewer people than HIV and AIDS. In 2003, the U.S. announced PEPFAR as the guiding policy and program for all U.S. foreign assistance relating to the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. Under PEPFAR, 15 focus countries in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as Vietnam, receive a concentrated influx of funding for prevention, treatment, and care in hopes of turning the tide in parts of the world facing the

worst of the pandemic.

The U.S. is to be applauded for the targeting areas most affected by HIV and AIDS. Unfortunately, the Bush Administration added the following amendment into the text of the act which allocated PEPAR funds:

(f) LIMITATION. — No funds made available to carry out this Act, or any amendment made to this Act, may be used to provide assistance to any group or organization that does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) initially warned that applying these restrictions to U.S. groups would raise free speech issues and suggested that the requirement should be applied only to overseas groups, but in 2004, DOJ reversed itself and said that the administration could apply the rule to U.S. groups.

Global Fund to Fight AIDS

In early May 2005, new language circulated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) attempted to extend these restrictions even further by applying them to groups who receive funding through multilateral organizations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. The Global Fund is an international partnership among governments, civil society, the private sector, and affected communities, and was created to finance a dramatic turn-around in the fight against AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. The Global Fund and other multilateral organizations such as the World Health Organization, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, and any United Nations agency, are exempt from the requirement to avow that they are against prostitution. This new missive, however, required that any sub-grantee receiving U.S. federal money through these multilateral organizations would be required to state that it opposes prostitution. Had it taken effect, this new rule would have required the approximately 3,000 groups in 128 countries that receive Global Fund money to publicly oppose commercial sex work and sex trafficking.

Perhaps as a result of international pressure, the Administration has backed away from this requirement. On May 17th, Ambassador Randall Tobias, Global AIDS Coordinator of the United States, told the CDC to refrain from applying this new rule.³ The Federal Register was corrected on May 24, 2005, to stipulate that:

In addition, any recipient must have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking. The preceding sentence shall not apply to any exempt organizations (defined as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the World Health Organization, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative or to any United Nations agency).

It also stated that:

The U.S. Government is opposed to prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and dehumanizing, and contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons.⁴

The propagandist tone stating that prostitution promotes trafficking is alarming, but not unprecedented.

CONFLATING TRAFFICKING WITH PROSTITUTION

The history behind this tone and these policies begins with the conflation of prostitution with trafficking. Trafficking, which has been referred to as “modern day slavery,” is the transport of people for the purpose of labor, usually in inequitable conditions, involving the use of force, fraud, or coercion. In 1910, the Mann Act, also called the White Slave Traffic Act, prohibited traveling across state lines to commit “immoral acts.” While “white slavery” has been equated with prostitution and forced prostitution, “immoral acts” was vague enough to be used against women charged with conspiracy for purchasing train tickets across state lines to meet their fiancés; against the boxer Jack Johnson, and, later, the guitar player Chuck Berry for consorting with white women; and in politically motivated prosecutions of suspected communist sympathizers including Charlie Chaplin.⁵ This language was ultimately limited by the politically and socially conservative Meese Commission in 1986 to activities that were illegal in the location in which they were committed.⁶

The legal definition of trafficking focuses on the use of force, deception and coercion, and debt bondage. Anti-prostitution activists equate all prostitution with trafficking in persons, arguing that all prostitution is forced and therefore constitutes trafficking. However, others argue that trafficking occurs in all industries in the form of forced labor and slavery, and that prostitution is not inherently trafficking. These advocates offer examples of people who do not wish to be forced out of the sex industry.

Debate over the definition of trafficking and whether this should include all forms of sex work or all prostitution has become standard fare in legislative forums on forced labor and trafficking.⁷ This is history repeating itself. In the late 19th century, feminists in the United Kingdom aligned with religious organizations in order to abolish legal, licensed prostitution.⁸ A similar coalition of certain feminists has been and continues working with religious and political conservatives to promote the inclusion of all sex work in the definition of trafficking in persons.⁹

These efforts to fund only organizations that take an overt anti-prostitution stance are simply new variations on past efforts to equate prostitution with trafficking.

Two groups lose out when sex work and trafficking are conflated: trafficked persons, because the lurid focus on sex trafficking obscures the plight of forced laborers in other fields including agriculture, construction, and domestic work; and sex workers, whose agency is denied and who are made subject to further intrusions by legal authorities. Sex workers over the world point to the state, and particularly to uniformed authorities, as the foremost violator of their rights.¹⁰

THE EFFECTS OF THE POLICY

It is easy to declare that one is “against traffic in women” or “anti-prostitution,” but immensely more difficult to determine what would be helpful to those deemed in need of help. These policies exclude the people and programs most able to identify trafficked persons in the sex industry from U.S.-sponsored funding. Activists and community-based organizations addressing HIV/AIDS, trafficking and sex work, and many other issues including family planning and drug use, have been and will continue to be severely restricted by these fiscal limitations.

Projects that involve sex workers themselves are the most successful at combating abuses within the sex industry around the world, but because such projects often advocate empowerment of sex workers, they may find themselves cut off from funding. The people who are hurt by the loss of funding are not policymakers, lobbyists, or activists; they are poor women far from the people who make these decisions, women whose voices and needs were not considered when these decisions were made. Maurice Middleberg, vice president of EngenderHealth, which operates projects in Africa and Asia, said, “we shouldn’t have to agree with Administration policy in order to do the work of saving lives.”¹¹

Well-established and effective practices may be penalized under these new regulations for U.S. funding. This ideological agenda has the potential to affect effective projects whose success has been widely recognized. This is detrimental to public health as well as to efforts to assist trafficked persons and sex workers. In fact, a number of effective programs have begun to reject such highly restricted funding.

Brazil has turned down U.S. federal aid money because it is opposed to these restrictions. Pedro Chequer, Brazil’s National AIDS Commissioner said, “sex workers are part of implementing our AIDS policy and deciding how to promote it.... They are our partners. How could we ask prostitutes to take a position against themselves?”¹²

The Guardian reported that Gabriela Leite, coordinator of the Brazilian Network of Sex Professionals, attempted to save the funding by “assuring U.S. officials that the grant money received only would be used for HIV/AIDS education and prevention and not for commercial sex worker

rights issues.” However, “talks ‘broke down’ when Leite’s group refused to condemn commercial sex work.”¹³ “This would be entirely in contradiction with Brazilian guidelines for a programme that has been working very well for years. We are providing condoms, and doing a lot of prevention work with sex workers, and the rate of infection has stabilised and dropped since the 1980s,” said Sonia Correa, an AIDS activist in Brazil and co-chair of the International Working Group on Sexuality and Social Policy.¹⁴

INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS REJECT U.S. FUNDING

Other local programs have felt forced to turn down these funds as well. One such program is the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) of Kolkata, more widely known as the Sonagachi Project. This is considered one of the strongest success stories of HIV prevention among vulnerable populations in South Asia. The Sonagachi Project is one of many projects that exemplify pragmatic and effective approaches to reducing not only transmission of HIV but also abuses such as trafficking within sex work. The prevalence of HIV among sex workers is far lower in Kolkata than elsewhere in India.

The Sonagachi Project’s anti-trafficking initiative relies on the participation of red light district residents, especially sex workers, to prevent trafficking into the red light districts. At the International Conference on HIV/AIDS in Bangkok, July 2004, Sonagachi personnel reported that this program had assisted more than 400 people to leave the red light areas where DMSC is active. USAID supported their presentations at the prior International Conference on HIV and AIDS in Barcelona in 2002. The negative ramifications of excluding exemplary projects such as the Sonagachi Project from USAID contracts would be enormous.

Another sacrifice to current policy is a Thai project that enables sex workers to get high school equivalency diplomas. Diplomas are important for those who want to leave the sex industry and seek other work. It is a cruel irony that an education project for sex workers was deemed unsuitable for U.S. funding given that education is an asset that can help these women gain other employment.

This policy has also led to the isolation of Women’s Network for Unity (WNU), a Cambodian sex workers group that uses the slogan “Don’t talk to me about sewing machines, talk to me about workers’ rights” to emphasize the need to address working conditions within the sex industry. Their voices—incompatible with an abolitionist stance that is unable to accommodate the idea of better conditions within the sex industry as a valid human rights issue—have been ignored by U.S. policymakers. As a result, the twelve organizations with which they have worked for

three years no longer support WNU, due to fear that supporting a sex workers' organization with an empowerment agenda will jeopardize their American funding.

RESPONSES AND RECOMENDATIONS

International organizations should base policy recommendations and implementation on demonstrated and measurable successes in HIV prevention and treatment, as well as efforts to combat trafficking in persons. The inclusion of sex workers, trafficked persons, and their advocates is a crucial part of creating effective policies addressing trafficking in persons and sex work.

Unfortunately, current policies neglect the real needs of the people purported to be assisted by these programs. Moreover, recent U.S. foreign policy shifts have taken a dangerous turn, with aims directed at reducing women's autonomy, particularly in the field of reproductive rights. The paternalistic approach to new funding to combat HIV and AIDS, coupled with the unrealistic anti-prostitution stance demanded of recipients of anti-trafficking and HIV-prevention aid, are examples of this trend.

The good news is that this is balanced by the existence of a growing base of supporters working to direct policy in more positive and enlightened directions. Grassroots organizing of sex workers is happening around the world and sex workers' organizations are gaining in influence. Hopefully, these organizations can draw attention to the Bush Administration's decisions to sacrifice the very people intended to benefit from funding efforts and point out that this is a fundamentally immoral moral agenda.

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