

The International Sex Workers' Rights Movement

As I write this, it is eleven years since *Sex Work* was originally published, and the terrain of the sex workers' rights movement has changed a lot in that time. Although we had held two international conferences, one in 1985 and another in 1986, and the United States, Australia, and Brazil had organized some national meetings, communication between organizations in different countries was just beginning when *Sex Work* appeared.

The biggest growth in the organized movement has not been in the United States, the movement's birthplace, but in countries with less puritanical heritages, perhaps. The AIDS epidemic was one influence. Because of AIDS, and substantially because of fear that female prostitutes posed a threat to the heterosexual population, suddenly there was money for studies of prostitutes in many countries. In the United States, COYOTE collaborated with Project AWARE, which was the first study to clearly delineate the risks to sex workers, and to identify these risks as being related to injecting drug use and personal relationships, not to sex work, per se. Most researchers, however, would repeatedly fail to understand what prostitution was, and would continue to justify their research on the basis of protection of customers, not the female sex workers themselves, and it was a long time before anyone looked at male prostitutes. Or clients, for that matter, who, when researchers did look at them, turned out not to be at risk of HIV infection because of their patronage of sex workers in industrial countries, and proved to be at substantially less risk than the prostitutes they hire in places like Kenya, India, and Thailand.

In the U.S., only one project created by prostitutes was actually funded to do AIDS-related work: California Prostitutes Education Project (CAL-PEP) in the San Francisco Bay Area. The laws about nonprofit organizations and political pressure for law reform in the

U.S. meant that CAL-PEP, under the direction of Gloria Lockett, had to remain nonpolitical in order to continue to receive government and/or foundation money, and COYOTE, which was political, remained unfunded. In Canada, sex workers in Toronto were funded by the government to work on AIDS, including operating a needle exchange long before any were legally organized in the U.S. Toronto's Prostitutes Safe Sex Project, which was fortunate enough to have Danny Cockerline to produce incredible literature, eventually became Maggie's, a safe place for sex workers as well as an HIV/AIDS prevention project, while the political activity was the purview of Canadians Organized for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP).

In Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and West Germany, on the other hand, the government funded existing sex workers' rights organizations and provided funding to sex workers to develop projects where none existed, in order to prevent AIDS. In those countries, although governments may have been uncomfortable about it, the sex workers' projects were able to organize politically as well. Australia's sex workers' organizations also affiliated with the Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations, which became a powerful lobby in that country, and also formed a national network, the Scarlet Alliance. Because the organizations were funded, they became training grounds for both social service providers and political activists. As a result of several of these organizations' efforts, several states have reformed their laws, and the state of New South Wales is now in the process of developing its first Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) regulations for sex work businesses. In New Zealand, the NZ Prostitutes Collectives have also influenced government policy discussions, and it is likely that some or all states will reform their laws in the foreseeable future.

Looking at Europe, in Germany there are sex workers' rights organizations in many cities, including Hydra in Berlin, HWG in Frankfurt, Phoenix in Hannover, and Madonna in Bochum, which were able to contribute to the reform of mandatory testing laws, for example. The H.W.G. hosted a national conference in 1990, and then an international conference in 1991, which was the first time women from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and other East European countries were able to participate.

In the Netherlands, where prostitution, per se, is decriminalized, the government has been discussing reform of the laws covering sex work establishments. The Dutch government has taken what

they consider to be a pragmatic approach to both prostitution and drug use, and was one of the first governments to authorize needle exchanges. Their health ministry worked closely with De Rode Draad, the sex workers' rights group in Amsterdam, with the result that the health ministry developed good, nonjudgmental, noncoercive health promotion projects for sex workers, and De Rode Draad was free to focus on other issues full time. Most of these organizations hired both sex workers and non-sex workers, and although the alliances were sometimes tense, those partnerships have broadened the range of voices speaking out for law reform.

In 1989, I was invited to work on the issue of sex work and AIDS by the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS. Although my purview was so-called "developing" countries, I was able to work closely with sex workers' organizations in Europe to establish guidelines for sex worker-supportive policies and projects. While I was there, the Global Programme on AIDS gave a small grant to the Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), founded by Cheryl Overs, who was able to organize the first formal meetings of sex workers to be held at the International Conference on AIDS, in Amsterdam in 1992. The NSWP established communications with many sex work-focused HIV/AIDS prevention projects around the world, and provided technical assistance to many countries that wanted to set up sex work projects. One of the most exciting projects, in Calcutta, encouraged the sex workers to form a collective to focus on their self-defined issues.

When I came back to the United States in 1993, I was able to take a year off, living on savings from the only high salary I ever had (or am likely to have), and one of the things I did was to explore e-mail, and to a lesser extent, the internet. As sex workers in different cities in the U.S. and other countries also began to get on-line, often at my urging, I was able to start a completely informal mailing list. At first it was just a question of my sending mail to everyone I had on my list, and their responding to me; then I circulated their responses. Eventually, many people on the list developed their own lists, and the number of people on the various lists started to grow. At some point, we took the bull by the horns, so to speak, and started a formal listserve mailing list, which Lacey Sloan was able to house at the State University of New York/Buffalo. In fact, we developed several lists: one for sex workers and invited, long-term allies; one for newcomers to the movement (sex workers and allies); and eventually one for academics focusing on research on sex work.

Partly as a result of the ease of communication with e-mail, Norma Jean Almodovar then worked with the Center for Sex Research at California State University/Northridge to organize an International Conference on Prostitution (ICOP) in March 1997, which drew sex workers, academics, and people with their feet in both camps. Out of that conference came the decision to form the International Sex Workers Foundation for Arts, Culture, and Education (ISWFACE), led by Norma Jean and a board consisting of sex worker activists and artists.

Meanwhile, *Sex Work* has profoundly influenced the discussion of sex work around the world, with translations in German and Japanese. The proceedings of the second World Whores Congress, which was held in Brussels in 1986, were published in the book edited by Gail Pheterson, *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, which was translated into Spanish. Many sex workers who formerly felt very isolated have said *Sex Work* gave them the space to think, talk, and organize about their work, and some of them have formed organizations in their own countries; for example, SWEETLY in Japan and SWEAT in South Africa. Non-sex workers were also influenced by the book, and there is a growing body of writing on sex work, including history, public health policy, and philosophy, written by academics supportive of sex workers' rights (e.g., Bernstein, 1995; Califia, 1994; Chancer, 1993; Chapkis, 1997; Clements, 1996; Jenness, 1993; McElroy, 1995; Shrage, 1994).

Sex Work was revolutionary, the first book to amplify the voices of sex workers (a term we owe to Carol Leigh). Since then, a sex worker, Nickie Roberts, wrote the first major history of prostitution from the sex worker's point of view (Roberts, 1992), Eva Pendleton collaborated on a queer studies anthology (Colter, et al., 1996), Carol Queen published a collection of essays about her work (Queen, 1997), and Jill Nagle edited an anthology of sex workers' writing (Nagle, 1997). In the works are at least two books of writings by male sex workers, and a book of writings by sex workers about clients.

The effort by some self-described feminists to silence sex workers who did not agree to portray themselves as victims has clearly failed.

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