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Challenging the stigma of sex work in Calcutta: Material context and symbolic change

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Abstract

Stigmatisation and discrimination against social groups raise obstacles to the participation of their members in community interventions. Internalised stigma and a lack of empowering experiences promote fatalistic expectations that little can be achieved. This paper discusses how the Sonagachi Project in Calcutta challenges stigma as part of its community development and health promotion efforts with sex workers, drawing on interviews with 19 sex workers involved in the Project and a group discussion among the Project's leaders. The internalised stigma of prostitution is challenged (1) by asserting that sex workers have rights which should be respected, (2) by claiming equivalence to other oppressed but politically successful groups, and (3) by providing evidence of what sex workers have already achieved. These arguments are made plausible to sex workers by providing evidence that change is possible, drawn from their material context. I conclude that interventions designed to problematise stigma and discrimination should back up the conceptual alternatives that they present with evidence of demonstrable change to people's material life circumstance.

With real examples and empowering experiences that demonstrate the plausibility of those alternatives
With material evidence and empowering experiences that demonstrate the possibility of change.

With real examples and empowering experiences that demonstrate the plausibility of those alternatives

That demonstrate that alternatives are plausible.

Need the word 'material' in here to reflect title.

…examples from their material environment…?

Introduction

This paper examines the efforts of a sex workers' organisation in India to challenge the internalised stigma of prostitution. It does so from the perspective of an interest in the mobilisation of community participation in development. While contemporary development policies recommend that interventions should capitalise on the agency of marginalised communities, a historical context of stigmatisation and discrimination has often undermined such agency. When a social category, such as 'prostitutes', has been subject to profound and sustained symbolic and material exclusion, how is it possible for such a group to challenge that stigmatisation, and to develop alternative, positive understandings of their status, which could provide a basis for their collective action?

Paulo Freire's concept of problematisation provides the theoretical starting point for the present analysis. Under repressive social conditions, such as colonialism or dictatorship, Freire suggests, material oppression which denies people opportunities for agency, and symbolic oppression which denies them positive or active definitions of self, lead to fatalism (Freire, 1973). If these forms of oppression are exerted with sufficient force and duration, people may come to consider their hardships as inevitable and unassailable, so that the appropriate response seems to be adaptation rather than resistance (Montenegro, 2002). Problematisation is a process through which the taken-for-granted social order is questioned and disrupted. The social order is problematised when subjects can

conceive of alternative social arrangements to those that currently exist. Stigma is problematised when those who are stigmatised do not accept their stigmatised status as 'the way things are' but believe that things could be different, and that they may legitimately demand and expect better. According to Freire, such problematisation is the condition for transformative collective action.

Given the limited effectiveness of education and legislation as anti-stigma strategies, the potential of Freirean collective action interventions is currently attracting attention (Campbell, Foulis, Maimane & Sibiya, 2005; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). From this point of view, community development workers and community organisations are expected to promote problematisation of stigma and discrimination among those who are stigmatised, as the basis for their anti-stigma collective action. But the promotion of critical, transformative understandings is not a simple task. Where are communities to find these alternative versions of their status? The first aim of this paper is to detail the various strategies used in the work of the Sonagachi Project in Calcutta, in order to provide conceptual tools to assist community development workers to design problematising interventions.

There are key challenges in developing problematising interventions. Efforts to create supportive fora for critical debate do not always lead to critical thinking. Participants may reiterate the oppressive ideology (Campbell & McPhail, 2002), or may engage in debate on the basis of expectations that it is those who are

already powerful who will be able to make things happen (Guareschi &
Jovchelovitch, 2004). Against the weight of a history of material and symbolic
exclusion, how can a minority voice suggesting an alternative have influence?
Creative arguments and novel meanings alone are unlikely to convince
participants that change is possible if their daily experience is that it is not. Thus,
the second aim of the paper is to understand what makes the alternative,
empowering versions take root and have plausibility for participants.

The Sonagachi Project

The life circumstances of many of the women in the sex trade in Calcutta
exemplify material and symbolic exclusion of the sort described by Freire.
Women usually enter the sex trade as a last resort, due to poverty and a loss of
family support. They are in a vulnerable position, with little money or social
support to rely upon. They enter a hierarchical sex trade, with madams or pimps
often exerting strict control over their working conditions, and keeping them
isolated from other sex workers. In an ambiguous legal situation, they are
vulnerable to arrest by police, and have little recourse to justice if exploited or
abused by clients, madams or others. Symbolically, women who sell sex are
marginalised within popular culture, for instance, being presented in Hindi films
as objects of men's lust, ultimately to be rejected in favour of the chaste woman
(Sleightholme & Sinha, 1996). While a minority of communities traditionally send

women into the sex trade, and do not stigmatise them for it, many communities and families cut off their ties with a woman who is known to be a prostitute.

Responses to the HIV pandemic brought increased opportunities for community interventions among sex workers. Community mobilisation is seen as an important component of such interventions in India (Chattopadhyay & McKaig, 2004). The Sonagachi Project in Calcutta is a relatively successful example of such participatory interventions (Basu et al, 2004).

The Project was founded in 1992 by a coalition of donors, local academics, NGOs and sex workers, with the remit of HIV prevention in Sonagachi, Calcutta's largest red light district. Project documentation describes its philosophy in terms of "3 R's: Respect, Recognition and Reliance. That is respect of sex workers and their profession; recognising their profession, and their rights; and reliance on their understanding and capability" (Jana & Banerjee, 1999, p.11). Accordingly, sex workers are recruited to take on the majority of the posts in the Project, taking part in decision-making as well as implementation. An explicit part of Project policy is to challenge the stigma of sex work and to promote sex workers' social and political awareness as the basis of a collective action movement. Hence, within education sessions and regular project meetings, the discrimination against sex workers is problematised. These policies and arguments were initiated by individual founders of the project, including

politically-aware sex workers and non-sex-worker academics and activists, but have taken off, to become part of the discourse of the red light district.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 sex workers employed by the Project. Informants fell into three categories: peer educators (3), who work part-time, promoting condom use, clinic attendance and membership of the project to their sex worker peers; supervisors (10), who have usually been with the Project for a longer period and have been promoted, to oversee groups of peer educators; and elected members of the Project's problem-solving committees (6). Informants were asked about their lives as sex workers and their roles in relation to the Project. In addition, the Project's director, who grew up in a red light district, a son of a sex worker, was interviewed twice, and a group discussion, which focused on the Project's work, was conducted with 6 Project leaders (5 sex workers and the director). Interviews were conducted jointly by the author and a co-interviewer, in Bengali with simultaneous English translation. They were audio-recorded, then translated into English and transcribed for analysis.

The analysis picked out segments of dialogue in which sex workers made sense of their identity as sex workers and their capacity for collective action. It distinguished between segments that demonstrated internalised stigma (which included sub-themes of discrimination, fatalism and humiliation), and those that

problematised stigma. Three main strategies for the problematisation of stigma are distinguished. Through interpretation of these strategies the paper then explains what makes the strategies plausible.

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Stigma & fatalism

Sex workers explained that, in their home communities, marriage and motherhood were key criteria for a woman to achieve respect, and that being a prostitute denies them these sources of respect. The stigma of prostitution results in widespread discrimination against sex workers, who spoke bitterly of being rejected by their families, being considered open to sexual exploitation, being evicted from their rented flats, their daughters being considered unmarriageable, and their children being taunted at school.

> Peer educator: Our neighbour who is not associated with this line [prostitution] asks us to help so that her daughter can be married off, but on the day of the marriage she tells us to remain in our rooms and not to come out. Why? Don't I feel like seeing the bridegroom? When you took money from me then you didn't hate me. But when the bridegroom came, you asked me to remain in my room. Then you treat me with disrespect. […] If I rent a room somewhere and people come to know that I am from Sonagachi, they say "either you pay Rs.10,000 or vacate the room within the week". From where will I get Rs.10,000? If I go somewhere else, the same thing will happen. (11)[1]

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[1] Numbers in brackets are the identification numbers of interviews.

Accordingly, many women hide their profession from their families and home communities, telling them that they are working as domestic workers or in factories.

This stigmatization is not only enacted by others, it is also internalised by the sex workers, and evident in the ways that they speak about themselves. The distinction between 'red light district' and 'family district' is a key distinction used by sex workers. Being in sex work excludes a person from being a 'family person'. A family person is spoken of as 'good', while being in sex work is 'bad'. Entering sex work is spoken of as 'becoming bad' or 'becoming spoiled'. Just as the spoiling of food is irreversible, so it is considered extremely difficult for a woman to lose the stigma of having been in the sex trade.

> *Interviewer:* If a sex worker gets married and has children, she is no more a sex worker. She is a family woman now. Then how can people call her a sex worker?
> *Supervisor:* She used to do the business and the label is already on her, so she would never be able to shed her previous identity. People would not accept her as a family woman. (60)

Sex workers thus learn that they cannot regain a respectable identity, but must expect and accept stigmatisation and discrimination. Their fatalism about their profession is compounded by disempowering experiences of poverty and gender. As other authors have shown, the most profound stigmatisation often occurs at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion (e.g. poverty, gender and disability) (Abadía-Barrero & Castro, 2006; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Some sex workers

express this compounding of problems, pointing out that, even less alterable than their profession, their gender condemns them to discrimination such as exclusion from employment, and being seen as sexual objects. In the following exchange, the madam spoke with great contempt for the interviewer's suggestion.

> *Interviewer*: Would you prefer another job?
> *Sex worker*: What job would we get? Even educated people are without jobs. Maybe a boy can find a job, but we girls…
> *Madam:* We can't do that because we have holes. (9)

Problematising stigma

In this context, the suggestion that sex workers need not be subject to discrimination, and that they might bring about effective change sounds implausible. So how does the Sonagachi Project promotes a de-stigmatising representation of sex workers as respectable people who can bring about effective change? Three main arguments are used.

Sex workers have 'rights'

According to Project leaders, undermining the internalized stigma among sex workers is a prerequisite to mobilizing them to take part in the Project's work. To this end, a core feature of Project meetings, of the encounters between Project

workers and other sex workers, and of interactions between the Project and the wider public, is critical discussion of the viewpoint that sex work is morally wrong, and promotion of the idea that sex workers have rights which should be respected. They argue that sex workers are not doing anything wrong, but rather that it is society which is in the wrong, by not affording sex workers the rights enjoyed by other citizens.

> *Interviewer:* Tell me, what do you understand by the "sex workers' rights", for which [the Project] is fighting?
>
> *Supervisor:* All other workers have rights, but we as sex workers don't have any rights. So, [the Project] is trying to get our rights. We should have rights over our body. We are harassed by everybody – police, local men – and we don't have any say over our body. We are working and it is service-based work, but we don't have any rights.
>
> *Interviewer:* What are these rights?
>
> *Supervisor:* Right to self-defence. If we stay under a madam, we are forced to take more customers even if we don't want to. But if we have our right, we would have our say. We can refuse. Police harassment will be reduced. We would get receipts against the rent we are paying to the landlady. (60)

The notion of rights is very useful to the sex workers, here, casting their discrimination in a different light. In contrast to the expressions of fatalism presented above, in which discrimination against sex work appeared inevitable, by invoking the notion of rights, such discrimination is seen as illegitimate and the alternative – where their rights are duly respected – is conceivable. The special character of the concept of "rights" is that the absence of rights does not

undermine their validity, but rather, calls out responses of indignation and anger (Stenner, 2005), and collective action to restore those rights. This mobilising effect of the concept of rights is one of the advantages of rights-based approaches to challenging stigma (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

However, the claim that sex workers' rights should be respected rings hollow to some women, whose experience is that these so-called rights are systematically denied. Abstract rights may appear unrealistic and irrelevant in the context of the unremitting stigmatization and discrimination that sex workers experience.

> *Supervisor:* Some of them even at present refuse to believe that [the Project] is of any help. They feel that a prostitute can never get recognition in society, so it is of no use bothering and going to the meetings. (20)

Such findings suggest that simply presenting a conceptual alternative may not problematise discrimination sufficiently to stimulate collective action.

Claiming equivalence to other groups

The abstract notion of 'rights' is given greater concrete substance by comparing the situation of sex workers with the situations of other social groups around them. Pointing to similarities between sex workers and others normalizes the profession and problematises the picking out of sex workers for stigmatization.

An argument is made that men also have multiple sexual partners and are not stigmatized for it.

> *Peer educator:* The man has his wife somewhere else far away. He cannot go home for 6 months. He comes here and enjoys himself. No one blames him because he is a man. That's what we say. When the men come here, no one disrespects them. But they are doing the same sex act. But when we are doing the same thing with customers we are given no respect. That's because we are females. We have the same blood. Then why this discrimination? (11)

Comparisons are also made with other forms of work, to assert that, just like other labourers, sex workers sell their skilled manual labour in return for money which is used to support their families.

> *Supervisor:* The media asks us why we do this job, then we also ask them, why they do their job? To earn money. Then I also say that I work to earn money. When they ask us why we have not done some other job, then we tell them: a landlord rents his house, we also rent our body for some time and get money in return. (41)

Further comparisons are made with other oppressed groups that have achieved changes to their status through collective struggle. Such comparisons encourage sex workers to participate in the Project, countering fatalism. The achievements of the trade union movement are cited as a model that the Project may follow.

> *Sex worker leader:* We formed an organization and started protesting against wrong doings and protecting ourselves and also fighting for our rights. In the past, labourers

worked for long hours and got a nominal amount of money and some got no money at all.

Over and above that, they were beaten. Then they fought for their rights, 8 hours of work,

overtime, etc. (Group)

Collective bargaining through a trade union is a familiar and effective strategy for

improving working conditions in Calcutta, where workers in the informal sector,

such as tailors, cobblers or rickshaw drivers, are unionized, as are workers in

formal employment. Party politics are also lively at the local level in red light

districts, and a small number of Project workers reported first becoming

politicized – learning to understand exploitation and the value of organization –

through involvement with the local political party. The political achievements of

Dalit ("untouchables") in India further provide an inspiring example for the

Project. In response to the *Dalit* political movement, the Indian government has

implemented a positive discrimination ("reservations") policy for members of

scheduled (low) castes, which reserves for them certain proportions of university

places, government jobs, etc. The Project Director described his early

politicization when he came to see the situation of children of sex workers as

being similar to the situation of children born into a scheduled caste family.

> *Director:* I wrote a letter to the President [of India] through a journalist at that time when
>
> they were talking about reservations. Thanks to B. R. Ambedkar, after independence,
>
> scheduled castes are no longer untouchable. They are now minorities, quite strong,
>
> getting government jobs and leading a prestigious life. But before and even after
>
> independence, the children of sex workers are treated as untouchables. […] I wrote to the
>
> President that we, the children of sex workers, are more eligible for reservations. Children

would be able to get admission into good boarding schools, like children under reservations, without competitive exams, and would get a chance in government jobs. The future result would be: the next generation will be much better off and would be able to lead a normal life like any other children in the society. It was big news in all the papers. (40)

Indeed, there had been an indigenous impetus towards organisation among a group of sex workers who had tried to collectively challenge exploitation by a local criminal, prior to the initiation of the Sonagachi project. This had eventually been undermined due to a lack of resources, but indicates that the sex workers were not entirely fatalistic about their potential to initiate change.

However, these comparisons to other groups are not necessarily convincing. While sex workers may agree among themselves that what they do is not objectively wrong, at other moments, some acknowledge that it will be difficult to disrupt the deep-seated symbolic stigmatisation of prostitution by others.

> *Peer educator*: The truth is that although people won't insult us, addressing us as "whore" to our face, behind our backs they will call us "whores of Sonagachi". […] If we get recognition, then police, madam, landlady, local miscreants will not give us any trouble, but nothing more. The one who gives treatment is called doctor. The one who pulls a rickshaw is a rickshaw-puller and in the same way, the one who does sex work is a sex worker. But the work which is not good, people will always mark it as bad (39)

This sex worker again expresses internalised stigma when she accepts the description of her work as "not good".

Evidence of sex workers' success

It is not only the achievements of other groups that demonstrate that sex workers may overcome the effects of their stigma and gain their rights. The Sonagachi Project has created real new possibilities for women in Sonagachi, which mean that many of their hardships can now be practically challenged. Some sex workers have been trained to represent their colleagues to the police. They can secure the release of a woman who has been arrested in a police raid, or can get the police to investigate cases of violence or abuse of sex workers. Committees of sex workers have been set up to resolve disputes and conflicts, and they can advocate on a sex worker's behalf in a dispute with a madam or landlady. The Project has set up a credit union which enables sex workers to build up savings and to take out loans at a reasonable rate, rather than being exploited in emergencies by moneylenders. Some sex workers deal with their hardships by making use of the Project's support, but without voicing the Project's conceptual arguments about the arbitrariness of the stigmatization of sex workers. Their hardships appear open to challenge (i.e. they are problematised) because the Project provides for action alternatives. We could call this *material problematisation*. However, this has not worked for all residents of Sonagachi. Some women know vaguely of the Project but do not consider themselves to

have problems that the Project could address, even though they do face hardships. Publicising the problems that have been solved could contribute to people interpreting their hardships as actionable and taking up the action opportunities available to them.

A minority of women in Sonagachi – those who are very actively involved in the Project, and who have received training and experience in problem-solving – compared their previous discrimination with recent successes and experiences of being respected, to show that stigmatization and discrimination could be tackled.

> *Supervisor:* Now I make the police rub their noses on my feet. Now they would take my case because I am a member of [the Project]. They used to treat me like a dog and make me stand outside the Police Station – saying that, a bloody whore from house No. 24 has come to lodge a complaint. But now, they offer a chair, give me a cold drink or tea and talk to me with a lot of respect. […] Now I have no fear […] Keeping this in mind, I joined the committee. I make the girls understand this also. (47)

Having been trained to be representatives of the Sonagachi Project, some sex workers have gained recognition by speaking at press conferences, or at workshops of NGOs, or in meetings with politicians or academics. They speak with pride of their ability to speak with these "members of society", and of the respect accorded to them. They have discovered that, in some contexts, they can freely reveal their sex worker identity, and that this leads to recognition of their

eligibility to speak on behalf of sex workers, rather than to dismissal of their point of view.

> *Supervisor:* We had a 3 day workshop for sex workers. They paid us 200 rupees each. Everyone was asked to introduce themselves. They spoke a lot but no one gave her actual identity [as a sex worker]. At that time I went up on stage and took permission from the respected audience. I told them I was a whore, a sex worker, and I told them about my life. From that time onwards my name started appearing on the television, in newspapers, everywhere. (41)

It is a core principle of the Project that sex workers have the abilities, or can develop the abilities, to take on all of the roles involved in running the Project. Accordingly, Project leaders encourage and support sex workers to take on challenging tasks, such as international travel to speak at conferences, or negotiating with police or politicians. Sex workers who had been involved at this level described their initial reluctance to take on such tasks, and how valuable it was to them that the leaders had confidence in their ability to succeed.

> *Sex worker leader*: When our organization was in the initial stages, many people were working here who were not sex workers. They took us with them, trained us and pushed us into the limelight to talk for ourselves, because they think that we can talk better for ourselves and explain everything to others better. We feel proud when the supervisors say that sex workers are running their own organization and project. (36)

Discussion

The first aim of this paper was to equip community development workers with a conceptualisation of strategies for the problematisation of stigma. The analysis distinguished three different means of problematising, which can be differentiated along an abstract-concrete dimension. The first is an abstract, conceptual means. A concept such as "rights" (or, for example, "equality" or "justice") identifies a lack in people's lives. The concept exists as an ideal, but not as a reality, and this discrepancy can stimulate collective action. The second means of problematising rests on examples that have been witnessed by members of the stigmatised group. Drawing comparisons between the stigmatised group and the widely-known different life circumstances or successes of other groups can render an alternative way of life and collective action conceivable. This strategy is less abstract, as the alternative way of life exists to be seen and to be compared with. The third means of problematising is more concrete still: it is to materially problematise hardships, so that alternatives and opportunities for successfully solving problems are actually available. This approach relies upon experience within the community. It problematises by comparing past experience with present, or contrasting the experiences of different community members.

The second aim of the paper was to identify how such alternative conceptions appear sufficiently realistic to participants to be worth pursuing. The analysis gives weight to the role of the material context. Just as an attitude of fatalism is

engendered and maintained by a material context of oppression, the notion that sex workers are eligible for rights and can bring about change is supported by a political culture that allows space for collective action movements, and a local context that provides for empowering experiences. Calcutta's political culture provides a precedent in the successful efforts of other marginalised groups to gain recognition and legislative change. Their tried and tested means – such as forming an organisation to represent their interests, and holding demonstrations – both have legitimacy in the eyes of the powerful and are familiar to the disempowered. In other parts of the world, well-known instances of successful resistance, such as independence struggles in former colonies, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, or the civil rights movement in the USA, might provide culturally familiar concepts, methods of protest and inspiring examples to support the viability of collective action. Examples relevant to the regional political context are more likely to be convincing to participants than references to universal human rights or international policies made at distant political summits.

In addition, the concrete experience of having achieved successes is a powerful motivator of participation. Organisations which work with marginalised groups can seek to provide the empowering experiences that the wider social context has denied them. Such organisations should ensure that their internal environment gives people experiences of being trusted and of achieving positive results. They can also change the community context so that alternative courses of action really become open. Such changes might include setting up micro-credit

facilities or problem-solving committees, or advocating for better treatment for the community by police, health services or local power-brokers (as does the Sonagachi Project). Again, I am suggesting that concrete local *experience* of efficacy is what gives plausibility to the possibility of change.

In debates about mobilising collective action, efforts to bring about change at the material level are often seen in opposition to attempts to bring about change at the level of ideas (Leonard, 1984). Interventions aiming at material change are criticised for excluding community members from intellectual ownership of the changes to be brought about. And interventions which focus on changing ideas are criticised for neglecting the actuality of material deprivation. However, my argument is that ideal and material change are not alternatives but mutually supportive aspects of a single change process. Abstract ideas provide the goals for material changes, and material success strengthens the ideals being strived for. That ideals describe a state that is distant from current material reality is in fact their strength, as it is by being beyond present experience that they offer novelty and change. The challenge for project leaders is to make these ideals more than empty rhetoric. Successes in achieving material change, if they are well-publicised, can reinforce the validity of the grand ideals. Projects need to balance ambitious long-term goals with achievable short-term goals, so that short-term successes give credence to the struggle for the long-term goals. Material changes that are not discussed as part of a community's political agenda, and grand ideals with no material backing are equally incomplete. Ideal

and material change are both essential complementary aspects of a single process of politicised change.

Acknowledgements

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