

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Sex Worker Political Development in Costa Rica: from Informal Solidarities to Formal
Organizing

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of
Philosophy in Political Science

By

Mzilikazi Ashaki Koné

2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Mark Q. Sawyer, Chair

While many accounts of sex workers presume they lack agency, this project studies how people framed as powerless assert positions of power through social interactions, friendships, and organizing. I examine sex workers' politics and power from the perspective of a subset of female Costa Rican sex workers. I engage specifically with sex workers who organize, in order to theorize everyday experiences of politics, including solidarity building and acts of accommodation or resistance vis-à-vis state interventions, health policies, and the police. Central theoretical bases for the project include Michael Hanchard and James Scott on “politics from below.” I also draw on the work of Michele Berger in order to advance Political Science literature and frameworks in regarding everyday and labor-related interactions, challenging and extending the field's understanding of the politics of work-related interactions. I position sex-work as a form of labor and analyze the role that informal interactions play in organizing. The project also engages a multi-disciplinary set of literatures, including key texts from feminist and gender studies as well as theoretical and empirical approaches to studies of race, ethnicity,

discrimination, and social movements. I discuss the political valences of stigma against sex work by extending concepts of discrimination from African-American studies.

This study examines micro and macro aspects of sex worker activism through resistance politics, empowerment strategies, and organizing. It also provides practical and theoretical insights on sex worker politics that can apply to other communities. The project's central questions are: 1) what kinds of political actions characterize sex workers' engagement in Costa Rica? and 2) how are informal and formal strategies used to organize sex workers? Unique among studies of sex work, I present a multi-level analysis of these perspectives in a Latin American context. As a case, Costa Rica highlights the diverse ways sex workers organize to resist the status quo. The dissertation examines three distinct but interconnected contexts: individual sex workers working in San José's *zona roja* (red zone); female sex workers who organize with the twenty-year-old sex worker project La Sala (*The Living Room*); and the international network of Latin American sex worker organizations, RedTraSex.

The dissertation of Mzilikazi Ashaki Koné is approved.

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2014

Dedicated to all those in the struggle for rights and recognition.

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SPANISH TERMS

Colones- Costa Rican currency

Compañera- companion, friend

Red- network (used in reference to the network RedTraSex)

Zona roja – ‘Red zone’ refers to an area of San José.

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VITA

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Chapter 1- Introduction: Informal, Formal and Transnational Sex Worker Politics

Studies of the topic of sex work and sex workers, as well as explorations of the intersections of sex work within individual lives, both highlight the ways stigma and discrimination have served to either galvanize people into organizing using their own voices or to marginalize and silence their experiences. In this dissertation I explore how women experiencing constrained labor circumstances both create informal worker solidarity, and can lead to participation in sex worker organizations. Women in these situations engage in informal acts of solidarity and engagement to publicize their cause, gather support, and organize others for sex worker rights. This dissertation is one of the first to present an analysis of sex worker politics and organizing. My study focuses on a particular moment in time, in order to examine the ways that local and informal acts play out in the politics of a local sex worker organization. Viewing sex workers as political actors is key for describing and understanding the numerous aspects of a transnational sex worker network's effort to develop more leaders among sex workers.

Given the many debates about sex workers and their often presumed lack of agency, this project seeks to discuss the spaces where people presumed to be powerless assert positions of power through their social interactions, friendships, and ability to organize. Accordingly, I examine sex workers' perspectives on politics and power from the perspective of a subset of workers. This project engages female sex workers who organize, in order to theorize around everyday experiences of politics, including spaces for solidarity building, and accommodation with (or resistance to) state policies and interventions, health policies, or the police. This project advances the literature and frameworks in Political Science on the types of everyday and labor-related interactions that are considered political. Moreover, insight on sex work organizing provides both a practical perspective and a theoretical insight on sex worker political

development and organizing. While all sex-workers are not on the front lines mobilizing for political change around prostitution, there exist a range of ways that sex-workers think about politics and mobilize politically. This includes sex workers who may not organize around sex work per se, but perhaps around prison abolition, homelessness, sexual violence, or access to health care. Consequently, by politics, I am referring to a broader understanding of political behavior, including participation in community organizations and social movements to smaller acts of informal organizing, as well as the established organizers, activists, and policy makers who work with direct or extant issues related to prostitution. This also includes various types of resistance and workers' critical analysis about participation in problematic and stigmatized labor and relationships.

One aspect of this project is specifically focused on the politics of everyday organizing and resistance of people who are involved in the informal economy that is the sex industry.¹ Sex workers are both engaged in politics and have prior political transcripts about sex work given the history of policing of sex workers. To measure levels of political behavior, an examination of sex worker organizing, through informal, formal, and transnational spaces, must reflect the direct efforts at representation, solidarity building and socio-political consciousness-raising in very different organizing spaces that these workers pursue. Workers recognize the need for more access to resources, child-care, avoiding dangerous clients or problematic interactions with the police. Scholars who have researched sex worker organizations suggest that organized sex workers have been the most critical and outspoken in regards to policy, activism, and writing on sex work (Cabezas 2009, Majic 2010, Jenner 1993, Murray 2002, Berger 2004). Organizing

¹ The informal economy is cash based, untaxed or unmonitored. Other terms used to represent this are black market or underground. Street vendors and garbage recyclers are also considered informal workers. Gender inequality is such that women are more likely represented in informal work (Portes and Haller, 2005).

publicly, given the stigma and discrimination associated with sex work, is an indication of willingness to engage with the politics associated with prostitution.

This project assesses a segment of the overall population of sex workers in order to ask the following questions: 1) what kinds of political actions are sex workers engaged in Costa Rica? and 2) what are the informal and formal strategies used to organize sex workers? The study uniquely models the use of these perspectives in a Latin American context, with Costa Rica as a case study highlighting various ways of organizing politically, resisting, and pushing back against the status quo on sex work. It is also an entry point for three distinct areas: individual sex workers working in San José's *zona roja* (red zone), the women who continue to organize as sex workers with the twenty-year-old sex worker project La Sala (*The Living Room*), and its connection to the international network of Latin American sex workers, RedTraSex. Consequently, this study allows for examining both micro and macro aspects of sex work: resistance politics, empowerment strategies, and organizing. A better understanding of these types of groups will help to drive a more comprehensive political understanding of how people who are perceived to be powerless assert positions of power within their socio-political contexts. While sex workers are this study's primary focus, this project has broader applicability to other groups of informal laborers and stigmatized workers. For example, many immigration debates, with resonances to both labor and stigma, may also benefit from a similar framework in which to understand political interventions by marginalized persons.

In addition, I examine the space of an organization as a central place for political action, through interviews with forty sex workers from San Jose's *zona roja* which provide details of relationships, informal solidarity building amongst workers, and interactions with clients and the police. In considering an international perspective, I turn to La Sala's connection to RedTraSex,

and their goal to develop politically engaged sex worker leaders throughout Latin America, highlights the transnational politics of the sex worker movement. It is through this exploration of sex work and organizing in Costa Rica that I argue that sex workers use complex strategies for survival that can be couched within a broader political understanding of gendered, classed and racialized forms of resistance. I argue sex workers use survival strategies akin to resistance tactics described by Scott (1985), Hanchard (2006), and Kelley (1994). Consequently, I illuminate various resistance tactics and attempts to assert spaces of power, especially in places where sex workers are not typically positioned as wielding power. Scott (1985) refers to examples of resistance, including “passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception” (31). Interestingly, in the literature on sex work, discussions of lying, deception and performance are issues that are often addressed given the affective economic nature of the sex work relationships (Cabezas 2009, Schifter-Sikora 2007). Many theorists navigate the spaces of power and agency in sex work, discuss the role of choice, and engagement with contracts, and spaces in which some sex workers are afforded positions of power (O’Connell Davidson 1998, Pateman 1988). Though sex work is legal in Costa Rica, the power and space for contract enforcement is not afforded to all sex workers. Thus this project is about exploring the spaces where workers push back and attempt at forming collectivity, supporting female empowerment, and wherein sex worker leadership is seen.

Setting the Scene: Prostitution in Costa Rica

The coffee and “Banana Republics” of Central America have had many trajectories similar to those in Caribbean countries dependent on tourism. A country of 4.7 million, Costa Rica has the most developed welfare system in the region and has the highest life expectancy. An

agricultural based economy focused on coffee, beef and bananas, Costa Rica began to move towards tourism development in the late 80's. The positive indicators for the country, including their lack of military, projects peace and safety in a region that experienced civil wars through the 1980's. One broad effect is that the state has moved from a primarily agriculturally based economy to one that is also tourist-focused, and thereby has encouraged the population to participate in the tourist economy. While direct tourism dollars to a community are considered a direct effect of the industry, the multiplier effects of tourism--interactions outside the direct exchange of money--are often found in hotels, restaurants, taxis and the like. The informal attempt to gain access to the tourist economy is captured by a discussion of the secondary effects of tourism. Thus, one consequence is that increasing numbers of people compete for access to the tourism sector, both formally, through hotel employment, as taxi drivers and tour guides, and informally, as unofficial tour guides, taxi drivers, and procurers for prostitution and drugs.

Costa Rica, though popularized as a destination for eco tourists, has also become a hotbed for sex tourists with the growing presence of a number of websites that guide newcomers through the sex tourism community. Many guides discuss the capital city, San José, as a central point for sex tourism though the overall boom in Costa Rican tourism has been based on Costa Rica's natural beauty through eco-tourism. Though the complexities of sex work in Costa Rica easily fall within this context among Costa Ricans, a major share of the country's sex work market is specifically directed toward Costa Rican and other Latino clients including Nicaraguan, Panamanian and Colombians as opposed to the North American and European tourists who have helped popularize Costa Rica as the "Thailand of the West." This makes prostitution in Costa Rica an international and national issue driving the local economy as well as international tourism. Though sex workers have legal work status in Costa Rica, it is clear that

improving access to safe working conditions and supporting the health and safety of these workers is a national priority. Organizations like the sex worker group, Asociación La Sala (The Living Room), have worked since 1994 to support sex workers through service provision and engagement with local organizations to publicize the needs of sex workers.

This study focuses on sex work in the capital city San José, which provides a centralized location for the study of sex work, and is the point of entry into this project.

What is the relationship between the state and sex workers? As I indicate in greater detail below, the literature indicates that in places where sex work is legal, including Costa Rica, the workers are continually dogged by harassment, violence, arrests and extortion by police as they navigate their financial and social interactions with potential clients. The interaction with police can serve as the main engagement between state forces and sex workers themselves. As I indicate below, at one point in Costa Rican history, sex workers had to carry health identification indicating testing and results for sexually transmitted infections. Whether or not a sex worker was carrying a card at all, or whether it was up to date, were grounds for police harassment or arrests of sex workers. While sex workers are no longer required to carry this identification, questions about how sex workers interact with and deploy their individual or collective political power remain largely unanswered. The 1844 Law of Venereal Prophylaxis for “hygiene and public morals”, were put in place to manage disease, but it did so through the management of prostitutes. It was these laws that mandated prostitutes lives, as the compelled registration of prostitutes differentiated between public and hidden sex workers (Hayes 2006, Schifter-Sikora 2007). Unmarried women were suspect and suspected prostitutes could be placed on public registries of prostitutes unless they could show they were either married or had a “respectable job” (Schifter-Sikora, 2). Prostitutes were subject to weekly medical tests with which a failure to

comply could lead to 10 days jail time, while infected women were subject to more time (ibid). These laws were in place until the 1943 Sanitary Code that demanded the obligatory treatment of venereal disease for all people, and prohibited prostitution with the threat of fines and jail (Rivers-Moore, 78). After the brief Civil War of 1948, the language of the code changed and the prohibition of prostitution removed. The state focus on the policing of morality led to Article 207 of the code, allowed the forced treatment of venereal disease, giving police the right to forcibly detain and arrest people to do so. Though these laws were not specifically focused on sex workers, these laws were exclusively enforced with them (ibid, 89). Health raids were used in the 1950's through 70's to round up and force testing and treatment (ibid, 92). The 1973 General Health Law and Ministry of Health Law ended the measures of the Sanitary Code, though they later implemented a carnet (identification) issued exclusively to prostitutes that noted when they had exams. Police could demand sex workers to produce this card, until 1995, when courts ruled against this practice. Additionally, this same time period saw rulings against forced HIV testing (ibid, 104).

Recent studies of the Caribbean and Latin America's sex industry are many but they mostly examine the topic through the lens of tourism, specifically sex tourism (Brennan 2004, Cabezas 1998, Cabezas 1999, Cabezas 2004, Cabezas 2009, Campbell 1999, Gregory 2006, Kempadoo et al. 1999, Padilla 2007). Many authors explore questions about sex tourism in Costa Rica, exploring US sex tourists and female sex workers, such as Schifter-Sikora (2007) Rivers-Moore (2011), and others focus on female sex tourists who travel to the Caribbean coast for romantic relationships with local men (Puccia, 2009). There have been a number of studies that focus address the organization La Sala (Rivers Moore 2009, Vargas Solera 2011, Mata and Rodriguez Quesada 2011). Other scholars have focused on framing Costa Rican prostitution

through a historical lens (Hayes 2006, Marín Hernández 2006 & 2007, Putnam 2002). Given all of the research focus on international sex tourism to Costa Rica, my study adds to the literature by further examining the national market for prostitution. One important point to note is that the majority of sex worker participants in this study are women over the age of forty, while studies that focus on sex tourism typically focus women in their twenties and thirties. My project offers a distinct turn through a multipoint case study exploration of organization participation, leadership and empowerment of Costa Rican sex workers.

A continued focus and exploration of sex worker organizations, specifically through the lens of RedTraSex is important because in its seventeen-year existence, it has made a broad and uniting impact on sex worker organizing throughout Latin America. In 1997 a conference of Latin American sex worker organizations met in Costa Rica and developed a plan that would be the blueprint for a network of organizations made up of sex workers throughout Latin America called RedTraSex (Red de Mujeres Trabajadores Sexuales de Latino América Y El Caribe- Women's Network of Sex Workers of Latin America and the Caribbean). With the Executive Secretary based in Argentina, other nations represented include Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. Member organizers actively meet and participate in conferences and trainings throughout the region, while also working locally in their home countries to address the needs of sex-workers. The goal of the network is to “Augment the presence and visibility of organizations of female sex workers in political spaces and to make decisions at the national, regional and international level” (redtralsex.org/ar- Nuestros Logros). RedTraSex actively discusses and organizes around labor rights, HIV/AIDS prevention, health and human rights, and violence prevention. They are concerned with empowering sex workers

through the strengthening of women's organizing and in promoting an awareness of sex workers' rights.

As Cabezas (2009), notes, many of these organizations arose out of attempts in the international community to fund HIV/AIDS prevention efforts in the Third World. Though many organizations continue to work on issues of health and HIV/AIDS prevention, most have expanded their goals over time. That many of them sprang out of funding by international aid organizations cannot logically dismiss their potential to become representative, bottom up politics representing the people they are organizing around. It does, however, complicate issues around organizing and international funders, and the questions of how organizations come into existence and with what funding or what stipulations are operative as they continue organizing.

The movement to organize sex workers has not been able to generate a similar response or consistent victories everywhere. One reason can be seen in the roles and identity of sex workers; for example, all who work in some aspect of the industry do not necessarily identify as such, as sex work can be a transient labor and identity. Consequently, the term "sex worker" has been an actively political tool to attempt to engage and organize around this identity, though it poses unique difficulties. In the analysis, I highlight how language is important for the sex worker movement, and those who affirm their work as "sex workers" are able frame the narrative of the movement as one centrally connected to labor, human rights and respect.

Costa Rican 'Exceptionalism'

Costa Rica stands out in the region as a democratic and peaceful nation in an area where both those qualities are not often present. After the brief and violent Civil War in 1948, the President of Costa Rica abolished the military. As a consequence, Costa Rica has often been

framed in exceptionalist terms within Central America, both in regards to its framing as a white nation in the region, as well as in being a peaceful, stable nation. In 19th century Costa Rica, liberal elites in that country worked to develop the rhetoric of whiteness and family-centered communities in order to promote agriculture in the coffee producing central highlands (Hayes 2006).

The lack of de jure segregation in Latin America leads to a common omission of questions on the effect of race/color, and the effect of racism within the multiracial and multiethnic communities of the region. For example, though there are fewer blacks in places like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay than in Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, there still existed a regional colonial project and slavery that was dependent on indigenous and black labor exploitation throughout the Americas (Andrews 2004, Telles 2004). In many countries it would be difficult to take race/color into account as census data does not take race into account:

With the exception of Puerto Rico, no other Latin American country has collected census data on race with the same consistency and regularity over time as have Cuba and Brazil. Most countries, in fact, have eliminated race as a category of information from their national censuses; growth rates and demographic characteristics of their various racial groups are thus impossible to determine (Andrews, 156).

Consequently, a general omission of data regarding race/ethnicity in Latin America is not surprising, especially given embrace of theories of mixing that glorify the Spanish and Indigenous mix resulting in '*mestizos*' of Latin America, or the mixing of the Spanish and Africans in the creation of the mixed race '*mulato*'. Often, Costa Rica is projected as a white, Catholic, Spanish speaking nation, which serves as a contrast to the West Indian black, English speaking, Protestant population that began to migrate in the country in the late 19th century (Harpelle 2001). The linguistic and cultural differences that were regionalized within Costa Rica had an effect of "Caribbeanizing" the coast. The integration of English speaking blacks also

provides an interesting location from which to consider the present situation of Afro Costa Ricans. The presence of Afro-Latino, Indigenous and migrant populations in the country speaks to the diversity of the region. It also highlights Latin American examples of racial discrimination and stigma attributed to the race problem in the Americas (Purcell 1993, Harpelle 2001). These migrant workers went there for work on railroads and banana plantations (Purcell, 1993). However, successive generations have experienced the same issues around race and assimilation mirrored by other Afro Latino populations in the Americas.

Though not the norm in texts on Latin America, increasingly scholars are discussing the multiracial and multiethnic make-up of the Americas and its effect on politics and culture in the region (Andrews 2004, Marx 1998, Wade 2000). Though it is not always explicit nor the main focus of the work, many authors present a basic understanding on the effects of racial discourse in the Americas, noting that in the region, “the overlapping hierarchies of class, ‘race’ and gender forged during the colonial period have remained strikingly persistent through time” (Chant and Craske, 133). This acknowledgement only continues to support the theory that race/color, in addition to gender, sexuality, ethnicity and migration status are important pivots of experience of intersectionality in Latin America. In the case of Costa Rica, consciousness about race and other points of difference amongst the women highlights the need for an intersectional approach to studying Latin American women’s experiences. Though often framed as a monolithic people due to the lack of data, race and ethnicity, and migration status all serve as additional axes through which to examine the experiences of sex workers in Costa Rica.



Figure 1: “A place for us/ Association La Sala/ sex workers and ex-sex workers fighting for our rights”. Photo by author.

Theoretical Approaches to Studying the Mobilization of Marginalized Stigmatized Groups

This study is heavily influenced by perspectives on politics from below, as seen in James Scott *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985). This text serves as a fundamental starting point for Political Science scholars focused on local, everyday ways in which peasants resist the dominant system, including foot dragging, theft and sabotage. The scholarship of Michael Hanchard (2006) and Robin Kelley (1994) adapt from Scott’s framework to explore responses to racism.

Michael Hanchard (2006), builds on Scott’s affirmation of the politics from below with his conception of coagulate politics that fits into a space between macro and micro politics. In his text, macro politics are “conventional political competition, social protests” while micro politics

are “social activities that do not culminate in the formation of political community, a community of norms and interests that exceed the boundaries of individual concern and interest” (Hanchard, 42-3). Coagulate politics is the concept that further explains actions that take place between macro and micro politics. Hanchard notes that "Coagulate politics take place within public spheres and work sites in full view of superordinates, but are largely contingent upon the encounters between subaltern members, divided by the conditions of labor (agent and consumer), but united by a perceived commonality of subordination” (Hanchard, 34). Coagulate politics is fundamental to the exploration of spaces of resistance and engagement of politics for sex workers.

As scholars of U.S. black political thought and history, Hanchard and Kelly incorporate Scott’s ‘politics from below’, as a way to understand black organizing, culture and varying types of resistance as political. The theorizing around Black politics in the United States must incorporate the concepts and experiences of stigma and discrimination as fundamental parts of the historical and contemporary black experience. Thus the literature on black politics is often able to highlight the intersection of political development with the experience of stigma as a result of racism. The role of stigma in the development of black political thought is real, and thus I believe that this history serves as a framework for addressing the development of politics amongst stigmatized and marginalized workers, and as an example, model, or foil for understanding how other stigmatized, discriminated and disenfranchised populations organize for greater access to rights. Stigma and discrimination are pertinent to the development of black politics, and it can be useful to conceptualizing other experiences of marginalization or disenfranchisement.

Feminist Approaches to Prostitution

Scholars who have considered sex workers, as social movement organizers or workers, (Jenness 1993, Majic 2010, Cabezas 2009, Berger 2004), deal with the nuances in sexual labor, while trying to assert agency through work and informal or political organizing. The question of prostitution is as problematic in feminist writings—and as polarizing—as in writings on pornography. Pateman (1988) famously sits on one ideological end of the spectrum, suggesting that sex work is the sale of female victimization, thus challenging any potential agency of the women involved. She and others (Barry 1995) do not believe that women can really choose to be in sex work. Others, like Bell (1994), evince a Marxist feminist view, re-emphasizing that all labor is exploitative. Wojcicki (2000) suggests that a more recent wave of academics, "Third Wave Feminists," accept the position that what women do with their bodies is their choice and are aware of the nuances within prostitution, allowing some more agency than others. Thus, the location from which one makes claims about sex work affects how sex work organizations are framed. In making an argument that sex workers can affirm spaces of power, I locate this work in a nuanced location, understanding that the questions around agency and power are often complex and that no one perspective encapsulates the only valid framing. However, a framing of sex work organizations, from progressive feminist and social movement perspectives, indicates that I am seeking to draw out the potential spaces of power.

There are some highly pertinent examples by political science scholars and theorists who write on sex work that only serve to highlight the variety of academic perspectives on the feminist and other theoretical implications of prostitution (Pateman 1988, Berger 2004, Majic 2010). While other scholars continue to push the discipline of Political Science to expand contemplation of various acts as political actions, Michelle Berger's use of intersectional stigma

addresses multiple issues affecting a person's social location and their effect on the politicization process.

Feminist scholars, as might be expected, are very diverse in their perspectives on prostitution. Some of the scholars I mentioned above (Pateman 1988, Barry 1995) challenge women's ability to have any real agency in a society where women's bodies are an easily bought commodity, and thus any sense of control over herself is contrived. Sex positive scholars (Chapkis 1997) affirm that women have an increased level of power and economic autonomy through sex work over other forms of labor, for example, through reasoning like that of flexible work hours, empowering workers further. Free contract feminists believe that payment in exchange for a service is acceptable as long as there is no coercion, while liberal feminists try to understand the "broader context within which choices are made." Marxist feminists challenge the debate by highlighting that the sale of any service by any worker transforms them into a commodity, in the same way as a worker providing sexual services. Radical feminists lean towards greater criminalization of prostitution and a shift of blame around the criminalization towards the men who participate. While the debate sometimes leaves the ivory tower to include actual sex workers, it understandably represents a wide array of points of view on sex work, identity and labor. Clearly, like many other experiences, no single representation or theory is able to adequately explain the whole population.

Given this ongoing debate, I argue that the question of individual agency (about the lack thereof) is weakened in specifically political spaces like sex worker organizations. Both the organizing of stigmatized groups and perspectives by those involved moves questions of agency into distinctly political spaces, where political actions and perspectives are being performed.

Berger's (2004), use of the intersectionality literature referenced above takes into account

the roles of race, gender and class. This approach to critical thinking on social location is widely acknowledged as an important perspective and is increasingly viewed as relevant in other multi-racial and multi-ethnic sites. Consequently, I am self-consciously engaging with scholars and theoretical methods that take race/color into consideration, given the multiracial makeup of the Americas. Employing this intersectional approach is valid and necessary, given that it actively incorporates a more complex understanding of people, in particular the various ways that race/ethnicity/color/class and gender impact the complex ways in which people experience life. I am consciously including this idea within the framework, as well as a question to explore in the research. This study will employ these various approaches from Political Science to continue to consider everyday forms of politics.

It is complex to determine what is an expression of politics in sex work, especially considering how one frames sex work, for example, as work or as always inherently exploitative of women, determines the political light in which it prostitution is framed. If one considers the misogyny, capitalism and inherently sexist perspectives that create and maintain spaces for sex work, and also takes into account that people must rely on sex work as labor, often risking violence, abuse or disrespect, we must ask how one can really 'resist' this? In this work, I argue that having a politicized, gendered, and comprehensive perspective on the work they are doing constitutes everyday politics for sex workers. This is important aspect of my work, since women in Latin America exist in an intersectional context shaped by gender, race, migration status, poverty, drug use, and experience with the criminal justice system (among many things). Similarly to North American women, Central American women also display a diversity of experiences that relate to both the concepts of intersectionality and intersectional experiences of stigma.

Stigma and Intersectional Stigma

Of the many aspects to consider in the realm of sex-workers and questions of developing shared identity are questions of identity formation, stigma, and collective identity formation of those sex workers who publicly get involved in organizing. These concepts are related to theories of coagulate politics because they relate to how stigmatized or “othered” people organize. Because sex-workers do experience stigma, we can use García Bedolla’s (2003) framework, which suggests that stigma either causes people to more closely identify with the stigmatized group, or that it actually causes them to keep from identifying with the group since “how a group member responds to feelings of stigma, along with the political resources and opportunities available in his or her political context, affects the group member’s political engagement” (5). This is similarly central in looking to see how and whether sex workers identify themselves publicly and, consequently, their potential to identify as such and organize as a group. One example of this is when asked about discrimination, study participant Magdalena, 46, responded “Oh yes, of course, always when.... You know when you have a problem with someone, it comes out- oh you’re a whore from 8th street, from 12th street—I don’t know but, but it doesn’t affect me, I’m not interested in what people say, it’s not important to me”. Experiences like this one may affect sex workers differently as to whether their work makes them targets for insults or further acts of discrimination, whether it affects them personally, or their ability to work.

The role of how the individuals see themselves in relation to any sense of a collective identity is primary to mobilizing a sense of connectedness, “In other words, collective identity is less about how one sees oneself, that is, one’s personal identity, and more about the values and attributions one feels are attributed to his or her group(s) because of how the group(s) is seen by

others” (García Bedolla, 7). Stigma can be a catalyst for collective action, and that this stigma does not necessarily mean that the group is seen as any more or less legitimate than other groups, only that these groups are mobilized by the stigma. Berger (2004) offers a point of departure that is important in looking at questions of stigma and identity development. Berger uses “intersectional stigma” as her point of departure, noting that there are multiple oppressions that people experience (race, gender, class), and these multiple oppressions then interact with additional stigma (in this case, of being a sex-worker). Berger focuses on the intersection of these issues with stigma as an important place within which to look at political participation, and yet also argues, “but stigma itself is a rich and previously ignored concept as it is related to questions of political participation, affecting resources, access and outcomes” (Berger, 22). I saw this with my study participant Abril, a 72- year - old former worker who is a short, heavy-set woman with short cropped hair. She enjoys attending events at La Sala. She notes that the association with sex work keeps potential helpers from wanting to work with and support the sex workers:

Many associations don't help the women because maybe the people see us like... because the people pass and say: 'look at those whores, what are they doing here?' -- and its not like that, each one knows their own necessities, that's why they end up in the street because you don't know the necessity, they have children and their men leave them and this is not being a prostitute and doing what you need due to necessity. -Abril, 72

Abril notes that the stigma associated with sex workers remains strong, potentially keeping these workers from accessing various programs that may potentially be sources of support. A lack of an understanding as to why women engage in sex work, paired with the critique of their participation in the work, allows the stigma to persist.

Towards a New Analytical Framework

This project examines spaces where sex workers engage in politics. How do they organize and how do they contest stigma, discrimination, and violence? Conversations around sex workers are often framed around a dichotomy of whether they are indeed agents or victims. This project affirms the expression of various types of politics: from the informal interactions in community or neighborhood organizations, in relations with the police, in the affirmation of the right to health and safe working conditions, or with sex worker leadership. I explore sex worker politics in three distinct spaces: informal relationships, resistance politics and solidarity development amongst street workers; formal organizing through the Costa Rican sex worker organization, La Sala; and transnational spaces, through an exploration of the politics of network of Latin American sex worker organizations, RedTraSex.

In the context of formal organizing with La Sala, I explore the theoretical framing of the concept of *empowerment*, and how frequently it is used to address the socio-political uplifting of historically marginalized or stigmatized communities. There are spaces for resistance, where sex workers push back at stigmatized treatment, discrimination, and violence. There are also formal organizing spaces where sex workers plan and organize to push for increased recognition of their human rights. But what does empowerment look like in practice? While the rhetoric is right on for consciousness-raising for sex work and labor, once people have some ideas about empowerment as a concept, then how do you engage with what empowerment looks like in everyday life? In organizations like La Sala, which was first established to address HIV prevention for sex workers, and later expanded to address the issue of individual and group empowerment as evidenced in the Project Manual, “the emphasis is on empowerment as a woman and as a sex worker for dignified life and respected work” (Van Wijk, 12).

What does the process of empowerment look like for the women who work in the *zona roja*, or for the sex worker volunteers of La Sala? What is clear is that there are various empowerment theories and strategies sex workers use, though these strategies are contested-- sometimes by the same organizations whose mission it is to empower sex workers. I explore this beginning with the 2011 vote by sex worker volunteers at La Sala to vote out the former president, University Professor, Alvaro Carvajal, and elect the first sex worker president to the project. Successful organizing on the part of the sex worker volunteers led to this leadership shift, eighteen years after the project began.

What is occurring in the transnational spaces for sex worker organizing? RedTraSex, established in 1997, represents a network of autonomous sex worker organizations from across Latin America. Their ability to secure international funding from major international organizations like International HIV/AIDS Alliance, United Nations Population Fund and United Nations AIDS has helped maintain momentum, especially around issues connected to HIV/AIDS education and prevention training for sex workers. The significance of maintaining a transnational network in Latin America is that its presence, including the additional perks of media attention and transnational solidarity building, helps strengthen the organizations in each individual country. During my fieldwork, I witnessed the difficulty of trying to keep the doors of La Sala open after the leadership transition. La Sala's participation in the transnational sex worker network RedTraSex adds additional publicity to organizing for recognition of sex worker rights, and multi-country connection helps to keep the project doors open. Belonging to RedTraSex means being a member organization of an internationally funded network, whose work and future goals are already recognized by funders. This adds helpful recognition and media attention within the country. Organizations stand to gain from their international

connections. Della Porta and Tarrow (2005) term these connections *transnational collective action*, which is “coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activist international actors, or other states or international institutions” (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2-3). Local groups benefit from *externalization*, where nationally weak social movements who cultivate international relationships, are better able to develop their collective claims (5). The transnational effort adds to the work of global social justice movements by working to make these similar claims in various country contexts.

The last point of focus in my project is the transnational sex worker network RedTraSex, where I examine how the language of human rights is often emphasized to inspire sex workers everywhere to affirm their rights. As a network, RedTraSex authors produce texts such as *10 Años de Acción, 10 years of Action* (2007) and *Un Movimiento Tacónes Altos, A Movement of High Heels* (2007), which provide the history of the network, as well as trainings on various organizational issues, including chapters on confronting violence, affirming sexuality and rights, as well as learning how to organize. They themselves affirm that producing their own materials and histories is in itself representative of politics (2007). RedTraSex’s focus on sex worker leadership highlights that the people who have worked as sex workers need to continue having their say in the issues affecting their lives. RedTraSex notes that while professionals in mixed organizations may have the best of intentions when it comes to empowering sex workers, many of these same spaces maintain the power dynamic where professionals are in leadership positions. RedTraSex advocates for member organizations to have as much professional support as they can, but implore that sex workers lead these organizations.

The following main chapters of the dissertation thus move from the informal, to the formal, to the transnational levels of analysis, focusing on the various levels of sex worker organizing and political action.

Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4
Informal	Formal	Transnational
Primarily Street Workers	Association La Sala	RedTraSex

Project Data and Methodology

I spent seven months over two trips working with La Sala from January to June of 2012, and in August 2013. I choose to conduct research in San José because of my long time relationship with Costa Rica. I had been there at least 8 times over 16 years, living with one family all that time. In fact, when I arrived I moved directly into an apartment with my long time home-stay sister, and then roommate. My existing Costa Rican community allowed me a swift transition into life and research there.

Though I had previously contacted La Sala before my arrival, I was still nervous to begin research. It was particularly important to me then, as it is now, to frame my research within a frame of solidarity and support. In *Breaks in the Chain: What Immigrant Workers Teach About Democracy*, Apostolidis (2010) is concerned about questions of solidarity and collaboration with study participants in his work with immigrant workers and union organizers. I too am concerned about this in the research, wanting to both conduct good research and be cognizant of how my presence at La Sala could affect the project. Consequently, I spent months volunteering at La Sala, and learning along the way, before ever beginning interviews. I have participated in participatory action research and feel conscious of not wanting to take more out of my experience through the research, then in also actively supporting workers at the project.

While I was at La Sala between three and five days each week, where I would spend two-five hours with the organizers. The hours at la Sala were limited, from around 9am to 1pm. There were generally only two La Sala leaders there on a daily basis, sometimes with tasks to do for projects, and other times, just to be there at the space. I was able to witness many events and workshops take place at La Sala, including a workshop on human rights, the unveiling of the *Sexy & Segura Magazine*, *Sexy and Safe* and release party, a mother's day event, as well informal meetings and a board meetings. There was a lot of downtime too, were I was able to sit and meet with the women, help in with the tasks at the project, or do nothing. I was able to go with La Sala organizers to events across San José, including conferences and workshops with other organizations.

I conducted 40 interviews² with current and former female sex workers. I only focused on female sex workers, thus excluding male and transsexual sex workers. I also chose to only interview sex workers rather than include clients. I made these specific choices because of my specific concern with women's organizing and political engagement processes. While the majority of women were Costa Rican, I also interviewed Dominican, Peruvian, and Nicaraguan women. I was able to begin recruiting participants during an event at La Sala, where I was able to make an announcement about the study. There I met a group of women and began to schedule interviews. The organizers of La Sala graciously offered me space in their loft office space to conduct interviews. This greatly eased the stress of finding another location. Workers were already familiar with the location, and it was easy to schedule time according to their schedule. The location is so centrally located, and furthermore, this allowed women to share the information with others, and to easily find me. At the *Sexy and Sure* event, I made an

² This is a UCLA IRB approved study with a verbal consent process. All sex worker participant names have been changed throughout this dissertation. RPIL Study, IRB # 11-003405-CR-00002.

announcement about my study, and invited people to participate. This first event helped me meet the first study participants. After this initial event, I used the snowball method, and asked for referrals through study participants. I used business cards to help share my contact information with potential study participants. I was able to conduct all the interviews within La Sala, which provided a comfortable and familiar space, security and comfort both the women being interviewed and myself. In this interviewing stage, my goal was multifold. Not only did I want to learn about the lives of the sex workers in the area around La Sala, I also wanted to learn about their connection, or lack thereof, to La Sala. Consequently, I interviewed women who had organized with La Sala directly, women who had had some contact with La Sala and women with no contact to La Sala. This provided a three-pronged focus on the women and clarified the various actual connections to the project. This enabled me to actually link the focus of the interviews to the La Sala organization, even though I was also doing some one-on-one questioning regarding individual experiences as well.

Interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to one and a half hours, though most interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. With an average age of fifty, most participants are mothers and many are grandmothers. They represent many self-described race/color categories, including self-described categories of *blanca* (white), *trigueña* (brownish), *morena* (brunette, dark hair and skin), *mulatta* (mixed, African/European), and *mestiza* (mixed race-Indigenous/European). They represent a broad range of educational attainment, though the majority did not complete high school. Many women described migrating to the capital from regions across the country, highlighting stories of agricultural and rural families, and the need to migrant to larger cities for greater access to work.

La Sala has a large collection of books and resources that span the history of the organization. There are books, manuals, pamphlets, posters, papers, newspaper articles and other materials in the space. These materials have a minimum level of organization, for the most part, though they remain very valuable in that many of these materials exist at La Sala. Thus, I was able to read through, copy, or photograph materials for later work. I was also able to collect copies of books produced written and produced by RedTraSex, and La Sala, all of which have been important for the development of this project.

Sex worker organizing in Latin America is alive and well, from small acts of resistance to the status quo, to transnational organizing for coordinated actions. This movement is inherently connected to many other movements, including women's rights, reproductive health and justice, workers rights, and gender equality to name a few examples. Though the movement remains small in Costa Rica, it is growing. Sex worker organizing occurs in very different spaces, but the concepts engaged throughout this project all work to the same end: to affirm labor and develop solidarity. Practical empowerment methods, sex workers in leadership roles, consistent self-determination and sustained access to economic resources are keys for organizational development.

Chapter 2- Informal Solidarities: Violence, Friendship and Acts of Resistance

Introduction

MK: And how did you find out whether you had real friends here or not?

P: Within the environment you would notice, when they would see you sad and would come by, or if you had problems with someone and you explained and told someone and you noticed that the person was listening, that in reality they are concerned for how you feel and what is happening to you... so there were not more than 20 people, but I have a number of friends in this environment—when I have been in the street, when I've had money, when I haven't had clothes, or I've been dirty or something like that, and they have opened the doors of their homes or apartments to me and have had me stay with them for days at a time, and the one who left again was me. – Emilia, 49

Emilia, a Peruvian migrant who chose to live in San José, speaks of the support friends offered throughout her life, including the periods when she survived as a sex worker. Finding and noting the spaces where female sex workers identify support, within the environment is important, as spaces of solidarity and friendship are rarely examined. While the bulk of this project is focused on sex worker organizations, the exploration of informal relationships, friendships and shared stories are a baseline for exploring both a sense of shared identity and the solidarity that develops among women who work in similar circumstances.

The anxieties caused by having to find employment and accessing and securing resources were voiced by many of the women who participated in this study, though I argue that it is the relationships--both informal and the friendships--that set the stage for shared identity and solidarity development. When sex workers share their stories with other workers, they learn that they are not alone in their experiences, especially when dealing with stigma or discrimination, vis-à-vis clients or policing in the area. La Sala, San José's sex worker organization is housed in the *zona roja*, in the old Canada Dry building.

It is a large, two-story building that appears run down from the outside, but is warm and

welcoming inside. Located down town, in the business section, it is three blocks from San Jose's main shopping drag on Central Avenue and only two blocks from the city's famous central market.

Only a few doors from La Sala is a police station, which was placed there several years ago to decentralize the city's policing. Some sex workers claim that an additional police presence has helped to stem violence. Although this section is a prominent commercial area, is also home to bars and brothels and provides easy access to drugs, including powder and crack cocaine. As such, it is a neon sign, advertising sex for sale, but without a hint of the violence that awaits potential customers. On the south side of the block, around the corner from La Sala, is a large marketplace where fresh vegetables, meats, cooked foods and household products and are sold. On both sides of the street, there are many commercial stores. Beginning around eight each morning, sex workers who ply their trade in the streets, stand quietly, hoping to meet potential clients.

Their venue is a two-minute walk, around the corner from La Sala. In the other direction from La Sala, on the north side of the block, there are commercial stores, whose owners offer a broad range of wares, from purses and backpacks to furniture. Food stalls are full of delicious meals, snacks and drinks. On the corner, an older man sells newspapers. The main attraction, for potential clients, however, are the six brothels standing in a row. They range in style and decor. Some feature women in high heels, lingerie and sexy underwear, while others highlight benches where women, fully clothed, wait for clients to enter and attempt to lure them to one of the rental rooms in the back.



Figure 2- the front of La Sala, located in San José's *zona roja*. Photo by author.

The culture in this environment is vastly different from that surrounding sex workers on the south side of the block. To the untrained eye, the distinctions may seem minor, but they are

not, as the stigma and discrimination that confronts sex workers is a major factor in their lives and experiences. Operating in the relative safety of a brothel is far less dangerous than working on the street. Women working in brothels have slightly more anonymity and can change clothes there if necessary to slide into other identities, while women working on the streets are extremely visible and risk exposure to family, extended family and casual friends.

Walking the streets and climbing into cars driven by unknown and potentially dangerous men offers no security. As a consequence, women who work on the streets around La Sala complain of constant threats to their safety. This endless fear of violent confrontations with dangerous men and continuous harassment by police, however, does take a severe emotional and psychological toll. It is as damaging as the effects of nagging poverty and the cultural and psychological weight associated with stigma and discrimination.

Against this backdrop, one sees a huge diversity in the community of sex workers, which I explore in the visible areas of friendship and camaraderie among women who apply their skills in similar conditions. The exploration of trauma and workers' experiences with violence also suggests similar sets of risks. I therefore examine whether similar sets of risks lead to any sense of shared identity, solidarity and informal organizing.

Organizing Sex Workers

In the world of sex worker activism, a very important aspect of organizing is the willingness to “come out,” to show one's face in public. As growing numbers of workers organize and speak openly about sex work, they normalize the experiences of sex workers. Cabezas (2009), speaks to the importance in mobilizing the “sex worker” as a political identity:

Sex worker presupposes a fixed identity and thereby creates and freezes differences and subjects. This identity may be fixed where institutions like brothels or pimps control the conditions of women's sexual activity, but not necessarily in less constrained situations. Sex worker is an empowering term in situations where the woman or man does not have substantial control over the disposition of sexual activities because it marks those activities as labor and therefore as entailing worker rights (21).

"Sex worker" can be an affirming identity that moves the group as workers from the shadows to the light. Notwithstanding the latest terminology and whether having access to this language around sex work is empowering, some women engage in sex work, yet choose not to participate in political rallies or marches. They may, however, choose to speak publicly about their experiences. This choice clearly indicates that discrimination and stigma are real issues affecting the lives of sex workers who are marginalized citizens.

Sex workers, when viewed outside the world of political activism, are seldom, if ever, seen in images that portray them as kind, soft, loving and gentle. Fewer still are cast in positive images that convey, in a real sense, who sex workers, in fact, really are. The reality of who is a sex worker is covers a broad range, leading to diverse groups of men and women who participate in the erotic industry. Nonetheless, overly simplistic ideas about who sex workers are continue to exist. Nina Lopez-Jones, of the English Collective of Prostitutes, discusses commonly held, stereotypical views of sex workers (1987):

The media is always looking for the "real" prostitute: the perfect victim—the street walker controlled by a pimp and preferably on drugs, who hates men and may be painfully inarticulate; or the professional whore—the high class call girl who is ready to defend clients and declare how much she loves her job. These are the most common examples of the many stereotypes which allow the media to divide us from other women, to portray prostitute women as more exploited and/or lower in consciousness than others (272).

What the sex worker identity does not do is include everyone who is a sex worker. As sex work can be a transitory form of labor that is not always viewed as permanent or long- term, "sex

worker” as a term clearly cannot not represent all the participants. Laura Agustín (2007) speaks to why marginalized people might purposely choose not to organize, “But many of the marginalised (sic), find the margins easier to live in; their friends are there; or they don’t like the centre (sic). Telling one’s story, going to protests and marches, chatting with outreach workers and a host of other projects, are simply not interesting to many people, whether they are maltreated by society or not” (175). Substantial risk is involved in going public and organizing around a cause. It expends personal energy and financial costs, either in long trips to a multiplicity of meetings, or in perceived lost wages by attending meetings and workshops. The risk of going public and developing a common identity can work to the advantage of sex workers in asserting positive identities around sex work that can have significant benefits. “As a basis for collective self-esteem, social identification induces a desire to see the in group in a positive light to achieve a sense of ‘positive distinctiveness’ in comparison to relative out-groups” (Brewer and Silver, 163). This sense of ‘positive distinctiveness’ becomes increasingly relevant as a result of people being ‘out’ and public about sex work. While these efforts may be slow, the 'action of being' can over time help to lessen the experience of stigma experienced by the group. However, even as all workers engaged in sex work may not identify as ‘sex workers,’ or be willing to organize as such, some of the shared experiences around sex work can work to politicize the experience of sex workers, adding to a sense of shared identity as highly visible workers facing similar types of risks.

A plethora of considerations pose valid challenges to more sex worker organizing.

Sanders and Lopez-Embury (2009), describe some of the risks in organizing:

Obstacles preventing sex workers from collectively organizing have been mainly those of exposure and loss of anonymity, which could endanger them in situations such as keeping their children, harassment by authorities and the public, loss of housing opportunities, arrest and incarceration, threats to family life and family members, loss of ‘day jobs’ in

other fields, loss of social status in their communities, and much more. Sex workers are, in effect, caught in a dichotomy: if they organize, they will be silenced by loss of freedoms; if they are silent, those freedoms will never be realized (99).

These are some of the more obvious challenges to organizing sex workers broadly that are particularly risky entry points into organizing. Whether they are willing to organize on their own behalf, however, there is the sense that sex workers together might somehow have enough of a sense of shared identity, through these common experiences, shared risks, or sites of discrimination, to do so. Regardless of these potential sites of intersection among sex workers, there are many differences that might challenge any mass mobilization of sex workers. Chapkis (1997) highlights that “class differences among sex workers function not only to divide those within the trade, but also to create significantly different experiences in performing erotic labor. Sex workers with little class privilege working in positions of low status are generally afforded the least respect and are considered the most ‘deserving’ of abuse by clients, the police and the public,” (102). Street workers, like many of the women represented in this study, reflect a highly visible population vulnerable to abuse. Similar experiences of stigma and discrimination are important activators of solidarity, inspiring acts of resistance. The diversity of participants involved in the sex industry means that these experiences alone, across all sex workers, are not strong enough to create a broad based momentum for a social movement among sex workers. However, the experience sex workers in specific locales, who identify on a socio-economic basis and similar levels of visibility, stigma, policing, or work insecurity as factors, may jar them into pondering if they should align with others.

Street Workers, Visibility and Solidarity Development

It is the women who work primarily in public spaces, those who have the most likely contact with risks associated with highly visible street work, who are the central focus of this

chapter. The public nature of street workers highlights an increased level of contact with police, as well as additional calculations of risks associated with being seen with clients. The women in this study are sex workers who are familiar with La Sala, but who, for the most part, do not organize or participate with it in organizing or leadership capacities. Some attend events and health workshops there. In either case, the women say, it is important that they maintain an awareness of La Sala and its opportunities for political engagement, even if some choose not to organize with the group. I argue that street sex workers engage in small and informal acts of resistance based on shared experiences, including those caused by stigma and discrimination. Although some express no interest in organizing around these issues, shared experiences and daily challenges posed by the conditions in their environments, including connections with clientele, local business owners, community members and police harassment, combine to engage them and elicit a variety of responses.

Experiences of stigma or discrimination set the stage for informal acts of resistance, or what Hanchard (2006), describes as "coagulate" politics--as representative of individuals' responses to assertions of power over their lives in small acts of resistance. "Coagulation is a practice devised and employed to forge circumstantial, incidental, alliances between members of subordinate groups, without an overarching theory of resistance to daily acts of domination" (Hanchard 16). An example is friendships among people who are similarly situated and who express consciousness about the work. Stigmatizing actions or behaviors towards sex workers, for example, may set the stage to develop a collective identity. Individuals who directly encounter systems of injustice must decide whether or not to act:

...Individuals faced with conditions of inequality, whether as isolates or as parts of larger groups, institutions, and organizations, invariably must respond to the following questions: DO I accept the conditions of inequality in which I am enmeshed? If I do not accept those conditions, how might I respond? If I respond to the conditions of inequality

before me, what might be the consequences—as well as limits—of my actions? (Hanchard, 29-30).

A plethora of literature about sex work is available. Historical and contemporary perspectives, the labor and the risks involved, the threat of discrimination, stigma and violence caused by clients are covered, among many other themes. In all this work, few studies explore the spaces for political reaction and responses in the absence of massive protests and political organizing on the part of most sex workers. As Hanchard noted above, people must decide on their own terms how they will react to injustice. Are sex workers always going to be framed within the context of victimhood, where a lack of agency, political protections or social clout prevents them from mobilizing on any massive scale? In this section, I will frame an informal, shared identity as a result of similar and shared experiences, that inspires workers to develop and act on resistance strategies, even if there is no chance for the development of a social movement response, but which nevertheless helps to develop and spread resistance stories and strategies among street workers. Furthermore, such issues as the feminization of migration also play a role in the increasing criminalization of migrant sex workers, which in turn focuses much greater attention on major problems faced by both sex workers and migrant populations. The potential for exploitation and abuse of migrants also highlights the extent to which various states of legality for both sex workers and migrant workers make their overall lives either more stable or more vulnerable. I am concerned with drawing attention to some of the injustices faced by sex workers that are often addressed within the existing literature on prostitution as connected to a broad ecology of violence experience by street workers. I agree with the assertion of Garcia Bedolla (2003), and Berger (2004), that stigma and discrimination, as well as violence, act as important factors to consider as an initiator of political action, with even small or individual acts challenging the social status quo and is representative of political behavior.

Risk and Violence

“Here you see things-- in this street we are risking many things, as much a sickness as a lost bullet or a stabbing. And what? What? Who is going to respond?” – Andrea, 64

Sex workers prioritize a hierarchy of risks that assess various dangers and consider both the perceived consequences as well as their ability to control and minimize physical risks (Sanders, 49). The question of managing these risks seems particularly unique to sex work, because of the lack of public uproar over crimes committed against them. As such, sex workers must carefully assess health and safety risks associated with their clientele. Managing choices and constraints are issues faced by all women, though sex workers operate in a culture that is less concerned with violence or brutality. This forces them to quietly navigate around several different sets of risks. In Costa Rica, sex work is legal and sex workers do not have any interventions by the state that determine their ability to work. Even as it stands in a legal, though mostly unregulated, position, the threat of violence and perceptions of drug use and abuse around prostitution often pushes people who may be potential supporters of sex workers into supporting the abolition of prostitution rather than considering ways to improve the work and labor conditions of sex workers (Chapkis 1997). Sex workers are often framed as either trafficked women or guilty women. This simplistic dichotomy only frames sex workers as people worthy of state protections if they are trafficked and are thus framed as victims (Wijers 1998). If all sex workers do not experience equal protection by law enforcement, the government's primary arm of compliance, then sex workers become much less likely to report crimes committed against them by clients or others (Mellon 1999). There is some sense that sex workers are obligated to shoulder the weight of the violence and risks associated with prostitution, rather than examine the conditions that give rise to violence.

From the start of this project, I set out to find locales of resistance where female sex workers are able to find the spaces to organize on their own behalf. It was through semi-structured, qualitative interviews that the lived experiences and continuous risks confronted by women selling street level sex quickly became clear. Sex workers are extremely vulnerable to criminal elements, not because they have not explored the risks associated with this labor, or because of the labor per se, but rather, because of the lack of enforcement of laws that cover the kinds crimes committed against them. These realities point up the nagging violence faced daily by sex workers and the gender-based violence experienced each day by women as well. After my first few interviews, I wrote in my field notes: "Before we started, Isabel talked about being raped by two men and left for dead. She spoke about being helped by strangers and denounced the two men and the taxi driver who took her to them. "They all," she said, "went to jail." Several significant aspects about this note stand out. First, before I started asking questions, Isabel shared her moving story of rape, trauma and survival and told of playing a role in the prosecution that sent the perpetrators to jail. Since many rape victims never see their attackers brought to justice, I wonder if Isabel has shared her story of survival with others.

As my interviews continued, more women began to speak of being raped or brutalized, or knowing a sex worker who was. Jimena, a 42-year-old widow and mother of 6, spoke of poverty and trying to support her kids. She also got caught up in selling drugs and in the drug system. After being arrested and serving three years in jail, she finds that she cannot find any work because of her record. She repeats over and over her necessity to work in this field though she has other interests and things she is good at, like cooking. She wonders how she will find a way to support herself outside of sex work. She described why she no longer gets into cars:

I don't get into cars because of that, because one time I got into a car here in the...in a bar over there and the man took me with him to his house because his wife was not there.

When I got there, he told me to take off all of my clothes and he did it to me everywhere, even my anus and everything and I thought he was going to kill me with a gun and afterwards he kicked me out with nothing but my skirt and blouse covering me at 2 am—until a taxi driver stopped for me. Uh! Since then I don't get into cars, if you want, if you want to do that only God goes with you. – Jimena, 42

The violence experienced by Jimena, Isabel and others highlights various responses to the violence: from speaking out to cooperating with police and changing other practices around the labor because they are perceived as too dangerous. Emilia, 49, a migrant from Peru, has battled addiction all her adult life, since teen years. Emilia's addiction caused her to leave three daughters to be raised by their grandparents. Emilia notes that she did not need to get into prostitution, but rather that drug use led her to do so. She has found friendship and support through her romantic partner and friend, who is also a study participant. She has also encountered violence in the *zona*.

M: Have you ever had trouble negotiating with places, with hotels?

P: No, in this aspect I'm very calm, it's not that I'm that way with everyone, but I don't like problems—if I drink, its to have fun, if I smoke, its to be calm, I really don't like problems very much, rather, what's more like it is I almost got killed out here, they stabbed me here in the *zona*.

M: here?

P: Yes, to rob me for 10 thousand colones (\$20). –Emilia

Violence by clients is not the only threat, as women told stories of violence on the part of the state through incarceration, as well as partner violence. Some of these stories of survival are genuine accounts of life and death. Are resistance strategies available to the workers to combat the real threat of violence experienced by women on the area's streets? There is a distinction made by the women themselves, as well as by the clients, made on the women who work in brothels, versus those who work in the streets around the *zona roja*. Andrea 64, describes who it is she believes works in the area, “Look, women of this category, like young women, pretty women, are not going to come to this zone, here there are only the veterans, women who are now

old are the women who are here, the young women out here are crack users, the young ones are crack users, and these crack users—what do they do? Charge 1000 pesos (2 dollars), go with a guy to buy crack.” Drugs are a visible presence in this neighborhood. Many of the women’s interactions with the police are also framed by whether they possess illegal drugs. Drug use and sales was an issue that came up throughout the interviews. Andrea’s perception of the sex workers in the area who use drugs is that they are charging inexpensive prices. Selling sex at lower prices and the willingness to have sex without a condom can affect the expectations and demands made of the other workers in the area. As a result of high drug use in the area, many women speak of its effect on their work, the risk of violence in the area--as related to drugs and crime--and the role of drug addiction in the lives of some of the women.

An additional factor that affects the lives of many women is their experiences with incarceration, either personally, or with close family members,

And I...I would like to get honorable work because I... I know how to cook well and I know a lot of things, but, in order to try to give my children the best, I started to sell drugs and I went to jail in 2005 to 2008, so know my sheet is stained and for the people, people who have been in jail are delinquents and because of that they won’t give you work or anything. But for me, I don’t like being in this. I would do anything for another job, even if it were cleaning houses or something. But not here. But well, the needs--or I repeat no one will give you work because it signals like one were really a delinquent and you don’t have to be a delinquent to end up in jail. They are seconds because for one moment of anger, for whatever, whatever person can end up in a problem and pa! - Jimena, 42

Many women spoke of stories of incarceration, either of themselves or close family members like their partners and children. Women’s’ experience with the state in the form of incarceration acts as an additional factor in regulating the participation of women within the formal economy. Additionally, Jimena speaks to the stigma experienced by people who have been incarcerated and how it forever limits access to some kinds of labor.

Prostitution and the Police

Writings about sex work in the region have heavily focused on the degree to which sex workers deal with police harassment or abuse. While in some regions police seem to turn a blind eye to prostitution, in others, sex workers have to manage paying bribes and tolerate other forms of police abuse. Mellon (1999), writes that, “Sex workers report that they know they cannot rely on help from the police in cases where they experience rape or sexual violence or when clients rob them or refuse to pay, since they are often characterized as immoral people who are somehow outside of society and thus not eligible to partake in rights guaranteed to other citizens” (314). For many sex workers, managing the relationship with the police is an important aspect of the work, as harassment, bribes and arrests are common for women across the region (Cabezas 1999, Cambell et al. 1999, Mellon 1999). Chateauvert (2013) notes an important assessment about police and sex workers. “While not every person who engages in street sex trades experiences about police brutality, reports and studies from around the world indicate that law enforcement is the “Big Daddy” of perpetrators” (173). Many of the women in this study noted personal experiences with harassment by the police. Catalina, a Nicaraguan migrant and mother of 4, recalls being picked up by police:

Yes, like two times they picked me up...I don't know why, because they arrive and they tell me- to the station, let's go, and I say, “why?”-, 'Walk!' No more then that and when I arrive they check me up to the very last compartment in your purse, and they put me in an room smaller than this, a closed room and two female police officers enter and they stand there and they take everything off me, they take off my underwear-- I didn't like this, because they didn't have any reason to do this to someone, maybe if they saw that I was a delinquent in the street, that I'm a drug addict, that I'm drug dealer or something, I tell them, 'why do you do this to me if I'm not the type of person you think I am?'-But this is why they are in the street, they say, 'anything can happen.' –Catalina, 52

Cecilia, 64 speaks to what she believes to be the protocol of the police interaction with sex workers:

Oh no, they check everything on you, they check your breasts, they check everything, they will even lower your pants to check it because in the *zona* there are a lot of drugs, I know there are a lot of drugs so they believe that those who sell it, pass it on to you in your bag and that one is hiding it-- well, this is true, but its the police's duty to, or of, a chief of police to bring the women in and register them here (at the police station), not in the street where everyone is watching, as people are passing on the bus and there is everyone, you know, that there is someone you know who can pass by, like in my case where my children detest me and seeing one of these cases, can you imagine? It's terrible. – Cecilia, 64

Though the women have expectations about where searches of their person and personal objects can take place, it still does not keep the searches from occurring. Camila, 36, former La Sala member who has traveled throughout Latin America representing La Sala, reflects on the power that the police may yield over sex workers, “Sometimes they mistreat them, they rape them, they rob whatever they have on them.” In the face of state violence, or, at a minimum, what is perceived to be an abuse of power on the part of the police, what are tools available to sex workers as they engage with the police?

Shared Experiences, Informal Support and Friendship

The informal experience of camaraderie and support leads to a collective identification with others who may have had similar circumstances. I argue that informal relationships between sex workers, where people share stories about work, is enough to create informal group identification and may lead to potential spaces to views one's experiences as connected to a linked fate with other sex workers. Paula is a mother of seven boys, lives in the streets and has long battled drug addiction. Paula had no desire to have sex worker *compañeras*; she also has an aunt who is a sex worker, who would often check on Paula. In asking Paula about her relationships with other sex workers:

MK: Do you have any friends in the streets?

P: Friends, no.

MK: Why?

P: I don't have any friends because I don't trust anyone.

MK: Why? Have you had bad experiences?

P: I don't trust anyone because there aren't any good influences for me, no one is going to teach me anything good, people are vengeful, treacherous and will sell you for a piece of crack, I don't have friends and I don't trust anyone.... I always walk alone. – Paula, 39

Still, other women spoke of the potential for community building when things go wrong:

MK: Have you had any experiences where your friends or acquaintances in the area have helped you out?

J: Yes, we almost always help each other when there is a problem—everyone gets involved. – Jimena, 42

The willingness to get involved with work colleagues, but only up to a certain point, highlights the extent to which people identify with and are able to support each other. Other women spoke of casual communication among workers:

Yes in everything I work alone, I don't have any friends, yes I'll ask questions. When I have doubt and have to ask about something, but from there I'll ask, maybe I'll talk with them a little and I'm listening and I get in the conversation, but afterwards I separate, or rather, I don't walk in groups...I walk alone. – Catalina, 52

Walking alone also suggests some logical sense that workers are trying to best position themselves to meet clients. Nevertheless, casual communication between workers still creates informal connections. Others have stronger connections with other workers, where they advise colleagues to adapt to certain behaviors. Violeta, 48 is a mother of six children, the majority of whom are adults, except for an eight-year-old daughter who lives with her family members. She speaks of the many life challenges that brought her to the *zona roja*, where she now struggles daily to at least make the 5,000 Colones a day she needs to pay for the room she rents each day. In explaining her current challenges, Support between work friends, she explains, can extend to work talk and advice regarding condom use:

I have said: 'Maria, use a condom, tell the men to put it on—look I have condoms, tell them to use them!' - and she says, 'Ah, they don't want to' - they don't want to use

condoms, so—‘ay Maria! I won’t, it scares me’ I have always used condoms, see? – Violeta, 48

While some women emphasized health advice through the sharing of information about condoms, Irene spoke of her many friendships that developed in her years as a sex worker:

MK: Do you have friends from work who have shown you any support?

I: Yes, of course, economically and emotionally. They have given me money for food, for bus passes and to have fun. They have loaned me their clients (laughter)... Very good relationships, even interpersonal relationships. I am a person who loves quickly, but I’m also really hateful, there are people who I really don’t like, but I am also human, but yes, I have had very good friends. – Irene, 45

Friendship and common experiences are the foundation for going beyond the informal and casual conversation to being willing to talk about or speak out against injustices. Many women spoke of support between workers when one was unable to make enough money for housing or for food:

Aha, well, because we all know each other and some help each other, but not with money—there are sometimes when—the other Saturday, I went with Kathy, she took me home, because I didn’t make the 5,000 Colones for the lady of the house (where I rent), so I couldn’t go to the house to the room because the woman won’t let me enter, so I had to go with her to hers, crying, so she took me home saying, ‘lets go to the house;’ she gave to me a place to stay, so I wouldn’t wake up in the street. -Violeta, 48

When asked whether she had ever received support from other sex workers, Jimena replied:

No, well—well, when I was broke, she helped me economically, when I have had it, I have given it to her, when she has it, she has given it to me. Yes, in December, I gave her a humble gift and she gave me something. And that’s how it is, if I have something and they are hungry and they haven’t made any money, I will take them to eat--and on another day that I am hungry, they will take me to eat. – Jimena, 42

Economic support between women highlights the small, but reliable safety net that exists for work colleagues and friends. Another example for which this is true is Abril, who is one of 25 children. Born in the countryside, her parents never enrolled her in a school. As a girl of 12, she experienced a violent rape by an adult man that left her pregnant. Her father forced her to marry the rapist. At 18, she left her husband and the two children he fathered. A second marriage, at 18, was to a violent man, who physically abused her. She later left and began as a novice in

work in sex work at 19. Now, at 72, she occasionally sees a long-term client. She has one daughter, who is also a sex worker who primarily services tourists. She discussed the kinds of support that can exist between sex workers:

MK: Do you want to tell me about anything that has happened to you with a friend or an associate?

A: Yes, recently when Rosita was sick and everything, I went to visit her, I helped her with things because, well, these are situations that can happen to anyone, so its nice to help your compañeras. - Abril, 72

Emilia, on the other hand, does not believe she has any friends in her community:

Here you cannot trust anyone really, truly...maybe there are good people, but its a lie, in reality, in Costa Rica, I have found very few people here that I can say, these are friends! —Aside from Susana, no--Susana always took me to her house. I know her children and everything. I have lived in the house of her daughters, I have worked for one of her daughters, too, but in the world, no, nothing happens, at least here I haven't found that they tell you that someone is your friend, no, I don't have friends. – Emilia, 49

Although Emilia insists she has not found trustworthy friends, she also describes a relationship with another woman in the area, whose daughter has invited her into her home and employed her. Though she does not consider many people to be what she perceives as a friend, she still highlights a relationship of support. Luna reflects a different perspective, altogether having affirmed having sex worker friends. Furthermore, she also shares a sense of similar experiences with other workers:

MK: Do you identify with the experiences of other sex workers?

L: Yes, of course we identity between us. In fact, in the program that I am in, at La Sala, many sex workers come as the program is for the attention of sex workers and we identify with them. I identify with them a lot, in spite of that. I am not really working as an active sex worker now, but I identify with them because I also lived through what they are living now. – Luna, 51

In addition, some sex workers make an effort to provide financial support for colleagues during difficult times:

M: Is there any type of support that you have seen between the women?

Carolina: "Yes, like we say when a family member dies or a woman is sick, we gather (money), to help her, yes, between us all, we help out like this." - Carolina

In identifying with other workers in the community, the women are more likely to have a shared sense of identity or community. In this case, negative work experiences related to those common among sex workers in experiencing harassment, stigma or discrimination by family or friends, all add to the sense of shared identity, even if informally. Hanchard (2006), notes that, "The concept of politics at work here involves individuals and groups with a disparate set of interests and subject positions, dominant and subordinate, who are in conflict and competition over goods, services and resources" (30). Although sex workers compete for clients, there is a distinct thoughtfulness among many of them, which is manifested in the shared positions with the others, which reveals that informal communities can develop from a sense of commonality and mutual support. This represents an engagement with the political and cultural realm.

In the case of the examples above, in noting that sex workers' friends and work colleagues with whom women are willing to invite home, invite to eat, share access to support and resources, reflects a certain level of friendship and support that is visible even among informal co-workers. Shared experiences of stigma and discrimination, whether they are personal experiences, are not bound to affect the broader community, as these stories are shared, even among small groups of informal friends. Negative experiences associated with stigma and discrimination also play roles, both in establishing solidarity and a sense of common identity. While the examples of actual actions and spaces for political resistance in this chapter are about interactions with the clients or police, they also reflect a broad array of spaces in which women have to speak up, or back to, injustice. In this case, sex workers' experiences with the police color their interactions with other sex workers, which in turn affects perceptions and expectations of police interactions with sex workers. This creates spaces where the development of informal

identity, or a sense of friendship can occur. These are also the space where individual acts of resistance--speaking back to the police in the assertion of rights, or demanding payment for work--are manifested. Sex workers, in sharing of their lived experiences, help to affirm other workers' demands for greater recognition of their rights and protections.

Acts of Resistance

When Magdalena was a high school student, her father was killed in an accident. She dropped out of school to work and help her mother care for her younger siblings. At 18, she met the father of her children. When Magdalena had her first child, she realized that her partner's idea of supporting his family was to move them into his mother's house. After the birth of her second child, she returned to her mother's home. Before starting as a sex worker, she worked as domestic worker, where she found the work to be backbreaking and exploitative. Here she describes how she found her voice to defend herself in an interaction with a police officer:

Two months ago, a police officer from around here brought me in. I was standing in front of a bar when she sees me and says, 'can you come with me?'—I was alone and so I asked her why--and she told me--'its that we have an order that you accompany me,' and so I say, 'ok, lets go'—he who doesn't owe isn't afraid—and when I am going to pass, I'm crossing, she pushes me! So that really upset me that she pushed me, so I told her, 'you don't have to push me, I can walk alone! You don't have any reason to touch me.' So she turned and told me, 'how disgusting! I don't like touching prostitutes!' and she did this (shows how the police wiped herself off), and she said, 'more like it, it disgusts me to touch prostitutes.' And I said, 'and what are you?' She replied, 'I work with honor' and something else, and I said, 'well, who knows, I would have to see that'...and she came and she looked through all my stuff and she tells me to drop my pants and I told her, 'no, I'm not going to.' I told her, 'if you want, you can take me to a doctor to do an exam.' And so she tells me, 'then I'm going to leave you here a long time'—'that's not important to me.' I told her, 'you don't need to be disrespecting me—I am a woman just like you and I'm not going to drop my underwear, I'm not interested!'—So she tells me, 'well don't do it, then--can't you see that you all disgust us?'" – Magdalena, 46

Magdalena's interaction with the female police officer and her outright refusal to accept the officer's verbal or physical harassment or stigma, is significant because it demonstrate resistance

politics through her willingness to speak out in the face of the officers discrimination. A series of small acts by sex workers have the potential to add up and render important effects, as do actions that speak to their own interests or serve as advocacy on behalf of other workers.

Magdalena's bold interaction with the police officer and refusal to tolerate her highhanded verbal abuse was risky. Confronting insecure officials, who wield the power vested in them by the state is dangerous for all but the rich, and especially so for sex workers, who are seldom accorded the rights and privileges held out to "respectable" citizens. Magdalena decided to speak out rather than remain silent. As Hanchard notes, "Actors engaged in coagulate politics minimize risks and loss, retreating into the hidden transcripts of their private sphere lives, without assuming that their activities should lead into public mobilization in the form of collective action"(34). Though Magdalena choose to respond to the police officer who took her to the police station, her actions do not necessarily commit her to participation in greater political action around sex workers and police. Magdalena's memory of the experience, however and willingness to share this experience with other sex workers, can create new and different ties of identification with other sex workers who have similarly experienced discrimination or abuse at the hands of police officers. Former sex worker Luna, comments on defending other sex workers from police abuse:

MK: In any moment as a sex worker, have you suffered any problems with the police?

L: "Yes, I have suffered problems with the police, because, more than anything, I was always really calm as a sex worker, in spite of not studying because I really only went to the sixth grade in school, I have been very educated and wise—In other words I don't have to scream or mess around or send someone to hell or any of these things that some of my compañeras did and these types, with their uniforms and abuse of power treated them poorly many times, and so I always got involved to defend them. That they mistreated me, or treated me bad or took me away because I was in sex work? No, never. The problem with police always was more than anything to defend other compañeras. — Luna, 51

Citizens' willingness to engage the police, to interact with and assert rights, shows that people

will push back against what they perceive to be unjust interactions with the state. Although we cannot ignore the question of scale when considering acts of resistance, as people share their experiences with their friends or colleagues they develop a more collective identity, which nurtures the idea of shared experience and identification. The more people talk about this experience of stigma, the more likely they are to share frustrations about these experiences, even if they are not personal experiences. Hanchard notes this effect, “As a result, individuals from various group clusters, not just racially coded ones, activate a sense of injustice or outrage against an imminent or ongoing process of selective discrimination to reform, in macro-political terms, the process to increase the likelihood that the outcome will be more favorable to the less powerful participants” (34). The collection of these individual responses can move in the direction of overall change, due both to the unplanned nature of acts of coagulation and to growing solidarity, which can result in more actions. Luna describes working at a massage parlor with her sister where they shared a difficult client:

MK: Have you ever had an experience where you were treated you badly because of the work?

L: "In the three years that I was really working, I was treated very well, thank God—I only had one problem with one guy with a sister of mine. He invited us to the room and we went with him- my sister was with him and I was too and when we left—it was the custom that the client paid before going up to the room or the massage salon – the client had to pay first. That day the guy didn't pay because there was a lot of trust, the owner of the location had a lot of trust with him and he never thought that day that there was a risk of him not paying. He didn't want to pay—so when we went down, we said, ‘ok, now you can pay us’ because we also would just try to collect the money immediately. So we said, ‘ok, pay us now’ and he says, ‘pay what? I didn’t go with you anywhere’—the guy was half drunk and he didn’t want to pay and we were going to go to the southern zone to see our Dad who was sick, and so we had decided that after work, we were going to go on the 10 p.m. bus leaving from San José to the border, arriving there the next day. This guy didn't want to pay and didn't want to pay and didn't want to pay—and this was at around 8 o' clock at night at that time, so we waited for him outside and I jumped on top of him and I grabbed him and kicked and hit him and I took his wallet and I took the money that corresponded to us and the guy says, ‘no!’—The guy jumps on top of me and we get into it like we hadn’t before—I grabbed him and I split his eyebrow, I gave him a slap! So ugly, so ugly that I split his eyebrow, it was bleeding down his face--the guy

says, 'no! - Leave the wallet' - and I say, 'no, I only want what belongs to my sister and to me in this—here take your wallet.' This was the only disappointment that I remember that was ugly, ugly, that happened to us - or that happened to me-but not after that, or rather, after that, no nothing." – Luna

This story of a client who refused to pay ended in a physical altercation where the worker was able to take the payment owed to her and her sister. In searching for spaces where workers push back against violence or victimization, this is a story of sisters working together and of workers who refused to back down when cheated. Whether one should support their physical response is not for the writer to suggest, but rather to note the spaces where workers pushed back. In some cases, workers encounter such clients as the drunk Luna referenced in her account, in other cases, the willingness to fight back makes a difference in workers' stories, including those of surviving violence. Olivia discussed sex workers who had to carry a health identification card to prove they had been examined for sexually transmitted infections. While this practice ended in 1995 Olivia speaks to the threats of raids and of being detained by the police.

MK: In any moment as a sex worker did you have any problems with the police for being a sex worker?

O: Of course! I've had to fight also—I was the first woman, I think, who put a complaint against the police in the Advocates for the People.

MK: Yes?

O: Yes, because the police before... (look the arrived) to the businesses and they would detain all the women, they did raids! They would go into the businesses without permission, they would bring cameras, the TV channels with journalists so that they would take pictures, they would throw open the doors of the rooms with the journalists so they could get the women naked and the men, it was frightening! They would take us... One time they detained me in Alajuela for not having the document from the Health Ministry because before it was demanded that we go to the Ministry of Health to do exams and to have a license and if the police came by to demand it--and we did not have it--they would take you to jail--because I didn't know my rights, you see, I didn't know that in our political constitution there is an article that says that no person can be detained without having committed a crime, if you are not committing some scandal in the street. Well they knew and they violated our rights—the thing is, they detained me on a Friday night at 9 p.m., until Saturday at like 3 p.m. in the afternoon in cells, hungry, cold—what a horror! Afterwards in Guapiles, in Limon Province, we would go every Saturday to work at a business there and at 3 p.m. in the afternoon; there were a bunch of police on patrol to detain us. They pursued us throughout the whole hotel—that was a witch-hunt.

Well, starting after I began to come to La Sala and learn my rights, then one day, I rebelled and I said, 'I'm going to denounce these police, because this is too much abuse and I went to the Advocates for the People, a institution that is here to defend the rights of Costa Ricans. I put in a complaint and they even dismissed a police officer as a result.
–Olivia

Olivia shares a story where she uses interesting language to describe her refusal to take police abuse—“I rebelled.” This is an explicit response to refusing to put up with certain treatment while trying to work. Olivia’s willingness to employ what she learned about her rights led her to be proactive and to submit a formal complaint against the police who detained her. Olivia's report, especially in light of other women’s experiences with violent clients and police, highlights another way to address the issue and to affirm sex workers rights.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored some of the issues in the literature on sex work on formally organizing sex workers and the challenges associated with it. In addition, the threat of violence and the nature of policing around prostitution demean workers and deprive them of status as human beings. As such, they waiver between victimhood and anxiety over the blame and guilt associated with participation in the sex industry. As they experience stigma and discrimination as sex workers, they are likely to share their experiences with other friends and work colleagues. Any experiences shared are added to a sentiment of solidarity among street sex workers who share similar risks and challenges. These feelings and sentiments may actually result in some sort of individual action, in what Hanchard (2006), defines as coagulate politics. Hanchard notes, “But in the case of actual human beings engaged in the politics of labor, their modes of resistance are more akin to individual repertoires at different times and places, rather than stances undertaken collectively and most important, simultaneously” (59). Thus, in the case of individuals and their potential for resistant actions and behaviors vary widely, yet collectively

may actually challenge the existing social system or the status quo. For example, the accounts given by Magdalena, who spoke back to the police officer, or Luna, who defended other sex workers from the injustice of the police. These small and sometimes individual acts represent the potential power of small acts, not in their direct response to the police per se, but in the power of the news shared about the experiences. An assertion of rights is brave and stories about it can inspire others to invest in actions. There is a sense of shared identity that comes as a result of sharing stories, where the law, experiences of harassment, stigma and violence, all work to shape the sense of common identity.

In the face of competition, stigma, marginalization and necessity, there remain spaces for seeing and identifying with the experiences of others. In any capitalist framework, success in the sex industry is based on direct competition with other workers. This can lead to the sense that sex workers are natural enemies, where clients can be ‘stolen’ from one another and where most other women cannot be trusted. Instead, there are formal and informal spaces where this narrative of distrust is actively dismantled. La Sala's organizer's addressed this issue within the context of group empowerment. The project's manual published in 2000, explains, “...we have needs and interests in common, that permit us to organize and obtain large changes and achievements in our favor. Because of this, we believe it is important to create consciousness in the strength of solidarity and to reinforce positive feelings in order to begin to construct distinct forms of relating with each other” (Van Wijk, 60). Just as La Sala works to instill a sense of solidarity amongst sex workers, these moments of solidarity and recognition of broader injustices against sex workers play a role as well. While a shared sense as sex workers may ultimately begin to shape a common identity, similar experiences can lead to solidarity development among sex workers, which is key to both informal and formal expressions of organizing.

Chapter 3- La Sala: Empowerment Politics in Theory and Action

Introduction

La Sala had finally received some funding. Finally. After almost six months since the start of my fieldwork there, a grant came through. At this point in time, the women of La Sala had been leading the project alone for about nine months. While they previously had both professional and academic leadership running the project, the women were now on their own, both leading the project, maintaining community ties, and seeking project funding. There were supposed to be a number of grants in the pipeline to the project, but the dates on receiving funds continued to be pushed back. With the expected funding, La Sala leadership planned to pay five months of back rent for their space and finally begin work on a new project. The women planned to create a network of sex worker organizations within Costa Rica. This follows a model exemplified by RedTraSex, an international network of sex worker organizations in Latin America, to which La Sala is a member, along with the Argentine sex worker organization *AMMAR: Asociación Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina en Acción por Nuestros Derechos*. An organization of sex workers in Argentina founded in 1994 to defend the rights of sex workers that has nine branches of its organization. Similarly to AMMAR, La Sala organizers want to develop other branches of their group in order to develop a national network of sex worker organizations within Costa Rica. Members affirm that there are many sex workers throughout the country, and that they remain largely unorganized.

Over a weekend in June of 2012, project coordinator Alba Tomas, drove the three main organizers of the project and myself to the south of Costa Rica to the Panamanian border, to the town on the Costa Rican border, Paso Canoas. It was decided that this location, six hours south from the capital city of San José, would host the first workshop organized *for and by* sex

workers. They received funding from United Nations AIDS to do workshops focused on HIV/STI prevention methods with other sex workers. The town seems to have sprung around and out from the centrally located border crossing. Strip malls and market booths line the streets with goods that were marketed as cheaper deals than you could find in the capital. This was the second trip I made with the conference organizers to the town, the first occurring two weeks prior, when the organizers went to make the initial plans for a workshop. On the first trip, the first stop was to Bar Felix, a small bar and brothel who had about 10 men and women in it at the time. The jukebox played loud Dominican *bachatas* as La Sala leaders, Carolina, Alba and Inez went directly to the bar to find the manager. They quickly found Evangeline, the Panamanian bar manager, and they proposed the idea of the workshop. The manager invited the women to go around back so that they could explain things more comfortably and face to face, rather than across the bar. The leaders explained their intention for the workshop as well as goal for the sex worker network. Almost to the surprise of the leaders, Evangeline quickly agreed to participate and assured the attendance of 25 women; more women than there had even been funding for. The leadership was determined to make it work and the commitment to deliver participants to the workshop excited the leaders, who promised to return in two weeks time. That night, the commitment of attendees, along with easily locating and reserving space for the event, were both swift and meaningful achievements. The project idea, funding, and planning represented a major accomplishment for the women of La Sala. It was the first event they had created, run and organized by themselves: the new sex worker leadership.

When I first went to La Sala, I found three women bravely holding down the project. Apparently, this was a far cry from the project in older days of more consistent funding. As I would come to learn during my fieldwork, La Sala, like many non-profit organizations,

experienced positive moments where the funding was available and abundant to the point of being able to offer services like free visits with a psychologist, workshops and holiday celebrations for sex workers and their families. It is also faced difficult moments in which they had to close their doors, due to a lack of funds. In January 2012, the lack of funding whittled down La Sala's consistent participation to three remaining members who believed in the project enough to struggle to continue to keep the doors open. As Alba once told me, "somos las ultimas sobrevivientes del proyecto" (We are the last survivors of the project). This was an appropriate way to describe the membership at the time.

For the majority of La Sala's existence, it was an organization *for* sex workers, with the professional staff in leadership positions. Sex workers have long been connected to the project as volunteers. The current story of La Sala is about the partnerships between sex workers as organizers, active agents in their process of education and empowerment and/or as service users of La Sala, and their connection to professionals and academics, which both started and ran the project for the majority of its existence. The start of 2012 at La Sala was the point in time in which La Sala finally became an organization *for* and *by* sex workers, meeting a project goal set out in the 1997 La Sala Project Manual's "Cycle of Empowerment". The cycle is *wellbeing* (providing resources to the population), *access* (being able to access the resources), *consciousness raising* (critically analyze discrimination), *participation* (having the population involved be a part of their own process of defining needs and project goals), and control (with the group running the project and defining the direction of the project) (Van Wijk, 11). The recent transition to sex worker leadership is due to a number of reasons including, strained project finances, tensions between the sex worker participants and the professional³ leadership,

³ I use professional to note people with degrees in specific range of expertise who have run aspects of the project over time, including but limited to social worker, academic or medical doctor.

and the lack of leadership and decision making abilities by the sex workers in the project. Furthermore, La Sala's participation in the transnational Latin American sex worker network RedTraSex, whose leadership also played a role in both pushing and encouraging La Sala members to become the leadership at their project, and to become an organization *by* sex workers, rather than what they had been historically: an organization *for* sex worker.

The goal of this chapter is to explore the issues of empowerment and leadership at the project, especially as they relate to the shift in leadership. It became the goal of the project founders, Dutch social worker Karina Van Wijk and researcher Rudie van den Berg, that sex workers eventually lead the project. Professional leadership ran the project during the years it ran from 1993-2011. This leadership transition took place in 2011, after 17 years of existence, which begs the question of why it took so long for sex workers to become the leaders at La Sala. This chapter explores the goals and objectives of the project, in addition to what occurred in the leadership roles, as both potentially empowering and disempowering experiences for sex workers at La Sala.

Empowerment is now a popular term to reference everything from personal growth, to the success of collective struggles. It is used both in social justice circles and academic texts, from popular culture to self-help. Though it is becoming more common in colloquial language, it is often unclear what empowerment actually is, or what an empowered person or community look like. I will consider contemporary texts on empowerment that frame it as a process, and explore it through the lens of La Sala. The relationship between professionals and sex workers at the project highlights an aspect of the organizing and the politics at sex worker centered organizations like these, sometimes referred to as a mixed organization, meaning that it is comprised of both professional staff and sex workers. An exploration of the complexities of

leadership and empowerment processes in theory and practice at La Sala highlights through one case study, sex worker leadership in a mixed organization. It is not uncommon for a project or organization to have or employ professional staff if they have the funds to do so, but rather, the point of significance here is about the development of sex worker leadership and project management.

Following this general introduction this chapter addresses what empowerment concepts looks like in theory and in praxis. Thus, this chapter takes a unique approach to the literature by addressing the behind-the-scenes organizational practices that affect leadership development and empowerment processes for sex workers at La Sala. The subsection on practice is divided into a discussion of the original formation of the La Sala organization; an analysis of the leadership; organizational transformation; and a brief analysis of empowerment in action.

Theories of Empowerment

Empowerment is a concept that is used throughout various fields, from questions around collective action and social movement building to the language of development. Often times the word is used without providing a clear understanding of what empowerment is or looks like. How can we tell when we are encountering an empowered person? Rowlands (1997) explains the concept as related to various types of power, “In this framework, empowerment can be classified as a process in which people gain power over (resisting manipulation), power to (creating new possibilities), power with (acting in a group) and power from within (enhancing self- respect and self-acceptance)” (Rowland’s in Samman and Santos, 8). In most circumstances, it is clear that empowerment is about a transfer of power from people who apparently understand it, or have access to it, to people who do not. This process can be individual or community based. In the

Research for Sex Work Newsletter's Empowerment Issue (2000) empowerment is generally reflected by a play on three different types: personal, social and community empowerment. In Rowlands (1997) and Van Wijk (2000) note that though this concept is translated into Spanish as *empoderamiento*, it is still a bulky translation that is not universally understood. Rowlands suggests that the concept is more closely related to Friere's (1970) '*conscientisation*', translated to English as 'consciousness raising'. In consciousness-raising, the community itself has to find its own solutions to its problems. Rowlands (1997) reflects that this concept highlights, "individuals becoming subjects in their own lives and developing a critical consciousness- that is, an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment, that leads to action"(16) With both terms, the result of a heightened recognition of what is happening in the broader world, and the individuals connection/role in this larger world, is representative of a political process that affectively becomes political when people connect to others. Empowerment is often described as a process that is both internal and external (Rowlands 1997).

There are many interesting writings on the empowerment concept, as well as critiques of its intent to give power to people without power. Agustín (1988) reflects on the term:

A word used by those who view themselves as fighters for social justice, *empowerment* is the current politically correct way to talk about helping. But *empower* is a transitive verb whose subject is the person doing the empowering a technology aimed at "constituting active and participatory citizens" and simultaneously linking subjects with their own subjection (158).

This highlights the potential problematic in that people, who seem to have a lack of access to what we consider to be 'power', need people who have more resources (in educational attainment, access to funding, ties to a non-governmental organization (NGO), etc.), to teach or awaken to their individual or collective power. It highlights the idea that there is a certain amount of power, and that with the right trainings or activities, those without power can be

taught, or trained to activate, engage, or take power. This seems to highlight an important class distinction around the concept.

Other scholars have been explicit in making the connections around consciousness-raising as a distinctly political process. This is important to be explicit about the potential political outcomes of the process:

Consciousness-raising is also a collective activity, not only because speaking is a social activity, but because anger becomes a political resource only when it is collective. Consciousness-raising begins with the claiming of public space and political language for what were private feelings and personal sorrows... Public space is necessary to consciousness-raising in order that the process of becoming angry can be recovered by the collectivity as part of its own past... The psychological symptom is transformed into a political issue in that it reflects a collective experience. (Lyman, Peter 1981:69 in Boler, 115)

This reflects the importance of emotions and personal experiences in the making of a political process. This is the process of making individual experiences a part of a larger collective experience that is representative of a process of politicization. It highlights the very important issue of public space to be, and the language to express what their main issues are in connection to an assertion of rights. This is reflected at La Sala with a major portion of their struggle related to maintaining the project space.

The empowerment and consciousness raising processes can be considered when reflecting on people's attempts to increase their own personal and collective empowerment. In the case of sex workers and empowerment, how does the process work? Who is the empowered sex worker? There is growing literature on sex workers organizations, self-advocacy and activism that address the development, leadership, and progression of these movements (Agustín 1988, Berger 2004, Cabezas 2009, Chapkis 1997, Garofello 2010, Jenness 1993, Kempadoo and Doezema 1998, Laverack and Whipple 2010, Majic 2010). Much sex worker activism since the 90's has been engaged by and around the HIV epidemic as sex workers' desire to have a more

active role on how national and international policies, prevention practices and policing affects sex workers practices and rights. This has had both positive and negative externalities for the sex workers community as a movement. It has positively engaged and politicized sex workers as agents and peer educators around issues like health and human rights. In the current moment, a consequence of this is, is that most access to funding is often solely through the lens of organizations tend to receive is around the question of HIV/AIDS. The benefit is the positive information being spread within the sex worker community, though negatively, it also continues to focus on sex workers as central to prevention nodes in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This has an effect of making it difficult to develop other projects within these organizations besides those that deal with HIV/AIDS. Cabezas (2009) notes that sex workers are highly surveilled people around public health concerns, and so it makes sense that health is the primary way in which sex worker organizations receive access to funding, but also reflects a limitation on project development. They are often the targets for education and prevention programs, and as a consequence, this remains an primary way these types of groups are able to receive funding. In an article exploring sex workers, HIV prevention, and empowerment, Wolffers (2000) finds that the constant focus on HIV may actually be disempowering for sex workers, while others who focus on the question of empowerment rarely consider the professionalization of sex work as empowering. Professionalizing sex work would also certainly include improved working conditions, and Wolffers says that this is a possible source for empowerment. Professionalization could lead to increased power over working conditions, including condom enforcement. Interestingly, many sex worker interviewees in my sample noted that they as workers had received numerous trainings on sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV prevention, and many interviewees asserted that it was their male clients need greater education on HIV/AIDS

and consistent condom use. The continued financial focus on HIV prevention affects the extent to which different organizations are able to develop to include other foci for project expansion.

Other literature around sex worker empowerment focuses on political changes around sex work. Whipple and Laverack (2010) make explicit connections between New Zealand sex workers organizing to their ability to affect that countries political process, leading to increased health resources and eventual legalization of sex work. Sex worker organizing led to a push to be more engaged in the political process to push for more rights. The authors reflect, “Giving sex workers the power to run their own organization has resulted in improved partnerships and relationships with law enforcement, politicians, public health officials, and with society at large” (37). The informal process that first engaged these workers to meet informally to share in their experiences, over time led to a politicization and desire to more broadly affect political change around sex work. In this article, the sex workers go from being described as powerless people, to empowered people as a result of their political successes. This highlights the importance of both agency and self-determination in organizing on ones own behalf. This allows space for people to have a say in what happens within their community. In this case, organizing was important to the empowerment process, though the real test of achieving power was whether they were able to engage with the political system.

In the case of La Sala, its foundation rests firmly rooted in the framework that sex work is work, and that these workers need improved working conditions. La Sala has always emphasized a need for solidarity amongst the women as people, and as workers, and as participants in the project. There has been a lot either written about La Sala as a project, or many articles that have used the space as a base to meet sex workers to conduct projects more broadly on sex workers. *The Project Manual* (Van Wijk, 2000) serves as the theoretical and practical guide for the

project. It was written six years after the organization began, putting into words the theoretical framework the project was founded on, as well as includes a plethora of activities to be done with sex workers to work on the various themes, including empowerment and leadership development. In reflecting on sex worker leadership at the project, Van Wijk writes:

Control, as the last step in the process of empowerment, is the expected result of La Sala. As it was mentioned before, through the work that has been done and that is being done now, it is intended that the same sex workers assume the direction of the project and that they come together as a group of their own. Currently there exists a group of sex workers who are in the process of preparation to take control of the project in the middle term (7).

The manual presents practical activities for empowerment development, self-esteem building, and leadership trainings that were all representative of various leadership and empowerment trainings. La Sala represents an interesting site for study, and I will rely on other studies and articles completed at La Sala to explore the question of empowerment and control. There are other writings on the project, including five university theses, including the work of Vargas (2012) and García and Rodríguez (2012) of whose work I will refer to throughout this chapter.

Organizational Formation

The Asociación La Sala was born out a project from the *Instituto Latinoamericano de Prevención y Educación* (ILPES-The Latin American Institute of Prevention and Education), an organization based out of Holland that targeted sex workers for education on HIV/AIDS, sexuality education and self esteem building. La Sala itself was based on an organization of the same name in Holland. The initial project plan for La Sala was to create a series of workshops for a group of sex workers that could later be replicated and shared through them with other sex workers (Van Wijk, 4). From there, the cycle of education around HIV prevention could be shared between workers, and could potentially extend though multiple groups of women, as well

as to the to clients (Carvajal 2012). The primary objective of La Sala was to prevent HIV infection in sex workers. It was not long before the goal of the project grew to address women's empowerment "La Sala considers it essential to work with individual and group empowerment as an indispensable element to achieve that they not only feel good, but in obtaining more self-determination, they take on being sex workers and fight for their rights" (Van Wijk, 5). Thus individual and group empowerment has long been a primary goal of the project, along with a greater struggle for rights. Since the beginning, the idea for the project was to provide services to this community of women, but to also include them in leadership roles in the project, to politicize women about the broader conditions in which they work, including but not limited to an analysis on gender roles and double standards, patriarchy and labor politics. From the start, the long-term vision for the project was for the women to one day lead the project. The project was to help inspire self-determination and encourage women to fight for their rights, both as women and as sex workers. Though the goal for the project has always been that the sex workers take an active role in the running of the organization; from serving on the board, to working as volunteers, to training to be leaders (Van Wijk, 2000). The goals of sex worker empowerment and leadership are summed up in the Cycle of Empowerment: *wellbeing, access, consciousness raising, participation and control* (Van Wijk, 6).



Figure 3- The *Cycle of Empowerment* as described by Van Wijk (2000), where individual and group empowerment processes are represented through these points.

The project goals include themes that are related to social justice and movement building. Besides HIV prevention and education around sexually transmitted infections, there are direct goals around the empowerment of the women as individuals and as a group, and to build solidarity between sex workers (Van Wijk, 5). These goals are directly related to the politicization of the women as individuals in the way they think of their work, as well as how they think collectively about sex work. Van Wijk (2000) notes the difficulty of this for a number of reasons including the socialization of women to be competitive with one another, the inherent competitiveness of the location and the work, and the double standard around sex workers that can have an effect on women’s self-esteem. This double moral allows men to visit sex workers, but blames and stigmatizes women for being sex workers. This acts as an additional factor limiting women’s willingness to “come out” as sex workers. All these factors have a direct effect on whether women were or are able to become organized and politicized around the project. Arguably the women who have stayed involved with the project have been affected and

energized by the goals of the project. They are after all, the people who completed the Project's Cycle of Empowerment by making the decision to *control* the project.

As an organization, La Sala can be described and imagined in very different ways. It serves as a mix of a service provider to the women who work in San Jose's Zona Roja. La Sala will work with other organizations, state health services, and volunteers who want to provide free public health services to women in the community. For example, La Sala hosted Costa Rican Social Security to provide free HIV/STI testing, a day a week for six-weeks. Alba Tomas, the project coordinator, has described La Sala as a civil society organization due to the services they provide and work they do in the community. In the past, La Sala has had numerous workshops, services, and events for women working in the Zona Roja. At one point, La Sala was able to provide inexpensive dental visits for the women of the community at La Sala, along with visits with a psychologist, and a number of events and celebrations for women and their families, including a mother's day event, movie nights and holiday parties.

La Sala's existence has also been tumultuous, especially as it relates to staffing the project and funding it. It has sometimes landed successful grants, allowing for various programs and services for the women, and other times has been devoid of grants, and has been funded by the women themselves. Similar to other organizations with staying power, there are a lot of stories as well as myths that exist around it, how people perceive it, and how it started. La Sala is simultaneously central and peripheral to the community of sex workers who work around it, both spatially in the *zona roja*, as a service provider, and as a comfortable and safe place for workers to rest, warm up a meal, or use the restroom. The consistently changing workers in the area, means that La Sala members have to continuously try and introduce new workers to the presence of organization and the project goals. The challenges of funding, changing leadership, and fewer

services at La Sala has made it difficult to attract new volunteers to become part of the organizing team of La Sala. La Sala is very unique type of organization because it is both socio-political in nature, working to organize and empower sex workers, through workshops and trainings, and also tries to provide services to the local population of sex workers including health screenings and workshops.

Leadership

The current leadership of La Sala are the trio Alba Tomas, Inez Manuel, and Carolina Rivera. Alba is a 51-year-old mother, grandmother, and owner of a small corner store in the front of her house. She is the coordinator of the project. She has been involved in community leadership, having served on neighborhood councils in her community. She has been the coordinator of La Sala for 12 years, and has been connected to the project since 1998, originally attracted to the project through the inexpensive dentist services that were provided through the group. Her family and community are aware of her role at the project. She is very proud of the group and her work and dedication to the goals of the project. Since the La Sala's transition to sex worker leadership, she successfully got the other leaders a job distributing condoms and doing male and female condom demonstrations in the brothels in the city. Inez is 45-year-old mother of five, a grandmother, and has been a part of the project for at least 14 years. She is an extremely expressive leader of the project. She is deeply committed to the project, and is one of the few sex workers I met who was very vocally "out" about sex work and her work with La Sala. She and Alba have both appeared on television, in newspapers and magazines representing La Sala. Carolina Rivera is a 50-year-old, a mother of two, and grandmother. She is very warm welcoming and kind to those who go to La Sala, and people have an affinity for her as a result.

All three women have remained connected and dedicated to the project, through its ups and downs, including the split from previous project president, and the tumult of project funding.

The original president and coordinator of the project was Karina Van Wijk, a Social Worker from Holland, she was extremely dedicated to the project. While I did not have the opportunity to meet with her personally, others people spoke very highly of her commitment, highlighting her dedication to the perseverance of the project. As the author of the project manual, she notes the difficulties in being successful at this because the project was foreign, and so was she. Furthermore, Karina Van Wijk is a social worker by profession. She both facilitated service provision to the women and tried to motivate change and empowerment efforts through workshops and the creation of a safe space at La Sala. Her level of education, professionalization, and nationality differentiated her from the women who the project was for. Many women from in and around the project spoke very fondly of her and her work, and her down to earth nature and comfort in moving around the brothels, and reaching out to the workers there. She has been described as kind, non-judgmental and committed. Arguably, Van Wijk came from an experience in the Netherlands where sex work is legal and regulated, and perhaps the population is more accepting in terms of its view on sex work as labor. The presence and work of La Sala has made inroads into public thinking about sex work in San José that have been visible both in coverage of the project on television and in the print media.

Like many organizations La Sala has consistently needed to seek outside support and funding throughout their existence. La Sala President Van Wijk first reached out for help to the University of Costa Rica (UCR) in 1995, and she did so in an effort to garner direct support in the form of student volunteers. UCR graduates must all commit 300 hours of mandatory volunteer work with a community organization in order to graduate. This is known as *Trabajo*

Comunal Universitario (communal university work). Van Wijk coordinated with UCR Philosophy Professor Alvaro Carvajal to create a TCU associated with La Sala, to which college students would spend time volunteering there. He served as the first TCU coordinator with La Sala for four years. When Van Wijk left La Sala as President in 2008, she tapped Carvajal to lead the project, where he spent two years as Vice President, and two as the President, 2008 to 2010. When Carvajal led La Sala and taught at UCR, Professor Jaqueline García went on to become the UCR TCU coordinator for La Sala.

Leadership Tensions

How do you develop leaders from a project that was first established to provide services to sex workers? When a project like this is created to help or provide services, and not started by the workers themselves, then the process for leadership development is different. Given that it went eighteen years without sex worker leadership, there were many challenges to the actual leadership change. It should be remembered that La Sala is low budget operation run by its volunteers. Though there are paid members in the project, the majority are volunteers,

In regards to the participation of sex workers, this is specified according to the interest of each; that can be from the participation in the programming of activities to the participation in the planning, design and execution of projects, like in the case of the volunteer teams made up of sex workers. Another great success is the participation is the incorporation of some sex workers in the coordination of La Sala who not only assume the daily interests of the project, but also functions of planning, administration and implementation and evaluation” (Van Wijk, 6).

In a mixed organization of professionals and sex workers, there may be disagreement about what makes a good leader, especially if professionals lead the project as they can maintain decision-making power about who is ready to lead and when. Why was there so much conflict about

leadership at La Sala? Which qualities would make someone a good leader and who should be in charge?

Former professional leadership at La Sala and professional intermediaries who have worked with the women at La Sala had mixed views about leadership development with the women through trainings and workshops. Various complaints from both the professionals and the sex workers at the project were reflected in the interviews. On the part of the professionals, critiques ranged from saying that La Sala volunteers had a difficult time coordinating and following through on a project, including project evaluation, that they lacked patience, the ability to manage money, or that they would not participate in meetings without leaving, phone use, greeting friends (Carvajal 2012). Former president Alvaro Carvajal critiqued the women in the project for not going to enough of the local brothels to connect with the women or invite them to La Sala. Carvajal lamented that only a few of the women would show their faces as sex workers, noting, “The stigma in Costa Rica is very strong. They don’t want to show their face for the cause. Many cannot read, it gives them shame that their families learn what they do. Many do, but in very closed circles. As much as we tried to help their discourse, the women come out with the same ideas” (Carvajal 2012). Carvajal’s critiques about the sex worker leadership extended to the women’s inability to bring other women into the project, “some women intimidate others from coming. They distinguish between the women in the streets and not and decide who they want to be there” (2012). There and that they did not have a good idea about leadership development. He additionally critiqued that even though a number of women had traveled outside of the country to countries throughout Latin America for leadership and organization trainings with RedTraSex, that much of the information they learned would stay with them, “they grew, but that the information did not grow beyond them” (2012).

TCU coordinator Dr. Jacqueline García of the *Instituto de Investigaciones en Educación de la UCR* (Institute Education Research of the University of Costa Rica) is a woman of small stature, with short modern haircut and both an inviting and direct personality. She wears bright scarves and colorful jewelry, and she easily dominates the space with her energy and focus. Students are always looking for her, and the phone in her office rings often. She is a very engaged mentor to her students, and is concerned with the experiences they have in the community work. Dr. García sees the current sex workers in charge of the project at La Sala as being both a strength and a weakness of the project (García, Interview 1, 2012). In the same sense that it is a good idea to have a sex worker lead the project, she points to some of the problems in having had the women lead the project. According to her, over the years the UCR students have given a number of workshops on development, how to do program logistics, project management, financing and managing a calendar. García explained the quantity of preparation that various groups of university student volunteers had put into trying to train members of La Sala over the years, and that many of the trainings never stuck with the women. García noted that the training sessions were repetitive and that as a consequence, the sex worker leadership was not developing as quickly as she believes they could. She notes that model of La Sala as developed by Van Wijk came out of Europe and was not originally developed with the group of women that La Sala worked with in mind. The model had been considered within a European context where women are more educated and are coming from a more liberal cultural context (García, 2012). Both Carvajal and García affirmed the need for sex worker leadership, but agreed that the transition should take place in a few more years. One reason for this is for the question of getting and managing the funds that would come into the project, and in dealing with funding agencies. A lot of the anxiety around the leadership and management of La Sala were

around managing money, including tasks like how to present receipts to funders and the state, and the risks of audits. In one experience, Alvaro Carvajal explains:

More than once I presented how you had to present the receipts, that they had to be pasted to white paper, had to have a stamp, had to be signed, more than one time and then later they didn't do it (Carvajal, 2012).

There are real benefits associated with having professionals associated with La Sala, especially those with experience in grant writing, which are primary to La Sala's ability to keep the doors open and the lights and water on. There is a certain language and strategy for applying for grants, and for many community groups, or groups without the means to pay for trained professionals, do not have the experience or training in applying for and receiving grants as this is definitely a specific set of knowledge. Thus, there is a perceived attitude that educated professionals know best as many of the sex worker participants of this study did not have the opportunity to complete primary school, and very few have had any computer access or training.⁴ It helped them to procure different avenues of funding, as there were people familiar with the grant writing processes, which is often both long and detailed. How might these specific sets of knowledge factor into developing sex worker leadership at La Sala? Within the non-for-profit world, organizations have to constantly apply for grants in order to run any programming—that is stable part of running many organizations. Needing sex workers who are 'out' are fundamental to the work, as are people with the ability to get grants.

Van Wijk (2000) spoke to a number of the experiences about leadership as discussed by Carvajal, many of which were based in the funding of the project. Van Wijk (2000) notes that there are difficulties in management at the project due to the finances, including who was and was not paid noting that this could create a feeling among the volunteers that their perspectives

⁴ In 2013 La Sala received a grant from RedTraSex to teach computer skills classes.

were not respected, that they would not be taken seriously, and affect volunteers level of motivation in the project (23). Van Wijk also noted that the economic needs of volunteers caused instability, and meant that they might leave the project for paid work. She also noted that having paid and volunteer staff made it difficult to demand punctuality and follow through, amongst other things (23). This reflects an interesting tension early in the life of the organization that reflects some of the difficulties in organizing economically marginalized women. Additionally, it notes the conflicts that exist around money, who gets paid to be in the project, and who is expected to donate their time to the project because it is their issue. The lived experience of working class and poor women means that volunteering for free presents a real challenge when they could be searching for paid work.

Sex worker volunteers continued to feel marginalized from their project in their ability to make decisions at the space, noting that they were rarely consulted. Alba notes,

Something that I saw as very strange was that it was an association or a mixed organization on its board of directors were people who are professionals, collaborators are what we call them, it was a board of directors and 80% of it were these people, and 20% were sex workers, or that's to say from 7 people, 6 people were professionals and 1 sex worker that represented the sex workers on the board of directors that they put her on more than anything for this but really it wasn't representing us really because it was just one vote no more and the rest voted and it was only her so I began to see it really badly, I didn't like it very much but many years past, 3, 4, 5 years that I came speaking and insisting with the compañeras that I didn't see it, that it didn't seem right to me-- until last year we told the president this, by the way up to that, is a man-- we told him that we didn't seem right that he was the president, that we wanted him to give us the presidency and that if he wanted to help us that he do it in the role of the vice president but he didn't accept it, since he didn't accept it we had to... we can say that we had to oust him like talk to him strongly in the assembly, to call and organize ourselves to be able to get him out, and we got him out and now we have a board of directors of only sex workers so now we can say that the organization is by sex workers for sex workers (Tomas, 2012).

In mixed organizations, if sex workers are not consulted about projects that are about them and their labor, that there may be little incentive for following through on recommendations made by the project leadership. Differences in terms of pay at the project, decision-making and project

coordination remain points of contention.

Organizational Transformation

The remaining women of La Sala recently separated from the leadership of Alvaro Carvajal in 2011. This was not an amicable split, and in the end the women left in the project voted him out of his position as president. They felt that one of the women should be the president of the project, while Carvajal refused to continue to work on their behalf if he was not in the leadership role (Carvajal, Tomas 2012). The women used their board of directors, which at that point had a number of sex workers on it, to vote him out of leadership. It seems as that the last straw with the women at La Sala really had to do with conflicts over money, who was getting paid and who was not, and leadership.

Alvaro Carvajal expressed his own frustration in trying to get organized with the volunteers, complaining that it was difficult to get the women to be consistent in their work and efforts, to be “out” at events as sex workers, or stay focused in meetings (2012). Eventually this tension became palpable for some of the women participants, leading them to start to suggest they have a sex worker leader of the project. Current Project coordinator Alba Tomas (2012) spoke to Carvajal’s leadership style:

Well he was here two years as the president for us. He helped us a lot because we presented a project and we got it and he helped us to develop it, in this he helped us...he helped us and I recognize it and I appreciate it, but in other things he was very much a despot with us, he was very.... In spite of him being very contradictory because you suppose he was there to help sex workers and it was more like we felt that he wasn’t helping us, but rather he was harming us in many ways and one of these ways was in the form of treatment towards us, that is to say he would treat us like we were his daughters, he would tell us things in front of people who were not in the organization, and would make us feel ashamed, he made us feel bad and a part from this, when we would have meetings with people from outside that would come to La Sala to meet with us, he without a thought would say that the majority of us didn’t know how to read, that we didn’t know how to write, that we didn’t know how to organize ourselves, that we

couldn't do the accounting and well, a bunch of things like this, in other words he would drag us on the ground in front of other people so we... at least I had this intention, I began to feel bad and to tell him in other spaces, for example when the two of us were alone, about how he treated us like we were stupid and we weren't stupid and if he was working on a project, he never asked as for consent or asked as our opinion or anything, how was he going to know if he were dumb if he never asked? At least he never asked me and I was the coordinator, he never called to ask me, "Alba, what do you think, is this good or bad?"-- he never did that, he just threw the document down and would send it, and now its done and by the time we knew about it, it was received, so this was something that we began to...I began to note that I didn't like it, it didn't seem right. So now, since August of last year we kicked him out of the board of directors and now we make up a board of only sex workers. This was a really huge change for the association and we feel that it was a gigantic step also because the *red* has been asking us that that we have an organization for and by sex workers (Tomas, 2012).

Alba expresses feeling patronized by the former president, and that his lack of informing her kept her out of the loop and ignorant to project plans. She also highlights how his style negatively affects leadership growth for sex workers, and that it actually makes them feel put down. This is a sentiment reflecting how sex workers can feel if there is no sex worker leadership in mixed organizations. It is reflected in other spaces, like RedTraSex literature, that highlights the importance of sex worker leadership. It highlights that non-sex worker leadership can ultimately stifle the leadership and project development skills among sex workers, "Some of us participated in the past in organizations FOR sex workers. But we noticed that we didn't take a leap. As one compañera said, 'It's been years since we've been going to trainings. How many workshops have they given us and still we have not begun to fly with our own strength?'" (Tacones Altos, 182). This highlights the very important point of when sex workers perceived as ready to lead in mixed organizations?

In my interviews, I also found tensions around leadership, money and its management at La Sala, and the difference between sex workers and professionals in the space that had previously privileged the professional's leadership role and experience in project management

and decision-making (Mata and Rodriguez 2012, Vargas 2012). At the same time, the professionals of the project complained of a lack of sufficient leadership amongst the sex workers, a loss of focus on a project or an inability to follow through on projects (2012). Is this simply the case of a feud between leaders, or representative of differences of opinion on leadership or empowerment, or rather structural issues and perspectives that did not match in practice? Mata and Rodriguez note:

Considering the prior, we can indicate that although there exists spaces for meeting for the board of the directors, volunteers and female sex workers in general, there exists an illusion of participation, then they open the space to talk, give opinions and also vote, but generally with norms of interaction proposed by the board of directors, and on occasions the women don't have a real awareness about what is being worked on (Mata and Rodriguez, 266).

The lack of communication about the project being focused on led to a lack of engagement on the part of the sex workers at the project. Professionals have served an important role in which it aided the project in its very inception and development, ability to access funding, attaining the space and making contacts with other professionals to volunteer their services at the project. La Sala's written material and professional leadership affirmed a desire for sex workers to take over the project. However, Vargas (2012) and Mata and Rodriguez (2012) both affirm the tensions at the project between the professionals and sex worker volunteers that denied sex workers real leadership or decision-making powers at the project. La Sala's foundation is both based in its experience as a mixed base organization, as well as in its apparent commitment to sex worker empowerment and leadership. Though the leadership change was long anticipated per project founders, in actuality it remained highly contested throughout the life of the organization. Vargas (2012) affirms the same in her study, "Its necessary to say in respect to this point that in various occasions there was a polarization of opinions between the two groups that make up the organization: the group of professionals and the group of women workers and ex- sex workers"

(64). The entrenched disagreements over decision-making, the use of project funds, and not consulting sex appears to have led to a long-standing conflict about leadership and consulting sex workers.

Empowerment in Action

On the morning of the Paso Canoas workshop on the border between Costa Rica and Panama, there was a sense of nervousness the women gathered their materials for the their presentation and workshop. There were a number of people who had come to help out the workshop, including all the leadership, another La Sala volunteer and two North American students. Making the best of the workshop space tables were moved around, a computer and projector was set up, as were snacks on the tables. The leaders had quickly rehearsed their power point a few days prior, though the reality that they would now be presenting it created some nervous tension leading to the start of the event as we got prepared. The leaders were nervous about whether any women would come to the event. There was noticeable relaxation amongst the leaders once participants began to arrive and settle into the seats. This was really happening! Most of the participants arrived early or on time, though throughout the event, there were more people arriving. Though the project only really received funding for 15 participants, they mad it stretch to cover the 23 women, one man, and 2 children in attendance. Most of the women there were Dominican and a few were Panamanian, and the majority of which were of African descent. That the majority of the women were both black and migrants represented a real contrast to the kinds of sex workers that I interviewed, and which groups of migrant women work around La Sala.

The bulk of the presentation and activities was on the prevention of HIV and sexually transmitted infections. They explained the differences between HIV and AIDS, showing images in a power point to help in the explanations. They conducted group activities, played games with blown up condoms, and showed how to use both male and female condoms. Though they mainly focused on how HIV is transmitted and prevented and on condom use. They distributed yellow condom holders with male and female condoms, Sexy and Segura Magazines⁵ and other pamphlets and materials.

At the end of the presentation, Alba showed photos from La Sala events and talked to the women about La Sala and their participation in RedTraSex. Given that many of the women in attendance were Dominican, they talked about the leaders of the Dominican sex worker organization MODEMU (Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas- Movement of United Women) who are also members of RedTraSex. The leaders spoke about how MODEMU leaders wanted La Sala to reach out to Dominican sex workers in Costa Rica. Alba talked to the women about RedTraSex and La Sala's desire to start a branch of the organization in Paso Canoas, to organize sex workers there. Interestingly, this process highlights the role of citizenship and sex worker organizing. Alba and Inez emphasized the women's importance, that they needed to organize as sex workers—that their citizenship or lack thereof did not lessen their need to organize for their rights, nor diminish their rights as workers to support, health care and dignified housing. At the end of the workshop, Inez passionately began to discuss her conviction about the rights of sex workers:

Being a sex worker does not mean we don't have a right to health, to a dignified home, and a ton of things like everyone else who works. This is a job, we are not the problem of

⁵ This was the second year that this magazine was produced with La Sala. The funding for this project came from the UNFPA, and was directed towards the women working around La Sala. This second annual magazine featured a story about La Sala. TCU students were responsible for working on the original research and work of the first Sexy Segura magazine (Garcia 2012).

anyone--we are the solution to many problems. When we are organized and empowered, we are going to have a voice and vote in the state. And we are going to be heard. True? This is not easy, I had 10 years in the organization that I had to experience in order to believe it and eat it. Because I used to say, I'm a sex worker, I don't have a right to anything-- But I have a right to things like anybody else! I pay and I pay taxes too. We need have a right to a pension. This will be when are 80, 90 years old, I still have a lot of sex work, left, but we need to be organized. I still have a lot to give... But we have to be organized to ask for our rights. Its not easy, but we can do it.

Many women nodded in agreement as leaders discussed their desire to organize sex workers.

When talking about La Sala, Alba made an important note of how they used to be an organization *for* sex workers, and that now they were a group *by* and *for* sex workers. The leaders communicated the message that sex workers need to work together in order to access their rights—for example, in accessing health insurance. The women seemed attentive while some nodded in apparent agreement with what Inez and Alba had to say. As the event came to a close there was a sense of positivity and hope. In an act of solidarity, Inez went on to extend herself further to this group of mostly women, noting that if any of them needed to be in the capital city that they could reach out to La Sala for support. She was welcoming and inclusive of them, offering her personal phone number. She went on to offer the project space as a place where women could stay if they needed to during their visit. After the workshop, many of the workshop participants went to the women of La Sala to express their thanks for the workshop. The leadership asked for commentary on the even, all of which were all positive. One attendee wrote, “To me it was the people I really liked a lot, it was very good, thank you. The workshop was wonderful. God wants you to keep up this work because we are also valuable, we are also important.” Other women went up to the organizers to express their thanks at being invited to the project. When La Sala organizers originally approached Evangeline about the workshop, she agreed that she would bring women to the event, even though she explained that there had been similar workshops offered before on HIV prevention. Even given this, the participants of the

project expressed having learned new information at the workshop. Furthermore, many women seemed to just enjoy their time in the group. The uniqueness of this meeting came out of sex workers leading and running the workshop all on their own. This highlighted the sense of the project being for and by sex workers, and the other women in attendance appeared to identify with this. This workshop highlights represents the place in which La Sala's leadership tested the limits of their leadership, embodying both self-determination and *control* of the project.



Figure 4 - La Sala Workshop. Photo by author

Conclusion

Empowerment remains an interesting and tricky concept, as is the way it is expressed in theory and in practice. In this chapter, I have explored this question as it relates to sex worker leadership, though this speaks to a larger issue within organizations about types of participation. In many ways, the goals for sex worker empowerment contradict the way in which leadership and power are deployed. Furthermore, while empowerment is about self-determination, it is also about exploring different modes of participation that are more representative and democratic rather than top-down leadership models. Otherwise, sex worker leadership also privileges the same leadership hierarchies that entrench leadership rather than encourage participation and democratic organizational practices.

The language of empowerment is very popular, especially within the world of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and not-for-profit organizations within marginalized communities. Where is the balance of teaching people skills necessary for leadership or empowerment training, and allowing, or rather stepping back from the project to allow for organic leadership? The case of La Sala is difficult in that its precarious finances often led to challenging moments in the projects history, and a push to maintain project funding. The skills afforded to a project by trained professionals are indeed real and tangible in the world of fundraising, so how to transfer these skills?

An organization's access to funds can significantly affect this leadership flow. The RedTraSex office in Argentina can afford to hire technicians and professionals, yet sex workers still remain in charge of the project. As noted in the RedTraSex book, *10 Years of Action*, the professional coordinator of the executive office, Carlos Mesa, who is not a sex worker, relates:

From the technical team we learn to use the knowledge that we have in a democratic form and to avoid that this become a factor of power towards the sex workers. And I believe

that the sex workers have noticed that the lack of theoretical knowledge doesn't keep them from representing themselves, it also doesn't impede them from directing us as a team or directing their organizations (82).

RedTraSex tries to produce a model that affirms sex workers ability as leaders of the team, and doesn't value professionals' abilities or skills *over* that of sex workers. The questions around empowerment and leadership at La Sala extend far beyond the scope of this organization. The real question of empowerment must be addressed to explain divisions of leadership in communities that favor educated professionals over the people whom the project is purported to support. In order for people to have increased stake in both local politics, including organizing around issues affecting their own lives, than self-determination and leadership are really the keys to increased empowerment.

Chapter 4-Transnational Sex Worker Organizing: RedTraSex, Labor and Human Rights

“Nos parimios a nosotras mismas. Y, como todo parto, no fue facil ni silencioso”
(*“We gave birth to ourselves. And, like all births, it was not easy or silent”*)- RedTraSex (10 Años, 19)

From Trafficked Victims and Prostitute Women to Sex Worker Organizers

There have long been efforts to manage women's physical movement and sexuality. Many laws have been created to legislate in these matters. For example, the Contagious Disease Act, which was passed in Britain in 1860, allowed that any woman suspected of prostitution could be stopped and subjected to a medical examination (Doezema, 5). Concerns about health intersected with moral concerns to create a kind of panic, wherein a woman alone in the street could be deemed a prostitute and subjected to forced detention or placement in a rehabilitation center. This type of regulation of women and prostitutes had its roots in medical efforts to control venereal diseases (Doezema, 5). While these acts were repealed in 1886, they were followed by a push to frame the issue of women's sexuality around the fear of 'white slavery' (the kidnapping and prostituting of white women) through express concern for women's purity and sexuality. The literature on these movements highlights how fear of women as prostitutes also extended into concerns about the purity and morality of white women broadly (Chapkis 2007). Though the startling tales of large numbers of "white women sold into ruin" were mostly unsubstantiated, this created a broad movement of organizers who worked to pressure governments for a response to the perceived problem. This expanded into international conventions and agreements about trafficking, including the International Agreement of 1904 and the International Convention of Paris (1910), in which nations agreed to punish traffickers who enticed or forced women into prostitution (Self, 248). These discourses have framed the

positioning of women as either prostitutes or trafficked women, interpretive frames that persist until the contemporary period.

This kind of language of trafficking and prostitution remains widespread and significant today. In most human rights documents, prostitution is framed from an abolitionist perspective, resulting in the argument that every type of prostitution is considered to be exploitative of women. Feminist movements, on the other hand, are less homogenous in its views, representing a broad range of perspectives and approaches to the question of prostitution.

While abolitionist arguments remain the most formally influential, considering their frequent expression in international documents, critiques do exist that assert international law does not recognize the distinction between forced and unforced prostitution (Schleifer, 219). Some highlight how approaching prostitution with abolitionist aims results in framing of prostitutes through the lens of sexual deviance only. Prostitutes are then classed as diseased or un-diseased, as responsible or irresponsible, and thereby are framed as either deserving or undeserving of aid, rescue, or reform (Scott, 227). These simplistic dichotomies in which prostitutes are persistently cast as disease carriers, moral transgressors, or victims to be protected, ignore the spaces where sex workers have an active and visible role in shaping the work or state based constraints in their lives. While international laws and policies about prostitution are still generally created by policy makers without input from sex workers or trafficked peoples, sex workers have nonetheless actively engaged in negotiating the politics around them. Sex workers have organized strikes and created unions, and in some cases they have been able to pressure the state for better living and working conditions.

This chapter considers the importance of the international network of sex worker organizations in Latin America known as RedTraSex. RedTraSex (*Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras*

Sexuales de Latino América Y El Caribe--Women's Network of Sex Workers of Latin America and the Caribbean), a network of sex-worker organizations in sixteen countries in the region, was developed in 1997 and formalized in 1999. The first meeting of the member countries took place in Costa Rica with members of La Sala present. While there is much extant research on different facets of sex work, the analysis I present here contributes to the scholarship on how sex workers organize politically and mobilize to use "human rights" concepts to their political advantage. While the words 'sex worker' apply to a very heterogeneous group, this network has embraced both this terminology and its connection to a broader identity. Their use of the term "sex worker" has served to create a collective as well as a political identity that has proven important for personal and politics acts of teaching, organizing, and advocating for human rights. For example, as I discuss below, in countries like Argentina these efforts translate to sex workers' mobilizing for political action around labor. As RedTraSex explains, "We define ourselves as 'workers' because we see ourselves as women who, without opportunities, we opt to get and maintain a living for our families by doing this work" (10 Años, 13).

Here I explore the spaces in which female sex workers affirm their rights and positions of leadership. Leaders from RedTraSex have met with political leaders in the Latin American region and have also been on the forefront HIV/AIDS activism. They have created spaces for human rights and health organizing which open spaces for participation in local and regional politics. These efforts allow them to demand access to rights and strengthen their ability to organize politically around "sex worker" as an identity. As I discuss below, one manifestation of their sex worker organizing has been in books they have written, some of which tell their own stories and others of which serve as resources for organizing to share with other regional sex workers. The chapter proceeds, firstly, by considering the ways the transnational character of the

network has contributed to its ability to achieve political goals and develop empowered sex worker leaders. Secondly, I discuss RedTraSex's production of alternatives to dominant legal and policy language about sex work. Thirdly, the following section looks at one of the network's member organizations, which provides a crucial space for affirming sex work as labor, since the group is unionized. Fourthly, I discuss RedTraSex's organizing strategies in greater detail, noting how the language of framing contributes to our understanding of the network's efficacy and strategies. (I employ the terminology of “framing” throughout this chapter in analyzing the aims of RedTraSex.) Fifth, representation, sixth, RedTraSex and La Sala, seventh conclusion.

Affirming the Power of the Transnational

In July of 2012, the glossy Costa Rican fashion magazine *Perfil* (Profile), whose audience is adult women, ran a feature article on La Sala. It discussed the question of rights in sex workers in Costa Rica, and how the workers would like to be recognized, pay their taxes, have access to health care, along with the other rights of workers. In the interview, RedTraSex director Elena Reynaga is also featured in the interview. Reynaga's words as the leader of a transnational organization RedTraSex, work to affirm the words of La Sala members by highlighting their collective struggle across Latin America. Article author María Fernanda Cruz notes and includes the voice of Reynaga noting that the women seek to “Adopt an Inter-American Convention to promote the complete exercise of ‘complete free and dignified of the sexual and reproductive rights’ and that the states guarantee the right of the women to decide about their own bodies, is part of the declaration” (94). That the magazine highlights the goals of the group, as well as their efforts within an international framework of how sex workers want to assert their rights indicates the extent of the international organizing. The framing of sex workers as workers within the context of popular culture works to humanize sex workers for the general

public, encouraging them to view sex workers within the framework of labor and rights.

Additionally, featuring the President of RedTraSex in the article about La Sala only works to highlight the international ties of the organization, helping to frame the group as both organized and well connected. When this language is used to discuss sex workers within the general public, it helps to move other workers to consider sex workers within these frames, perhaps challenging their preconceived notions of the sex worker.

These frameworks and languages are employed cross-nationally and transnationally. In the United States, organizations like COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), first organized in San Francisco in 1973, have organized to advocate for prostitutes' rights, visibility, and legalization in the face of ever increasing criminalization of sex workers. Other organizations developed globally throughout the 1970's and 80's, with issue-oriented foci that often depend on whether prostitution is legal in an organization's country. Far from these advocacy efforts being centered on the US or Europe, Latin America saw numerous sex worker organizations in Latin America begin to coalesce in the 1980s. Notable among these were the *Asociación de Trabajadoras Autonomas "22 de Junio" de El Oro* in Ecuador (1982), The Brazilian Network of Sex Workers (1987), and the Association of Professional Female Prostitutes in Uruguay (1986).

Organizers in Latin America have lobbied politicians and health authorities for better security, better hygiene in the brothels, better health approaches, an end to violence, and the right to organize into workers' unions. The pressure to organize as groups often emerges as a result of blatant disregard for sex workers rights. One sex worker collective's analysis reads:

Prostitutes are systematically robbed of liberty, security, fair administration of justice, respect for private and family life, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. In addition, they suffer from inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment and from discrimination in employment and housing. Prostitutes are effectively excluded from the human rights convention (Draft statements from 2nd World Whores Congress 316-7).

The International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights argued that sex workers need states to:

Guarantee prostitutes all human rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage, and motherhood and the right to unemployment insurance, health insurance, and housing. Grant asylum to anyone denied human rights on the basis of a "crime of status," be it prostitution or homosexuality. (305).

Affirming and pushing for the recognition the human rights of sex workers, through different legal contexts, remains a central component of the struggle today as sex worker activists continue to organize on both a local and international level. In many cases these movements use the Internet as a resource to make and build transnational connections. About a decade after regional groups arose in Latin America, Garner noted that "Movements are changing from fairly coherent national organizations into transnational networks, with highly fragmented and specialized nodes composed of organizations and less organized mobilizations, all of which are linked through new technologies of communication (Garner 1994, 431 in Tarrow 234).

Following Della Porta and Tarrow (2005), Frazway and Fonow (2011), and Dempsey et al. (2007) on the question of what transnational organizing looks like in practice, RedTraSex can be understood clearly as a transnational network. The group inserts itself into the international and local debates on the role of sex workers throughout Latin America, noting, "we are not the problem, we are part of the solution" (redtralsex.org).

Creating Alternative Accounts of Sex Work

An important part of this activism is the way RedTraSex has created its own documents, including the books *A Movement of High Heels: Reflections and Activities to Strengthen Our Organizations* (2007) and *10 Years of Action: The Experience of the Network of Sex Workers in*

Latin America and the Caribbean (2007). These add uniquely to the corpus of literature produced by sex workers and sex worker organizations (see Chapkis 1997, Delacoste and Alexander 1987, MODEMU and Murray 2002, Taormino et al. 2013). Since I believe close examination of texts by sex workers into academic literature will only improve debates on the subject, my analysis here aims, through consideration of these texts, to highlight the important role sex workers have in shaping conversations in social, academic and policy circles.

Legal approaches to prostitution include abolition, criminalization of clients as in the Swedish model, decriminalization that would regulate sex work like any other labor, and legalization that would require registration for sex workers, possibly mandatory health checks, and state toleration of prostitution (Ditmore, 250). The state of legalization in each country affects the lived experience of the sex workers there. Laws around prostitution are different in every country, and range on the scale from legal to heavily criminalized and policed. Nina Lopez-Jones, an organizer from the English Collective of Prostitutes, says about legal approaches that “The prostitution laws aim to divide women between those of us who are 'respectable,' 'good' women and those of us who are 'loose,' 'bad' women for refusing poverty by working in the sex industry. Money, in the eyes of the Establishment, makes good (working class) women bad” (273). These laws matter both in the individual experience of sex workers, as well as in the collective approach of organizing sex workers. Laws on prostitution place women in various stages of victimhood and criminalized, frequently making it difficult for them to legally assert their rights, especially in prohibitionist contexts.

RedTraSex asserts that the various spaces in which they organize, including those for economic justice, gender rights, or labor rights as all part of the political process, “Writing our own documents and presenting them to society is a political action. This is because with our

words we look to achieve change in society. Change depends on political decisions” (Tacones Altos, 191). I argue that RedTraSex’s efforts to develop sex worker leaders through the framing of sex workers as workers and as subjects of rights moves the international human rights debate forward with sex workers being able to represent themselves and their own political interests. This in turn creates the potential to move the conversation forward from one where either a sex worker is presented as deserving of human rights protections or not, whether she is a victim or not--to one that asserts the rights and humanity of *all* sex workers.

How does the comprehension of ‘human rights’ matter most for sex workers? Is it on the ground in the day-to-day experience of sex workers, or at conferences and forums on the international level where sex workers can come to the table as organizers? My research found that the organizers of RedTraSex want to interact with both of these groups, engaging and empowering women with the language to use in their everyday lives, as well as engaging with the same rhetoric as it is used on the international level in decisions often made about sex workers.

The *red* (network), which has existed since 1997, has served as a central organization through which other connected groups are connected can enjoy many benefits. While each organization remains autonomous, the network creates a central force that through its own existence strengthens each individual organization that comprises it. In many of the countries that make up the network, there are only a small number of sex worker organizations, and sometimes only one sex worker organization exists in that country. Given the lack of similar projects within each country, the international network affirms a larger transnational political space that not only works to back each smaller organization, but also provides a space for Latin American women to come together on a political, organizational, and transnational level.

Member organizations also note the way the network helps to make their group more visible, aiding in garnering media attention and funds. Maria Conseulo Raymundo, director of the Salvadoran sex worker organization Orchids of the Sea, notes, “RedTraSex provides us more visibility with government institutions. If we are on our own nothing happens, but when we are united in so many countries, the people have to take us seriously” (10 Años, 76). The network maintains emphases on human rights and sex worker leadership that help to centralize some of the goals for sex workers across Latin America. It both represents an effort to organize and creates greater recognition and traction for individual organizations. Increased visibility of organizations ensures their ability to secure funding and survive.

Project leaders note the importance of RedTraSex’s existence in helping to support this effort in each nation. When speaking to Inez Manuel, a leader from Costa Rica’s La Sala about RedTraSex, she shared that the RedTraSex leader and Executive Secretary, Elena Reynaga had once called her a soldier of the movement. The explicit language of the military that Elena invoked with Inez seems to represent an important perspective represented within the sex worker movement. She was also referring to the broader struggle of sex workers as representative of people engaged in a battle. Reynaga’s attitude and leadership has inspired sex worker activists throughout the region. She inspired Inez and other women of La Sala, affirming that they have a role in the fight for greater human rights of sex workers across Latin America, and the world. The power of belonging to RedTraSex is seen through the women of La Sala in their expectations of solidarity and support by RedTraSex and their ability to assert belonging to the network as further evidence of their political work and influence.

This is a sex worker led, transnational network, actively organizing for human rights, improved working conditions, and a different relationship with the state including sex workers’

direct participation in policy formation. RedTraSex pushes for sex workers to become politicized around their conditions and to consider themselves and their organizing of sex workers as occurring within the realm of the political. To this end, the network itself has gained a role in the fight against HIV, and has political currency in its meetings with government representatives, policy, or health advocates. Furthermore, it sees developing women as leaders and supporting the organizations in each country as political in nature. This *red* serves to affirm the group in the explicitly political space of health policy and human rights, cementing sex workers' role as participants and advocates in international organizing efforts.

A Workers Union in Latin America: AMMAR

This section of the chapter looks at a subset of the RedTraSex collective. The original plan for the network came out of a conference of sex worker organizations in Costa Rica in 1997. In two years, the network was officially formalized. It is a network of organizations in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. The executive regional secretary of RedTraSex is based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Argentina is also the home of an organization of sex workers called AMMAR (Association of Argentine Prostitutes) have organized and been accepted into a union (Hardy, 2010), which inspires women throughout the rest of Latin America by showing the possibilities of organizing. As I discuss below, AMMAR's role within RedTraSex highlight the political gains both the network and the unionized AMMAR workers have achieved.

As this chapter argues, RedTraSex is important for various reasons. One is that it is an active transnational network that organizes sex workers around various political issues, including labor and reproductive health. Furthermore, the organizers actively meet and participate in conferences throughout the region, as well as work independently in their local organizations to

create unique sociopolitical organizing goals based on the needs of sex-workers within that country

The goal of the organization is to “Augment the presence and visibility of organizations of female sex workers in political spaces and to make decisions at the national, regional and international level” (redtralsex.org/ar- Nuestros Logros). RedTraSex is very political in orientation, and actively discusses and organizes around HIV/AIDS prevention, human rights, preventing violence, labor, addressing machismo and gendered double standards. It is concerned with empowering sex workers through strengthening women’s organizing, and in promoting an awareness of sex workers’ human rights. It presents a different perspective on making sex workers visible as political agents. Just as the concepts of intersectional stigma and deviance play a role in affecting whether or not sex-workers choose to “come out” as sex workers and to be vocal about their work and organizing, the challenge from RedTraSex is that these are women who choose to be visible suggests an attempt to reject the intersectional stigma associated with sex-work.

It seems central then, that the Presidency of RedTraSex remains in Argentina; where one of the most organized sex worker organizations in the region is. It is here that the organization AMMAR has formed a union. Formed in 1994, this organization was able to integrate itself into the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (Central Argentine Union - CTA) in 1995, a workers' union in the country. This provided a huge boost to the organization, helping to legitimize the sex workers concerns as laborers amongst other workers. They have been mobilized against police abuse of sex workers. They became galvanized after the 2003 murder of a fellow sex worker compañera and organizer, Sandra Cabrera, who had spoken out against police violence, bad treatment and extortion of workers (Hardy 2010). While a police officer was

originally held for her murder, he was not prosecuted for the crime. Michael Hanchard (2006) reflects on this process about people who speak out noting that “speaking truth to power can get one killed” (60). As an organization, AMMAR has had political success: they have met with the former President of the country Néstor Kirchner on the rights of sex workers and were instrumental in his acknowledging and signing a decree on the discrimination experienced by sex workers since they are not receiving social security or retirement benefits (Reynaga, 4). They have participated in international meetings on HIV/AIDS, where Reynaga was the first sex worker speaker to be invited to speak at a session of the World AIDS conference in Mexico 2008 (RedTraSex pamphlet). They have participated in high-level hearings and meetings with United Nations branches, including United Nations AIDS, who have also provided program funding. Representatives from RedTraSex have traveled throughout Latin America to speak on issues of health and HIV/AIDS. Elena Reynaga is also the leader of AMMAR. She has become an international figure who has represented both of these organizations in various political spaces, with heads of states, within International Organizations, conferences on HIV/AIDS. She reflects that

In March of 1995, we became part of the CTA, and this was the turning point in our struggle to gain acceptance, recognition and clout. It was of great help in our combat against police violence, since we now had the backing of this large federation of labor unions, and when we lodged complaints of violence and harassment, the complaints were not only signed by AMMAR, but also by the CTA (Reynaga, 3).

The weight of having a labor union behind sex workers is significant in their fight for recognition of human rights and labor conditions of sex workers. AMMAR joins a group of select few sex worker organizations that have had success in unionizing.

Organizing Strategies

“No nos olvidemos: una sola gota de agua apenas moja, pero juntas hacemos un aguacero”
(*We cannot forget: one drop of water barely wets, but together we make a downpour*)-
(*RedTraSex*, Tacones Altos, 176)

In the case of how RedTraSex frames the work that they do as seen through their websites, research, and manuals, social movement theory focused on frame analysis can serve as a good point of entry. Zald (1996) comments that “frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cart behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action” (212). An organization works to frame the approach it’s going to take, whether it is in organizing, or how it will it will present itself in the media. The use of frames affects how groups are able to attract people based on the symbols used (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). The framing in which a group uses is an important consideration for the group, especially as it relates to the group’s ability to garner media attention in a way in which movements cannot generally afford to solicit on their own (McAdam, 1996). This access to media helps an organization or NGO seem to be useful for amassing support within the local communities, but to also serve as important messages for policy makers, foreign funding agencies, and the target population of the organization. Carolina of La Sala provides an example of how sex workers are often framed:

Of course yes, we give a lot of workshops about this (self-esteem, stigma), we give a lot of workshops, you know that stigma exists and discrimination, why? ‘She is bad, this is the easy woman’—but they don’t say this is the woman who gets her children ahead, that this woman is a fighter, she’s an entrepreneur, she is the mother and the father of the children—you understand? Because they see her from a place where they think that this woman isn’t worth it, she is the easy woman, but this environment is very difficult and very cruel. (Carolina, 50)

Carolina notes the need to frame women differently, as workers, as caregivers and supporters rather than as commonly portrayed in media and other spaces.

However, for sustainability of an organization within the country, the movement has to be able to maintain local support. Porta and Diani frame the connectedness experienced by people by noting that, “To identify with a movement also means to have feelings of solidarity towards people with whom one is not, in most cases, linked by direct personal contacts, but with whom one shares, however, aspirations and values” (88). This is important to gain membership in movements. Sometimes, people maintain negative self-perceptions, especially considering all the negative framing in which sex workers are often cast in public spaces, through news media and film. For sex worker organizations to grow, they need this alternative framing to attract membership, as well funding and attention from outside organizations. A Member of Coyote USA notes the difficulty of doing this:

A major factor has always been the difficulty in obtaining funds, either from foundations or the government, to continue public education and/or service- oriented projects. A second equally important factor is that speaking out about prostitutes’ rights when you are a prostitute involves a good deal of personal risk; it is difficult to sustain the effort without financial and political support. For many people and organizations, prostitution is still an extremely controversial issue (COYOTE, National Task Force on Prostitution, 292).

The affirmation of a similar struggle, through the framing of people engaged in prostitution as sex workers, and these frameworks as projected by the organizations, serves to help them create the solidarity needed to develop a collective identity, a more unified struggle, and start to develop support from the community.

Interestingly enough, in the RedTraSex literature there is also rhetoric highlighting various types of oppression akin to what we see in other writing about intersectional stigma. RedTraSex discusses what they call a triple oppression. This interpretation of multiple intersecting oppressions is reminiscent of Berger’s (2004) concept of intersectional stigma. In the RedTraSex manual *A Movement of High Heels: Women, Sex Workers and Activists* (2007), multiple authors speak to this process of multiple oppressions, “Now, what happens to sex

workers? We suffer like all women the oppression of gender. We suffer like all workers the oppression of being part of the working class. In addition, we are oppressed for being sex workers” (Tacones Altos, 58). This presents a particularly gendered and class-based conception of the oppressing intersections, suggesting that they, and not race/color, are the main principles that organizers rally around. While some organizations in the global south have a history dating back to the 80s, they were not necessarily included in the conversation in the internationalization of sex work activism. Sex worker organizations are not necessarily known either for their work on antiracism, or the role of intersectionality of race or ethnicity as factors in discrimination towards sex workers, though they do speak to a commitment to equality, “The network promotes the participation without discrimination of any kind (gender, race, sexual identity, age, country and/or socioeconomic situation) (RedTraSex pamphlet, 10)). As representatives from countries of Latin America, organizers must be familiar with sex tourism, migrant sex workers, as well as the experience of discrimination. Though they recognize human rights as something to be afforded to and mobilized for all sex workers, despite AMMAR's role as a union, the network miss an opportunity to speak about some of these other pertinent issues affecting workers.

The Politics of Representation

While RedTraSex is a network of various organizations throughout countries in Latin America, current or former sex workers make up all the organizations that it encompasses. While there are various groups associated with the network, each group is autonomous. While there are growing numbers of sex work organizations, including those made up of advocates and sex-workers, this distinction of who makes up the base of the organization can potentially affect the focus and goals of the organization. The question of sex-worker involvement and leadership is a

point of focus for RedTraSex. In *A High Heels Movement* (2007), RedTraSex highlights a strong distinction between NGO's and groups made up by sex-workers. In defining differences between sex worker advocates and organizations made up by sex-workers, they argue:

We are the base of the organizations. We call it this because the sex-workers are the base, and from this arise the direction of the organizations: we, the people that live the problems, decide to be the protagonists of our destiny, taking it in our hands to transform it. We form the organization and direct it. We decide what issues to work on and how to work on it. Only in these base organizations is the voice really our own. (Tacones Altos, 180).

The women of RedTraSex acknowledge the difference between having advocates who are concerned with various issues sex workers deal with and the empowering of sex-workers themselves. RedTraSex does not advocate against sex-worker advocates, and note that, "Some [organizations] have stifled us, and others have sincere concern. They can be very good people, but they will never be true voices of sex-workers" (180). Advocates might have positive intentions, but may or may not work directly with sex-workers on the policies they choose to engage or support. RedTraSex also speaks to broader differences between them and having advocates in the leadership, including the ability to control their own funds, make the important decisions about projects to pursue, and control how they form and present their identity to the local community. The text provides a critique about mixed organizations: "Some of us participated in the past in organizations FOR sex workers. But we noticed that we didn't take a leap. Like one compañera said "It's been years since we've been going to trainings. How many workshops have they given us and still we have not begun to fly with our own strength?" (ibid, 182). This highlights a sentiment about the mixed groups that organizations for sex workers can actually come to stifle leadership and project development on the part of sex workers.

Furthermore, RedTraSex itself tries to frame itself within a labor debate "The base organization presents an identity that brings us closer to working people: in forming an

organization OF sex workers we are an organization of workers that fight for our rights next to all other working people” (RedTraSex 2007, 181). Not only does RedTraSex mobilize sex-workers, but also they are actively trying to politicize sex workers. In *A High Heels Movement* (2007), information on sex-work, organizing, and politics is always followed by a series of activities, icebreakers, and conversation starters about how to organize around the specific issue. This shows that active attempt to both educate and politicize sex workers and provide a space for individual and group development. RedTraSex frames itself and its work on a sense of solidarity and an insistence on the human rights and dignity of sex workers, challenging the status quo around sex-work. It is actively concerned with discussing gender roles, machismo, worker’s rights, and other systematic issues that affect workers (2007). RedTraSex affirms their actions within a political space. The *red* asserts the need for the organizers to be both brave and independent in their organizing, offering advice that:

In RedTraSex, the organizations of sex workers now are not only health promoters. From our organizations of base, we do politics. What does it mean, “we do politics”? We are not in any political party, nor do we tell our comrades who to vote for in the presidential elections. To do politics means that we look for positioning and political action to achieve change (Tacones Altos, 191).

The organizers of the *red* are developing a way to have other sex workers think of themselves directly as political actors with potential direct effects on political outcomes. This does have an effect on how they are able to balance work traditionally connected with sex worker activism, like that around HIV prevention, to developing new opportunities for organizing.

Labor and Human Rights

In the international context in which women’s rights are discussed, they are often addressed within the framework of Violence Against Women. Cabezas (2009) addresses the ways in which

sex worker activists have worked to use human rights language to assert their rights as citizens (159). She also addresses the exploration of rights under this framework of violence against women, which continues to frame women as in various states of victimhood. We have to explore the ways in which sex worker organizations are able to push the discussion of human rights from a position of framing sex workers as victims, towards human rights as an active set of tools from which workers can use to assert the rights granted to all people. RedTraSex continues to move this conversation by writing about rights as objects to be wielded, “Rights are weapons. They are tools formed out of words. They serve us, above all to argue to demand that a situation changes” (Tacones Altos, 150).

Many sex workers argue for the decriminalization of sex work over the legalization of the work is preferable, so as to avoid trading informal pimps and control for state controlled policies and regulations. RedTraSex reflects this demand: “Sex workers DON’T want a law for us. We seek to achieve the same rights as the whole of the working people, the rights that correspond to people that live from their work” (Tacones Altos, 151, emphasis original). In connecting sex worker rights to those of all working people, this language works to create a stronger identity of the worker as the most central frame. Every worker can relate to wanting access to basic demands and rights, and RedTraSex helps affirm this as well by relating their rights to the rights of every worker.

RedTraSex promotes sex workers as political actors and leaders within their communities, and recognizes that they can be central to change for sex workers throughout the region if they are given space to discuss the issues affecting their lives. They assert “we look for a better quality of life for sex workers, so that they recognize us as subjects of rights and strategic actors for the development of our communities” (10 Años, 22). They note throughout

the literature that sex workers need to take the lead on issues affecting their communities, including efforts around health and policy.

RedTraSex affirms the power of the collective and highlights all of the important work that can be accomplished when sex workers decide to organize on their own behalf. Their literature highlights all of the potential successes of this movement when sex workers work together on their own behalf. This affirms the role of organizing for rights, “How do we reclaim our rights? Never alone. Always alongside our compañeras. To be organized helps to better our situation and our possibilities to win” (Tacones Altos, 150). This highlights and supports the work, building and solidarity necessary in order to develop strong sex worker led organizations. The decision making by women who have lived the experiences of sex workers allows them the space to speak on their own behalf, speaking to the policies and approaches that could be best served with that community.

RedTraSex and La Sala

Well, participating in the network has been very enriching for us, so much, so much because we have traveled so much. My compañera Inez, Camila and I, sometimes two at a time, sometimes only one of us. I as a focal point have had priority in traveling that we have been to. In every workshop we have been to, we come back with a huge force you know, every workshop we go to with them we come back we so much strength and so much desire to continue with the project and go on. It's been really nice to be in the network, its been like, we have felt important to participate in the network to be able to travel, because imagine, it's 15 countries and sometime two women from each country will travel and that can be a lot of women to pay for housing, the food, the plane travel, all of this then is a lot of money, but I say that for La Sala it has been really positive to belong to, or to be connected to the network. We have gone to Argentina, to Mexico, the Dominican Republic, we have gone to Peru, to El Salvador, to Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, we have gone to Panama—where else am I missing? Yes these are practically the places we have gone to. –Alba Tomas

As the member's testimony above attests, a number of women connected to RedTraSex project have had the opportunity to travel abroad to participate in conferences, trainings, and

leadership opportunities; these have been fundamental to their experience with the network and their sense of development within this context. Many women have been in the process of politicization through their participation in the *red*. These experiences inspired the women of La Sala by connecting them to an international project, but contact with RedTraSex also sparked conflict, given the lack of sex worker leadership at La Sala until 2011. This was problematic for La Sala's sex worker leaders as they were not the actual leaders of the projects, though they were often framed as such. The contemporaneous literature accurately describe La Sala's leadership as mixed, meaning it included professionals and sex workers, while groups like AMMAR have sex worker leadership and are able to hire professionals for support in their projects (10 Años, 2007, García 2012).

Interestingly, the question of sex worker leadership has a fundamental tenant of the *red* since the start of the project and yet La Sala was able to integrate into the group as an exception, perhaps due to its avowed commitment to eventually shifting to full sex worker leadership. Participation in the *red* would ideally have inspired the sex worker leaders of La Sala to become the actual leaders of the project, and each trip they would have gone on equipped them with further preparation for leadership in the organization. Instead, as I discuss in Chapter Three, conflict and struggles over the question of professional versus worker leadership resulted.



Figure 5- La Sala, UN AIDS and Sexy and Safe Condom Poster. “I kiss, hug, touch, caress, grab, suck...what you want, but with a condom. Condoms help prevent HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.” Photo by author.

Nevertheless, many women participated and experienced empowerment of various kinds. For some who have connected to organizing around sex worker rights, one’s willingness to speak out or come out about prostitution speaks as a testament of empowerment and a desire to participate in politics. Camila, a former member of La Sala who remains connected to the current organizers, speaks to this issue:

I didn't come with problems of addiction, I didn't come with problems of alcoholism, I did not come with client problems, or that I had a husband who hit me, I didn't come any of these problems, I came just to get to know the place (La Sala) and I began to like it and continued coming to help the others. Perhaps some people have anxieties about empowerment, myself, in respect to empowerment, I've been outside of the country to represent La Sala with my compañeras and speaking in modes of communication that travel all over the world like CNN, First Impact, Red Live, those from here (TV), channel 7, channel 15 which is from the University of Costa Rica, to say that I am not empowered.... The one who is not empowered does not go on television, and they didn't block out my face, they didn't darken out my face, my identity was not protected, I talked to them and period. When this happened my mother was living in Italy, my uncles in the United States, and these are worldwide news, this CNN and First Impact are news from outside of the country, so my face traveled for the whole world, and the world (saw it, met it) saying that obviously I am sex worker, so I don't believe that I need more empowerment. –Camila, 36

Camila expresses her thoughts about empowerment around her willingness to show her face and speak in a public forum in a way that “travels” throughout Latin America and the world. Camila spoke on these news sources while she was at a gathering of RedTraSex. Not many women spoke of empowerment in this way, but Camila's account speaks to the significant potential of the network, since she had a lot of experience organizing and attending RedTraSex events and trainings. These gatherings of sex workers that represent women from across Latin America garnered local and international media attention. The development of RedTraSex speaks to the ability to politicize sex worker issues in the Americas within the various nations and as a transnational network.

Some women who had organized around La Sala spoke to their experiences of going into public spaces to speak about sex work as being important to formation of the community of sex workers. In 1997, as RedTraSex was being organized at the first conference of sex workers in the region took place in San José, Costa Rica, the group had a difficult time getting the space to hold the conference. In addition, there was an outcry on the part of a local priest about the conference

(10 Años). The outcry was featured on local television, as well as in the print media. Olivia, a sex worker and former and member of La Sala spoke of the event:

A man who was a priest wanted that sex work was to be seen as a crime and to send the women and the business owners (of brothels, etc.) to jail. So I showed my face, I went on the program “In View” of a journalist whose name was Valverde. The thing is that we had to show our face for all of the sex workers. A number of us went on the program, but my comrades went on the show masks on and things, but I did not, I went on as I am, real. Yes, we had to go and raise our voice because this man pretended to get a project passed through the legislative assembly so that that the women sex workers would be sent to prison and others to a psychiatric hospital because he said that we were crazy, so we went from La Sala to show our face, to raise our voice and defend our rights and I was a leader, I was a leader as they say. - Olivia, 49

Olivia notes the importance of showing one's face around sex work in order to both humanize and politicize the issue. The willingness to go out and show one's face reflects this important aspect highlighted in literature about courage being necessary to organize and help to de-stigmatize sex work. Abril of La Sala notes:

I don't have to hide from anyone not even my children because I am not ashamed of what I am because it's a job, it's a job that one has and we all have them, like me, I go out with all these old men and in everything because I don't hide from anyone I say, that I should be on the TV more like it so that they can see you...because I am not ashamed because this is what gives me food to eat, true. – Abril, 72

This kind of perspective serves an important function for the public and other sex workers alike. For the public, this language of labor works to create solidarity with other workers by affirming prostitution as work. If other people can see them as workers, then sex workers can work to be included so that their rights can be represented and protected. In political terms, if sex workers in each country are viewed as laborers by the state, then they can also affirm their right to things like social security, access to health care, and improved working conditions. Olivia speaks to the need to dignify and professionalize the work:

Yes one has to dignify their work, because society has an idea that we sex workers are drunks, drug addicts, bad mothers--Not me--with my example I also want to show this society that sex workers also have values and principles. I fight every day to be an

excellent mother, a citizen because I am also a citizen in this country, and not consuming drugs or vices, I make my country better, my community, my journey...at least me with my example I've helped many compañeras stop consuming drugs or alcohol. -Olivia, 49

Olivia is affirming her space as a dignified worker and citizen. This is an important connection albeit rarely seen, because sex workers are often not conceived of as either citizens or workers deserving of rights. Olivia's statements thus affirm broader connections between citizenship and the state by evoking the sex worker's status as citizen, and thus deserving of the collective rights granted to all citizens. She is also noting a professionalization around sex work that has to do with challenging the presence or use of drugs or alcohol in or around sex work, thereby emphasizing that sex work is labor rather than pathology or transgression.

Conclusion

In her foundational work "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak notes that "It is assumed that everyone can speak in the same way" and yet so many who exist along the margins of society--including the most stigmatized workers, those in poverty, and women--often do not have the spaces and protections to allow them to speak (175). Existing within marginalized spaces works to make people both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. As this chapter has discussed, long-standing practices like regulations on women's bodies and their sexuality frame the ways in which these issues are discussed. But although I consider Spivak's analysis to be an apt diagnosis of the situation of marginalized persons, the groups I have examined here show us that the conditions that make one invisible and voice-less can be challenged.

Organizations like RedTraSex work to fill in the space for marginalized workers to have a space to express themselves and their needs rather than have these concepts be dictated by outside

actors and policy makers. Their use of texts, in particular, provides space for alternative discourses and empowering language to mobilize transnational activism.

As I discussed above, there is a wide variety of ways in which sex workers and trafficked people have been framed in international discourse, beginning with the fundamental question of whether sex workers even deserve protection. Once protection becomes the aim, framing these people as needy, powerless victims has often kept sex workers out of policy and decision-making circles around issues affecting their lives. But the organizations I have discussed that emerged globally have made this discourse more holistic. By demanding the rights of sex workers, or rather, by demanding that their rights be respected as would be the human rights of any other citizen, RedTraSex has been a visible political entity within the region of Latin America and has allowed sex workers to organize visibly in spaces that shape their lives.

RedTraSex continues to work to encourage the frames of labor and human rights as ways of connecting both sex workers and other workers to the causes of sex workers. These frames help to strengthen the self-esteem of sex workers, often working to professionalize their labor and their work as directly connected to the work they do for their families. This ends up being a central organizing tenet for sex worker activism that serves to bolster images of respectability and professionalism around sex work, with the concept of labor being a main frame through which the organizing is framed. To serve as public witnesses to this identity as legitimate laborers, RedTraSex is always looking for women organizers who are willing to show their faces and organize around the issues affecting workers. It is clear that regardless of growth, RedTraSex will never be able to represent the interests of all sex workers, as stigma and discrimination still make “coming out” as a sex worker a very daunting task. Indeed, one challenge these movements face intrinsically is that everyone’s voices may not be heard, since attempts to

empower 'sex workers' will never be a catch all for people who participate in sex work. Laura Agustín (2007) writes that:

Those who desire to empower sex workers must assume that they view themselves as engaged in sex work. The identity issue is crucial: while empower-ers want to valorize cultural and individual difference and give voice to the mute, if those to be empowered do not think of themselves that way then the empowerment project cannot succeed and may turn into an unwanted imposition. Many migrants who sell sex do not consider themselves sex workers (Agustín, 158).

There are people who will never be engaged by the sex worker identity enough to engage with the inherent risks with organizing and going public. RedTraSex notes this, and works to support women regardless of whether they are willing to show their faces in public. While the group cannot speak for everyone, their presence and the pressure to include voices like that of RedTraSex in political debates are fundamental to any future policy changes that will include the perspectives and experiences of sex workers' lived experiences.

The literature of RedTraSex provides activists with tools to organize, similar to the ways human rights concepts are employed as tools that can be used by the sex worker to frame her struggle. People throughout Latin America are familiar with the struggles of the labor movement, the women's movement, and the movement for democracy. In the context of social movements, the languages of human rights and labor serve as recognizable frames for workers and the public alike. In addition, RedTraSex's use of human rights language is not only helpful for providing arguments with which people are familiar, it also helps to *transform* this language from a tool that is used in discussions *about* protecting women into a component of organizers' toolkits, to order to help sex workers frame *their own* struggles within larger contexts of grassroots movements and fundamental rights.

While I have focused on sex worker organizations and sex worker advocacy organizations through a close examination of this specific group of workers, there are broad research implications. In particular, research that considers other forms of stigmatized identities, marginalized or heavily policed forms of labor, and questions of legal or decriminalized labor connect to my analysis of sex work. All of these forms of particular types of labor also connect to wider debates on migration of workers. Migrant sex workers should be included in discussions about migrant labor, for example, since it is vital that these political and academic conversations consider the growing feminization of migration and how the concepts of human rights and sex work converge in transnational movements of marginalized persons.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

Well, I think that all women have to be empowered in everything, *all*, from the one who is in the house, the one that is mistreated by her husband, who is hit by her husband, these women also have to be empowered and say: 'no more violence!' The same with the client that wants to mistreat her: no more violence! It's a question of love in every place, on every scale--not only sex workers, but any woman, any woman, has to empower herself, to not let everyone mistreat her—there are people that let themselves be mistreated by the boss, the children, the neighbors--its not loving yourself, so there is a lack of self-love, to have strength, to be brave. —Alba

In this project, I have investigated vivid examples of sex worker organizing and empowerment in three separate, but connected, spaces: first, at an individual, but informal street level in San José's *zona roja*; second, in the space formally organized around La Sala, a group *for and by* sex workers; and third, through RedTraSex, a transnational network of Latin American sex work organizers who actively engage with and encourage increasingly internal leadership development. In the early chapters, I addressed stigma, discrimination and experiences of violence that inspire informal solidarity and support. In these spaces, the workers appear much more inclined to speak up about acts of violence or discrimination and on-going threats. Although the context for organizing and solidarity is informal in these spaces, seeds of resistance are sown within the workers and they begin to identify shared experiences with their *compañeras* in similar circumstances. As the workers see the various levels of shared experiences that create spaces through which to identify with one another, or to support others, solidarity forms. These informal ties are significant, since they contribute to the development of support systems among sex workers. The solidaristic possibilities of these shared experiences become even more pronounced as workers increasingly begin to identify with each other, and thus are more likely to speak out or stick up for others.

I also discussed how stigma can also have the opposite effect and the ways that is can diminish the desire to openly organize on behalf of, or with, equally marginalized or stigmatized

workers. In the case of sex workers in San Jose's *zona roja*, the range of informal to formal friendships, in which workers share food, or listen to each other's stories, increase empathy among marginalized workers. These accounts of cases of violence and/or abuse, even if they do not involve the specific workers in the relationships, are live embers that ignite a shared sense of injustice or insecurity around sex work. These examples demonstrate that the seeds of consciousness-raising around a given set circumstances can be nurtured and will bear fruit, even in informal street worker relationships.

Dramatic changes can occur as workers become consciously aware that they are not alone, and as they see how countless others also suffer in demeaning and de-humanizing conditions. This is especially true when women see that many conditions in which they must earn their living are painfully unjust. Grasping this reality primes the listener, in this case, sex workers, to be informally supportive of other workers' rights. Large numbers of sex workers have experienced or simply heard about the travails that have led other workers, over time, to affirm their rights and demand an end to discrimination, violence and abuse. While their complaints may not always be framed in the language of 'rights,' they nonetheless evolve as common bonds with the potential to spur collective acts of resistance, friendship and demonstrations of informal solidarity. These small, individual acts of resistance against dominant or hegemonic forces do add up, if only in the consciousness of individuals. Consciousness-raising, after all, is foundational in the process of empowerment. Stigma and discrimination against sex workers may lead to a shared sense of identity or common beliefs for workers collectively; understanding these commonalities can become fundamental to building solidarity and developing social movements or broad-based socio-political organizations as La Sala. The informal actions by sex workers and the realization that their experiences of inter-sectional

stigma, discrimination, or violence as sex workers are not unique to them individually, or even to such workers, form the glue that binds them more tightly together. A broader connection to labor politics indicates that this is true for other working class solidarities, which in turn fuels the politicization processes necessary to build either informal or activist responses, among which are fighting back, using formal complaints, or other exhibitions of willingness to speak out. These actions are reflected and shared informally among workers and create the conditions for shared identity, if only informally. A shared sense of purpose or identity is an essential ingredient for social movements and organization building. Access to funds is also vital for the movement and development of the cause.

These issues of identity politics, acts of resistance, and spaces for solidarity building are very much connected to broader questions of individual and group empowerment. At its inception, La Sala was framed as a vehicle for empowerment with a clear mission, lofty goals, and the aim of having transparent, accountable leadership. La Sala's struggle to embody these over multiple years highlights how the question of leadership building and empowerment for marginalized communities is a fundamental one to explore. This is especially true as governments, seeking to provide direct support, increasingly turn to civil society organizations to develop projects and maintain support for historically marginalized groups and other targeted communities. Through my interviews and research at and on La Sala, I observed complicated relationships between professionals and the communities they work to support. Acts aimed at “empowering” others through specific tasks and organizing may perversely embed within the leadership model differentiations between workers, their education, and the types of roles they occupy. In this way, tropes that champion sex worker leadership may function as thinly veiled disguises to mask the problematic nature of relationships between sex workers and professionals,

with the former serving mainly as support staff (Vargas 2012, Mata and Rodriguez 2010). In the case of La Sala, if current (sex worker) leadership had waited until the professionals deemed them "ready to lead," they might still be waiting. The more privileged leaders, those with higher levels of education, connections to leadership organizations, and access to decision makers or major sources of funding, enjoy a higher status than the community they serve. With this privilege, they maintain their power to define and direct the operation of these projects. In the case of La Sala's leadership, however, the forceful ouster of the former project president created an unexpected opportunity for input from sex workers, and, just as critically, bolstered their confidence in their ability to maintain and preserve the project at the grassroots level. It also affirmed the advice that RedTraSex's leaders had long given La Sala volunteers: Sex workers should manage and lead their own projects, with professionals standing by to support the process. This transition also demonstrates the viability of sex worker leadership to La Sala's other constituents. As the local sex worker community witnesses additional successes at La Sala, especially the group's success in attracting more funding to provide additional services, they will likely continue to support the project. Each success for the leadership renews their determination to preserve and advance the project, in spite of many challenges.

Leadership by, of, and for sex workers is not only vital for La Sala's members, but also for sex workers outside the organization. I have framed La Sala as representative of in-between informal organizing and international organizing. Having sex worker leaders in the *zona roja* highlights those leaders in the community where workers with similar personal profiles are organizing to affirm all their rights. La Sala's presence and visibility in the community, with its sex worker leaders, indicates to other workers that there is space for support where workers are welcome, which can also accommodate the growth of politicized action. For now, La Sala is an

informative example of a socio-politically and service-oriented organization that relies on continual searches for funding so that the organization can be preserved and provide additional services. Sex workers can access La Sala as service users, establish contact with others, gain public visibility, and organize for greater recognition and rights for sex workers. This advocacy strengthens the local community and helps grow the organization, whether or not workers choose to actively volunteer for La Sala.

I have also shown how RedTraSex, the transnational network, represents a major accomplishment for sex worker organizers across the region and exemplifies the support that such organizations receive throughout Latin America. It frames organizations like La Sala in a global context, since the network is a magnet for print, electronic and Internet media, which cover its international meetings and leadership training sessions. Although no Latin American country has more than a handful of sex worker organizations, RedTraSex's public organizing works to provide the international visibility and clout that help those groups attract increased media attention, more project funding, and support. RedTraSex frames the concept of human rights as a useful hook that sex workers at all levels can promote in their advocacy. I have identified this as a response to the ways that discussions of human rights often occur in policy circles out of reach of the majority of people who are victims of abuse, where decisions are made about who deserves those rights and how to enforce them. While the 1954 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights frames them as universal, in reality such rights are not universally recognized or practiced. Sex worker activists are demanding a place to speak in both policy circles as well as in sex worker only spaces. RedTraSex uses trainings on human rights as a tool to connect the plight of sex workers to discussions on what actually occurs when they are denied these same basic rights. In many countries, they are often subject to imprisonment and abuse.

Just as significantly, RedTraSex employs the language of labor and solidarity to connect the workers to wider discourses of human rights, labor rights, and reproductive rights.

There are direct policy outcomes to organizing, including inclusion into workers' unions and access to greater rights within the home country, including access to healthcare and the chance to lead lives free from violence or harassment. As workers move more deeply into established organizing models, such as NGOs and transnational networks, greater work is being done to affirm the rights of sex workers as laborers. My study has emphasized how continuing to rely on the same models for change within communities, for instance, through support for international NGO's in the global context, practitioners and scholars alike should be aware of how specific models of empowerment are privileged in these spaces. But practices to actualize this concept of empowerment are ever evolving, and, as such, require theoretical and practical efforts to re-evaluate the power differentials in mixed organizations between professionals and community members. This is particularly urgent at the grassroots level. A continuous examination of how decisions are made and projects chosen within target communities is better positioned to keep leadership grounded in practical empowerment. Organizations working within this concept can identify progressive ideas around uplift and political engagement in target communities, as evidenced in the case of La Sala, so as to quickly address empowerment problematics related to decision-making, professional leadership, and financial management. These relationships will continue to be problematic, especially in cases where empowerment strategies remain central to organizational goals, yet day-to-day strategies are not employed on practical levels. Adding to attempts to standardize qualitative and quantitative measurements of empowerment would be one set of starting points for researchers and practitioners seeking to explore members' growth within both personal and group empowerment processes.

The difficulty of maintaining project funding, which stands alongside the problem of organizational management as a significant challenge for organizations, leads me to question why financial independence is not considered a more critical component of empowerment. While international and national organizations provide project funding for groups like La Sala and RedTraSex, as is the current international model for funding non-profit and non-governmental organizations, this indicates these groups' troubling dependence on outside grants to maintain viability. Additional strategies to attract funding, including business development and community cooperatives, could lead to increased financial independence, and empowerment via less dependence on or control by outside organizations or funders.

This project has also explored spaces in which sex workers seek to affirm their humanity and power. Through the work of RedTraSex, we see that, as much as organizing to demand rights, the production of written materials is representative of sex workers' political acts. While I affirm that La Sala and RedTraSex organize using standard social movement methods, my research also indicates the necessity of included of informal solidarities of street workers in a model of sex worker politicization. The centrality of these informal relationships for sex workers highlights the importance of this form of politics from below, where informal resistance tactics are representative of the few responses available to sex workers.

The contributions of this project to the field of political science are clear: the study expands our understanding of the kinds of groups to include in our vision of who and what is political, as well as what kinds of acts are considered political. This dissertation frames its participants as workers, but does so precisely because of the reality of sex workers' own assertion that sex work is labor, a move that is fundamental to accessing the same rights won by other workers.

While this project serves as an in-depth description and analysis of these spaces of power for sex workers, there are gaps in this project. My analysis explores and describes the spaces for politics and power at three distinct levels, but it could be productively enriched with the addition of additional analyses to explore what specific empirical predictors of moving from participation in informal solidarity into formal participation and political engagement. What my analysis is able to do is crucial for fleshing out the analytic environment for organizations of marginal workers, such as sex workers, and forming additional hypotheses for how these sorts of groups can be studied at multiple levels of analysis.

I have also brought forward the ways that leadership is a crucial factor for groups like this, and I have strengthened the evidence for the importance of maintaining representation from the target population in the leadership. Otherwise, as the La Sala case demonstrates, groups outside the target community control decision making within the organization in ways that do not do enough to build informal solidarity and ties between workers themselves as well as the broader public. The more workers are willing to identify themselves either formally or informally as sex workers, the more human and real they become to the non-sex worker community. A network like RedTraSex can provide some of the professionalization and leadership development pieces for organization, particularly when they are also champions of sex worker activism for social change around sex work. As other marginalized worker populations explore similar problematics, they can learn from the Latin American sex-worker example. The policy implications of such cross-fertilization could easily be that increasing numbers of under-represented people will be structurally and personally empowered to speak out and press for lasting, systemic change.

Appendix 1

RedTraSex Member Organizations with Founding Year

Country	Organization	Year Started
Argentina	Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina (AMMAR)- (Asociation of Women Meretrices of Argentina)	1994
Bolivia	Organización Nacional de Activistas por la Emancipacion de la Mujer (ONAEM)- Organization National of Activists for the Emancipation of the Woman	2005
Chile	Fundación Margen- Foundation Margin	1998
Colombia	Asociación de Mujeres Buscando Libertad (ASMUBULI)- Association of Women Seeking Freedom	2008
Costa Rica	Asociación La Sala- Association the Living Room	1994
Ecuador	Red de Trabajadoras Sexuales de Ecuador (REDTABSEX Ecuador)- Network of Sex Workers of Ecuador	2005
El Salvador	Orquídeas del Mar-Orchids of the Sea	2005
Guatemala	Mujeres de Superación (OMES)- Women who Overcome	2000
Honduras	Mujeres Unidas luchando por sus derechos- United Women Fighting for their Rights	2008
México	Asociación Civil Mujer en Libertad- Civil Association of Women in Liberty	1997
Nicaragua	Asociación de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales Girasoles- Association of Women Sex Workers Sunflower	2007
Nicaragua	Nicaragua Asociacion de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales Las Golondrinas- Nicaraguan Association of Women Sex Workers Swallows	2004
Panama	Red Nacional de Mujeres con Dignidad y Derecho (National Network of Women with Dignity and Rights)	
Paraguay	La Organzacion Unidas en la Esperanza (The Organization United in Hope)	2004
Perú	Asociación de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sarita Colonia (Association of Women Workers Saritia Colony)	
Republica	Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas	1997

Dominicana	(MODEMU) (Movement of United Women)	
Uruguay	Asociación Mujeres Meretrices profesionales de Uruguay (Association of Professional Women Meretrices)	1986

Appendix 2

Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Questions for Representatives from Organizations

1. How did this organization begin?
2. How many members do you currently have?
3. Do you attempt to get more members?
4. Does your organization reach out to work with sex-workers? If so, how?
5. What are the challenges to growing a larger membership?
6. Why did you choose to join this organization?
7. Have you been taught empowerment skills? If so, how? What kinds?
8. How do you continue the process of empowerment?
9. Do you perceive sex tourism as a serious issue in the country?

Questions for Sex Workers

1. Do you identify as a sex worker?
2. Do you have any friends or family who know that you are a sex-worker?
3. Are more of your relationships with Costa Ricans, or foreigners?
4. How do you negotiate your relationships with clients?
5. What is the power dynamic like with clients?
6. Do you have any friends or acquaintances that are also in this business?

If so:

- a. Do you identify with them or their experiences?
- b. Have you ever had any experiences where you feel like your friends helped you when it came to sex work?

If not:

- a. Would you like to have other friends or acquaintances that also work in this business?
7. Have you ever helped another woman that was a sex worker? If so, how?

Appendix 3

Questions for Interviews (Spanish Version)

Preguntas por las organizaciones

1. Como y cuando empezó esta organización?
2. Cuantos miembros hay?
3. Quieren tener más miembros?
4. Si esta organización trabaja en alguna manera específica con trabajadoras sexuales? Como?
5. Cuales son las metas en crecer la organización?
6. Por que escogiste participar en esta organización?
7. Le han enseñado empoderamiento? Como? Que tipos?
8. Como uno se puede seguir un proceso de empoderamiento?
9. Crees que el turismo sexual es un problema grande en el país?

Preguntas por las trabajadoras sexuales

1. Usted identifica como trabajadora sexual?
2. Usted tiene amigos o familiares que saben que trabajas en prostitución?
3. Mayormente, sus clientes son ticos o extranjeros?
4. Como negocias su relación con clientes?
5. Tiene amigas que también trabajan en este negocio?

Si la respuesta es si:

- a. Usted identifica con ellas y sus experiencias?
- b. Usted ha tenido experiencias donde tus amigas o conocidas le han ayudado en este negocio?

Si la respuesta es no:

- a. Usted le gustaría tener amigas o conocidas que también trabaja en este negocio?
6. Usted ha tenido una experiencia donde ayudo otra mujer que también esta en el negocio?

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