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COSTA RICA'S ASOCIACIÓN LA SALA

BY MZILIKAZI KONÉ

ON MY FIRST TRIP TO LA SALA (*The Living Room*), I met the politically active advocates for Costa Rica's sex industry workers, the small country's invisible, but often either demonized or victimized population. The leaders I met defended the population of sex workers, despite the challenges.

While I did find conviction in the trio of leaders—Nubia Ordoñez, Gretel Quiros Pastraña and Carolina Rivera,* La Sala's service provision at the time was unable to match that of the organization's headier days. In that moment they presided over a shell of a project in the heart of San José with very little funding.

La Sala is housed in a large building in San José, Costa Rica's notorious red light district. On the first day of walking there, I realized that it was situated in a dangerous area. A few doors from the building, ironically, there stands a police station. Several years ago, police officials decided to locate a station in the neighborhood to allegedly decentralize enforcement.

* Pseudonym



La Sala is housed in an old Canada Dry building.

Some residents and workers, according to La Sala, reported that the added police presence stabilized the neighborhood and that compared to previous years, there was less crime now. On the west side of the block, around the corner, shoppers make their way to a large marketplace, where fresh vegetables, meats, household products and cooked foods are sold.

On the other side of the street, there are other commercial stores. Beginning at roughly eight in the morning, women line up to meet potential clients and ply their trades. In the other direction, on the east side of the block and to the right, sit a bevy of brothels, some six in a row. The culture in the brothels is very different than that of the women on the street, on the south side of the block. In these areas, the working poor meet the bustling shoppers in one of the cities busiest market places. In the middle of this block, stands La Sala.

As I would later learn during my research there, La Sala, like many Costa Rican non-profits, provide critical services for its constituents, but only when the organization can access public and private funds. If La Sala's cash flow is interrupted, a serious lack of resources results and the organization is unable to provide these services, including the most basic necessities and such critical utilities as water and power. On numerous occasions, I witnessed drastic cuts in these services, even as the leadership worked to pay its bills.

A critique stating that much of the research on sex worker organizations focused on the U.S. and Western



Front door of La Sala features condom posters in the windows.



Front Sign: “A place for us... workers and ex-sex workers fighting for our rights”

Europe generated substantial comment several years ago. Consequently, such texts as “Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition,” (Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998), came forth to detail the kinds of sex worker organizations that emerged throughout the global south. As Cabezas (2009), notes, many of these organizations arose out of attempts in the international community to fund HIV/AIDS prevention throughout the region.

Although numerous sex worker organizations continue to fight for funds to maintain health and HIV/AIDS prevention programs, many of them have expanded their work and

goals, over time, to include human rights, addressing police abuse and accessing health care as priorities.

The Asociación La Sala was born in 1994, out of a project designed by the Institution Lationamericano de Prevención y Educación (ILPES--The Latin American Institute of Prevention and Education), an organization based in the Netherlands, which targeted sex workers for education on HIV/AIDS, sexuality education and building self-esteem. The initial plan for La Sala was to create a series of workshops for a group of sex workers that could later be replicated and shared with other sex workers (Van Wijk, 4). It was hoped that this

cycle of education around HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention would continue among sex workers and perhaps even extend to their clients (Carvajal 6/15/12).

During my seven-month fieldwork that spanned between 2012 and 2013, I was able to observe La Sala in the early stages of a leadership transition that would highlight the shift from professionals: a social worker and a professor who previously led the project, to sex worker volunteers, who had long worked with the project. According to the project manual, this change in leadership was the goal of the Dutch social worker and founder of the

"Felicidades Mamás!" [Congratulations mothers!], Mother's Day Piñata, Asociación La Sala, Mothers Day Party, August 2013



project, Karin Van Wijk.

The leadership transition occurred at the end of 2011, 17 years after the organization came into existence. Conflicts over funding, leadership and project control were all factor in the split, triggered by the steady ascension of sex workers to the board of directors that gave them enough votes to oust the previous leadership--the professionals--and wrest control over the organization.

Individual and collective empowerment has long been a primary goal of the project. Since its inception, the project was to provide services to this community of majority women, but to also include them in leadership roles in the project. 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. Carolina Rivera, a current leader of the project, described her perspective on empowerment strategies:

M: How does La Sala help other women empower themselves?

C: Well, that they believe in themselves. That they feel the value that they have as a human, this is first, that she feels that she is worthy in spite of her work, that they are valuable as people. From this, we help them learn that they are valuable as people, as women and that we are also valuable as mothers (3/21/12).

This interpretation of empowerment reflects a concept akin to self-esteem building amongst the women, including the affirmation for the role of motherhood that exists in

the lives of a majority of women that interact with the project.

La Sala's current goals can be described in many different ways. They serve as both a service provider to the women who work in San Jose's Zona Roja (red zone) occasionally working with state agencies and other NGOs's to offer temporary events and services like HIV/STI testing, access to optometrists and hosting health fairs in the space.

Additionally, La Sala serves as a center of education, where free workshops and trainings educate women on basic human rights and sex education. La Sala has hosted numerous workshops, services and events for women working in the area. They have also provided access to various types of doctors at low or no cost. Early in La Sala's history, the organization provided free and inexpensive dental visits, free visits for psychological services and access to a washing machine. La Sala continues to host events for women associated with, or using its services, including a mother's day event, movie nights and holiday parties, among other activities.

Organizing sex workers can be challenging, especially given the socialization of many women conditioned to compete against each other, the inherent competitiveness of the location and the work, and the double standard around sex work that can have a negative effect on women's self-esteem (Van Wijk, 2000). This double morality allows men to visit sex workers, but blames and stigmatizes women and acts as an additional factor limiting their willingness to "come out" as sex

workers. All these factors have direct effects on whether women were, or are, able to organize and become politicized around the project.

The double standard also plays a role in organizing since not everyone working in some aspect of the industry identifies as a sex worker, which can be a transient labor and identity. Consequently, using the term “sex worker” is an actively political tool to attempt to mobilize, engage and organize as an identity. Meanwhile, the dual roles of stigma and discrimination continue to be huge factors in determining one’s willingness to self identify as a sex worker, organize publically, or at all.

Gretel Quiros Pastraña, a project leader, described the need to develop solidarity among sex workers:

“Because I have done my homework in learning that she is not my enemy, she is my friend. How did I arrive at understanding this? Through workshops, trainings...they are not my enemies, they are my colleagues; I don’t say they are my friends like that...But they are people and I believe in them and that they have a lot of qualities and that because of this, I am here fighting.... they are part of the reason that I fight, without them, what is my cause? If I don’t believe in them, who will? I have to work so that people believe in them, just like someone believed in me” (3/27/12).

The project’s immediate goal is to secure adequate funding to keep the doors open and renew critical services. Somehow, in the interim, La Sala has staved off closure. Its organizers aspire to develop a larger network of sex worker organizations



**Nubia Ordoñez
speaks at the
workshop in Paso
Canoas,
June 23, 2012**

so workers nationwide can benefit from organizing. The current leadership has continued this goal by finding sites in outside provinces where workshops can be held for other workers.

In June, 2012, La Sala’s members left San José for Paso Canoas, a city along the border with Panama, where its leaders held their first workshop with the goal of developing a network of sex worker organizations in Costa Rica. Just before the workshop concluded, Gretel Quiros Pastraña spoke of her experience and the need for more organizing among 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 anyone--we are the

solution to many problems. When we are organized and empowered, we are going to have a voice and a 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 have a right to a pension. This will be when are 80, 90-years-old, I still have a lot of sex work left (*laughter*), 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” (6/23/12).

When Gretel and Nubia discussed their desire to organize as sex workers, the women nodded excitedly in agreement as the leaders declared

their goals of recognition and accessing corresponding rights. In previous years, Nubia pointed out, as she compared La Sala's current position to its past state, they were an organization for sex workers, but now, she noted, they are a group for and by sex workers. La Sala's attempt to develop a sex worker network, given the project's on-going financial difficulties, highlights a larger need for increased organization and politicization among the workers. In discussing their desire to expand, the women's decision to push for the network highlights the need to be more politically organized as laborers, to show their face to sex workers throughout Costa Rica and gain the collective power needed to pressure the state for recognition as workers and to thus access the rights afforded them.



Mzilikazi Koné (shown at left with Nubia Ordoñez) is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at UCLA with a focus on Race, Ethnicity and

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Author's note: For more information on La Sala, visit <http://asociacionlasala.org/index.html>

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"In Defense of the human rights of women sex workers," May 1, 2012



Coordinator Nubia Ordoñez and Leader Gretel Quiros Pastraña respond to a reporter, International Workers Day March, May 1 2012.