

The Sex Sector: A victory for diversity

By Laura María Agustín and Jo Weldon

Global Reproductive Rights Newsletter 66/67, no. 2/3,. (Amsterdam: Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, pp. 31-34).

Social-justice activists internationally have hailed as progressive and humane the 1998 report *The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia*. Edited by Lin Lean Lim of the International Labour Office in Geneva, the book recommends that the sex industry be included in official government accountings, first, because of its enormous contributions to regional economies, and second, as the only way to improve the situation of those employed as sex workers. With a recognised sex sector, governments would be required to extend labour rights and protections to people who work in it. At the same time, the report unequivocally demands the eradication of child prostitution as a serious human rights violation and an intolerable form of child labour.

Avoiding the polemic of usual publications on the sex industry, the ILO report contends that government recognition of this economic sector would improve the lives of between 800,000 and one million people who are paid for sexual services in the four countries of the study: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. The report estimates that .25-1.5% of the total female population of the region is engaged in prostitution and, furthermore, that each sex job creates approximately seven other jobs. Among the millions of other workers implicated in the sex sector are business owners and managers, mamasans, pimps and procurers, cleaners, waiters, cashiers, parking valets, security guards, vendors of food, tobacco, liquor, cosmetics and clothing, stylists, property owners, travel agencies, taxi and hotel room services and white-collar professionals such as lawyers and accountants.

The report estimates that the sector accounts for 2-14% of the Gross Domestic Product in the region. Significantly, the sex sector saw its spectacular increase during recent boom times, and is thus not the product of economic crisis, as is often alleged. The volume of transfer payments alone — money sent to rural families by urban sex workers — sometimes exceeds government spending on development programmes. Recognition of the sector would mean an enormous governmental gain in tax revenues that currently stay in the informal sector or are sent abroad.

Opening up a dark world

The ILO underscores moral, social and human rights problems generated by the clandestine nature of the sex industry and indicates that its recognition would give workers, especially migrant women and children, recourse to necessary state services, including health protection against HIV/AIDS. The immensely profitable business of 'trafficking' in human beings would be rendered unnecessary, the now routine violations of human rights could be penalised and workers would be able to organise to demand fairer working conditions. The authors contend that governments are irresponsible in pretending that the industry does not exist and link this 'ignorance' with rampant corruption that goes unpenalised. With recognition of the scale and economic

significance of the sex sector, governments could acknowledge the impossibility of enforcing total prohibition of prostitution and be freed (and forced) to include prostitutes in the occupational, health and safety regulations which protect other kinds of workers. At present, sex workers are unlikely to seek legal protection against abuses — including major human-rights violations — if they fear they will be prosecuted themselves.

The Sex Sector avoids recounting the usual stories of victimisation of prostitutes and does not enter into the common polemic against prostitution in general. Instead, the report cites what prostitutes said in interviews: that they knew what they were getting into, that friends showed them the way in, that the pay is infinitely better than their other options, that the work is more flexible and less time-consuming for mothers and, overwhelmingly, that it is the best way for them to help support their parents. They also complained of stigma, danger, abuse, exploitation, alienation and harassment. Significantly, these negatives were encountered most commonly not from customers but from police, officials and criminals. The potential stress that prostitutes suffer from fear of arrest, from being criminalised, is still to be researched.

Recognising diversity and choice

The report, which takes a dispassionate view, allows the possibility that adults might actually choose sex work. Arguments about prostitution usually bog down in the impossibility of comparing well-paid, freely chosen sex jobs and forced situations that resemble slavery. Abolitionists focus exclusively on victims and belittle the 'false consciousness' of those who say, for whatever reason, that they prefer sex work. The Sex Sector acknowledges the variety of experience within the industry in Southeast Asia and says that those who have few options for survival and choose sex work should be allowed to continue working, but with the protections and improvements in working conditions that would be possible with recognition of the sector in general. At the same time, anyone who does not wish to work in the sex industry should be assisted out of it, helped to understand their other options and offered opportunities to find and train for other work.

The report makes clear that those who prefer the work to other available choices are not limited to privileged First World women. According to many members of the working class, they may not love sex work but they prefer it to jobs in sweatshops and factory lines, cleaning public toilets and being clerks and secretaries. Sex jobs offer mobility, temporary and part-time opportunities and the possibility to take cash home to buy food the very same day. Recognition of the sex sector would allow people the possibility to try sex work and get out of it if they wanted to. They also would be able to report abuses without fear of being arrested themselves.

'Trafficking' and stigma

One of the worst aspects and most difficult problems in the sex industry are the abuses perpetrated by 'traffickers' who facilitate or force migrations of people seeking work in other countries. Restrictive immigration policies increase the likelihood that migrants will be open to coercive practices such as debt-bondage — contracting large debts that must be repaid as dictated by traffickers.

If prostitution were recognised as a form of labour, the stigma which portrays prostitutes as victims, social undesirables or criminals would be lifted. Workers would be encouraged to be more honest with health professionals — crucial in times of an AIDS pandemic. Prostitutes not accorded rights at work are more vulnerable to infection and illness: unorganised sex workers in Bombay have a rate of HIV infection of 50 per cent while the rate of organised workers in Calcutta's Mahila Songatchi Group is below five per cent. The ILO warns that stigmatisation sometimes influences health workers to avoid working with prostitutes, and insists that any health programmes must also be directed at clients.

Defining all prostitutes as victims adds to the stigma. It is probably better for a person who does sex work and dislikes it to view herself as someone who tried something they didn't like than to think of herself as the victim of repeated rape. Viewing every person who has done sex work as damaged is similarly disempowering. Leaving out of all accounts, as abolitionists do, the testimonies of sex workers who like and feel proud of what they do, only increases acrimony. No one's voice should be discounted. How one person assumes she would feel in a particular situation does not mean they she knows how all other people feel about it.

The role of men

Abolitionists denigrate clients of sex workers as depraved, violent men. But many clients have helped women to escape from situations of abuse, and growing numbers of clients are female. And while the majority of sex workers are female, large numbers of transsexual, transvestite and male prostitutes are discounted and marginalised in the anti-prostitution discourse.

Abolitionists take the position that all clients should be penalised, even incarcerated. Apart from the disturbing nature of this alliance between feminists and patriarchal agents of social control, it is difficult to feel glad at the prospect of millions more people in prison. When construed solely as johns, clients' other identities as fathers, sons and brothers are made invisible, along with the possible damage done to the families of those incarcerated. The social cost of prosecuting all clients as rapists would be extremely high.

The need for new research

The great difference between the two general positions in the prostitution debate is that abolitionists refuse absolutely to consider anything but total abolition (and thus refuse to discuss issues with non-abolitionists) while non-abolitionists advocate beginning with the recognition of prostitution as work and offer solutions depending on regional, cultural and individual situations, among these decriminalisation of all aspects of prostitution for everyone as well as various kinds of regulation. Both points of view suffer from a paucity of research data. Since the common goal of everyone is to reduce harm and discrimination, the priority should be joining forces to achieve this goal.

Much research on prostitution is flawed by using self-selected subjects (for example, women who have sought help at trauma centres). Research that might begin from the perspective that prostitution is labour has difficulty acquiring funding. The result is that

the same kind of studies are repeatedly cited in policy debates. What is needed is research into how various kinds of legislation affect the well-being of prostitutes, research that uses control groups of women from similar backgrounds as the prostitutes studied, research that distinguishes between forced and voluntary prostitution, research that includes both men and women and research that includes all responses whether they conform with the researcher's politics or not. Data from Minnesota should not be extrapolated to Thailand, and cultural considerations must be included.

Most important, sex workers should be funded to research themselves. One of the most unfortunate aspects of the traditional debate is that it is usually carried out by outsiders convinced of what is right and wrong for others. Biased questions are asked based on these beliefs, and views which dissent from them are discounted. Research conducted by subjects themselves would allow them to define and analyse their own problems, taking all cultural factors into account. Diversity of response and need would emerge, and alliances and partnerships could be forged. The recognition of sex work as labour would enable sex workers to speak, organise and participate in decisions that affect them. Without the input of a diverse range of sex worker voices, their priorities of need will always be misunderstood.

The authors of this article, who met in cyberspace, have collaborated to write it via e-mail, demonstrating the international alliances possible among unfunded and marginalised women's groups. Laura Agustín is a member of Conexiones Para Migrantes/Connexions for Migrants, an association of Third World migrants in Europe. Excluded from most fora and services they insist on their right to put forth their point of view. Their mission statement can be read at www.nodo50.org/migrantes, and they can be contacted at migrantes@nodo50.org. Jo Weldon is the director of the Sex Workers International Media Watch, a new initiative intended to facilitate networking and self-expression among unfunded organisations and individuals with the common desire to combat discrimination against sex workers. Their website is under construction at members.aol.com/JoWeld/SWIMW.html. Jo can be contacted at JoWeld@aol.com and at 1-212-946-6303.

Thanks for their help to Anti-Slavery International (UK), the Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (the Netherlands), members of the Network of Sex Work Projects from Venezuela, Australia, India, the USA and England, interested organisations in the Ukraine, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines and the Scarlet Alliance (Australia).