

Challenging the Stigma of Sex Work in India: Material Context and Symbolic Change

FLORA CORNISH*

*School of Nursing, Midwifery & Community Health, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road,
Glasgow G4 0BA, UK*

ABSTRACT

Stigmatization and discrimination against social groups raise obstacles to the participation of their members in community interventions. Internalized stigma and a lack of empowering experiences promote fatalistic expectations that little can be achieved. This paper discusses how the Sonagachi Project in Kolkata, India, challenges stigma as part of its community development and health promotion efforts with sex workers, drawing on interviews with 19 sex workers involved in the Project and one group discussion among the Project's leaders. The internalized stigma of prostitution is challenged (1) by asserting that sex workers have rights which should be respected, (2) by claiming equivalence to other oppressed but politically successful groups and (3) by providing evidence of sex workers' positive achievements. These arguments are made plausible to sex workers by a material context that provides evidence and experience of the possibility of change. I conclude that interventions designed to problematize stigma and discrimination should back up the conceptual alternatives that they present by producing concrete changes to a community's living conditions. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: stigma; discrimination; fatalism; critical thinking; problematization; community development; sex workers; India

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the efforts of a sex workers' organization in India to challenge the internalized stigma of prostitution. It does so from the perspective of an interest in the mobilization of community participation in development. While contemporary development policies recommend that interventions should capitalize on the agency of marginalized communities, a historical context of stigmatization and discrimination has often undermined such agency. When a social category, such as 'prostitutes', has been subject to profound and sustained symbolic and material exclusion, how is it possible for

* Correspondence to: Flora Cornish, School of Nursing, Midwifery & Community Health, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA, UK. E-mail: flora.cornish@gcal.ac.uk

such a group to challenge that stigmatization, and to develop alternative, positive understandings of their status, which could provide a basis for their collective action?

Freire's (1973) concept of problematization provides the theoretical starting point for the present analysis. Under repressive social conditions, such as colonialism or dictatorship, Freire suggests, material oppression which denies people opportunities for agency, and symbolic oppression which denies them positive or active definitions of self, lead to fatalism. If these forms of oppression are exerted with sufficient force and duration, people may come to consider their hardships as inevitable and unassailable, so that the appropriate response seems to be adaptation rather than resistance (Montenegro, 2002). Problematization is a process through which the taken-for-granted social order is questioned and disrupted. The social order is problematized when subjects can conceive of alternative social arrangements to those that currently exist. Stigma is problematized when those who are stigmatized do not accept their stigmatized status as 'the way things are' but believe that things could be different, and that they may legitimately demand and expect better. According to Freire, such problematization is the condition for transformative collective action.

Given the limited effectiveness of education and legislation as anti-stigma strategies, the potential of Freirean collective action interventions is currently attracting attention (Campbell, Foulis, Maimane, & Sibiya, 2005; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). From this point of view, community development workers and community organizations are expected to promote the problematization of stigma and discrimination among those who are stigmatized, as the basis for their collective action. But the promotion of critical, transformative understandings is not a simple task. Where are communities to find these alternative versions of their status? This paper will detail the various problematizing strategies used in the Sonagachi Project in Kolkata, with the aim of developing a conceptualization of these strategies which might facilitate the design of problematizing interventions.

There are key challenges in developing problematizing interventions. Efforts to create supportive fora for critical debate do not always lead to critical thinking. Participants may reiterate the oppressive ideology (Campbell & MacPhail, 2002), or may engage in debate on the basis of expectations that it is those who are already powerful will be able to make things happen (Guareschi & Jovchelovitch, 2004). Against the weight of a history of material and symbolic exclusion, how can a minority voice suggesting an alternative have influence? Creative arguments alone are unlikely to convince participants that change is possible if their daily experience is that it is not. Thus, the second aim of the paper is to understand what makes alternative versions of a community's status take root and have plausibility for participants.

THE SONAGACHI PROJECT

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

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

The advent of the HIV pandemic in India led to increased opportunities for development projects for sex workers. Participatory and community mobilization approaches have been widely initiated to promote sex workers' agency for HIV prevention. The Sonagachi Project in Kolkata is a relatively successful example of such interventions (Basu et al., 2004).

The Project was founded in 1992 by a coalition of donors, local academics, NGOs and sex workers, with the remit of HIV prevention in Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest red light district. Project documentation describes its philosophy in terms of '3 Rs: Respect, Recognition and Reliance, that is respect of sex workers and their profession; recognizing their profession and their rights; and reliance on their understanding and capability' (Jana & Banerjee, 1999, p.11). Accordingly, sex workers are recruited to take on the majority of posts in the Project, including management and decision-making as well as implementation. An explicit principle of the Project is to challenge the stigma of sex work and to promote sex workers' social and political awareness as the basis of a collective action movement. Hence, within education sessions and regular project meetings, discrimination against sex workers is problematized. These policies and arguments were initiated by individual founders of the project, including politically-aware sex workers and non-sex worker academics and activists, but have taken off, to become part of the discourse of the red light district.

METHODS

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

The analysis picked out segments of dialogue in which sex workers made sense of their identity as sex workers and their capacity for collective action. It distinguished between segments that demonstrated internalized stigma (which included sub-themes of discrimination, fatalism and humiliation), and those that problematized stigma. Three main strategies for the problematization of stigma were distinguished and are presented below. The discussion section then explores what it is that makes these strategies plausible.

STIGMA AND FATALISM

Sex workers explained that, in their home communities, marriage and motherhood were key criteria for a woman to achieve respect, and that being a prostitute denies them these sources of respect. The stigma of prostitution results in widespread discrimination against sex workers, who spoke bitterly of being rejected by their families, being considered open

to sexual exploitation, being evicted from their rented flats, their daughters being considered unmarriedable and their children being taunted at school.

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

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

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

Interviewer: If a sex worker gets married and has children, she is no more a sex worker. She is a family woman now. Then how can people call her a sex worker?

Supervisor: She used to do the business and the label is already on her, so she would never be able to shed her previous identity. People would not accept her as a family woman. (60)

Sex workers thus learn that they cannot regain a respectable identity, but must expect and accept stigmatization and discrimination. Their fatalism about their profession is compounded by disempowering experiences of poverty and gender. As other authors have shown, the most profound stigmatization often occurs at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion (e.g. poverty, gender and disability) (Abadía-Barrero & Castro, 2006; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Some sex workers express this compounding of problems, pointing out that, even less alterable than their profession, their gender condemns them to discrimination such as exclusion from employment and being seen as sexual objects. In the following exchange, the madam (brothel manager) spoke with great contempt for the interviewer's suggestion.

Interviewer: Would you prefer another job?

Sex worker: What job would we get? Even educated people are without jobs. Maybe a boy can find a job, but we girls. . .

Madam: We can't do that because we have holes. (9)

PROBLEMATIZING STIGMA

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

¹Numbers in brackets are interview identification numbers.

Sex workers have 'rights'

According to the Project leaders, undermining internalized stigma is a prerequisite to mobilizing sex workers to take part in the Project. To this end, a core feature of Project meetings, of the encounters between Project workers and other sex workers, and of interactions between the Project and the wider public, is critical discussion of the viewpoint that sex work is morally wrong, and promotion of the idea that sex workers have rights which should be respected. They argue that sex workers are not doing anything wrong, but rather that it is society which is doing wrong, by not affording sex workers the rights enjoyed by other citizens.

Interviewer: Tell me, what do you understand by the “sex workers’ rights”, for which [the Project] is fighting?

Supervisor: All other workers have rights, but we as sex workers don’t have any rights. So, [the Project] is trying to get our rights. We should have rights over our body. We are harassed by everybody—police, local men—and we don’t have any say over our body. We are working and it is service-based work, but we don’t have any rights.

Interviewer: What are these rights?

Supervisor: Right to self-defense. If we stay under a madam, we are forced to take more customers even if we don’t want to. But if we have our right, we would have our say. We can refuse. Police harassment will be reduced. We would get receipts against the rent we are paying to the landlady. (60)

The notion of rights is very useful to the sex workers, here, casting their discrimination in a different light. In contrast to the expressions of fatalism, presented above, in which discrimination against sex work appeared inevitable, by invoking the notion of rights, such discrimination is seen as illegitimate and the alternative—where their rights are duly respected—is conceivable. The special character of the concept of ‘rights’ is that the absence of rights does not undermine their validity, but rather, calls out responses of indignation and anger (Stenner, 2005), and collective action to restore those rights. This mobilizing effect of the concept of rights is one of the advantages of rights-based approaches to challenging stigma (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

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

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

Such findings suggest that simply challenging stigma at the symbolic level (by presenting a conceptual alternative) may not problematize discrimination sufficiently to stimulate collective action.

Claiming equivalence to other groups

The abstract notion of ‘rights’ is given greater concrete substance by comparing the situation of sex workers with the situations of other social groups around them. Pointing to similarities between sex workers and others normalizes the profession and problematizes the selection of sex workers for stigmatization. Project workers argue that men also have multiple sexual partners but are not stigmatized for it.

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

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

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

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

Sex worker leader: We formed an organization and started protesting against wrong doings and protecting ourselves and also fighting for our rights. In the past, labourers worked for long hours and got a nominal amount of money and some got no money at all. Over and above that, they were beaten. Then they fought for their rights, 8 hours of work, overtime, etc. (Group)

Collective bargaining through a trade union is a familiar and effective strategy for improving working conditions in Kolkata, where workers in the informal sector, such as tailors, cobblers or rickshaw drivers, are unionized, as are workers in formal employment. Party politics are also lively at the local level in red light districts, and a small number of Project workers reported first becoming politicized—learning to understand exploitation and the value of organization—through involvement with the local political party. The political achievements of *Dalit* ('untouchables') in India further provide an inspiring example for the Project. In response to the *Dalit* political movement, the Indian government has implemented a positive discrimination ('reservations') policy for members of scheduled (low) castes, which reserves for them certain proportions of university places and government jobs. The Project Director described his early politicization when he came to see the situation of children of sex workers as being similar to the situation of children born into a scheduled caste family.

Director: I wrote a letter to the President [of India] through a journalist at that time when they were talking about reservations. Thanks to B. R. Ambedkar, after independence, scheduled castes are no longer untouchable. They are now minorities, quite strong, getting government jobs and leading a prestigious life. But before and even after independence, the children of sex workers are treated as untouchables. [...] I wrote to the President that we, the children of sex workers, are more eligible for reservations. Children would be able to get admission into good boarding schools, like children under reservations, without competitive exams, and would get a chance in government jobs. The future result would be: the next generation will be much better off and would be able to lead a normal life like any other children in the society. It was big news in all the papers. (40)

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

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

Evidence of sex workers' success

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

The second aim of the paper was to identify how such alternative conceptions appear sufficiently realistic to participants to be worth pursuing. The analysis gives weight to the role of the material context. Just as an attitude of fatalism is engendered and maintained by a material context of oppression, the notion that sex workers are eligible for rights and can bring about change is supported by a political culture that allows space for collective action movements, and a local context that provides for empowering experiences. Kolkata's political culture provides a precedent in the successful efforts of other marginalized groups to gain recognition and legislative change. Their tried and tested means, such as forming an organization to represent their interests and holding demonstrations, both have legitimacy in the eyes of the powerful and are familiar to the disempowered. In other parts of the world, well-known instances of successful resistance, such as independence struggles in former colonies, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, or the civil rights movement in the USA, might provide culturally familiar concepts, methods of protest and inspiring examples to support the viability of collective action. Examples relevant to the regional political context may be more convincing to participants than references to universal human rights or international policies made at distant political summits.

In addition, the concrete experience of having achieved successes is a powerful motivator of participation. Community organizations can provide empowering experiences that the wider social context has denied the community. Such organizations should ensure that they give people experiences of being trusted and achieving positive results. They can also work to change the community context so that alternative courses of action become viable and real (for instance, by setting up micro-credit facilities or problem-solving committees, or negotiating with health services or police to be supportive). Again, I am suggesting that concrete local *experience* of efficacy is what gives plausibility to the possibility of change.

In debates about mobilizing collective action, efforts to bring about change at the material level are often seen in opposition to attempts to bring about change at the symbolic level. However, my argument is that material changes that are not discussed at the symbolic level as part of a community's political agenda, and grand ideals with no material backing are equally incomplete. Abstract ideals describe a situation, that is remote from current material reality, but this is in fact their strength, as it is by being beyond present experience that they introduce the possibility of change, and goals to be strived for. However, such ideals must be made credible, by ensuring experiences of success in achieving material change to a community's possibilities for action. For material changes to become more than individual changes, and to generate a wider process of politicized collective action, they need to become part of community members' symbolic understandings of their potential for action. Material and symbolic changes are complementary aspects of a single process of politicized change.

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