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The Philippine Sex Workers Collective: Struggling to be heard, not saved

Sharmila Parmanand

Abstract

The Philippine Sex Workers Collective is an organisation of current and former sex workers who reject the criminalisation of sex work and the dominant portrayal of sex workers as victims. Based on my interviews with leaders of the Collective and fifty other sex workers in Metro Manila, I argue in this paper that a range of contextual constraints limits the ability of Filipino sex workers to effectively organise and lobby for their rights. For example, the Collective cannot legally register because of the criminalisation of sex work, and this impacts their ability to access funding and recruit members. The structural configuration of the Philippines' Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking incentivises civil society organisations to adhere to a unified position on sex work as violence against women. The stigma against sex work in a predominantly Catholic country is another constraint. Recently, President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs has been weaponised by some members of the police to harass sex workers. Finally, I reflect on strategies the Collective could adopt to navigate the limited space they have for representation, such as crucial partnerships, outreach work, and legal remedies.

Keywords: sex work, anti-trafficking, Philippines, war on drugs

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Introduction

I used to work for a leading anti-trafficking nonprofit in the Philippines. I was disturbed by the absence of sex workers in discussions about trafficking for sexual exploitation and the privileged discursive position of trafficking survivors and anti-prostitution women's organisations. The experiences of

survivors were important but not fully representative of the lived realities of all individuals who engage in sex work. During the course of my work, I encountered some women who had been rescued from prostitution who were resentful of the disruption to their work and the moral judgment they felt in their interactions with their ‘rescuers’. I began to doubt the dominant anti-trafficking narrative that all women in prostitution were unable to make informed decisions for themselves. That is why in 2015, I reached out to the Philippine Sex Workers Collective through a message on their Facebook page. The Collective is a loose alliance of sex workers around the Philippines that advocates for sex workers’ rights.

In my first message, I explained my background and desire to learn more about the organisation. ‘Tex’, one of the founders, responded with scepticism and reminded me about the police raids on commercial sex establishments and the outing of sex workers in news media, especially in the period following the enactment of the *Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act* of 2003 (ATIP law). Despite this initial hesitation, my online message exchanges with the Collective continued for a year. In their replies, the leaders of the Collective assured me that they, too, agree that women who are in sex work but wish to leave should have access to meaningful alternatives. However, they believe that the criminalisation of sex work, or even of buying sex, is a form of injustice against sex workers and their families who depend on this form of work.

I met ‘Tex’ and the other leaders in person in August 2016. After several meetings and a three-part video interview I conducted with them for an online platform,¹ I worked more closely with them on a voluntary basis, for example on grant applications and media engagements. As a result of this work, I decided to focus my PhD research on the impact of anti-trafficking interventions on sex workers.

In this paper, I discuss the confluence of factors that limit the Collective’s ability to organise and lobby. After a brief overview of the history and current work of the Collective, I examine the difficult environment in which it operates: the confusing mix of laws on sex work, which renders sex workers more vulnerable to abuse, and the structure of the Philippine anti-trafficking ecosystem and the relationships among donors, civil society organisations, and the state, which, together, create a powerful anti-sex work lobby. I also review the Philippine Commission on Women’s (PCW) proposed *Anti-*

¹ Pampublico, ‘Pampublico x Sex Workers Collective: An Interview with Sharmila Parmanand’, *Pampublico*, 23 November 2016, retrieved 10 June 2018, <https://www.pampublico.com/pampublico-x-sex-work/pampublico-x-sex-workers-collective-an-interview-with-sharmila-parmanand>.

Prostitution Law,² which repeals punitive laws against sex workers and imposes criminal penalties only on buyers and persons facilitating transactions. Following this, I discuss other barriers the Collective encounters, including social stigma in a predominantly Catholic country, and police abuse, which has worsened under President Rodrigo Duterte's violent war on drugs. Finally, I conclude with broader reflections on the question of advocating for rights in a precarious context and the future of the sex worker movement in the Philippines.

I draw on private correspondence, interviews, and conversations with leaders of the Collective between August 2015 and September 2018. I also use qualitative data from life history interviews I conducted with fifty adult street- or establishment-based sex workers in Metro Manila from July 2017 to July 2018 for my PhD research. The sex workers I interviewed were all directly or indirectly affected by anti-trafficking interventions such as raids and rescue operations. I focused on these groups because they are often characterised as most vulnerable within the sex work hierarchy.³ They are more publicly visible and experience a higher risk of exploitation by third parties such as managers and the police. They usually earn less than escorts or call girls, whose clientele are wealthier, and who are likely to be more educated and possess greater social capital.

The Philippine Sex Workers Collective

Women Hookers Organizing for their Rights and Empowerment (WHORE), established in 1989, was the first sex worker-led organisation in the Philippines. WHORE publicly demanded for sex work to be recognised as work,⁴ and was condemned for that by the Catholic Church. Mainstream feminists also strongly disagreed with WHORE's position.⁵ 'Like ants battling elephants',⁶ the organisation retreated and focused on grassroots organising. Male sex workers

² Philippine Commission on Women, *Enacting the Anti-Prostitution Law: Amending Articles 202 and 341 of the Revised Penal Code*, Policy Brief No. 9, retrieved 10 June 2018, <http://www.pcw.gov.ph/wpla/enacting-anti-prostitution-law-amending-articles-202-and-341-revised-penal-code-rpc>.

³ R Weitzer, 'Sociology of Sex Work', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 35, 2009, pp. 213-234, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120025>.

⁴ A Dumlao, '500K Filipinos engage in prostitution', *Philstar*, 11 February 2013, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2013/02/11/907592/500k-filipinos-engage-prostitution>.

⁵ K Quitasol, 'Legalizing sex trade will not end exploitation', *Bulatlat*, 11 February 2013, <http://bulatlat.com/main/2013/02/11/%E2%80%98legalizing-sex-trade-will-not-end-exploitation%E2%80%99>.

⁶ Interview, 'Tex', Cubao, Metro Manila, Philippines, 10 September 2016.

formed Red Nobles, transgender sex workers established Shawushka, female students who paid for their studies through sex work formed Deviant Daughters, and their male counterparts created Deviant Dudes. In 2013, these different sex worker groups together formed the Philippine Sex Workers Collective, originally intended as the advocacy arm of WHORE.⁷

The Collective believes that ‘truth claims’ about sex work as violence against women, the ‘evil nature’ of men who purchase sex, and the supposed exploitative relationships between sex workers and third parties⁸ need to be contrasted with women’s own accounts of their experiences in sex work and viewed in the context of the alternatives available to them. In my interviews, leaders of the Collective recognised that the choice to enter sex work is often circumscribed by poverty and a sense of obligation to one’s family, but they disagreed with further restricting choices available to women in these situations. For poor Filipinas, alternatives to sex work, which are encouraged and regulated by the state rather than banned, include working overseas as domestic workers. Migrant work, however, may involve going into debt to pay recruitment and placement fees, and very real risks of physical and sexual abuse from foreign employers.⁹ Many of the Collective’s members were former domestic workers, factory workers, salesgirls, and seamstresses. Several were abused by their employers or had to spend long periods of time away from their families while barely earning a living wage in these jobs.

The criminal status of sex work in the Philippines precludes the Collective from legally registering as an organisation and sex workers from unionising. In my conversations with the Collective about the organisation’s plans, they stressed that their inability to legally register significantly restricts their work. Funding sources are limited, which places a huge demand on their members, many of whom come from low-income backgrounds and support children and elderly relatives, to perform activist labour for free and to pay out of pocket for small operating expenses. This has led to a relatively high turnover of leaders within the organisation and hampered recruitment efforts and

⁷ WHORE, *Here to Win*, 6 May 2013, retrieved 10 June 2018, <https://whorific.wordpress.com>.

⁸ The term ‘third parties’ describes anyone seen as facilitating sex work. See: Global Network of Sex Work Projects, *Criminalisation of Third Parties and its Impact on Sex Workers’ Human Rights*, Edinburgh, 2016, p. 3, <https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/Criminalisation%20of%20third%20parties%20statement%2C%20NSWP%20-%20May%202016.pdf>.

⁹ Over 275,000 Filipino women were hired as overseas ‘household service workers’ in 2016, based on official deployment figures provided by the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency, retrieved 15 February 2019, <http://www.poea.gov.ph/ofwstat/compendium/2015-2016%20OES%201.pdf>.

member retention. In a vicious cycle, the limited capacity of leaders to install robust financial and administrative systems locks them out of the few available funding opportunities.

Nevertheless, the Collective engages in advocacy and outreach work on selected platforms and for a smaller and carefully chosen audience. There are risks attached to fully revealing their identities in public. At our first meeting in 2016, three leaders of the Collective disclosed that they had recently attended town hall meetings and local government consultations where they revealed their work and then experienced police harassment and threats of arrest on the streets days later. Since then, they have become more careful about revealing their background when law enforcement officials are present.

Sex Workers as Victims or Criminals in Philippine Law

There is a tension in the laws regulating sex work in the Philippines. The *Revised Penal Code*, enacted in 1930, criminalises the sale of sex and defines prostitutes as ‘women who, for money or profit, habitually indulge in sexual intercourse or lascivious conduct.’¹⁰ It imposes fines or imprisonment on offenders. There is also a prohibition against ‘immoral doctrines, obscene publications and exhibitions, and indecent shows’, which can be used to shut down entertainment establishments and file charges against owners and sex workers.¹¹ However, the ATIP law defines ‘taking advantage of the vulnerability of a person... for the purpose of exploitation’, including for prostitution, as trafficking.¹² More explicitly, the Magna Carta of Women names prostitution as an act of violence against women from which they should be protected, which casts prostitutes as victims.¹³ This legal tension mirrors how sex workers are viewed in Philippine society: they are either ‘bad women’ with loose morals who break up families or victims who need to be pitied and saved.

¹⁰ Article 202, *Revised Penal Code* of the Philippines.

¹¹ Article 201, *Revised Penal Code* of the Philippines.

¹² Section 3, *Philippine Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act* of 2003. There is a subtle difference between the wording in Philippine law, which defines trafficking as ‘the exploitation or the prostitution of others’ and the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, which refers to ‘the exploitation of the prostitution of others’.

¹³ The Magna Carta of Women, passed in 2008, is a comprehensive framework of rights for Filipino women based on the Philippines’ commitments under the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW). It is seen as the decisive authority on women’s rights and entitlements.

This confusion over whether sex workers should continue to be treated as criminals is also reflected in local government legislation and policies. For example, a Quezon City ordinance mandates that sex workers are victims and it is their clients and third parties, who should be penalised, but the local police still regularly arrest sex workers.¹⁴ In practice, while no local government explicitly recognises sex work as legitimate employment, many local, municipal, and city ordinances require HIV education and condom availability for and STI testing and treatment of sex workers operating in licensed entertainment establishments.¹⁵ These policies are easier to implement in the case of establishment-based sex workers, but less so for freelance or street-based ones.

It is not surprising that corrupt police officers take advantage of this legal limbo. In my interviews, sex workers reported having been subjected to raids where police officers used anti-trafficking as a cover to extort money from them, their clients, and owners of commercial sex establishments. Allegations against police officers conducting indiscriminate and fake raids for extortion were referenced in the US Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* in 2010, 2017, and 2018 and in a UN research report on sex work in the Philippines and neighbouring countries.¹⁶

Exclusion of Sex Workers from Policy Formulation

The 2003 *Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act* led to the creation of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking (IACAT), which is tasked with overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the ATIP law. The structural configuration of the IACAT is unique in the Philippines: its members include government agencies such as the Department of Justice, the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Department of Labor and Employment, the PCW, the police, and three non-government organisations (NGOs), one each from among the sectors representing women, children, and overseas Filipino workers. NGO representatives hold three-year membership terms and are chosen by the government agency members. This hybrid model integrates selected NGOs within government anti-trafficking

¹⁴ Interview, sex workers in Quezon City, Philippines, 30 June 2018.

¹⁵ J Godwin, *Sex Work and the Law in Asia and the Pacific*, UNDP, Bangkok, 2012, pp. 148-151, <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/hiv aids/English/HIV-2012-SexWorkAndLaw.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151. The section on the Philippines in the US Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* can be retrieved at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/282803.pdf>.

structures. It also gives them institutional credibility in the eyes of donors. However, NGO dependence on votes from government agencies to secure IACAT appointments makes it difficult for them to openly disagree with the stated position of government agencies, such as the PCW, on prostitution. Powerful and well-funded prohibitionist organisations, such as the International Justice Mission (IJM) and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific (CATW-AP), have also held seats in IACAT. Finally, the United States is the biggest external source of funding for anti-trafficking programmes and projects in the country. The US government requires foreign-based grantees of federal funds for anti-HIV/AIDS or anti-trafficking programmes to adopt an organisation-wide policy opposing the legalisation and practice of prostitution.¹⁷

The *Anti-Prostitution Law*, formally proposed in 2010,¹⁸ reflects the common thinking in feminist and anti-trafficking circles that women in prostitution cannot have made a legitimate choice because poverty and unemployment have severely restricted their agency.¹⁹ The agency that has been lost in prostitution can only be reclaimed when the women are ‘rehabilitated’ and able to lead ‘normal lives’.²⁰ The country’s colonial history also influences the dominant conversation about prostitution, where it is constructed as part of a legacy of racism and imperialism,²¹ with a common focal point being the colonial dynamics of the sex industry that emerged around the former US military base in Subic. However, this deterministic notion of prostitution obscures various individual histories and experiences.²² Framing prostitution as something that is ‘done to women’ erases stories of sex worker organising

¹⁷ USAID, *Standard Provisions for Non-U.S. Nongovernmental Organizations*, 2017, pp. 70-72, retrieved 26 August 2018, <https://pai.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Standard-Provision-March-2-2017.pdf>.

¹⁸ Fifteenth Congress of the Republic of the Philippines, ‘An Act Addressing The System of Prostitution, Imposing Penalties on Its Perpetrators, Providing Protective Measures and Support Services for Its Victims, Repealing For The Purpose Articles 202 and 341 of the Penal Code’, 2010, retrieved 20 December 2018, <https://www.senate.gov.ph/lisdata/1002085641.pdf>.

¹⁹ J Tigno, ‘Agency by Proxy: Women and the human trafficking discourse in the Philippines’ in M Ford, L Lyons, W van Schendel (eds.), *Labour Migration and Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia: Critical perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, 2012, pp. 23-41.

²⁰ M Roces, ‘Prostitution, Women’s Movements and the Victim Narrative in the Philippines’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2009, pp. 270-280, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.05.012>.

²¹ E Ofreneo and R Ofreneo, ‘Prostitution in the Philippines’ in L Lim (ed.), *The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 1998, pp. 100-130.

²² K Kempadoo, ‘Women of Color and the Global Sex Trade: Transnational Feminist Perspectives’, *Meridians*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, pp. 28-51.

and resistance, such as the participation of sex workers in protesting the closure of the US base in 1986, which received little to no coverage in Philippine media.²³

The Collective was not represented or consulted in any official conversations about anti-trafficking efforts and prostitution, nor were they involved in the development of the relevant laws. Trafficking survivors are regularly given a platform by the anti-trafficking and women's rights groups to speak about the harms of prostitution, to the exclusion of sex workers who do not identify as victims.

In a telling contrast, the campaign for the passage of the *Domestic Workers Act* in 2012, led by anti-trafficking and women's rights organisations, involved rigorous consultation and coordination with domestic worker groups. The Samahan at Ugnayan ng Manggagawang Pantahanan sa Pilipinas (SUMAPI), an organisation led by domestic workers, was part of the technical working group convened to lobby for the passage of the law.²⁴ There are also stark differences in the language of the *Domestic Workers Act* and the PCW's policy brief on the *Anti-Prostitution Law*. While domestic work is recognised as vulnerable work, all stakeholders agreed to uphold women's choice to engage in it and sought to enact legislation that would prevent abuses.²⁵ In comparison, sex work was largely conflated with trafficking: 'More often than not, women and children trapped into prostitution are poor, uneducated, and sometimes sexually abused. They have been trafficked—recruited, usually through deception, force or intimidation, and forced and kept into [*sic*] prostitution through threats or actual acts of violence, until such time when

²³ New York Times, 'Bar Girls Run Off Strikers at U.S. Base In Philippines', *Orlando Sentinel*, 31 March 1986, retrieved 20 December 2018, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1986-03-31/news/0210170032_1_bar-girls-subic-bay-pickets.

²⁴ International Labour Organisation, *Philippine Campaign on Decent Work for Domestic Workers*, Narrative Report, 2009, retrieved 10 June 2018, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—asia/—ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_120013.pdf.

²⁵ The PCW states that women domestic workers are vulnerable to exploitation, and physical and sexual abuse, exacerbated by their being mostly migrants from poorer provinces and their lack of education or economic opportunities, and notes that the *Domestic Workers Act* may help address these issues. See: PCW, *Women's Empowerment, Development, and Gender Equality Plan 2013-2016*, PCW, 2014, p. 9, https://pcw.gov.ph/sites/default/files/documents/resources/womens_edge_plan.pdf.

the victims start believing that there is no other life for them outside of prostitution.²⁶ Sex workers are thus presumed to be incapable of providing consent, and the logical conclusion is that it is in their best interest to exit the trade.²⁷

In theory, legally conferring a ‘victim’ status on sex workers may shield them from some abuse by the police and reduce the stigma against them. It counters current popular conceptions of sex workers as immoral and deserving of sexual violence. However, it also enables interventions, such as rescue and rehabilitation, which often entails traumatic encounters between sex workers and law enforcement.²⁸ Further, sex workers who prefer to remain in their occupation are invisible and receive no support or protection. For example, ten of the women I interviewed were taken to a shelter for victims or some type of ‘processing facility’, where they were met by social workers who encouraged them to enter more labour-intensive, low-wage jobs such as factory or domestic work, or baking and selling handicrafts. The social workers made it very clear that their assistance was conditional on completely exiting sex work. My interviewees said that, under these terms, they returned to sex work instead because they were forced to choose and did not think the alternatives on offer were sustainable.²⁹ Finally, sex workers who refer clients to fellow sex workers, which is an effective way to meet trustworthy clients, may be considered criminals under this proposed law.

²⁶ Philippine Commission on Women, *Enacting an Anti-Prostitution Law: Addressing the System of Prostitution in the Philippines, Imposing Penalties on Perpetrators, and Providing Protective Measures and Support Services for Victims; Repealing Articles 202 and 341 of the Revised Penal Code*, retrieved 10 June 2018, <http://pcw.gov.ph/sites/default/files/documents/efiles/webmaster/anti-prostitution-policy-brief.pdf>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Forty of the sex workers I interviewed referred to their experience of raids as traumatic and unhelpful. In most of the cases, it was unclear if they were being arrested or ‘rescued’. Most were released after they paid a fine and did not receive any further assistance from the state.

²⁹ Interview, sex workers in Quezon City, Philippines, 30 June 2018. Their experiences are echoed by sex workers in other countries, see Global Network of Sex Work Projects, *Sex Workers Demonstrate Economic and Social Empowerment*, Edinburgh, 2016, pp. 2-3, which criticises rehabilitation measures that do not allow sex workers to exit on their own terms, <https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/SUSO%20Asia%20Pacific%20Briefing.pdf>.

The experiences of the sex workers I interviewed, including those who were not affiliated with the Collective, are ignored in the *Anti-Prostitution Law*. Most of my interviewees experienced abuses by members of the police rather than their clients or third parties. Many were either single mothers or had been single parents for a significant period in their lives, and the relatively higher hourly rates they earned in sex work and the flexible hours had played a role in their decision to choose sex work over other jobs. As one said, ‘I want to be able to watch my children grow up. I want to be able to stay home with them when they are sick. But my rescuers would rather have me work in factories from sunrise to sundown or raise other people’s children away from my own family for far less money.’³⁰ Another said, ‘I was a domestic worker for a family in Saudi Arabia. They took my passport. I was not allowed to leave the house or to make phone calls. I could only eat their leftovers. I woke up very early and went to sleep very late because there was too much work. I got shouted at in a language I did not understand. Is this the alternative you have for me?’ After her contract ended, she went back to the Philippines and became a sex worker, where ‘even (my) worst clients seemed like angels in comparison to my bosses in Saudi [Arabia]’.³¹ People who want to help women should wage a war on poverty and not prostitution, she added. My interviewees also regularly brought up ‘endo’, a common labour practice in the Philippines, as a barrier to stable work. This practice involves companies providing workers temporary employment for less than six months, and then terminating their contracts to avoid having to regularise the employees and cover the benefits associated with regularisation. An interviewee who worked as a salesclerk, said ‘The work was hard enough as it was, the pay was so low, and then they fired me after six months and all my work went to waste because I didn’t get regularised. They were willing to rehire me after another six months and discard me again after!’³²

Leaders of the Collective noted in our conversations that perhaps the different approaches to sex work and domestic work are a result of deep-seated moral beliefs about sex, especially objections to women having sex with strangers. They also suggested that the relative respectability of domestic work may be tied to the well-documented large amounts of remittances domestic workers send back to their families. Sex workers, too, make significant contributions to their families and the economy but the clandestine nature of their work precludes a public recognition of their contributions.

³⁰ Interview, sex workers in Recto, Metro Manila, Philippines, 22 February 2018.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview, sex workers in Kabayan Hotel, Metro Manila, Philippines, 3 January 2018.

Stigma and Social Distancing by Potential Allies and Recruits

The Catholic Church in the Philippines is more politically active than in many Catholic-identifying countries, as seen in its strong influence on the electability of politicians, its ability to block legislation on access to contraception until 2013, the absence of laws on LGBT rights, the abundance of faith-based civil society organisations, and the dominance of Catholic schools in the private education system. This situation affects the Collective's ability to find allies. The Collective initiated discussions with the Philippine offices of the International Labour Organization, Amnesty International, and UNAIDS, asking them to publicly declare agreement with their institutional position that sex work is work and should be decriminalised, and to provide support for the creation of a sex workers' union in the Philippines. However, these discussions have yet to produce results. It is entirely possible that the Collective's limited human resources have also prevented them from consistently following up on these discussions. According to 'Tex', who has also been involved in LGBT advocacy in the Philippines, some gay and trans members of the Collective have made overtures to prominent LGBT organisations but were explicitly told that any public alliance with sex workers would be too politically costly for the LGBT community. He also said, 'The LGBT movement refused to include us in their push for an anti-discrimination law. We wanted to explore the possibility of including "type of work" as a protected category in their proposed law.'³³

Many of my interviewees, including leaders of the Collective, hide their engagement in sex work from their families for fear of judgment and condemnation. Instead, they represent their work as performing in clubs or waitressing. A few of them have come out to their families, and this coincided with their willingness to take on more public roles in the Collective. There was often a dissonance in how my interviewees characterised their work: they spoke of it with regret because it could be a source of shame and disappointment for their families, but also with pride because they thought of it as honest work that allowed them to improve their families' quality of life, which they pointed out was morally superior to the corruption of police officers and religious leaders. This tension may be partially explained by the pervasive Catholic morality that regulates relationships and gender roles in the Philippines. Spanish colonisers imposed sexual norms through subtle coercion such as the aggressive promotion of icons like the Virgin Mary who is still idealised as a model of female behaviour. Women who openly defy moral prescriptions about sex outside marriage, let alone with strangers, face a significant degree

³³ Electronic correspondence with 'Tex', 14 September 2018.

of social opprobrium. This has led to women in the Philippines being predominantly judged (and judging themselves) as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ based on their sexual behaviour.³⁴ These sexual norms are increasingly transgressed in private spaces but are still publicly maintained. This has also led to women engaging in practices of ‘social distancing’ such as explicitly demeaning sex workers.³⁵ My interview data also supports Matthews’ argument that a strict economic focus when assessing types of sex work in the Philippines is insufficient and that socio-moral values are just as relevant in affecting a range of possible social stigmas and self-identities associated with each type of sex work, usually based on the extent to which sex workers ‘present themselves as providing sex as their primary service.’³⁶ Street-based sex workers transact in the public domain and are more upfront about their work, while escorts are more subtle and discreet. This may have implications for how sex workers engage with each other and their communities. For example, some interviewees spoke wistfully of fellow sex workers who have transformed from good friends to complete strangers after the latter transitioned to other jobs or higher-end forms of sex work.

Leaders of the Collective shared that they were wary of publicly sparring with feminists who openly condemned sex work. Not enough sex workers are willing to publicly fight for rights at this stage in their political journey. Without the numbers or the cultural capital to engage with an anti-trafficking movement that is led by middle and upper class feminists, technocrats, and nuns, the Collective has resolved that the way forward is to slowly and somewhat quietly invest in organisational development and in consolidating their base.

War on Drugs

After being elected president in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte began a violent ‘war on drugs’ that has led to at least 5,000 ‘drug suspects’ being killed by the police since July 2016.³⁷ Duterte has made several pronouncements to the effect of encouraging the police to aggressively pursue and even murder suspected

³⁴ C Brewer, *Shamanism, Catholicism, and Gender Relations in Colonial Philippines, 1521-1685*, Ashgate, London, 2004, pp. 39-58.

³⁵ S Chant and C McIlwaine, *Women of a Lesser Cost: Female labour, foreign exchange, and Philippine development*, Pluto Press, London, 1995, p. 153.

³⁶ P Matthews, ‘Cam Models, Sex Work, and Job Immobility in the Philippines’, *Feminist Economics*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2017, pp. 160-183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2017.1293835>.

³⁷ C Gonzales, ‘PDEA: Almost 5,000 killed in Duterte’s war on drugs as of Oct. 2018’, *Inquirer.net*, 27 November 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1057464/pdea-almost-5000-killed-in-dutertes-war-on-drugs-as-of-oct-2018>.

drug users and sellers.³⁸ Most of the people killed in the drug war have been from low-income communities.³⁹

Five sex workers I interviewed had lost their partners to these extra-judicial killings. One said, ‘The police raided our house and demanded that we produce names of drug sellers, but we didn’t know anyone! I was jailed for six months but they took my husband back to our house and killed him there.’⁴⁰ Two of them entered sex work after their partners were killed in order to support their children. The other three had to engage in sex work more frequently after their partners’ deaths.

References to the connection between illegal drug use and the commercial sex industry predate Duterte’s war on drugs. This link has been used not only by groups that seek to preserve the criminal status of sex work, but also by prostitution prohibitionists to demonstrate the vulnerability and lack of consent of sex workers.⁴¹ According to ‘Tex’, ‘Sex workers are therefore prime suspects not just as users but as people who work with drug dealers. This is not hard to believe for the police and the public. They already think we sell our bodies, so why not drugs? A student sex worker was killed in Baguio. They were reported to be dealing drugs. Their fellow sex workers, who are too scared to challenge the police, have said this is patently false. Their family does not want to pursue the case because they don’t want to publicise that their child was a sex worker.’ He added, ‘Given the stigma against sex workers and given that anyone can just be reported as a drug user or dealer, anyone with an axe to grind against sex workers could just report them to the police. I have heard of sex workers being interrogated about drugs after wives of their clients, who blame sex workers for the break-up of their families, have reported them to the police.’⁴²

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, ‘License to Kill’: *Philippine police killings in Duterte’s “War on Drugs”*, HRW, March 2017, retrieved 10 June 2018, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/philippines0317_insert.pdf.

³⁹ C David *et al.*, ‘Building a dataset of publicly available information on killings associated with the antidrug campaign’, *The Drug Archive*, 2017, retrieved 29 August 2018, <https://drugarchive.ph/post/14-antidrug-dataset-public-info-killings>.

⁴⁰ Interview, sex workers in Kabayan Hotel, Metro Manila, Philippines, 3 January 2018.

⁴¹ J Enriquez, ‘Why punish prostitutes and not customers and pimps?’, *Rappler*, 12 March 2015, retrieved 28 August 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/86244-enriquez-prostitution-violence-against-women>.

⁴² Electronic correspondence with ‘Tex’, 14 September 2018.

There are also credible allegations of drugs being planted on individuals and their property to justify criminal charges or police violence.⁴³ This climate of fear extends to sex workers. Based on my interviews, it seems that corrupt police officers have taken advantage of the war on drugs to weaponise the common association of sex work with drug use. According to almost half of the women I interviewed, police officers have threatened to plant drugs on them if they did not pay bribes or give in to sexual demands. One interviewee was taken to a precinct, where her phone was confiscated and she was threatened with drug charges. She was made to dance for the police officers and then taken by one of them to the toilet where he raped her. ‘I couldn’t defend myself’, she said. ‘Nobody cares about poor drug addicts dying. They care even less about poor supposedly drug-addicted prostitutes!’⁴⁴ Another interviewee noted that, ‘In the past, I could try to guilt or shame arresting officers—I would ask them if they were proud of themselves for taking away money for my child’s milk. Or I would taunt them for targeting us but having no courage to go after the real criminals. Some of them would leave us alone after. But things have changed now. We do not fight back. We are too scared.’⁴⁵ Some of their regular clients have also not contacted them as often as in the past: ‘They are afraid of getting shot or subjected to extortion because many of the anti-drug raids happen in bars and brothels.’⁴⁶

Some of the sex workers’ coping strategies include attempting to be less visible when soliciting clients even if it reduced their earnings and forced them to operate in less secure areas, and increasingly relying on third parties who offer protection based on links with the police. ‘This system pits us against each other. Some girls on our street pay bribes to the police, but my friends and I don’t. They see us as trouble-makers because our resistance means that our street could be raided. They turned my friend in. They also told my clients I had a vaginal infection’, shared one interviewee.⁴⁷ ‘Tex’ added, ‘The drug war has changed the way sex workers operate. Those who can afford to do so and understand technology have moved online. If sex workers are less likely to work in groups and you are less likely to see them face to face, this makes organising them much more difficult.’⁴⁸ Incidentally, the drug war was also cited by several interviewees as a reason for hesitating to speak to me: ‘We were worried you were working with the police. Are you sure you aren’t being

⁴³ Human Rights Watch, *Police Deceit in Drug War Killings*, HRW, 2 March 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/02/philippines-police-deceit-drug-war-killings>.

⁴⁴ Interview, sex workers in Recto, Metro Manila, Philippines, 22 February 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Interview, sex workers in Quezon City, Philippines, 30 June 2018.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Electronic correspondence with ‘Tex’, 14 September 2018.

followed?⁴⁹ Some sex workers do not disclose their status as drug users to state health care providers for fear of their private information being transmitted to the police. A few who are HIV positive have been forced to disclose their status to police officers (and risk further exposure and stigmatisation) for fear of being killed if they fail mandatory drug tests because of the substances in their HIV medication. The Collective issued a call for solidarity with drug users four months into Duterte's term.⁵⁰ However, the increased precarity of sex workers in the war on drugs has been absent from its critiques and the Collective worries about raising the issue because of the risk of being misrepresented as arguing in favour of drugs in the very simplistic and emotionally charged public conversations about illegal drugs.

In early 2016, the Collective aimed to launch a public campaign for sex worker rights and had reached out to sympathetic local politicians and rights organisations for support. However, after Duterte's election, the priority of most rights groups shifted towards criticising the war on drugs and fighting for basic freedoms such as the right to life and due process.⁵¹ The Collective also worries that Duterte's unprecedented masculinist rhetoric and behaviour, especially his strategy of using physical objectification and sexual humiliation against female opponents, has created an environment that is dangerous for aggressive sex worker rights advocacy. The Collective's focus in 2018 shifted from broader rights advocacy to helping sex workers with basic survival: providing them with information about and limited assistance against police abuse and reducing the vulnerability of sex workers to HIV amidst a spike in infection rates in the Philippines.

Conclusion

The sex worker rights movement in the Philippines is operating under a politically constrained context and with limited resources and allies. As it stands, the Collective must take safety concerns into account when deciding to engage in advocacy work: when there are opportunities for representation, which arise

⁴⁹ Interview, sex workers in Pasay, Metro Manila, Philippines, 3 January 2018.

⁵⁰ Global Network of Sex Projects, *Philippine Sex Workers Collective Call for Solidarity with Drug Users*, NSWP, 22 November 2016, retrieved 29 August 2018, <http://www.nswp.org/news/philippine-sex-workers-collective-call-solidarity-drug-users>.

⁵¹ L Stansfield, *Human Rights Advocacy in a Context of Extreme Securitisation: Amnesty International and the 'War on Drugs' in the Philippines (July 2016-May 2017)*, Master of Arts in Conflict Studies and Human Rights, Utrecht University, Utrecht, 2017, retrieved 26 September 2018, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/353553>.

almost exclusively in the HIV sector, they attend semi-public consultations and meetings. They work closely with organisations in this sector, including Actions for Health Initiatives, Inc., Positive Action Foundation Philippines, Inc., and Pinoy Plus Association. These organisations use their relatively higher visibility to highlight the effects of criminalisation and stigma on sex workers' access to health and safety, and to raise the issue of Filipino workers engaging in various forms of illicit sex work overseas, which has generally been invisible in official discourse on labour migration. Members of the Collective also conduct informal human rights training for sex workers. They are peer educators, outreach workers, and community organisers. Even if they receive abusive and threatening messages, and their Facebook page is regularly reported as inappropriate and taken down, they maintain a reasonably active presence on Facebook and Twitter. The core members consult with sex workers in their own communities and with colleagues in the HIV+ community who also work with sex workers. They prioritise female street-based sex workers in their outreach efforts. They usually give out their contact information and take note of sex workers' problems and requests, but often lack the resources to provide legal or financial assistance.

While aggressive lobbying for the decriminalisation of sex work may not be feasible at this time, there are a few strategies the Collective can adopt to expand their membership and increase their visibility based on practices that have worked for sex workers in similarly difficult conditions. The Association of Hungarian Sex Workers (SZEXE) documented police abuse against sex workers and initiated legal actions against the police, and, in some cases, successfully challenged arbitrary fining and detention practices.⁵² The Collective could persuade legal aid organisations to take on cases of police abuse, which is likely to garner media attention in the wave of scrutiny of the war on drugs. Such cases could deter future abuse and serve to highlight the dangers of an anti-trafficking policy that increases the exposure of sex workers to police harassment and violence. There are also many potential allies in the media and academic community that can be tapped. The Collective is working with volunteer writers and editors to produce a book of Filipino sex workers' stories and an accompanying interactive website. With a well-thought-out advocacy strategy that includes media interviews, book launches, and university tours, the Collective could build a strong public counter-narrative to the story commonly told about sex work by the anti-trafficking sector. Finally, the

⁵² A Dziuban and L Stevenson, *Nothing About Us Without Us! Ten years of sex workers' rights activism and advocacy in Europe*, International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, Edinburgh, 2015, pp. 11-12, retrieved 18 December 2018, https://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE_10years%20report_April2016_photo_%282%29.pdf.

Collective has also intensified their collaboration with younger academics, such as myself, who are interested in exploring the issue of sex work in the Philippines. Given the absence of data on the effects of anti-trafficking interventions on sex workers' lives, the Collective can work with researchers to address this gap and build a stronger evidence base for their advocacy.

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