Sex Worker Empowerment: Practical successes and limitations of a Guatmalan NGO

Abstract English
Empowerment (Page & Czuba, 1999; Chamberlin, 1997) within a stigmatized (Link & Phelan, 2001; Parker & Aggleton, 2003) population such as sex workers is a logistically difficult aim. Given the varying levels of harm and discrimination experienced by sex workers (Chapkis, 2013; Weitzer, 2005) there is an immediate need to examine the practical forms of achievements and limitations which can be realized through empowerment. This article provides an analysis of one non-governmental organisation’s efforts to empower sex workers, including its best practices as well as the limitations and obstacles some of which contributed to the dissolution of the organisation. Using the ethnographic research data gathered in Guatemala between 2009-2010 within the sex worker empowerment organisation, this article examines the practical rather than the theoretical issues facing empowerment efforts within the stigmatized population of sex workers. The critical examination centers on the questions of what worked and what could have been improved.

Abstracto Castiliano
Empoderamiento (Página y Czuba, 1999; Chamberlin, 1997) dentro de un estigmatizado (Link y Phelan, 2001; Parker y Aggleton, 2003) de la población, como los trabajadores del sexo es un objetivo logísticamente difícil. Teniendo en cuenta los diferentes niveles de daño y discriminación que sufren las trabajadoras sexuales (Chapkis, 2013; Weitzer, 2005) hay una necesidad inmediata para examinar las formas prácticas de los logros y las limitaciones que se pueden realizar a través del empoderamiento. Este artículo ofrece un análisis de los esfuerzos de una organización no gubernamental para empoderar a las trabajadoras sexuales, incluyendo sus mejores prácticas, así como las limitaciones y obstáculos algunos de los cuales contribuyeron a la disolución de la organización. Utilizando los datos de la investigación etnográfica se reunieron en Guatemala entre 2009-2010 dentro de la organización empoderamiento de los trabajadores del sexo, este artículo examina la práctica en lugar de las cuestiones teóricas que enfrentan los esfuerzos de empoderamiento dentro de la población estigmatizada de las trabajadoras sexuales. Los centros de exámenes críticos sobre las cuestiones de lo que funcionó y lo que podría haber mejorado.

Key Words:
Sex work, Empowerment, Stigma, Guatemala

Author:
Tara Sue Warden; tarasuewarden@gmail.com
Independent Ethnographic Researcher and Social Anthropologist, Bayonne (France)
Associate of the Scottish Center for Crime and Justice Research, Scotland (UK)
https://fr.linkedin.com/in/tarawarden
Introduction

While theoretical literature exists delineating the concepts of empowerment (Page & Czuba, 1999; Chamberlin, 1997) and stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001; Parker & Aggleton, 2003), there remains a need to examine the actions and efforts that organisations take to achieve empowerment within stigmatized populations such as sex workers. Specifically, this article seeks to examine those efforts and limitations that result in the success or failure of those organisations. It is important to examine the methods which work within the constraints of the particular needs of this stigmatized group.

Prostitution is the exchange of sexual service for money (Jolin, 1994, p. 70). This project, however, adopted the term sex work, *trabajo sexual*, which was used by local activists and sex workers where the research was conducted for two reasons. Firstly, because of the negative social stigma surrounding the term prostitution (Saunders, 2005, p. 344). Secondly, because of the complications which could arise with the Spanish word for prostitute, *prostituta*, being the root of the Spanish word for whore, *puta*. Feminist debate regarding sex work can be broadly split into two camps. The abolitionists believe all forms of sex work is violence against women regardless of agency and the sex-as-work perspective in which sexual services can be seen as a form of labour (Jolin, 1994, p. 70; Sanders & Campbell, 2007, p. 2; Weitzer, 2005, p. 2; Bernstien, 1999, p. 93; Jenness, 1990). Similarly to O’Connell Davidson’s (1995) findings, this project recognizes that the “issues of control and consent in prostitution are rather more complex than either the radical feminist or the liberal ‘sex work’ model suggest” (p. 1). On the one hand, this project recognizes the frequency of abuse within sex work, the common desire to escape sex work, and the dangerous implications for the sale of sexuality. On the other hand it acknowledges that the abolitionist perspective denies the agency of sex workers and that the consequences of making sex work illegal could violate the “civil and workers’ rights and integrity of sex workers” (Vanwessenbeeck, 2001, p. 243). This project recognizes women’s agency in conducting sex work and sex workers’ rights to have their livelihood recognized as legitimate. The consensual sales of sexual services to earn a livelihood were, in many
cases, an individual “choice”\(^1\) of research participants (Kempadoo, 1996, p. 79; Caradonna, Ava, 2009) unlike in human traffic in which consent is taken away.

The perspective of this paper is that the empowerment of sex workers include wider notions for social change such as the need to,

> “understand sex and sexual arrangements in specific cultural, class and religious contexts, to strip away the stigmas attached to sex work, to decriminalize prostitution, to end the trafficking of persons for prostitution, and to legitimize sex work. Building settings in which both women and men are able to engage in various sexual relations on the basis of equality, dignity and respect” (Kempadoo, 1996, p. 80).

It is not the purpose of this paper to justify this perspective, rather this paper seeks to provide a critical analysis of the empowerment strategies of one Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) situated within the sex-as-work camp.

Empowerment can be defined as a “multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important” (Page & Czuba, 1999). This process incorporates a number of qualities which include; having access to information and a range of choices, decision-making power, assertiveness, feelings of hope and togetherness, as well as learning to redefine who we are, what we can do and our relationship to institutionalized power, while increasing one’s positive self-image and overcoming stigma (Chamberlin, 1997 p. 44). At the personal level, empowerment can be thought of as, developing a sense of individual self-confidence and capacity so as to undo the effects of internalised oppression (Rowlands, 1996). With this understanding of empowerment, this article analyses best practices along with failings in a single community based Guatemalan NGO in order to provide an active discussion on potential paths forward for the empowerment of sex workers.

---

\(^1\) This article recognises that the “choice” to work as a sex worker is often a constrained and one based on a number of coercive factors such as debt, discrimination, limited access to education and employment opportunities, the financial burdens of supporting dependents, among others factors, however the term “choice” in this context is meant to draw a distinction between consensual sex work and sex slavery involved in human trafficking.
This article begins by disclosing the methodology behind the evidence-based assertions. Afterwards, it looks at the successes of the non-governmental organisation, and its impact on empowerment and stigma within the sex worker community. This section contains an exploration of the different methods utilized by the organisation to achieve empowerment, such as providing a safe space of dignity, opportunities for education, community outreach, and targeted empowerment workshops. In doing so this article seeks to demonstrate a model of best practices in sex worker empowerment. Centric to these practices is that the approach be directed by the sex workers themselves as the most effective way to achieve empowerment. The second half of this article presents an analysis of the obstacles and limitations faced by the organization which ultimately led to its dissolution in 2014. By exploring these shortcomings this article reveals contradiction surrounding the goals of the organization and its logistical capacity. Finally, this article reflects upon possible remedies to the obstacles and highlights questions for future sex worker empowerment organizations.

**Methods**

Ethnographic research was conducted from June 2009 until July 2010 in Guatemala to investigate the push/pull factors in society that reinforce sex traffic and commercial sexual exploitation. Guatemala City, is a key location for human traffic according to academic literature, “the sex industry in Guatemala and in particular, Guatemala City—has shown enormous growth in recent years, so that some now refer to Guatemala as ‘the new Thailand’” (Farr, 2005 p. 155). Access to the sex worker community was sought through a local NGO, MuJER, empowering over a hundred women through educational and vocational projects in the capital city. I volunteered full-time for the NGO which provided the ethnographic data in this article. MuJER staff consisted of four women including, the Director, Secretary, Assistant, and myself.

Given the dangerous and elusive nature of human traffic, research participants were selected through non-random, convenience, snow ball sampling (Schensul, et al., 1999, p. 233; Bryman, 2004, p. 304) based on opportunities which arose within the NGO. Participant selection was also conducted in red-light districts in the capital as well as in four other cities in Guatemala along human trafficking routes. Semi-
structured interviews were conducted from a total sample of 113 participants. Thirty-five were cultural experts including NGO and governmental workers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and housewives which brought a diverse means to understand the stigma facing sex workers. Of seventy-eight sex workers interviewed twenty were identified as former traffic victims. The NGO provided a setting dedicated to building personal relationships within the sex worker community including visits in the red-light districts\(^2\) as one way to accomplish that objective (MuJER, 2010).

**Successes and Best Practice**

The success of programs rested principally on its centricity around the sex workers needs as they, themselves expressed them. It sounds simple enough, yet many approach sex workers with previously conceived agendas, often politically or religiously motivated (Bindmen, 1997; Jeffrey, 2002; Bromfield & Capous-Desyllas, 2012). At times, women are seen as victims to be rescued (Haynes, 2007) rather than autonomous agents facing risks in their occupation. At MuJER, sex workers were asked rather than told what they needed in terms of support. In this way MuJER identified immediate needs and future goals to find ways to empower them to reach their goals themselves. In this vein, a fundamental aim of the organization was to be one day operated and directed exclusively by sex workers. MuJER planned to achieve this goal through community outreach emphasising empowerment. To this end, four methods were employed; provide a safe space, educational opportunities, positive presence in the red-light districts, and targeted empowerment.

**A Safe Space of Dignity:**

The principal base of operations was the MuJER Centre of Empowerment. An environment where long term trust developed between staff and constituents. The Centre of Empowerment was located in a building on the edge of the broader downtown area, a fifteen minute bus ride from the oldest red-light district in the city. The Centre was not indicated from the street for the sake of

\(^2\) The term *red-light district* refers to a zone of prostitution. The term derives from areas in Amsterdam where sex workers advertise their services using a red-light displayed in the window (Hubbard & Whowell, 2008).
anonymity and the building was securely locked whereby all entry was regulated by a
doorperson or cleaning woman. The main room was divided into common room, library
and office space. A second room was used as a small class room. The Centre was
open from 8am until 5pm, Monday and Wednesday through Friday, although closing
hours were not strictly kept as the staff often remained in the office until the last sex
worker decided to leave. Tuesdays were reserved for staff visits to red-light districts.
The Centre was exclusively open to female sex workers and by extension their
children, since the majority of female sex workers were single mothers. The
Empowerment Centre maintained a small library for adults and children, in addition to
puzzles and educational workbooks.

The Centre provided a place of dignity for the women to come and feel safe enabling
them to share their work and life experiences, skills, knowledge, compassion and
support as well as to participate in group activities, learn, and discover one another,
as women and as people with rights and value. The Centre was generally a bustling
area where the women would bring their problems to the staff and almost every day a
woman would cry. Solidarity between staff and sex workers was earned through
empathy and a dedication to wellbeing. Incorporating “empathic knowledge” can yield
insights often absent from more traditional methods of understanding and representing
populations (Kenny, 2008 p. 378). The Centre afforded a safe space away from red-
light districts with privacy to discuss the difficulties sex workers faced and where they
would not fear being overheard, or interrupted by gang intimidation, inebriated clients
making lewd or profane advances, or the overall intensity and chaotic nature of the
red-light districts. Yet, it was also important to realize, that sex workers were struggling
to balance work and family lives thereby any time spent at the Centre took time away
from those other priorities, so incentives were provided. These incentives took the form
of information and support as well as opportunities for education and self-
improvement. During opening hours, the Centre provided a number of classes for the
sex workers, including literacy, accelerated primary education, computer classes,
 jewellery making, and embroidery.

**Providing Educational Opportunities**

Often mentioned by research participants was an intention to exit sex work as soon as
they are able. Our team found this to be consistent with the narratives of a large
majority of sex workers. MuJER’s role was not to “save” women from the sex trade (Haynes, 2007), but to provide opportunities for them to empower themselves to exit the trade if they choose or simply offer self-improvement. MuJER saw education as a tool of empowerment which would increase capacity and self-worth of women, regardless of their intentions to remain in or exit sex work. In terms of academic education, the organization offered literacy classes, accelerated primary qualifications, basic computer skills, and English classes. Many of the women who achieved their primary school qualifications asked if it was possible to continue on to achieve their secondary school qualifications, with their goal being to become an Assistant Nurse. Many felt that sex work prepared them for this type of work given their relative ease with the human body.³ Conversely, for those who preferred to work manually rather than academically, a variety of tactile classes were offered including embroidery with ribbons, beaded jewellery making, and at their request, and aerobic dance class. All of these activities assisted in building solidarity within the population.

**Maintaining a Positive Presence**

One of the key principles of empowerment is a feeling of togetherness (Chamberlin, 1997 p. 44). MuJER sought to foster solidarity among sex workers while realising that remaining solely within the walls of the Empowerment Centre would have created a barrier between NGO staff and the community they sought to empower. Moreover, the NGO would be limiting its constituents to only those willing and able to seek empowerment. For a more representative sample of the community, MuJER needed to access the more marginalized of the population. This access occurred weekly, every Tuesday the office closed in order for staff to visit some red-light districts in Guatemala City. These visits served a number of purposes including, fact finding missions, human rights education and solidarity building activities as well as a means to connect with new sex workers moving around the city and invite them to the Centre. The ever present danger, however, of being in these districts should not be underestimated, as the capital city is described by Benson et al. as a “symbol of urban violence” in which, “on average, 250 people are murdered each month in the capital” (2008 pp. 38-39).

---

³ Interview 20, Paula, 33 years, Guatemalan, former Sex worker, 19/3/2010; Interview 21, Jessica, 44 years, Nicaraguan Sex worker, 22/3/10; Interview 81, Stacy, 35 years old, El Salvadoran, Sex worker and Traffic Victim, 14/6/10.
Yet MuJER felt that being a visible positive presence in red-light districts overtime was not just an exercise in building trust within the community, but also visible evidence that staff was working in solidarity with sex workers, in the stigmatized zones where sex work was conducted. These visits provided a chance to witness working conditions first hand. Tuesdays were chosen because sex workers said it was their slowest day. MuJER was respectful of their principle reason for being in red-light districts. Staff would not come on a Friday or Saturday, for example, and interrupt income potential.

Visits into red-light districts also provided a chance to get to know the wider sex worker population. Moreover, staff could conduct targeted empowerment directly onsite, one on one, with the population. The MuJER team would arrive with a subject to discuss, for example, the new law on human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Armed with this topic, the team moved from room to room discussing the subject with the sex workers, and leaving them with the understanding that we would return next week and quiz them on their comprehension. The following week, MuJER would revisit sex workers to assess how much they had retained from the previous week about their rights in relation to the new law. If the sex worker took seriously the knowledge of her own rights and answered the questions correctly, she was rewarded with either a small piece of candy or make-up. The reward was simply a way to try to make learning fun, it was not something to be lorded over them, but to be generously shared. In this way MuJER’s consistent presence represented a means for both solidarity building and targeted empowerment.

**Targeted Empowerment:**

Additional targeted empowerment actives including workshops and marches were organized by the centre. The workshops were based around various issues such as legal and human rights, problems with new legislation and the police, human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, self-esteem and self-image. As previously mentioned, the value of the time of community members was respected, and so in order to make learning fun and interesting, the organisation coupled workshops with other activities such as an exotic cooking class, or self-defence class, or a mother’s day celebration with cake. These occasions were largely successful given the increasing attendance with each event that signified attendants were recounting a positive experience to other members of the sex worker community.
Furthermore, the MuJER team remained committed to and motivated by the potential positive impact of social activism. Thereby adopting a type of participatory action research model, in which the researcher/staff were involved in the continuing process of change (Whyte, 1989 p. 368), instead of what Whyte describes as the somewhat conventional and elitist “professional expert” model which assumes that methods are “a professional activity and therefore must be designed, implemented, and reported by professionals” (1995 p. 289). It was important that the target population see that MuJER was willing to stand with them for their rights and sought a positive investment in their future. This helped to provide insight into what sex workers’ value and how these values guided actions. Similar to feminist action research and participatory research, MuJER conducted social action biased in favour of dominated and exploited groups wherein staff work “with” rather than “for” the researched by breaking down power dynamics while legitimizing the knowledge people are capable of producing (Reid, 2004, p. 3). Public demonstrations were important for sex workers and wider society to see that MuJER would stand with sex workers for their human rights and the betterment of the conditions in which sex workers operate.

Limitations and lessons learned

Some of the obstacles MuJER faced were significant enough to bring about the dissolution of the NGO in 2014 for some time. While some of these problems were typical to non-profit organizations, such as problems with funding; other problems were unexpected, such as problems with staff, and the transition into a sex worker run organisation. Other complications were specific to the sex worker community such the balance between anonymity, representation and wider social outreach. This section describes these difficulties while reflecting on the possible means to remedy them.

Logistics: lack of funding and wider societal connections

As with most non-profit, non-governmental organisations, MuJER was dependent on outside funding. Most donations were attached to rapidly approaching expiration dates, within months or a year. The problem with uncertainty in funding is that planning for long term goals and evaluating long term progress and impact was challenging to say the least. Moreover, the skills needed for successful grant writing were difficult to
find. These skills included an ability to create a needs-assessment report of the immediate, long term, and logistical concerns of the organization using computer skills and the expertise to communicate these concerns professionally to donors. A successful grant-proposal writer is a key asset to any non-profit organisation, yet one not easily acquired given the limited compensation provided by non-profits whereas that same skill set could be profitable on the commercial market.

One way to solve the problem of a lack of diverse skills would be to approach alliances with other institutions. While MuJER maintained valuable contacts with similarly minded NGOs, further connections remained limited for a number of reasons. Primarily, the numerous daily tasks to fulfil the organisation’s mission did not allow time for additional projects. Yet, connections with universities were hypothesized to have been beneficial for locally based professional skills as well as an investment in MuJER’s long term goals of community sensitization to concerns of sex workers.

Additionally, members of MuJER had hoped to eventually build relationships with clinics and hospitals. Previous work on human traffic within Central America has found that, “the most reliable and consistent information (...was from...) health service providers—both public and private---who have regular access to and contact with individuals in the commercial sex industry, including trafficked persons and traffickers” (IHRLI, 2002, p. 21). Partnerships with medical facilities could help to identify some of the more vulnerable and invisible sex workers and traffic victims for aid.

The organization lacked a societal outreach representative or department, who could have facilitated sensitization workshops with police, in order to build partnerships in an attempt to lessen the current climate of indifference or even exploitation in which police officers have reportedly taken advantage of sex worker vulnerability by requesting money or sexual services in exchange for less police harassment or to avoid incarceration. Also, legal representation would have been beneficial to the sex

---

4 ¿La policía? nunca ponen atención, (...) solo dicen ‘ya voy’ y nunca ir. / The police? They never pay attention, (...) they just say, ‘I’m coming’ and they never go. (Interview 44, Victoria, 26 years, Honduran, Sex Worker, 16/4/2010)

5 ¿En este trabajo, ha recibido algún tipo de maltrato o violencia? Sí, ¿Cómo qué? Como de la policía cuando estaba allá arriba. ¿Qué ha pasado? Ponen su arma a mí y me quería parar. ¿Cuántas veces? Una vez. ¿Hizo una denuncia? No, no lo hizo. / In this work, have you received any type of mistreatment or violence? Yes, Like
worker community. The organisation was affiliated with a law practice that aided in the breakdown legal jargon to provide laymen explanations for new legislation concerning sex workers. This connection also provided legal advice to sex workers who found themselves in difficult situations, such as child custody battles with abusive partners. Yet this connection was tentative and to be used sparsely since neither MuJER nor sex workers could afford fees for legal advice.

MuJER also lacked a voice in the political sphere. Religious and moral groups had a strong voice in the creation of the new law Decreto 2009, while sex worker organizations were excluded. Some speculate that this exclusion was by design since ideologies regarding sex work differ between religious organizations and community organisations. Moreover, MuJER could have benefited from a media representative to achieve societal sensitization to oppose current stigma. While a community outreach branch would have been beneficial, there were also problematic ethical and practical issues to consider.

**Representation: limited scope, and promise of anonymity**

There are numerous ways in which sex work is conducted. As Weitzer (2005) explains, in order to truly represent the needs and concerns of sex workers, it is important to understand as many sex worker experiences as possible. MuJER was limited in its capacity as a community representative given its narrow target population, of only female sex workers, and only those reachable through the logistical means of the organization. Therefore MuJER would need extensive community outreach within the sex worker population before it would be able to conduct societal outreach on the community’s behalf. Most notably, MuJER maintained a loose connections with Transgender sex worker organization, “Reinas de la Noche”, but much more extensive research would have needed to occur before the organisation could claim to represent a majority of sex worker interest.

---

**what?** Like from the police when I was up there [points toward one end of the red light district]. **What happened?** They pointed their gun at me and I wanted to stop. **How many times?** 1 time. **Did you make a denouncement?** No I didn’t. (Interview 24, Abby, 30 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 25/3/2010)

6 Interview 12, Rose, 31 years, Guatemalan, NGO Worker, 25/1/2010

7 Interview 52, Carolina, 41 years, Guatemalan, NGO Worker, 27/4/2010.
Moreover, MuJER encountered difficulty providing wider community outreach given the promise of anonymity provided by the organisation. A majority of women sex workers in Guatemala live what they describe as a “double life” in which the women hide their means of earning income. Many of them maintain a residence far from where they conduct sex work in order to ensure a geographic separation, but also when asked what they do for a living, most reply that they are cooks in a small café, or housekeepers on the other side of town. In order to aid in this separation, the name of the organizations was made ambiguous, MuJER meaning Woman, implied that the organisation was a women’s empowerment organisation rather than solely a sex worker empowerment organisation. Some even claimed to work for MuJER empowering women, rather than sex workers. As such, community outreach beyond the sex worker community was logistically difficult as many of the participant sex workers were uncomfortable with public attention. When MuJER participated in public demonstrations, such as the No Violence Against Women march and rally, fewer than five sex workers were willing to walk with MuJER, and one wore a mask. Perhaps, if staff had more time and resources, MuJER could have created many masks and potentially costumes to include more constituents while maintaining anonymity. MuJER might have been able to raise more awareness of the issues that faced this community.

The Goal: an NGO managed and operated by sex workers

In the field of ethnographic research, participation is described as more than taking part, but involves the persistent, active and consensual involvement with people (Winton, 2007 p. 500) and the relationships between those people. Participant observation is therefore inherently “messy, complicated, and often emotionally fraught interactions between two or more human beings” (Hume and Mulcock, 2004 p. xviii; 8 “double lives” or “doble vida” in which their inner social circle of family, neighbors and friends are unaware of their income earning methods, and in some cases sex workers even modify their personality from one life to another (Interview 19, Tina, 29 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 18/3/2010). 9 A random sample of three of the numerous interviews which confirmed the paradigm of the double life: Interview 24, Abby, 30 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 25/4/2010; Interview 52, Pricilla, 52 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 27/4/2010; Interview 87, Camellia, 18 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 16/6/2010.

---

8 “double lives” or “doble vida” in which their inner social circle of family, neighbors and friends are unaware of their income earning methods, and in some cases sex workers even modify their personality from one life to another (Interview 19, Tina, 29 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 18/3/2010).

9 A random sample of three of the numerous interviews which confirmed the paradigm of the double life: Interview 24, Abby, 30 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 25/4/2010; Interview 52, Pricilla, 52 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 27/4/2010; Interview 87, Camellia, 18 years, Guatemalan, Sex Worker, 16/6/2010.
also see Kenny, 2008 p. 384). These dynamics appear in any social group, but it is important to note that they were particularly complicated within the sex worker population given the high levels of histories of abuse among sex workers (El-Bassel, Witte, Wada, Gilbert, & Wallace, 2001; Farley & Barkan, 1998; Young & Carol Boyd, 2000). Additionally, the nature of jealousy among sex workers who are forced to compete with one another for clients. One member of staff had a history of child abuse and was also a survivor of violent gang rape. Understandably, she suffered from post-traumatic stress, but also the cycle of abusive relationships she grew up with continued to undermine her relationships within the organisation. Situations became so disruptive that she was mandated weekly therapy sessions to retain her staff position. Without oversight, however, she soon stopped attending therapy sessions. Upon reflection, mandated therapy is rarely effective, if the person is unwilling to benefit from therapy, then sessions come to little use. What is important to note, however, is that the goal of the organisation was to become a sex worker run organisation with little to no outside influence, yet the problems with this goal became increasingly apparent.

In addition to the problem of emotional struggles translating into the cycle of abusive relationships, there was the issue of the lack of education levels which translated into a lack of capacity. Hiring sex workers as staff was difficult given that women often became sex workers because their lack of education and qualifications meant that they were unable to find other employment, with the same pay and flexibility of hours. In many cases women came to MuJER because they had a primary school level education or less. Therefore, they often lacked the necessary skills in computers and of writing reports which are requisite for donner oversight in non-profit organisations. In which case, in order to achieve the goal of a sex worker run organisation, there would need to be a great investment in staff training. Moreover, it would be difficult to find potential staff who are open about their involvement in sex work and would not require anonymity. In the case of MuJER, one of the reasons for the failure of the organisation was a lack of report writing. Thus a need to change leadership without a practical replacement readily available. The organisation crumbled from within.

Safety, Dangers and Insecurities

One of the principal concerns of any organization should be the safety of its staff and constituents. Guatemala has a homicide rate twelve times that of the United States,
four times that of Mexico and considered the fourth most murderous country in the world (Tran, 2011, p. 1). In *Dangerous Fieldwork*, Lee identifies two kinds of dangers which can occur in the research process, “ambient and the situational” (1995 p. 3). According to Lee, ambient danger arises from a dangerous setting, whereas situational danger is evoked by the researcher’s presence or actions (1995 p. 3). Ambient danger in Guatemala is what the International Crisis Group calls, “one of the world’s most dangerous countries, with some 6,500 murders in 2009, more than the average yearly killings during the civil war” (International Crisis Group, 2010). Guatemala City is “now one of the most dangerous cities on the planet” (O’Neill, et al., 2011 p. 2). Moreover, MuJER worked with a traditionally targeted and stigmatized social group, sex workers, regularly collected data in red-light districts considered some of the most violent areas of the city and controlled by gangs. These are areas where homicide and assault are common place and the gangs maintain supreme power through murder, impunity and fear. As noted by Nordstrom and Robben, “the front lines are volatile and inchoate, with violence being constructed, negotiated, reshaped, and resolved as perpetrators and victims try to define and control the world they find themselves in” (Nordsrom, et al., 1995 p. 8).

Situational danger can be provoked in a number of ways, for example a NGO workers trying to change the status quo by empowering sex workers. In order to deter attacks while in the field, the MuJER team wore T-shirts which advertised our role as aid workers. There was evidence, however, that anyone who challenges the status quo were potential targets. The United Nations has been vocal on the recent trend of murders of public prosecutors and the increasing vulnerability of human rights defenders; 250 reported human rights defenders were victims of attacks and eight had been killed in 2010 alone (UN News Centre, 2011). In late 2010, Amelia a fellow sociologist from Huehuetenango, was abducted and murdered. Clearly the thin shield of cotton t-shirts would not stop a bullet. While visiting the red-light districts, our team were subjected to verbal and physical harassment as well as gang intimidation. The gang members were a constant dangerous presence in these areas, but never more dangerous than when they were under the influence of substances, alcohol or drugs. Our team often avoided eye contact, always wear clothing to cover skin, nothing form fitting or flattering and using hats in order to always appear unattractive and aloof. Yet
in order to be safe, it was important to always feel very unsafe. This feeling of insecurity kept the team on alert for impending dangers.

Additionally, in a fervent patriarchal society, being a woman can put a researcher at risk (Hume, et al., 2004 p. 7). Women in Guatemala are exceptionally targeted for violence known as femicide. Femicide is the murder of a woman because she is a woman (GGM, 2008; GGM, 2006; Benson, et al., 2008 p. 51; Carey, et al., 2010 p. 143; Caissie, 2010). Gender based motives include rape, sexual torture and mutilation followed by bodies often being left in very public spaces. Feminist activism is dangerous in a country where femicide and rape are appallingly common methods to assert power over a woman (Medicos Sin Fronterra, 2009). Just in the month of March 2010 alone, two constituents of MuJER, Sandra, then later Doña Sessy, were murdered\(^\text{10}\) and many more have been murdered since then. Impunity and indifference continue to shroud the death of sex workers.\(^\text{11}\) Sometimes sex workers are migrants and in order to maintain anonymity staff never asked sex workers their real names, instead using their working names. One of the problems with this practice, is that when one of them is murdered, we were unable to notify their family, and the vast majority of sex workers are single mothers (ASI, 2008). There are children in El Salvador and Honduras and even in Guatemala who are still waiting for their mothers to return home, who will never know why she stopped calling and sending aid.

Unfortunately, safety was not central for the organization, as safety is difficult to measure and under the circumstances almost impossible to achieve without

\(^{10}\) Sandra was strangled to death with a power cord in her room in the red light district. Doña Sessy was shot five times at the end of the work day as she was closing up her room in the red light district, she bled to death in the dirt.

\(^{11}\) Si es una trabajadora sexual que fue asesinado, lo omiso, sólo era una puta, así que la razón era drogas o del cliente, es por eso que los mataron, pero en realidad se trata de un rechazo de las mujeres, el rechazo a la mujer que está apoderando esta es la realidad, el machismo ha atacado, lo que la sociedad ha creado. No es que se excluye, es que son excluidos por la gente, la sociedad, nos ponen las denuncias, pero son documentos muertos, que los escriben, pero no importa, ellos hacen decisiones sin nuestro consentimiento. / If it's a sex worker that was killed, they shrug it off, it was just a whore, so the reason was either drugs or the client, that's why they were killed, but in reality this is a rejection of women, the rejection of women that is taking over this is the reality, the machismo has attacked, which the society has created. It's not that we exclude, it's that we are excluded by the people, society, we make denouncements, but they are, dead documents, we write them but they [police] don't care, they [legislators] make decisions without our consent. (Interview 18, Jazmine, 42 years, Guatemalan, sex worker, trafficked victim, NGO worker, 18/3/2010)
connections to law enforcement. The organization, therefore, focused on goals it could accomplish such as education and empowerment. This was regrettable given that security was a primary concern for our constituents, but understandable since even law enforcement officials rarely challenged the superiority gang violence and traditionally disregard sex workers as citizens with basic human rights. Nevertheless, the situation provokes some interesting questions, most notably about whether the organization could have done more to improve security for its constituents and staff?

**Conclusions**

This article examined the successes and failures of a Guatemalan sex worker empowerment organization given the context of working with the stigmatized population of sex workers. The critical analysis can be considered a contribution of lessons learned which raised several questions, such as;

- How and with whom are connections to be fostered to fill logistical gaps?
- How best to manage the balance between respecting sex worker anonymity and representing their concerns in society?
- How best to foster a team of sex workers who can realize the goal of managing and operating the NGO given the initial limited qualifications among sex workers?
- How can an empowerment organization make safety and security concerns central to its mission given that insecurity is the principal obstacle to the realization of human rights in sex work?

Moreover, the examination of MuJER’s positive and negative aspects is a contribution in the sense that it revealed examples of best practice for future pathways to empowerment of sex workers, such as MuJER’s core methods of providing a safe space of dignity, educational opportunities, a positive presence in red-light districts, and targeted empowerment efforts. Finally, it is the opinion of this researcher that sex worker empowerment is a marathon of day to day efforts to change the perspectives of people. While it is a daunting aspiration to positively effect change in society, it is an aspiration well worth having.
Works Cited


