

Is Sex Work Sex or Work? Forming Collective Identity in Bangalore

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Abstract While sex worker activism grows increasingly vibrant around the world, the forms and practices of sex work vary widely, and are often secret. How do sex workers come to see themselves as sex worker activists? What tensions emerge in the formation of collective identity within sex worker activist organizations, especially when the term “sex work” has often traveled linked to transnational organizations and funding? To answer these questions, this article analyzes in-depth interviews and participant observation on sex worker activism in Bangalore, India. Focusing on an organization I call the Union, I argue that it was first within the “shop floor” of transnationally funded HIV prevention organizations, and then within the activist work of the Union, that sex workers came to identify collectively as activists at a large scale. However, distinct configurations of practice among gendered groups of sex workers in Bangalore meant each group related differently to the formation of a sex worker activist collective identity. Two aspects of sex workers’ practice emerged as particularly central: varying experiences of sex work as “sex” or as “work,” and varying levels of anonymity and visibility in public spaces. Organizing through transnationally funded HIV prevention programs helped solidify these categories of differentiation even as it provided opportunities to develop shared self-hood.

Keywords Sex work · Collective identity · Social movements · HIV/AIDS · India

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“My body!”¹ shouted Shanti, a charismatic activist, transgender woman and former sex worker with a luminous smile. Her fist waved in the air as she energized a small crowd of transgender women,² cisgender women,³ and men⁴ who do sex work on the steps of Bangalore’s Town Hall. The rally, organized by a sex worker organization I call the Union, had been hurriedly called in response to a new Central government ordinance that many sex workers’ rights groups felt threatened sex workers’ livelihoods.⁵ “Our rights!” shouted Sita, a cisgender woman and sex worker, standing next to me and laughing. With a subtle grammatical shift—the expected response was “my rights!”—Sita and the other protestors both teased Shanti and inverted the individualistic tone of the classic slogan, reformulating it as a collective claim.

Sita and the other protestors, then, positioned themselves as a group of sex workers demanding their rights collectively. This position depended on the idea that the collective identity of the “sex worker” existed in the first place. Yet, as this article shows, Sita and

¹ Shanti used the slogan “Our body, our rights” in Kannada—*nanna deha, nanna hakku*.

² I have chosen to describe this group as “transgender women,” though some would primarily identify as transgender or TG, some as hijra, and many shifted personal identifications depending on the context. Hijras are part of a ritual community of “third gender” people with its own religious practices and kinship structure. Hijras have a history in South Asia dating back to at least the sixteenth century (Reddy 2005). Almost all those I interviewed who were transgender women had participated in the hijra community at some point, but some had left the community and no longer identified primarily as hijra. Thus, I use the broader category of “transgender women” to refer to this group—some would primarily identify as transgender or TG, some as hijra, some as kothi, and many shifted personal identifications depending on the context.

³ By “cisgender women,” I refer both to people who were assigned the category “female” at birth and people who were not, but currently identify as women. However, the term “cisgender” is not familiar to those I interviewed, and the binary of “cisgender” and “transgender” does not quite fit the configuration of sexuality and gender they experience. Thus, where referring interviewees’ own identification, I use the term “women.” I recognize the limitations of both terms in this context.

⁴ The category of the man in sex work in the Union is slippery, partly because of an entanglement of biomedical classification, social movements, and colloquial language that has produced a proliferation of overlapping categorizations (Cohen 2005; Boyce 2007). Those I include within the category of “men” identified as “men who have sex with men” when asked to do so in public health programs, but also identified as double-decker (men who engaged both in receptive and penetrative sex with male and sometimes female partners), bisexual, gay, and kothi (effeminate men who engaged in receptive sex with men). Many of these men placed themselves on a continuum of gender expression, for example identifying as relatively more “masculine” or “feminine” in different situations or at different points in their lives. Thus, I do not use the term “cisgender” to describe them. All were members of the Union or had supported their work in some way, but their relationships to sex work varied, as shown later.

⁵ The Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance (Ministry of Law and Justice 2013a) was a hurried response to the notorious 2012 Delhi gang rape and the wave of protest that followed. In the aftermath of the rape, the government formed a Committee, chaired by Justice J.S. Verma, to investigate amendments to criminal law “to provide for quicker trial and enhanced punishment for criminals committing sexual assault of extreme nature against women” (Verma et al. 2013). The Committee released its comprehensive report on January 23, 2013. In a departure from existing law, it included prostitution within its definition of exploitation (Verma et al. 2013, 438). The report became the basis for the subsequent Ordinance, which the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, signed on February 3 (Mohini 2013). The Ordinance was criticized by many Indian feminists for various reasons (Menon 2013), and it incorporated the Committee’s language on prostitution. On hearing of the Ordinance, The National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), of which the Union is a member, began organizing protests such as the one I describe here. A few days later, NNSW issued a formal press release asking the Verma Committee for “clarification” of the language that had been incorporated into the Ordinance, arguing that “The formulation in the Ordinance is a setback to sex workers who are fighting for legal and societal recognition of their fundamental rights to dignity and pursuit of a livelihood” (National Network of Sex Workers 2013). In response, the Verma Commission did issue such a clarification (Chakrabarty 2013), and prostitution was removed from the definition of exploitation in the final Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (Ministry of Law and Justice 2013b), which became law in April 2013.

Shanti's experiences of sex work differed fundamentally, and for neither was this collective identity automatic, nor was it comfortably a public claim. Some such differences were plainly visible at the protest: While Shanti and many of the transgender women formed a boisterous and visible presence, the other women were quieter, more cautious about standing at the front of the crowd. Some sat with signs printed for the protest—"Sex work is not exploitation" and "Sex work is dignified work"—strategically covering their faces, so that they could participate without disclosing their participation to suspicious family members who might notice them in the newspaper. So how did Sita and Shanti come to a shared public defense of the rights of sex workers in this way? And what were the limits of this shared collective identity?

In this article, I analyze the formation of the collective identity of the "sex worker" within an activist organization in Bangalore. Sex worker activism grows increasingly prominent worldwide, and in India it has gained political influence since the mid-1990s. The scholarly literature on sex work in India has gestured toward the ambiguities of the concept of "sex work," a relatively new activist term with North American origins, in relation to Indian sex workers' lives, but few scholars have investigated the formation of the collective identity of the sex worker within activist organizations systematically. How do sex workers come to identify as sex workers within activist organizations, when their everyday lives often reflect much more complex intersections of sex, work, and intimacy than a fixed category can accommodate? One area of sociological literature in which such questions have been explored is in the literature on collective identity in social movements. Drawing on the insights of this literature, I argue that the collective identity of the sex worker had to be formed: First, as the "shop floor" of transnationally funded HIV/AIDS programs made space for these groups to identify shared circumstances of marginalization, and second, as the Union began to mobilize collectively as a group of sex workers independently of HIV/AIDS programs.⁶

While the literature on collective identity provides useful insights for studying the formation of collective identity, it tells us less about potential cleavages within collective identity formation. In the Union, forming a collective identity was a more unstable process than the literature sometimes suggests. It rested on constitutive tensions among cisgender women, men, and transgender women that were reinforced by the particular process by which the Union formed. In particular, these groups differentiated themselves from one another based on their 1) different interpretations of sex work as "sex" or as "work," and 2) different experiences of anonymity and visibility in public spaces. These distinct experiences of sex work presented members with unique sources of ambivalence toward adopting the collective identity of the "sex worker" and toward one another. Further, since the literature on collective identity in social movements largely focuses on the U.S., it has less to say about transnational power relations—in the case of the Union, for example, of the circulation of epidemiological categories through U.S.-funded HIV/AIDS donors that partly (but never completely) shaped the process of identity formation and the cleavages that resulted.

Ultimately, the sex worker collective identity formed in the Union held within it conflicts as well as complementarities. Both were visible in the relationship between Shanti, at the microphone, and the cisgender women sex workers, like Sita, on the steps shouting along with her. When the reporters arrived, they first sought out Shanti and a few vocal transgender women, who immediately called on Sita and Sarita, two cisgender women from the Union. "Female sex workers should talk!" Shanti said. Sita, at first, responded reluctantly—though a

⁶ This article focuses on the formation of "sex worker" collective identity within a particular social movement organization. It has less to say about sex worker identity in other organizations or outside of activism.

dedicated organizer, she avoided public statements about sex work. But when she finally did give an interview, her experience linked the Union to the large number of women in Bangalore involved in sex work—while Shanti’s comfort speaking publicly drew attention to the protest.

In the next section, I outline the existing literature on sex work and sex worker activism in India and internationally, and then turn to the literature on collective identity, before moving into a discussion of the research context, my methods, and an analysis of my in-depth interviews and participant observation. I suggest that literature on sex work can benefit from the collective identity literature’s attention to the mobilization process in forming collective identity. I then show how differentiations among members outside of activism led to some conflicts and some complementarities within the collective identity of the sex worker that the Union ultimately formed.

Sex Worker Activism, Collective Identity, and the Role of Organization

Forming Collective Identity: Indian Sex Worker Activism

Feminist historians of India have analyzed accounts of prostitutes and devadasis⁷ working collectively for their interests well before the term “sex work” entered global circulation, both through formal organizations and through more dispersed or individualized resistance to regulation (e.g. Arondekar 2009, 2012; Tambe 2006, 2009, both writing about the nineteenth century). Since the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, this activism has grown both in scale and formality, and the term “sex worker” has become more central to organizing, in India and transnationally (Bindman and Doezema 1997; Gall 2007, 2012; Hardy 2010; Jameela 2007; Kaiwar and Gothoskar 2014; Kempadoo 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Mgbako 2016; Sukthankar 2012). As with the Union, as shown in this article, one driver of this formal organization in India was the HIV/AIDS crisis, which drew new state recognition of sex workers, and led to state and transnational donor funding for grassroots organizations of sex workers across the country (Ghosh 2003, 2004, 2005; Lakkimsetti 2014; Lorway et al. 2009; Lorway and Khan 2014). Yet, as this section shows, scholars and activists have not systematically investigated the process by which sex workers themselves have come to identify collectively with the term in such a short time (or not).

The term “sex work” originated with the activist Carol Leigh in the late 1970s in San Francisco (Leigh 1997). The sex worker movement Leigh helped found in this period in the U.S. (Berg 2014; Bernstein 2007; Chapkis 1997; Chateauvert 2014; Delacoste and Alexander 1998; Grant 2014; Jenness 1993; Nagle 1997; Oselin and Weitzer 2013; Weitzer 1991) formed in response to the exclusion of sex workers from mainstream North American feminism and the raging “sex wars” of the time. These sex worker activists were influenced by sex-positive feminisms and LGBTQ politics, and positioned sex work as an expression of sexual autonomy.

While the term “sex work” has circulated transnationally since these beginnings, its uses have taken on distinct articulations in distinct contexts. In India, sex worker activism has been driven by poor and working-class sex workers (Kotiswaran 2011a), groups arguably less visible in North American sex worker activism (Bernstein 2007). It has formed alongside,

⁷ Devadasi is a broad term used to describe women ritually dedicated to local deities and associated with temples. Devadasis historically have been involved in sex work, though not all are. See Ramberg (2014) for a nuanced exploration.

and sometimes synergistically with, growing LGBTQ activism as well as state sexual regulation (Lakkimsetti 2016; Puri 2016). Notably, despite wide variations in the ways sex workers relate to the term (e.g. Sukthankar 2012), the term “sex worker” has played a central role in the most recent wave of organizing (Kaiwar and Gothoskar 2014) in a way that it did not before the 1980s (Nalini Jameela’s 2007 bestseller *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* showcased the term).

As it has globally, the *concept* of “sex as work” has been the subject of bitter debate among feminists in India. Some position “prostitution” as an “aspect of the prevailing unequal gender relations” (D’Cunha 1992, WS34) and the idea of sex as an occupational choice as a Northern imposition (WS42); others argue that the “work position” offers the best route to improving sex workers’ conditions (Kotiswaran 2011a, 2011b); and some take what Kotiswaran (2011b) calls “middle ground” positions, opposing sex work as an institution but supporting the rights of sex workers as individuals (Sunder Rajan 2003; also see George et al. 2010; Kaiwar and Gothoskar 2014 for useful reviews). However, few of these scholars analyze the ways in which “sex work” operates as a “political identity” (Grant 2014, 20) and ask how those who exchange sex for money come to understand themselves as sex workers (or not). Those scholars and activists drawing on ethnographic research or longtime work with sex workers point to the potential ambiguities of the concept in the lives of sex workers. Shah (2014, 75) argues that “the label ‘work’ may not be adequate to accommodate the social and political complexities of exchanging sex for money;” Kotiswaran (2011a, xiv) suggests that “it is at the intersections where sex becomes work and work demands sex that sex work needs to be understood.” Activist Meena Seshu and filmmaker Shohini Ghosh point out that words like *dhandha*, meaning business, have long been used in India to describe the exchange of sex for money—but “business” can carry different connotations than “work” (Seshu and Ghosh 2008; Kole 2009; Menon 2009, 102). Others question the concept of “agency” and its centrality to the work position. Ramberg (2014, 176) notes that the question of agency around which debates about sex as work center are inadequate for an understanding of the *devadasi* system as a transactional form; Dasgupta (2014), writing about work with DMSC in Kolkata, analyzes sex workers’ silence, their refusal of language, as a way to recover agency by refusing the dichotomies of trafficking and sex work debates.

These observations open up intriguing ambiguities and differentiations in the ways people who exchange sex for money may or may not identify with “sex work” as a collective identity, and the different valences “sex work” can take on. While many writings analyze sex work as concept and practice, and its regulation, fewer focus on activism as the object of analysis, and fewer still engage questions of collective identity formation systematically and comparatively (though see Lorway et al. 2009).

Conflicts in Collective Identity and the Practice of Sex Work

Sociologists have argued that collective identity plays a role in all phases of social movement organization: in the formation of collective claims, in recruiting new members into movements, in determining tactics, and as the outcome of movements, such that a shared collective identity becomes an end in itself (Polletta and Jasper 2001). A starting point of the sociological literature on collective identity in social movements is that collective identities do not exist de

facto, but must be created in and through movement: “To understand any politicized identity community, it is necessary to analyze the social and political struggle that created the identity” (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 352). Thus, to understand sex workers’ formation of collective selfhood, the process of organization itself must be an object of analysis.

Much of the contemporary sociology of collective identity departs from the insights of Melucci (1985, 1995), who argued that “new social movements” globally were neither an automatic effect of structural conditions (as in narrow interpretations of Marxism) nor an expression of shared beliefs (as in Durkheimian sociology) but an organizational achievement that must be actively built. Collective identities are the outcome of social movements, not their precondition; they are, as Hunt and Benford (2004, 447) argue, an “interactional accomplishment” (a version of Marx’s insight that classes in themselves become classes for themselves through struggle.) Social psychologists have noted that beliefs and identities result from mobilization, rather than pre-existing them (Munson 2010); the more involved activists become, the more their collective identity solidifies (Klandermans 2002).

What conflicts emerge in the process of forming collective identity? In North American sociology, the scholarship on this question has largely focused on LGBTQ identity in the U.S., and, especially, on the tension between assimilationism and separatism (Armstrong 2002; Bernstein 1997; Epstein 1988; Gamson 1995; Ghaziani 2011; Kimmel 1993). Gamson (1995, 390) argues, “This debate...is not only over the *content* of collective identity (whose definition of “gay“ counts?), but over the everyday *viability* and political *usefulness* of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'man,' 'woman'?)" Put differently, this question addresses the relative fluidity or fixity of collective identity, or its relationship to either “us/them” distinctions or an appeal to similarities with other groups (Moon 2012).

While such divergences are important to Indian sex worker activism as well, and I explore them elsewhere (Vijayakumar 2018), because they focus on U.S. contexts, they miss some dynamics central to sex worker activism in India. Sex worker organizations in India contend with conflicts between the complexities of practice and the transnational resonance and access to Northern funders adopting more fixed global categories or “respectably queer” (Ghosh 2015) approaches provides. Scholars investigating LGBTQ activism in India have noted these difficulties in the “globalization of categories,” especially in relation to HIV/AIDS organizations (Altman 1999; Cohen 2005; Karnik 2001; Kole 2007), as have scholars studying queer identities and their global circulation (e.g. Altman 1996; Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Moussawi 2015). The use of fixed terms and identities is often key to constructing identities that can form the basis for solidarity and claims for legal inclusion and transnational recognition, but it also has its costs, and they often fall along classed and caste-shaped lines (Khanna 2011; Shah 1998). Khanna (2013, 123), for example, argues that “the erotic and the sexual need not speak to the sense of self or define it at all.”

Questions surrounding collective identity formation among sex workers in India have been less explored than among LGBTQ groups, but the ethnographic literature on sex work details several ways in which differentiations in sex workers’ practice might shape their relationship to collective identity. In the Union, I suggest the following were most important: the relationship between “sex” and “work,” and the dynamics of anonymity. Both have been explored in the literature on sex work globally, though less often in the context of activism. For example, using ethnographic data, Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) shows that relationships to “sex” and “work” differed across economic tiers, arguing that street-based sex workers in San Francisco, unlike higher-end sex workers, frequently described their sex work as labor, and sought to

maintain a gendered divide between their “home” and “work” selves. Hoang (2010, 2011, 2015) finds a similar distinction in Ho Chi Minh City, between lower-end sex workers, who exchange sex for money, and higher-end sex workers, who exchange sex for intimacy and gifts in addition to money.

A second line of differentiation is that of anonymity. Public visibility is an important feature of sex workers’ lives because of the criminalization and stigma associated with the work. In this sense, the visibility of sex work has concrete consequences: the criminalization of sex work means, in practice, the policing of all deviations from gendered norms in public spaces (Grant 2014, 9). For some sex worker activists, then, “coming out” is a radically subversive act. Carol Leigh (1997, 228), for example, in San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s, drew attention to the demand that sex workers remain anonymous by attending feminist events with a paper bag over her head. Yet this “coming out” did not bear equal rewards or equal burdens: For poor and working-class sex workers of color, more directly at risk of police violence and more dependent on sex work for livelihood, public disclosure was less appealing (Chapkin 1997, 127; Delacoste and Alexander 1998, 281).

Both the dynamics of sex and work and the dynamics of anonymity have immediate consequences for how groups of sex workers form a collective identity. If sex work is “just work,” sex workers may prefer not to identify with other sex workers. For example, writing about the sex workers’ rights group DMSC in Kolkata, Ghosh (2003) notes that the identity of the “flying” prostitute, who works in secret and does not live in a red-light district, has been more difficult to accommodate than that of the brothel-based sex worker. For those sex workers for whom disclosure presents particularly high risks, forming a collective identity around sex work may fail. The rest of this article relates these insights to the case of the Union, analyzing how it formed the collective identity of the sex worker, as well as where tensions emerge and persist.

Methods

This article draws primarily on 50 in-depth interviews with members of the Union, an organization of, at the time of my fieldwork from 2012 to 2013, approximately 1400 sex workers, according to the Union’s own estimates. The Union, formed in the mid-2000s, was based in Bangalore and positioned itself as a sex workers’ labor rights group, with a focus on supporting individual sex workers in accessing state welfare provisions, supporting sex workers who had been arrested and detained, and advocating for the decriminalization of sex work. My interviews with Union members formed part of a larger study of sex worker organizations in Bangalore and their relationships to HIV/AIDS programs. Bangalore proved useful for studying these relationships in part because it was home to several sex worker organizations. Of these, the Union was most explicitly concerned with activism around sex as work; it was also one of few organizations in India, to my knowledge, working with cis and trans women and men in sex work together.⁸ It was thus ideal for a study of the formation of sex worker collective identity across variations in practice.

I identified the Union as part of a larger process of identifying key sex worker organizations in the city, by conducting interviews with initial contacts I found online and asking for referrals

⁸ Notably, Ashodaya Samiti in Mysore works with all three of these groups, but combines HIV prevention work with activism.

to other key organizations. I then used a combination of snowballing and seeking out new contacts through participant observation to identify members and staff at the organization to interview. The interviews upon which this article is based took place largely at organizational offices; a few took place in interviewees' homes. Almost all of the interviewees spoke Kannada as a first or second language. I conducted all of the interviews in Kannada, and they ranged from forty minutes to three hours in length. I digitally recorded all interviews and then transcribed them directly into English. I also conducted a year of participant observation with members of the Union as well as with two other sex worker organizations in the city, attending events and meetings, accompanying organizers in their day-to-day work, spending time in organizational offices, and visiting members in their homes. During this time, I became involved in the organizations' activities, helping with training events or elections, speaking about the organizations' activities, or writing research reports. Because I conducted the in-depth interviews while conducting participant observation, I often had many informal conversations with interviewees before and after interviewing them formally, and had spent time with them over meals, traveling to events, watching and dancing to movie songs, or playing games. Several of those I interviewed became friends I was in touch with throughout my fieldwork and after. Though my participant observation centrally informed my study, I focus here on personal narratives from in the in-depth interviews, because they allow me to compare the three groups in their accounts of their personal trajectories in and out of sex worker activism.

The Research Context: Sex Work in Bangalore

Sex work practices in Karnataka vary by site of solicitation, site of work, frequency of sex work, type of client, and type of services (Buzdugan et al. 2010). Bangalore has no red-light district, so most sex workers there operate as an "open secret" (Shah 2014), in public places that double as sites for solicitation for those in the know.

In this article, I focus on gender as a key line of differentiation among different sex workers, but acknowledge the limitations of doing so.⁹ None of these groups was monolithic. However, many Union members came from backgrounds in HIV prevention work that were premised on fixed gendered groupings, such as "men who have sex with men" (MSM) and "female sex worker" (FSW). Thus, gender became the most important differentiating factor among members: It was the line of differentiation *they* presented as most important, and they often very proudly described the Union as a joining together of three gendered groups. In other words, the process of organization I describe below in part shaped the lines of differentiation that formed within "sex worker" collective identity in the Union. Each gendered group in the Union described their experiences of sex, work, and anonymity in distinct ways. In another organization or context, other factors, such as caste or the type and site of sex work, might have proven more salient (Ghosh 2003; Shah 2014).

Background information about the three groups shows that they differed not only in terms of gender but also in terms of educational background, caste, and family relationships. A larger proportion of the cisgender women and men were married or in long-term monogamous relationships, compared to the transgender women, of whom 53% were single, and almost all of the cisgender women had children, unlike the other two groups. Of the cisgender women I interviewed, nearly half had never gone to school, compared to 14% of the men and none of

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify this point.

the transgender women; 55% were Dalit,¹⁰ compared to lower proportions among men and transgender women. In short, the cisgender women were poorer, lower caste, less educated, and more embedded in patriarchal family structures than the other two groups. There were, however, some overarching similarities. None of the interviewees were from elite backgrounds and few were from middle-class backgrounds; none had more than a high-school education. This finding corroborates the Union leadership's description of the organization as primarily working class.

Differences among the three groups are closely linked to differences in experiences of sex work. The three groups solicited clients and conducted sex work in similar sites—in public spaces, like markets, bus stands, and public parks—and, once better established, through networks of long-term clients they maintained over the phone. However, their paths into sex work and experiences of anonymity differed. Many of the cisgender women sex workers I interviewed were poor, married, and had children, were disproportionately Dalit, and had sought additional income to support a struggling family and many facing an added burden of caste stigma. Often living within patriarchal family structures, they faced risks in disclosing that they did sex work, and many did sex work in areas far removed from where they lived with their families; as much as possible, they blended into the background. Men, too, were embedded in patriarchal family structures, and, like cisgender women, they were less visible in public space as sex workers; they were also, for the most part, less likely to come from poor and stigmatized Dalit backgrounds. They were less dependent on sex work for economic livelihood, and had often come to sex work while spending time in parks and public places where men meet for casual sex. The majority of transgender women I interviewed lived within the hijra system, in which sex work was a common income-generating strategy and one of few options for earning a livelihood. They also tended to have higher education levels and fewer of them were Dalit. Unlike men and cis women, they were visibly different in public space. This visibility made them vulnerable to violence, and made it harder to do sex work anonymously.

Forming Collective Identity: From the “Shop Floor” of HIV Prevention to the Union

Given the differences among these three groups, what made the Union's shared collective identity possible? This section suggests two steps. In a first step, HIV/AIDS organizations worked as a “shop floor” within which these through groups might identify shared circumstances. Just as the factory in a manufacturing context might operate to unify workers against common oppressions in a traditional Marxist analysis, HIV/AIDS organizations brought sex workers together into common spaces of organizing in ways they might not have experienced otherwise, helping them to identify commonalities and organize collectively. However, HIV/AIDS organizations rigidly distinguished among these groups, sometimes further reifying divisions along the lines of epidemiological categories. In a second step, sex workers working within HIV/AIDS organizations began organizing as the Union, with shared goals. The Union's collective identity had more fluid boundaries than epidemiological categories,

¹⁰ Dalit, meaning “oppressed” or “broken,” describes those castes outside the traditional Hindu four-caste system or belonging to the lowest castes. The official government term is “scheduled castes.”

allowing sex workers to connect experiences across groups, while maintaining lines of differentiation.

Sex worker organizing in India, and especially in southern India, cannot be understood outside the context of HIV/AIDS. Starting in the mid-1980s and especially in the 1990s and 2000s, public health researchers designated female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and IV drug users the three key groups in India “at risk” of HIV/AIDS. 2003 saw the launch of the Gates Foundation’s Avahan program, which focused on six states, including Karnataka, and initially committed \$258 million mainly to large-scale HIV prevention with a focus on at-risk groups (Ng et al. 2011). Avahan built on existing efforts by sex worker activists and the Indian government (Jana et al. 2004; Rao 2010), but infused new resources into sex worker groups; in 2011, the Karnataka government claimed to have reached 98,000 sex workers through its HIV prevention programs (KSAPS 2011, 25). Because the program functioned through sex worker groups that provided sex workers with a range of health and social services, they became a site for the formation of collective identity (Biradavolu et al. 2015; Lorway and Khan 2014; Lorway, Reza-Paul, and Pasha 2009; see also Ghose et al. 2008; Lakkimsetti 2014 on HIV programs not limited to Gates-funded initiatives). Notably, HIV/AIDS also played a key role in the emerging LGBTQ rights activism of the time (Boyce 2007; Cohen 2005; Lakkimsetti 2016; Puri 2016); the landmark case *Naz Foundation v. Govt of NCT of Delhi*, which challenged the anti-sodomy section 377 in the Indian Penal Code, was initiated by HIV/AIDS NGOs.

HIV prevention programs rigidly distinguished among different “at-risk” groups. Drop-in centers for “men who have sex with men” (which included kothis¹¹ and transgender women) were managed separately, by different NGOs than those for “female sex workers.” A new member was first taken to a counselor to learn about the services at the drop-in center and document background information. I often heard NGO staff explain that new members “did not understand their identity” yet until they went through a counseling process. Malini, a transgender woman, described the first time she realized that the word she had just learned, “sex work,” described what she already did:

Here these people speak English; they say I do “sex,” “sex work.” Actually when I first heard [the term] “sex work,” I had thought it must be some other job!...One time, I was wondering what a friend was doing when he did “sex work.” So I went with him. [I realized that he goes to] Majestic [the major bus stand in Bangalore] and does *sule kelasa* [a derogatory colloquial term for sex work]!...I said, “I did this too last night! Is *this* what ‘sex work’ is?”

As Malini’s account indicates, key to joining an HIV prevention organization was developing a technical language for describing practices she took for granted. Almost every person I interviewed had first heard the term “sex worker,” both in English and in Kannada (*laingika karmikaru*), at an HIV/AIDS NGO or community-based organization. Sarita, a Union member, explained, “This person at [an HIV prevention NGO] told me the name sex worker. That’s when I found out.” Sarita had words for what she did before HIV/AIDS NGOs—like *dhandha* (business)—but HIV/AIDS NGOs helped solidify these terms, giving them an aura of formality.

¹¹ Kothi literally means “monkey,” and describes effeminate men who engage in receptive sex with men. See note 4 above for a more detailed discussion.

Soon, however, this process of solidifying a category extended beyond HIV/AIDS organization. The Union exemplified this shift: Most of the members of the Union learned about it through an initial connection to HIV peer education, but the Union focused on concerns beyond sexual health, such as housing, pensions, and police violence, and sought to unite groups thought of as epidemiologically distinct. Union members identified shared bases of marginalization that blurred the epidemiological categorizations of HIV programs; sex workers faced similar forms of stigma, and they did sex work in similar contexts, thus experiencing similar risks of police violence and criminalization.

One example of shared stigma was members' experience of the heterosexual, patriarchal family. Early on in my fieldwork, I was sitting with Lata, a cisgender woman and sex worker, at a meeting at which members of the Union were presenting interactive street theater. The play focused on a man who was in love with another man but was forced into a marriage with a woman by an unrelenting family. Lata immediately saw a connection to her own life. She told me she had also been forced into a marriage—the same set of norms that placed men in heterosexual marital relationships against their will also placed women like her under patriarchal control. Sita, another Union member, related oppression within the family to the public denigration of sexual “others”:

[I]f they're kothi, hijra, transgender, they face problems...from their families and the public. People say he's a koja, chakka, all those kinds of names. They give them a lot of trouble. And they scold our women too with all this kind of talk, saying she's a whore (*sule*) and all that. They say all these wicked things to our women...we have the same problem, right? That's why we said we would invite everyone, and include everyone, and form the [Union], and we'll work for everyone together.

Another point of alignment was the experience of policing. The Union initially formed in response to a shared experience of criminalization and stigma—four sex workers were arrested and then outed in the media, and the protestors that mobilized in response were beaten by police. When listing their most frequent problems, almost all of the interviewees began with the police. Police and gangs of “rowdies” beat up, arrested, demanded bribes from, and raped sex workers across groups. “Even if we're different, the job we do is the same,” Preethi said. Hari, a man in sex work, described the common forms of violence sex workers faced:

And some of the problems were almost one, and in some areas there were differences... Female sex workers had children. Our people [sexual minorities] don't have children... but in sex work, violence, or [those kinds of] problems, when all that came up, it was mostly similar. When we discussed it, we said the work we are doing is respectable work, and we wanted it recognized as work... So then we said OK, and we started the Union.

Hari noted the differences among the groups, but also the shared advocacy goals of all three because of the work they did. The Union further cultivated the ability to identify oneself as a sex worker in order to solidify this collective identity. At one board meeting I attended, for example, each participant in the circle practiced introducing herself: “My name is _____, I am a sex worker, and I work for the Union.” As I watched, the introduction became more smooth, the uncertainties settling into a pattern.

The role of organization in forming collective identity was particularly clear in the differences between those Union members who had spent longer in the Union and had taken leadership roles and the less active members. Social psychologists and social movements scholars note that protest participation reinforces commitment and group identification over time (Klandermans 1996, 2002; Nepstad 2004). In my interviews, less involved members who had attended fewer Union events had less to say about sharing a collective identity, especially across the subgroups of trans and cis women and men. More active members emphasized that they had learned to identify collectively through shared experiences of organizing. Collective identity had to be actively formed through mobilization. However, tensions persisted even among those members and leaders with a long-term commitment to the Union. In the next section, I address these conflicts, drawing mainly on interviews with committed members.

Tensions in Forming Collective Identity: Sex, Work, and Anonymity

“We Absolutely Have to Do It”: Cisgender Women and Sex Work

Among the cisgender women interviewees, sex work was one among limited livelihood options available, an option often pursued in combination with other options, rather than a permanent designation. Almost all the cisgender women sex workers I interviewed had worked in other informal sector jobs prior to and sometimes alongside sex work, reflecting patterns across India (Sahni and Kalyan Shankar 2013). Unlike men and trans women sex workers, they most often came upon sex work through other jobs. Introductions to sex work took place through friends at garment factory jobs or at construction sites. Working and sexual relationships were interconnected; for example, one might move out of a job and into a relationship with a partner with financial resources, and then back into the workforce if that partner disappeared. For example, Soundarya lived with an abusive uncle for whom she worked in the fields. Eventually, her uncle raped her and she became pregnant. After an abortion, her parents sent her to work in a garment factory. She said they didn't want her getting further “ruined.” At the garment factory, a friend introduced her to sex work. Eventually, she entered a long-term relationship with a client and moved in with him. He paid the rent, while she continued to do occasional sex work for additional income.

Soundarya's trajectory epitomizes the twists and turns many of the cisgender women interviewees followed in and out of sex work. For many, sex work could be seasonal or flexible depending on the ebb and flow of income from other informal work, the presence or absence of partner or other family support, medical expenses, and children's needs. Lekha, a sex worker and HIV peer educator, described her patterns of work:

I've worked in other places, I've worked in a garment factory, and now while working [as an HIV peer educator], I tie flowers. While doing sex...If I get clients (*girakhigalu*), I do sex, and if I don't get clients, I tie flowers and work [as an HIV peer educator]...And if I'm not feeling well I don't tie flowers.

Such accounts made it difficult to, for example, calculate an average monthly income from sex work, or identify a main source of income. Instead, my questions about income usually resulted in complicated explanations of how sex work income could increase or decrease depending on need, season, health condition, and age, and finding a client was never guaranteed.

As the story of Nalinamma, a former sex worker, exemplifies, sex work was tied to family obligation for most of the cisgender women interviewees. Nalinamma had married into a family with a family business of selling secondhand cars. For years, she did not do sex work, but then family financial troubles led her back:

Finally, [the family] became very poor. [Business] slowed down. There wasn't even enough for food. I was always thinking about this at home. They weren't sending me to a job...At home there was no rice, no lentils, nothing...One day, I told my husband: "I'll go find a job." [He asked] "Where will you get a job? Who will give you a job in Bangalore?" My sisters-in-law and I used to go house to house and sell soap. No one used to buy it. They'd close the door. They wouldn't even come to the gate. Even if we circled the whole city we wouldn't even get 30 rupees...I told [my sisters-in-law] finally, "I won't come [to sell soap]"...I said, "You go, you do it, I'm not coming. My legs hurt. I won't go." And finally, I had done it before at the lodge, and I knew, right?...I went courageously...I did sex and I used to bring home food for every one of them. My husband asked: "Where did this money come from? Where did you get it?" I said, "Don't ask where it came from or how it came? Eat. After you eat, ask me one day, and I'll tell you."

Nalinamma did not do sex work continuously from the time she was first introduced to it—she chose it when her family fell into hard times.

Nalinamma was proud of her ability to feed her family with her earnings from sex work. Many of the cisgender women interviewees echoed Nalinamma in describing sex work as a necessary strategy for raising a family. Vijayamma, a sex worker, spoke in tears about her daughter. She had done sex work to raise her daughter, she said, without ever telling her what she was doing. "The reason for all this is poverty," she said, "But when women face difficulty, what path is there? If you take that life [of not doing sex work] you only get half [of what you need]. And if you do this [sex work], people say it's bad. How are you supposed to live?" For Vijayamma, sex work was a necessary strategy for poor women: it was not a situation of coercion, but one of obligation. As she insisted, "People in the profession (*vritti*) are not respected. But we absolutely have to do it."

For almost all cisgender women I interviewed, sex work was a strategy pursued, ideally, in secret from their families—out of bus stands, lodges or "houses" away from their neighborhoods and children. Except for elite sex workers who stood on the main streets in the expensive Cantonment area of the city, most sex workers, even when they were working, were not easily identifiable in public spaces except to those familiar with the sex market—including local police. Cisgender women members I interviewed often told me with pride that they could not be recognized as sex workers in public, that they looked like "family" women. Underlying this preference, for some, was an effort to de-exceptionalize sex work. The Union had once participated in a meeting in which someone proposed creating a red-light district in Bangalore. Lata, a Union leader, opposed the proposal: "We're just like everyone else who's making a living, so treat us like that. Don't make it known that all these people are sex workers and stick them in one place."

A preference for blending in was a survival strategy in a context where being identified as a sex worker by police could lead to institutionalized abuse and violence, even when not actively soliciting. As Sita explained, "After we came to sex work, now, wherever we stand, wherever it is, whether you have a friend or someone with you, whether your father is with you, or whether your older or younger brother is with you, they [police] always assume it's a client

(*girakhi*) in public. Because you're in the profession (*vrutti*)...that's just the kind of person you are." In this context, Sita preferred to blend in, to resist the implication that being a sex worker was "the kind of person you are" and the police violence that resulted. Sita wanted sex work to remain only one part of her identity—the work she did, rather than the person she was.

"I Didn't Want to Take Cash": Men and Sex Work

In everyday conversation, the men I interviewed often did not make the distinction between "doing sex" for money and "doing sex"¹² for pleasure—instead, they discussed sex work as an extension of their sexual practice. Men still did pursue sex work for money—but in the most common narrative of paths into sex work, that they had first begun to have sex with men, and then had begun to get paid for it (see Lorway, Reza-Paul, and Pasha 2009).

Some of the interviewees in this group presented money as a secondary motivation for sex with other men. Gitesh exemplified this perspective. An NGO worker and member of the sex worker union, Gitesh was married to a woman, had two children, and described himself as a "doubledecker," someone who was "on both sides at the same time." He had a long-term male partner of twenty years, as well as an extended family life with his wife and children. Gitesh described his relationship to sex as entirely distinct from that of cisgender women in sex work: "They come for money," he explained. "We come only for happiness (*sukha*)." Thus, when Gitesh described sexual encounters in which he was paid, the money seemed secondary:

I didn't want to take cash. I didn't have a reason to do sex for money. For them [partners], they get a kind of happiness (*sukha*), and for me, I get a kind of peace of mind (*nemmadi*), so why should I ask for money? I had the idea that [if I did] I'd become cheap. Even now, I feel shy about asking for money. I don't ask. If they want, they might buy me food, or if I like, I can also buy them food. But the one thing is, if we're going to drink, I don't give money. They have to pay for it. That costs a lot of money...If they didn't, I wouldn't ask. If they said they'd pay, I'd ask for that [alcohol]. But for money at least, I didn't ask. If they gave money on their own, I'd take it.

Here, Gitesh revealed a complex interplay between sex and payment. Food, a basic expense, could be paid for by either partner, but Gitesh would not pay for alcohol, a bigger expense. Gitesh initially described himself as seeking out only a kind of satisfaction from sex, but then revealed that he would take money, as long as it was given without him having to ask for it.

Gitesh suggested that sometimes he would be paid and sometimes he would not be. For other interviewees, money was more of a primary goal, but it was still intertwined with sexual practice. Puneet was the son of a vegetable seller and a security guard, and now supported his family with 5000 Rupee (\$74) a month from sex work, even paying partly for his sisters' wedding ceremonies. He began sex work when a friend suggested that rather than "going for free," he should "take money." He noted, "I don't say I'm a sex worker first. First, I say I'm gay. Then we chat, and then I say I

¹² I always heard this formulation the same way: with the noun "sex" in English, and the verb "to do" in Kannada (*sex maadodhu*).

charge for sex.” Puneet’s interactions with sexual partners occurred initially in the context of setting up a sexual relationship, not a monetary exchange. What was important, Puneet explained, was to establish that he was gay. Though he solicited partners more systematically than Gitesh, and it formed more of his regular income, it was important for Puneet not to position his encounters initially as motivated by money. Indeed, he told me over and over how much he enjoyed doing sex work on its own terms.

For many of the men interviewees, describing the path to sex work was intertwined with describing a path to sexual identity. Nagaraj, for example, explained that, as a young teenager, “My character was changing, kind of. I am a boy, but I have a female feeling (*bhavane*).” A friend who sat next to him in school told him about “male sex male,” and paid him 100 rupees for sex. “When he gave [the money], I felt I should continue. I wanted to become a sex worker.” These changes happened during a difficult time in his life; he had been sent to live with an abusive uncle and was struggling financially. Beginning with his early sexual relationships, money was a prominent element.

I can't even explain it, I was in so much difficulty...If I delivered a bin of water they'd give me one rupee [\$0.08]...If I went to a hotel for a little bit of food, a chapati [flatbread] cost 1 rupee 25 paise [\$1.25]. But if I couldn't pay, I'd do sex with him. I've done sex and eaten a chapati.”

Like the cisgender women Union members, he emphasized his work as part of a family obligation to his son; when he got money from sex work, he placed the money next to a photo of his niece, who had committed suicide. But while Nagaraj resembled cisgender women interviewees in talking about his need for money and supporting his family, in general he was much more comfortable identifying as a kothi or gay than as a sex worker: “What I do is sex worker. My category is kothi.”¹³ His family knew about his work with sexual minorities and transgender women, but not that he did sex work:

TGs [transgender women] have come and talked to my older sister, have talked to my family...But in my house they don't know I'm a sex worker. I don't tell anyone. [Why] don't I tell anyone? Even if I did construction work or manual labor they'd expect it. If I say I'm a sex worker and I go for sex—No one would agree! You can't put a sign up that says sex worker.

Nagaraj’s comment here also points to the relative anonymity of men in sex work. Like cis women, interviewees who were men told me they were not identifiable as sex workers in public. If they stood out, it was because of “effeminate” body presentation, rather than their sex work, and many had survival strategies for managing their visibility, depending on the circumstance. Gitesh, for example, said that his family knew that he acted “like a woman,” braiding his nieces’ hair and talking in a womanly “style.” In public, Gitesh said he used more masculine body language. And, though a member of the Union privately, he was unable to speak publicly on behalf of the Union, as a sex worker.

¹³ Notably, here Nagaraj is talking about the “category” using the terminology he became familiar with in the NGO world.

“Hijras Have to Do Sex”: The Hijra System and Sex Work

For transgender women in the Union, the relationship to sex work was, as for cisgender women, one of familial obligation, but within a different kind of family—the hijra kinship network. Within the hijra system,¹⁴ work takes place according to economic obligations within a *guru-chela* (teacher-disciple) system, organized into seven larger *gharanas* or houses.¹⁵ The family system, in addition to providing protection for hijras who are often vulnerable to harassment and abuse, also serves as an economic structure that supports older hijras. As Usha, a counselor at an NGO project who had left the hijra community, put it, “Seniors age... They have to earn from people like us...so what they do is they look at how to keep juniors like us in control.”

To many of the trans women I interviewed, the hijra system was nearly co-extensive with sex work or begging; sex work was a necessary activity within the hijra system. Preethi’s narrative, for example, followed a structure that echoed many of the life stories I heard. A sex worker and HIV outreach worker when I met her, Preethi told me she used to “act like a girl” and that she had, using the English term, “female character,” even when she was in sixth grade, and eventually started a relationship with a classmate, a man. As for many I interviewed, for Preethi, “acting like a girl” included yearning to wear women’s clothing and do “women’s work,” like cooking and cleaning. Preethi eventually found a community of kothis who met regularly in the park in her town, but when her family found out, and her brother beat her up, she ran away from home to Bangalore, began to wear saris and dresses regularly, and joined the hijra community, where she began doing sex work. Malini, a hijra who was now living separately from her guru with a partner, described her initiation to this system:

[A]fter I came here [to Bangalore], I joined a group with people like me, and then for one or two years I was with them and begging, and doing sex work, and doing the work they said to do at home, washing the dishes, washing the clothes...and earning every day. [They said] every day if you bring 1,500 we’ll have your operation done, and if you earn more we’ll do even more. They gave me that hope. And I did that and gave them money, and now I’ve done this [surgery] and become like this.

For many interviewees, sex work was inseparable from becoming a “real” hijra as well as sustaining one’s position in the hijra system after the operation.¹⁶ Just as their childhood inclinations to femininity were tied up in the idea of doing “women’s work,” their lives as hijras required specific “hijra work.” When I asked Malini if she preferred the label “sex worker” to the label “hijra,” she highlighted the inextricability of work, sex, and gender identity: “It’s all the same, right? Hijras have to do sex.”

¹⁴ For many transgender interviewees, it was important to distinguish being part of “hijra culture” and being a transgender woman. To be hijra meant a particular mode of dressing, kinship system, and religious practice, as Reddy (2005) details, but other trans women did not participate in this system. The lines between hijra, kothi, and transgender were somewhat porous. Among these interviewees, several “pant-shirt kothis,” hoped to join the hijra community at some point in the future, or had previously been part of the system. Some left the hijra community to live with a male partner as a wife. Most transgender women I met had at some point lived in the hijra community, and, even if they now lived independently, still had some relation to it.

¹⁵ Once hijras join the community, they traditionally undergo a castration operation, or *nirvan*.

¹⁶ As my interviews were all members of the Union, this observation obviously cannot be generalized to all trans women, who do not all do sex work.

Notably, not all hijras do sex work—many, for example, pursue other forms of income, such as begging in shops and traffic intersections. However, Malini’s refusal to draw a line between the two points to the way in which many trans women sex workers I interviewed, like cis women sex workers, often described sex work as obligatory, a core feature of life as a hijra. Interviewees disagreed on whether this connection was preferable. Vaishali, a trans woman who lived alone but with a guru nearby, explained, “If you do sex work...you don’t go for happiness, you go for money. You can’t do anything else, right, so you go to sex work.” Other trans women I knew often joked and laughed about encounters with clients and talked about enjoying them. Indeed, the common word among hijras to describe sex work was “phun,” or fun. For still others, sex was no longer pleasurable once it became one’s designated work within the hijra system. Some even gave a biological explanation: Sex lost its charm, they said, after they had undergone their operation. Lavanya, a transsexual woman who had left the hijra system after six years and now lived with her parents, said,

Now I’ve lost all the interest....Then before I had castration, I had a lot of interest in doing sex. I was always in the mood. But now, it doesn’t agree with me at all. Just somehow, I have to pay rent, I have to eat, I have to work, that’s it. Even if I do sex, I don’t get that much satisfaction.

Lavanya related her prior, masculine self to a time when sex was pleasurable; once she was a feminine sex worker, sex work was only work. Indeed, Lavanya was eager to find a job other than sex work that she thought might be more respectable, and but widespread discrimination against transgender women made such an option difficult.

The intertwining of work and sex for transgender women echoed other interviewees—though all thought of sex work as a livelihood strategy to some extent, men described it most as sexual practice, cisgender women most as an obligation to support their families, and transgender women a bit of both. However, there was one major difference between the transgender women I interviewed and the other groups: transgender women were highly noticeable in public space, visibly transgressive of gendered bodily norms, and often stood together in groups. In everyday life, trans women sometimes leveraged this visibility to protect themselves. Scholars have written about hijra performances of hyper-sexuality, both a parody of conventional femininity and a way of shaming men (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005). Their bodily visibility gave hijras and transgender women a kind of freedom to redirect their abject social position into a public performance of subversion. Preethi, a trans woman, explained, “The public is a little scared of us. If they hear our voice, or if we clap our hands.”

Many interviewees noted the visibility of being transgender, but longed for a more “feminine” ability to blend in. Preethi had mastered the ability to speak demurely and softly and pass as cisgender in women-only spaces, such as the front seats of buses, while switching to a more legibly confrontational mode of behavior when necessary, such as when she wanted to drink in a bar where women rarely went, or when standing at the front of a protest march. Despite Preethi’s strategic use of this ambiguity, though, her enduring hope was to develop even more “female character,” to live long-term with a male partner, and to raise children.

Trans women’s ambivalence about sex work was sometimes linked to a desire to leave behind what they described as the bodily ambiguity of being trans. In this rendering, femaleness took on a decidedly middle-class, patriarchal character. Vaishali, for example, longed to be seen as a “normal girl,” unidentifiable as transgender. She was proud of her striking looks; in her living room she had displayed several professional headshots, and she

had even secured a role as a dancer in a Kannada movie. Yet she complained that, ultimately, it was sex work that made female purity impossible:

However pretty you are, people don't agree [that you're a woman]...Look, even if they agree, what's the work you do? They say you're a whore (*sule*)...They don't know why we come into it. If I was born as a girl and was at home, would my parents have let me [do this]? They would have found me a nice boy and got me married and he would have looked after everything, the good and the bad.

Vaishali's longed-for ideal, a "nice boy," evoked middle-class domestic femininity—staying home and being provided for by a protective man. In contrast, the public visibility of being trans also associated her with the degradation of sex work. In this context, it was easy to understand her ambivalence about sex worker activism.

Conflicts and Complementarities

In the above sections, I examined patterns around sex, work, and relative anonymity that shaped each subgroup within the Union. These patterns bear particular analytic importance because interviewees themselves constantly referred to them in discussing the differences among them. Differences in sex work practice affected how each group saw the others, and shaped the potential for shared collective identity.

Cisgender women and men sex workers' preference for selective disclosure meant a complicated relationship to trans women. Most of the cis women leaders of the Union, who spoke passionately and articulately in meetings about their experiences in sex work, had not told their children or families how they earned money. Some said they hoped to reveal themselves publicly once their children were grown up and married, so as not to damage their marriage prospects. Others participated in public protests but always covered their faces to maintain anonymity. Many of the cis women interviewees initially feared trans women for their bold public presence and open challenge to sexual norms. On the other hand, they often said they admired them for their fearlessness in public space. Similarly, some men pitied those in the hijra system, their social marginalization and their dependence on their gurus.

Differences in seeing sex work as "sex" or as "work" also had implications for how these groups related to one another. Transgender women's idealization of middle-class domestic femininity meant an occasional wary attitude toward cisgender women in sex work; they viewed them with a mix of envy and pity, and sometimes even moral censure. Sudha, a transgender woman, longed to be seen as a woman with a family life (*samsari*), and questioned the moral purity of women who choose sex work. "They could do something else, right? Now they are married, they have children, and they have a household life (*samsara*). They still come here [to do sex work]. We don't have that." In her view, to be a trans woman was to do sex work because there were no other options; if she were a "real" woman, the safety of a patriarchal family would protect her from such indignities. This analysis left cisgender women in sex work morally suspect, incomplete women, unworthy of the ideal Sudha imagined for her own womanhood. It also made it difficult for her to identify publicly with sex work as a collective identity; her ideal was to stay "near the house," just like any good *samsari* would. Similarly, some trans women I interviewed saw men's sex work as playful and promiscuous, in contrast to the sex work they did to earn for their gurus, and they sometimes dismissed this

promiscuity as self-indulgent. Finally, all three saw the other groups as potential competition for clients.

In short, all three groups had reasons to be ambivalent about identifying collectively with other sex workers. These differences posed significant challenges to forging a shared “sex worker” identity within the Union. But it could also lead to complementarities. Within the Union itself, men and trans women sometimes felt excluded from the Union, which was predominantly led by cis women. Nevertheless, Usha, a transgender woman, was eventually elected president of the Union, and leveraged her organizing experience, her comfort with public speaking about sex workers and sexual minorities, and her relatively higher education level to re-invigorate the Union at a time when it was struggling to gain stability. She noted:

Before I couldn't stand women. Really! Because when I stood on the road, we used to shout at them, they used to shout at us, and you pick up our clients and we pick up your clients...In [the NGO] we all gained awareness that we all do the same work. We all face the same problems. If the police take us, they take all of us, and if we get stuck with rowdies, we all got stuck. Since we're all facing the same kinds of problems, if we fight with the government, we all should do it together.

Usha's model of collective selfhood suggests a certain fluidity of boundaries between her own experiences of sex work and those of other groups of sex workers. Usha herself no longer did sex work now that she had left the hijra community, and her personal identity centered more on being a transgender woman than on being a sex worker. Yet Usha emphasized her similarities to other sex workers—“We do the same work” and “We're all facing the same kinds of problems.” This approach allowed the Union to build on the complementarities between its different subgroups despite the conflicts within it. It also allowed the Union to identify shared circumstances beyond the category of “sex worker.”

Conclusion

The term “sex worker” is a product of activism, and a relatively new one (Leigh 1997). Yet few studies address how sex workers actually come to think of themselves as sex workers in an activist context. In this article, I have used the literature on collective identity to examine the formation of the “sex worker” in the particular context of Bangalore. In Bangalore, the formation of the sex worker occurs at the intersection of HIV/AIDS programs and activism, of state and donor funds, and of a shifting regime of sexual regulation (Cohen 2005; Lakkimsetti 2014; Lorway and Khan 2014; Lorway, Reza-Paul, and Pasha 2009; Puri 2016; Reddy 2010). While the “shop floor” of HIV/AIDS programs, redirected by the labor politics of the Union, may be unique, the process speaks to a more general insight: sex worker collective identity is a product of struggle, and must be actively and continually formed (Rupp and Taylor 1999; Taylor and Whittier 1992). This process also suggests that the content of collective identity, or what it means to be a sex worker and the relative fluidity of the category, is not automatic: It, too, emerges through a process of organization—in this case, first through a process of classification through transnational discourses and funding, then through a process of activist mobilization.

Understanding organizational processes, however, is not enough to make sense of the conflicts within a shared collective identity. This article has further drawn on the insights of the literature on sex work practice to examine how different configurations of practice shape sex workers' relationships to each other, and to the collective identity of the sex worker. I showed that two dynamics were particularly central: the relationship between sex and work, and the relative anonymity of sex workers in public spaces. In the Union, these differences tended to cluster around gendered groupings of cis women, men, and trans women—each of which had distinct social backgrounds and followed distinct paths into sex work. These groupings were partly solidified through HIV/AIDS programs, and the Union actively blurred boundaries and formed a more fluid collective identity that worked across groups—a process that was sometimes, but not always, successful. In other words, the history of the Union's organization, as members began as HIV prevention workers and then formed an organization oppositional to HIV/AIDS programs, shaped the ways in which differentiations affected relationships to collective identity, and the ways in which differences in practice came to be understood.

Sex worker organizing around the world has gained increasing prominence in the last few decades, but it has taken varied forms (Gall 2012; Kempadoo 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). The Union's focus on poverty and marginalization differs fundamentally from the sex-positive feminist approach to sex worker activism that emerged in the 1970s in San Francisco where the term originated. However, tensions persisted even in the 1970s between a focus on sex work as a liberated choice and an approach to sex work as a survival strategy, and the tensions hinged on class and race differences between professional escorts and call girls and street-based sex workers (Bernstein 2007; Chapkis 1997; Delacoste and Alexander 1998). The Union's approach to sex work was not entirely unique to India—it spoke to experiences of sex work that poor and working-class people in sex work share, but have often been marginalized in sex worker activism in North America.

In a context where recognition as a legal subject is central to making demands on the state, the formation of collective identity plays a crucial role in social movements (e.g. Khanna 2011). And yet, as a deeply stigmatized group, sex worker activists face a tension between solidifying a category of exclusion, as a way of revaluing it, and emphasizing the porousness of the category. Ultimately, the Union faced both centripetal and centrifugal pressures—on the one hand, pressure to solidify a group category and advocate for its rights, and on the other, pressure to identify broadly with other marginalized groups in order to speak to the wide variations in experience among its own members. The very flexibility and breadth of concerns sex workers faced stood in tension with the specificity of organizing *as* sex workers—a tension that, at times, stimulated organizing, and at other times, hindered it.

Yet, as this article shows, the tensions in collective identity have roots in the dynamic relationship between differentiations in practice the process of organization. In the case of sex workers, these differentiations in practice are partly shaped by economic exchanges and networks, but given meaning and solidity through the process of struggle. Making sense of the formation of collective identity, then, requires both attention to the dynamics of sex work in everyday life, and attention to the organizational processes through which sex workers become sex workers, and activists become activists.

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