

Ellen Sprenger: And the actors also help write the script, so it is a very participatory process. Moving now to South Africa: Soul City, you also have a visual for us. Do you want to briefly introduce it before we look at it?

Lebo Ramafoko: In 1999 in South Africa, the domestic violence act had been passed but it had not yet been implemented. Some of the reasons were that the justice personnel had not been trained, the police were not aware that it was a crime to beat up a woman, and the public was not aware. They still believed that it was a private matter between husband and wife. Women who were facing abuse felt that it was a secret and not something that they could speak up about. (Plays video clip)

Ellen Sprenger: (Referring to the video) This is so incredibly powerful. Tell us, what this has done in society – the numbers, the impact. Tell us the story.

Lebo Ramafoko: This was part of 13-part television series that went out on air in the largest television station, the public broadcast station, SABC 1. We printed a million booklets on violence against women, in four languages. The little leaflet that the doctor gives Matakala has a toll-free line on it that we set up in association with the National Network Against Violence Against Women, so that women could call. For me, the major achievement of the series was the establishment of the National Network Against Violence Against Women.

The question of how cost effective is this ... For me, the simple answer is that what tools like this can do is to help other organizations to plug in. It gives them a way of putting in the mainstream platform a lot of the work that they have been doing in the background.

Ellen Sprenger: In terms of movement building, you said that in some ways it's also a channel for NGOs to amplify the issue. How does it work in practice? How do you work with other organizations around Soul City. How do you connect?

Lebo Ramafoko: It starts with our research phase. We develop our messages through different partners in government, in civil society. At the beginning [of a project], we investigate the issues that we would need to deal with and the messages we need to deliver. [At the same time] we also investigate what are the organizations working on the ground that we can work with. So, for example, when we did this series, we identified a number of smaller organizations that were not networked, and that's when we fundraised to get the network going. So it starts in the research phase.

Ellen Sprenger: Arvind, you know the work of these organizations quite well. What are some of your observations or reflections that you'd like to share with us, with the audience before we actually take questions and comments.

Arvind Singhal: I think the proof in the pudding lies in your consumption of it, and you've seen in some ways a slice of the work that these three outstanding organizations do. Breakthrough, Puntos, and Soul City, I'd say, are the leaders when it comes to using the power of the popular media, but of course they dovetail [their media work] with other activities on the ground, whether it's partnering with other organizations, alliances, or other kinds of movements. [These organizations] reach tens of millions of people every single day. They reach them proactively, they shape discourses in existing places, and they create the possibility of new discourses. In essence they are changing the stories that people live, day in and day out. They create possibilities for new stories to emerge, for people to live out possibilities which did not exist for them before.

The first episodes were a bit of a disaster. The acting was not so good, but it had passion and conviction. We were presenting topics that were controversial in the country

I think what's unique about these organizations is that they are sort of intuitive indigenous movements – indigenous in the sense that Soul City is an organization of South Africans, by South Africans, for South Africans. And Puntos is people in Nicaragua doing things for Nicaraguans. The work that they do, in a sense, is informed by local wisdom, by local creativity, by local passion and strategy. So, I think it's a combination of these factors which make this strategy potentially a very powerful one.

Sex Workers Meet Feminism



Veronica Magar: There is a lot of feminist ambivalence about the sex workers' movement. [Some] feminists take an abolitionist position, meaning they would like to abolish prostitution. And then there's the sex worker rights position that [other feminists] take, which wants to legalize sex work. What we hope to do in this sessions is get beyond this polarization and look at how these issues play themselves out in government positions and policies.

Meena Seshu: The collective that I work with (VAMP) started working on HIV/AIDS 16 years back. The government of India was pushing NGOs to work with sex workers, so that the "bridge population" – meaning men who were going to sex workers – would be saved. We were shocked by this written policy. As women's rights activists, we wondered, "who is worried about the sex workers?" But sex workers were just not part of the agenda. Their agenda was men, this "bridge population."

At the same time, I was grappling with the issue of my own understanding of prostitution, because I come from a very typical educational background that taught that prostitution was exploitation, victimization, oppression. Since I was programmed to think that, when I went to work with the communities, I was looking for it. I said, where are the victims? But they were not willing to accept the construct of victimhood. And it just freaked me out. We were working with condoms, under the understanding that enforcing condoms was impossible. In my other life, I worked with dowry victims, and knew that condoms were just something that could not be negotiated. But these supposedly total victims took the condoms like that (snaps fingers) and were talking about resisting men and enforcing condoms. How come this entire group of women, who are supposedly victims, can actually enforce condoms so easily?

The thing that worried me was that nobody was addressing violence within sex work. Everybody just thought that since sex work and prostitution *is* violence per se, you just talked about abolishing it. You did not do anything for the women who were in sex work. There was tremendous violence, and nobody was addressing it. I remember at the time that a man got drunk, raped a woman, murdered her, and nobody batted an eyelid. Nobody. I was thinking if we can collectivize the women to resist violence from all levels – from political parties, from police, from criminal gangs – that is the solution to this issue. And that's what we started doing. We started collectivizing, and in the process, we took a group of women to the police to talk about a criminal gang doing violence to them. The police inspector, who was a woman,

said, "Meena, I don't think they're women." I said, "What do you think they are?" She said, "They're petty criminals; they're not women." It freaked me out because she actually felt that because they sleep with different men every night, they are not women. She believed that as a police officer implementing the law, she had to treat them as petty criminals, and that was enough.

Both Meena and I admitted that actually we were very nervous about this session, and I want to start with that on a personal level. Because I think that it's that nervousness that has become attached to the way in which this issue has been discussed in the feminist movement that I most want to address

The other layer I'd like to talk about is this issue of being forced into prostitution. The women were challenging this construct, but I had it in my brain that most women who were in sex work were actually forced into it. I asked, "You chose to be here?" And they said, "We neither chose to be here nor were we forced." I said I didn't get it, and they said, "Listen, choice is a very cruel mirage. You put it out there, and say there are 10 [types of] ice creams and strawberry is the one I want. But that's not the way it is. In real life, there are [a limited number of] options, and you choose what is the best possible option for yourself." And that's what most of the women were saying they did.

The thing that made me grapple with this issue was that these women were asking very serious questions and challenging some very strong patriarchal norms. One that I found absolutely fascinating was who controls the womb?

The sex workers kept telling us, “This baby is mine. It belongs to no man. He’s just incidental in the process.” Which brings me to the issue of property, because these women are heads of their own families, and they have property under their own names. I don’t know how many rural women can claim they have property in their own names, but a large group of sex workers have got a lot of property in their names, which for me was very interesting.

Things that worried me ... One was that I was facing a situation where sex work was either a form of slavery or at the other end of the spectrum an exercise of the right to work. These were exclusive positions. I was very disturbed by this because it was putting two human rights violations against one another: slavery and victimhood on one side, and choice and the right to work on the other. As a feminist, I was like, “OK, this is one layer that I’m working with,” but the other layer that fascinated me much more was what I call the female sexual condition, and sexual control. There was this construct of acceptable female sexual behaviour, which definitely meant that the sexual self could not be used for the pursuit of making money. Women had to be pure. All of this really came to me as two distinct worlds: one, the world of those who wish to control sexuality, couching it in terms of societal norms or the good of the species, and the other the world of the resisters, who break the norms and live by rules unacceptable to the good moralists or saviours of norms.

The journey with sex workers has been consumed with discussions on sex, love, multiple sex partnerships, and discomfort with sex as just a physical activity or as activity of pleasure devoid of love. Concepts of sexual morality, sexual sacredness, sexual pleasure, sexual preference, sexual diversity, sexual health and sexual rights ... all of these became very important in the puzzle of life, and I deeply believe that the feminists with their analysis can really help the sex workers rights movement in unravelling some of this mess.

Charlotte Bunch: Both Meena and I admitted that actually we were very nervous about this session, and I want to start with that on a personal level. Because I think that it’s that nervousness that has become attached to the way in which this issue has been discussed in the feminist movement that I most want to address.

I was thinking about whether I was going to do this panel, and it wasn’t that I don’t have an interest in the issue. It was rather, do I want to put myself into that place where we’d had so much painful, divisive and disrespectful non-debate because it [was so] polarized? So, I think that what both of us want to start by saying is that what’s most important today is for all of us to feel safe to say what are our confusions, what are our questions, what do we need to learn and hear and think about. I’m not saying that we’ll come out of this agreeing or loving each other. This is a very difficult issue because it brings together a variety of issues that are very important to feminism and that have everything to do with the control of our bodies. Who controls them? How do we control them? What does it mean?

I think it also has everything to do with the huge debate in feminism between “victimization” and “agency.” I want to agree with you so much that we are all both victims and agents all the time. This notion that we are either only victims or only agents making free choices doesn’t help us get to the intersection of where are we victimized and where we are making choices in a limited universe. And I don’t think there is anybody here who doesn’t feel we live in a limited universe of choice. We want the ability to have protection for the choices we make. How do we do all of that in a world where the sexual control of women’s bodies is so central to all of the institutions that we live within?

One of the challenges that Meena brought to me in suggesting this conversation is where is the space that we in the feminist movement are actually listening to sex workers? I want to recognize that, of course, not all sex workers agree. We’re all so used to being told, “Women are divided, you don’t agree.” Well of course we don’t all agree, and neither do sex workers. Why should they? Why should any group of us agree on everything? But if we ground ourselves in talking this through with the women who are most affected, I think we would get further in understanding the ambiguity and difficulties of taking effective action in this area.

I agree with most of what Meena has said, and I want to talk about it in terms of my own work. I have come to the intersection of these issues out of two histories that lead me to see different strands of this. One is my own work, which most of you know about, on violence against women, including work on anti-trafficking that I started in the 1980s when I helped to organize an international workshop on female sexual slavery. In the beginning of that work, much of my concern was of course for the women who have been trafficked. Human trafficking is very real, and the victimization of those women is very real. How do we get them understood on the human rights agenda, to get the kind of remedies and resources that we saw male human rights defenders getting from the state in the 80s when they were coming from struggles around political repression from the state?

In the beginning, much of my own focus, and I think that of many of us in the feminist movement, was around the aspects of trafficking for sex work that are exploitative and that did have to do with literally being kidnapped and forced. But in trying to think about how to create policies for that, I saw very early on the tendency for this work to become another version of the protection racket, which is not real protection, but protection at the price of giving up your rights. I think this is the question for all of us in the human rights struggle: how do we get protection for women from very real abuse without that protection coming at the price of giving up their rights to sexuality and mobility. Many of the anti-trafficking measures that were being initiated right from the beginning were anti-migration.

I also [had concerns that women were being told] how we could use our bodies. I [reflected on my experiences in

the] lesbian feminist movement [and I thought], “Oh oh, somebody is telling me again what’s the right kind of sex, when and how I use my body, and what I can do with it.” I remembered all those people – and I think they thought they were doing it for our own good – who locked up gay and lesbian children to make them straight, because they thought being lesbian or gay would bring you so much trouble in the world. I thought, you know, we have to be really careful that we aren’t restating a protection mode that’s based on somebody else’s idea of how we should live our lives, and somebody else’s view of what’s happened to us in the choices and situations that we’ve ended up in.

With respect, I tell you that the sex workers movement is being underestimated. Many of us have not attended university, and many times not even primary school. But I tell you that for 30 years we have been standing on a corner or inside a brothel. Those 30 years give us authority and experience to say what we ourselves want

Like many women who have been struggling with this issue, I feel it’s very important to create space where we can really keep talking about how do we give women protection. Everyone who’s worked in the battered women’s movement knows this dilemma: how do you give women protection where they’ve experienced some kind of violation, but not decide for them what they want to do. It’s not our right to decide where they’re going to spend their lives, and who they’re going to live with, and who they’re going to decide to be with. I think that’s the really difficult part of this issue. That’s why we’ve made these imperfect divisions – and I agree we need to rethink them – between forced prostitution and sex work. There *is* attention [being paid] to this; there is money, and there is government work being done. How do we make sure that that [work] both protects women in sex work from violence they experience in the work and also expands their

options if they don’t want to stay [in sex work], without predetermining what their answer is.

I think this is where the real challenge lies, because we *do* live in a world, all of us, where there are forces that control our options. We are all always struggling to be sure women have opportunities to choose. But I think there is a certain set of assumptions in sex work that goes to the issue of sexuality, [which is that] we somehow know what [sex workers] want. I think this is where we really have to challenge ourselves. [That’s] not to say that women should not be given an opportunity and a way to change their situation if they want to. But not if we do it in a way that preconceives the answer and that denies them other kinds of rights and either makes them illegal or makes it impossible for them to organize. I can’t think of a better way to feel that you have more rights than to be able to not be illegal, to be able to operate and have some rights in your work, to improve those conditions, and to see whether that’s what you want to do or not. If you’re trapped in that, you have no chance to see if that is what you want to do. At the same time we have to be very aware that there is a lot of money being made in this business, and most of the time women are not getting that money.

So, how do we pull those strands out and figure out what *does* it mean ... It’s not even so much important what *my* tentative ideas are of how we might get there as it is about how we can talk about this differently. How can we really take the threads of this issue and begin to understand that we are facing a dilemma where the root causes for women not having power as sex workers are of course the same [root causes of] the inequity that women face in every area of life. So if we could relate the work we’re trying to do on the issue [of sex work] to the work we’re trying to do to empower women across the board, I think that we would make more progress, both in the increase of options for women and in bettering the situation of women in sex work.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION: EXCERPTS

Participant: Good morning. I am the general secretary of Asociación Mujeres Meretrices de la Republica Argentina. I am also the regional secretary of the women sex workers’ network of Latin America and the Caribbean. I want to first congratulate you on this discussion. But I also want to say that sex workers have already advanced on some topics. First, the differentiation between sex work and trafficking of people. We say that sex work is for consenting adults of legal age. This is sex work; that’s how we define it. This is different from the trafficking of people, the sexual exploitation of children, and slavery. We also want to differentiate between exploitation and slavery. Obviously we are against slavery. We know what slavery is, and there are many women who exercise prostitution as slaves. Exploitation is something else. All workers suffer exploitation, not only sex workers.

With respect, I tell you that the sex workers movement is being underestimated. Many of us have not attended university, and many times not even primary school. But I tell you that for 30 years we have been standing on a corner or inside a brothel. Those 30 years give us authority and experience to say what we ourselves want. We hope that you don't continue judging us, but fundamentally we hope that you don't continue to talk on our behalf. We have a voice, and we also want to have a vote on these spaces. Thank you very much.

Participant: It's a pleasure to be here. I've been a sex worker for 13 years and an activist for my rights and for those of my sisters and brothers in sex work for just as long. I just wanted to say a couple of things. The first is, I think there needs to be recognition that we *do* fight for our rights all the time, everywhere we work. We know what our rights are, and are *actively* fighting to protect not only our own rights but those of our sisters and brothers who we work with. That is often not recognized, the tremendous work we do to improve our working conditions, and to stand up against police violence and state torture. The ways in which we protect each other when we are in prison are often not recognized. The way we protect each other from attacks not only from right-wing politicians but also from anti-sex work feminists is not recognized.

I think there needs to be explicit support from the feminist movement for the sex workers rights movement, because we are in fact a feminist movement. But [instead], we're having to deal with the tremendous harms and human rights violations that have been done in the name of "feminism," perpetrated against us to prove some theoretical point. When I started to work on the street in Montreal in 2001, for example, a number of feminist groups decided that they were going to go on the anti-prostitution rampage, and allied with right-wing people and religious groups to do so, which is not a strange combination. We have seen it in the United States when the powerful alliance between right-wing Christian groups, religious fundamentalists, and a number of mainstream feminist groups [cooperated] to pass aid restrictions to limit HIV funding to sex workers groups, at a tremendous cost to sex workers lives all over the world.

What we saw in 2001 was sex workers [targeted by] vigilante neighbourhood groups, who were trying to chase us out of the neighbourhoods where we'd worked and often lived for sometimes 20, 30 years. They were chasing us out with baseball bats and also, in what I thought was a very unoriginal and biblical way, by throwing stones (laughter). At that time, the major feminist groups were pushing for what was called the Swedish model, which is a supposedly feminist model for dealing with sex work, which was to arrest clients. As a result, [the police] arrested over 600 clients. But this did not stop them from [also] arresting sex workers. People, we end up in jail no matter what! As long as sex work is criminalized, we end up in jail.

The point was to arrest the client, [who] became some sort of folk devil in the feminist narrative. They arrested all these men ... migrant men, poor men, men involved in the streets. Never rich men. That's also how it plays out. [These were] men who we did not consider our enemies. Men who we work with, who we consider our allies against police repression. What happened as a result is that it drove sex work underground, and limited our choice of clients so that in order to keep on living and making our money, [we] had to choose from a smaller pool of clients, sometimes people who were drunk or potentially at more risk of violence. The rates of violence that were reported to the sex center by and for sex workers tripled. The number of violent attacks [tripled] because the cracking down on clients, a supposedly feminist strategy. The number of assaults with a deadly weapon went up fivefold.

I feel that there needs to be an accounting in the feminist movement for the harms caused by anti-sex work stands by feminist groups. There needs to be strong support not only for sex workers rights, but a recognition by the feminist movement of the power of our own organizing, and the terms and the ways in which we have done it.

Participant: I'm from the Netherlands, and I want to share with you a dilemma. I come from a country where the government does not have an abolitionist approach, but we still share the same problems. Yes, there a few sex workers whose position has improved, but there are a lot of sex workers who are out on the streets. There are migrant sex workers, and addict sex workers, who don't get any protection. And at the same time, the issue of the middleman is not resolved, and increasingly, a lot of money from criminal circles is entering the sex work industry with a new range of forms of violence.

Participant: I have been working in the Netherlands on this issue for a long time. I just want to fill in a bit more [about] the legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands. We, the anti-trafficking movement, were working very closely with Red Threat, the prostitution rights organization that was organizing at the same time. What we were lobbying for was not just a matter of [establishing] a law that legalizes prostitution. It was about how do you support the women who are working in the industry to set up their own businesses, to be independent, to be in control of their own work. That was what was not allowed. So legalization was still a mechanism of control. It was purportedly to stop trafficking ... [but] it doesn't work that way. It's not so clean, the industry is not so clean, motivations are not so clean. The basic thing is that women cannot control their work, their lives, the way they make money, the way they spend money. That's when the problems start. You cannot protect people. You can just make them stronger, to protect themselves if they need protection, get help when they need help, and to control their own lives and bodies. It's not so simple. Whether you legalize or not, the problems are not going to disappear.

We Have Wasted our Time Pushing for Women in Decision-Making Positions



Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi (Moderator): Before us we have a motion, which reads, "We have wasted our time pushing for more women in decision-making positions. They have not made a difference." We have two debate teams here, to argue *for* the motion and *against* the motion.

We have recorded a number of successes in the African women's movement. A lot of our investments in terms of engaging with state structures and with individual structures have paid off to some extent. Today, for example, we can boast of having more women in parliaments than ever before. Rwanda has broken world records in terms of numbers of women in parliament, over 50 percent. The recently constituted pan-African parliament has a woman as speaker of the parliament. And three years ago, we were delighted to be able to elect the first democratically-elected female president in Africa, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. So we've ticked off a number of boxes in terms of our successes in that area.

But every now and then we've had complaints and grievances, very lengthy ones, that some of the women we've got into positions of decision-making, who got in there off the sweat of our backs – our research, our activism and agency – have not lived up to expectations. So this is why these aggrieved sisters have brought this motion forward.

For the motion, I'd like to introduce the team to my left. I'll start with Solome Nakaweezi-Kimbugwe – wave your hand. Solome is a feminist activist and the executive director of Akina Mama wa Africa, who are the convenors of the famous African Women's Leadership Institute. Next to her is Iheoma Obibi from Nigera, journalist, activist and executive director of Alliances For Africa. Alliances For Africa has done a lot of work in some parts of Nigeria, getting women into positions of decision-making. Last but not least, to my immediate left is the very famous feminist activist Everjoice Win, who is currently the head of the women's rights program at ActionAid International. If that position does not exist, I have just promoted you!

To my left, against the motion, I have the beautiful Thelma Ekiyor from Nigeria and based in Ghana. Researcher, peace activist, feminist activist and conflict resolution specialist. She's currently the executive director of the West Africa Civil Society Institute. Next to her, we have our very own Rose Mensah Kutin, or Dr. Rose as she's known in many parts of Ghana. Economist, public policy specialist and feminist activist. She's a founding member of Netright in Ghana and also Abantu for Development. Next to Rose is another famous sister, whose name was invoked this morning, Margaret Dongo

from Zimbabwe. Margaret is a freedom fighter, an opposition independent candidate, and a women's rights activist. You are all welcome.

For the motion: Thank you Madame Chair. Let me start by contextualizing what it is that we have done in terms of investing in women's political participation, because otherwise [we] will be challenged by those who say we have not done anything. And by "we," I mean women's movements in their totality, particularly feminist movements. Firstly, we have advocated for laws and policies to be put into place. We have facilitated women to be put in positions of power. Starting with the suffragette movements globally, the right to the vote, the civil rights movements in many countries: feminist activists have been there. The constitutional reforms in many of our countries, the legal reforms: it [was] the feminists and the women's movements who have been doing [the] work. We have now got [quotas] into our regional constitutive acts, and regional bodies such as SADC now have a target of 30 percent.

Every now and then we've had complaints, very lengthy ones, that some of the women we've got into positions of decision-making, who got in there off the sweat of our backs ... have not lived up to expectations

All of this has come about because of the investment and the work that has been done by feminist and women's movements. And yet, very often, the first thing that you hear from women when they get into these positions is, "I pulled myself up by my own boot straps. I got here because I worked really hard, and I have nothing to do with these women." That is one of our biggest problems.

Secondly, if you look at many African countries, it was not women in political parties who were [originally] fighting