The Role of Empowerment Ideology in the Mobilisation of a Marginalised Group:

A Case Study of a Sex Workers’ Collective

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The context: HIV prevention

The Indian context

- HIV concentrated in ‘marginalised groups’ (SWs, MSM, IDUs)
- Major response to HIV/AIDS is ‘targeted interventions’ (NACO & Gates Foundation)
- New policies prioritise a ‘community-led’ or ‘community-owned’ approach
- Few successful examples of community mobilisation to inform scaling up
Community mobilisation: our approach

- What is the difference between ‘targeted interventions’ and ‘community mobilisation’?

- Traditional health promotion
  - 1. Education by professionals
  - 2. Peer education – community involvement but not mobilisation

- Community mobilisation approach:
  - Empowerment for collective action
  - Community ownership and leadership of intervention
  - Social transformation rather than individual behaviour change

- Key ingredient: the organisation’s ideology or philosophy
The Case Study: VAMP/SANGRAM

- Working with sex workers in 7 districts around Maharashtra / N. Karnataka border
- SANGRAM (NGO) established in 1992 & VAMP (sex workers’ collective / CBO) established in 1995
- Aims of VAMP / SANGRAM
  - Championing the rights of ‘people in prostitution’
    - Collective decision-making by VAMP members
    - Crisis resolution offered to the community by VAMP
    - Advocacy & protest against discrimination HIV/AIDS prevention, care & support
    - Peer education
    - District campaign
    - Outreach
Research methods

- Ethnography
  - Observation:
    - 6 months ethnographic fieldwork
    - Core data comes from attendance at VAMP’s meetings and observation of their problem-solving
  - Interviews:
    - 21 sex worker employees of VAMP/SANGRAM
    - 5 non-sex worker employees of SANGRAM
    - 7 sex workers not active in VAMP
    - 5 group discussions with sex workers and madams not active in VAMP
The content of VAMP’s ideology

- Empowerment of the women is the top priority (above HIV/AIDS issues)
- Decision-making authority rests with the women (not with Directors / NGO staff)
- Decisions are taken collectively
- Non-hierarchical structure
Impact 1: Staff’s attitudes and behaviour

- Non sex worker staff do not overshadow sex workers with their technical skills. Rather, sex workers are considered the decision-makers.

- Staff say: “that most of the trainings are need-based and the community decides them. When an ORW [outreach worker] says in a meeting that she felt a particular peer was lacking on certain issue, training is conducted.”

- “The on-paper strategies don’t work always and we have to go by these local (and practical) strategies.”

- Staff maintain a stance that the sex workers are experts and changes have to be approved by the collective.
Impact 2: Members’ confidence and critical thinking

- Strong ideology provides lots of arguments and stories to give women new-found confidence individually and collectively.

- E.g. Regarding previous oppression by police & goons – the response was keep quiet. After collectivisation, they realised the power of their unity.

- E.g. A leader when upset with a non-responsive municipal councillor at a time of crisis: “it’s high time we need to make him realize our power. This time during the elections, one of the sex workers from [red light area] will buy a ticket for the elections (register for election) but withdraw after some time.”
Impact 3: Guidance for decisions and actions

- Referring back to their ideology helps to make sure that their processes and decisions are empowering.
  - For decision-making, they ask “does this empower the women?”

- E.g. VAMP returned funding that came with too many conditions (the anti-prostitution pledge)
  - negotiates over the demands being set by funders (e.g. peer educator report cards)
  - resists being positioned as needing ‘capacity-building’ from funders
    - “it is not that we need to learn from you, you need to learn from us”

- Strict adherence to ideology resists engagement with alternative points of view
Conclusions

- Context of extreme historical marginalization → need a strong and adamant empowerment ideology
- Empowerment ideology has many positive impacts for mobilization and de-marginalization
- Empowerment ideology also leads to resistance to input from outsiders
- Is it possible for a CBO to have a more confident ideology that can absorb critique?