

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
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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
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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
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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
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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
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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.
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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.”
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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
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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?
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