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From the Field

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From the Field

These short pieces, written by individuals engaged in sex work-related activism and scholarship, are intended to provide a snapshot of ongoing social justice efforts regarding this highly politicized issue. In the following commentaries, Sienna Baskin documents U.S. efforts to provide legal aid to sex workers and victim-survivors of sex trafficking, Thaddeus Blanchette describes a Brazilian prostitute's campaign for a seat in Congress, Megan Morgenson speaks to the need to incorporate sex workers' perspectives into anti-trafficking initiatives, Sarah Jenny Bleviss documents new mobile phone technology designed to help U.S. sex workers navigate the risks they face working in a criminalized profession, and Gregory Mitchell (together with Thaddeus Blanchette) and Jayne Swift detail two events on U.S. campuses designed to promote critical thinking about sex work and trafficking.

Dispatch from New York City

Sienna Baskin

For the past nine years, the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center has helped sex workers in New York City fight the legal battles that come with being a criminalized population. Although this year we secured a major victory for survivors of sex trafficking, we still face an uphill climb as we strive to improve the lives of sex workers. People often ask us whether we support the legalization of prostitution. Although we don't have a simple yes or no answer, we think that the question itself leads to important conversations about the harms of criminalization to sex workers and trafficked people. Our clients are profiled, harassed, beaten up, sexually assaulted, arrested and jailed by the New York City Police Department because their work is a crime. They are processed quickly through the criminal justice system and end up with convictions that can never be sealed or expunged. Their criminal records bar them from immigration status, public housing, and other benefits. Our clients have been refused work in the health care, education, and financial fields because of their records. In spite of these harms, there is little political will in New York to reform the anti-prostitution laws.

In the last legislative session, we helped write and pass the first law in the U.S. that allows survivors of sex trafficking to vacate their past convictions of prostitution-related crimes. It sailed through the legislative process with wide support, largely because it allows lawmakers to assist survivors of trafficking without changing the criminal law against prostitution. Many of our clients stand to benefit from the new law. Kate* ran away from her abusive home at age 14 and was recruited by a violent pimp and forced to engage in prostitution. She was arrested six times, and the police never noticed that she was a minor. Maria* was trafficked by her husband from Central America. In 12 years of marriage, he physically, sexually, and psychologically abused her, and forced her into prostitution. Maria was arrested over eight times. Through their personal strength, both clients found escape routes to better lives. But for both, their criminal records have been barriers in their pursuit of stability and safety.

The criminalization of prostitution seems especially cruel in the case of people trafficked into commercial sex. Yet sex workers also find it difficult to improve their lives because of the significant barriers presented by their criminal records, and this new law does not offer a remedy to them. However, we hope that this legislation will have a broad effect in its implementation. In bringing the first motions on behalf of trafficking survivors, we are building relationships with police, judges, prosecutors and defenders, who now must question why trafficking victims are being convicted of prostitution in the first place. If trafficking victims are afraid to reach out to the criminal justice system for help, perhaps the system has failed. We hope that carrying out this law will lead to a real re-examination of our punitive approach to prostitution.

** Clients consented to have their stories used, but not their real names.*

Sienna Baskin is the Co-director of the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center. SWP provides free legal and social services to sex workers and survivors of human trafficking, and engages in policy advocacy and human rights documentation to improve their lives.

Prostitute Campaigns for a Seat in the Brazilian Federal Congress

Thaddeus Blanchette

Under the slogan “*Uma puta deputada*” (a pun meaning either “congressional whore” or “a bitchin’ [awesome] congresswoman”), sex workers’ rights activist and retired prostitute Gabriela Silva Leite has launched her candidacy for a seat in Brazil’s House of Representatives. Fifty-eight year old Leite is running on the Green Party ticket in the state of Rio de Janeiro. If elected, she promises to focus on “defending women’s liberty”, a task which includes supporting sex workers’ demands in the Brazilian Congress. “We don’t have clear public policies for [sex workers],” said Leite in an interview for *Terra Notícias*. “Our laws are confused. It’s not illegal to be a prostitute, but maintaining a ‘house of prostitution’ is a crime. People know that prostitutes exist, that we are part of society, but they want to sweep that under the rug. What I’d like to do is work with public policy for change.”

Leite was born into a middle class family in the state of São Paulo. In 1969, she entered the prestigious University of São Paulo (USP), where she took night classes in philosophy and sociology. A year into her studies, however, Leite dropped out and became a prostitute. “I worked as a secretary all day and at night I’d go to USP,” says Leite, describing her decision. “Coming back from school, I’d pass by the old Hotel Hilton, which housed a chic nightclub frequented by high-class prostitutes. I’d see the girls show up in their expensive clothes and I thought ‘I need to make a radical change in my life’.”

While working as a prostitute, Leite organized demonstrations against the police violence directed at sex workers during the military regime. Moving from São Paulo to Rio de Janeiro, she founded the first prostitutes’ association in Brazil and became one of the leaders of the national sex workers’ movement. Later, she founded the Davida Prostitutes’ Rights Association in Rio (“Davida” meaning literally “of the Life”). Due in part to Leite’s significant efforts in this regard, Brazil continues to utilize sex workers in safe sex education and has recently declared

“sex worker” to be a legitimate occupational category for tax and social security purposes. Davida is a part of the Brazilian Prostitutes Network, with which it engages in the struggle to make sex work a legitimate activity in Brazil.

In recent years, Leite has gained notoriety by founding the “Daspu” brand, a line of clothes designed and modeled by prostitutes and their supporters (which can be seen and ordered at <http://www.davida.org.br/>). Proceeds from Daspu are plowed into the prostitutes’ rights struggle. “Daspu gives us an income that is independent of outside groups,” says Leite. Here, Leite is referring to the United States Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act of 2003 (House Resolution 1298/Public Law 108-025), which cut off Brazilian sex workers’ rights groups from USAID funding. “Though these groups are often well-meaning, they also are subject to political pressures” Leite has said, “An example of this is USAID which no longer funds our award-winning anti-HIV work because of a Bush-era determination (untouched by Obama) that public moneys cannot be given to groups that advocate for prostitutes’ rights. With our own clothing line, we generate a small but significant income stream for our projects that cannot be touched by political concerns.”

Dr. Thaddeus Blanchette is an adjunct professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro who specializes in the study of people trafficking, prostitution and sexual tourism.

Breaking the Silence, Building a Bridge

Megan Morgenson

I’m a sex worker who lives and works in the U.S, and I love what I do. I love the freedoms and benefits my job provides, but I *hate* that human trafficking is such an insidious cancer inside my industry. I am not the only one from within my vocation that holds contempt for predators who exploit sex workers, but the disgust we often share with those outside of our profession is not one that can often be talked about freely. Our subculture is estranged on some level from mainstream society due to judgment, fear of arrest, and other repercussions that make it difficult to share our thoughts, tell our own stories, or report crimes and suspected abuses when they happen. We are left to fend for ourselves and help our colleagues when we can, but not as effectively as if we were able to engage on equal terms with a system that is supposed to universally protect all citizens.

As I became more interested in pursuing sex workers rights activism, and as my own county was labeled by the FBI as being in the top five recruitment area for the sex trafficking of minors under 18 years of age, I felt it was important to put aside my own fears of becoming harassed or arrested by law enforcement and break my silence by becoming involved in a local task force focused on human trafficking in our area. Could I have done this without divulging my professional identity as a sex worker? Of course, but I strongly believe my participation in anti-trafficking efforts would be an asset precisely because I have specific ties and insights into sex worker’s lives that abolitionists and other anti-trafficking activists often lack. My personal and professional experiences as a sex worker can offer important recommendations regarding how to best address trafficking while simultaneously respecting the human rights of sex workers who

are not experiencing coercion or force. My role in speaking out and getting involved as a known sex worker while also fighting to end human trafficking is able to serve multiple purposes, not the least of which is also offering a new example of how diverse the experiences of sex work is, including the common interests, concerns and goals we all share as humans.

Bridging the gap between sex workers rights activists and anti-trafficking efforts is the only logical step in my mind to effectively end human trafficking. However, this will be difficult to achieve as laws remain in place that criminalize what consenting adults do for money, in private, and behind closed doors. Many of my fellow sex workers have been abused, not by traffickers, but by a system that leaves them little opportunity, then shuns and punishes them for using whatever resources they have at their disposal to take care of themselves and their families. Until we can move beyond the moral judgment surrounding the basic human need of exploring the most intimate parts of our human selves, our sexuality, and penalizing those that choose to offer this service in exchange for pay, we will never have the access needed to effectively reach victims of trafficking.

Megan Morgenson is a current sex worker and activist, fighting for sex worker rights, individual rights of privacy and sexual freedoms.

Sex Workers Go Mobile: A Mobile Technology Innovation for Harm Reduction

Sarah Jenny Bleviss

PROS Network, a coalition of social service providers offering services to sex workers and other marginalized populations from a harm reduction and human rights perspective, has designed the PROS Network Services Finder, a mobile website for use with the iPhone and Android providing a listing of harm reduction services for sex workers in New York City based on GPS location information. The current services listings are organized under the following categories: harm reduction and syringe exchanges, shelters, legal services, youth services, and advocacy and support services. In future iterations, the application will include a two-way “bad date list” feature as well as the ability to report instances of violence with a focus on combating police violence.

PROS Network Services Finder was developed in two courses at New York University’s Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP): Professor Christina Goodness’ Information Technology for Socio-Political Change, and Professor Shawn Van Every’s Mobile Me(dia). The first iteration of the project was developed in collaboration with fellow ITP M.A. candidate Matthew Swenson using the text messaging technology known as SMS (short messaging service). To use this application, one simply texts the phrase “nyhelp” with their New York City zip code to 41411, and in return receives the contact information for the closest social service provider. .

Sex workers face a number of barriers to accessing services such as mental health care, social services, and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Pervasive cultural stigma, legal obstacles, poverty, formal education, and other factors exacerbate the barriers to access of

services. In recent years, mobile phone technology adoption rates have soared throughout the world. Simultaneously, the anti-prostitution pledge mandated by the U.S. Congress' 2003 passage of Public Law 108-025 has created an extremely difficult climate for non-governmental and non-profit organizations that work with sex worker populations to maintain adequate access to funding in their programs due to the require of the Anti-Prostitution Pledge, essentially silencing them by putting restraints on organizations by requiring them to sign an anti-prostitution pledge regardless of whether their national laws render prostitution legal, decriminalized, or illegal. These grassroots agencies and organizations are most equipped to identify victims of trafficking as well as to penetrate this difficult-to-reach population and provide services.

Projects like the PROS Network Services Finder could be highly beneficial in the Information Technology for Development community. Organizations such as IAVI (International AIDS Vaccine Initiative) are already integrating mobile technology into their outreach in Kenya. Using mobile technology in outreach and intervention could offer invaluable access to a marginalized and difficult to reach population both domestically in the U.S. as well as abroad.

Sarah Jenny Blewiss is an activist, artist, and community organizer working on her M.A. in Interactive Telecommunications with a focus on technology for public health at New York University.

Midwest Stops Traffick: DePauw University's Controversial Conference

Gregory Mitchell & Thaddeus Blanchette

“Stopping Traffick!”, was a two-day event that took place on September 10 – 11, 2010 and was of interest to sex worker rights activists as its organizers, Michelina Ferrara and Margarita Villa, took a rare and admirable position by offering nearly half of the featured speaker slots to activists and academics who advance sex workers' rights positions and critique anti-trafficking campaigns that harm sex workers. The event began with a panel entitled “The Ethics of Modern Day Slavery” featuring the four sex worker rights' speakers (Carol Leigh, Tiantian Zheng, Thaddeus Blanchette, Gregory Mitchell) and Dr. Daniel Bercu of Doctors at War, an anti-trafficking organization. Roughly two hundred students attended and many were taken aback by this panel, which questioned the “human trafficking” framework. Members of the first panel described how trafficking discourse often harms sex workers, both intentionally and unintentionally, in various contexts around the world. This controversial opening session was followed by dinner and additional dialogue between the students and panel members.

The next day's events began with a presentation by Maria Suarez, a human trafficking survivor and representative of The Los Angeles-based Coalition against Trafficking. Suarez's story was followed by a lecture by lawyer Laura J Lederer of the anti-trafficking group Global Centurion, who was the founder of The Protection Project at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Lederer, a former advisor to the Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs, described the efficacy of Swedish “end demand” initiatives and claimed that the legalization or decriminalization of sex work contributes to sex trafficking. Following her

presentation, Lederer was rebutted by sex workers' rights activists Carol Leigh from the Sex Workers Outreach Project and Bay Area Sex Workers' Action Network, who firmly critiqued "end demand" policies as harmful to sex workers. Academic researchers Tiantian Zheng (SUNY Cortland), Thaddeus Blanchette (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), and Gregory Mitchell (Northwestern University) then took the stage, with each successively presenting material from their scholarly fieldwork. This panel presentation was followed by a lecture by Alden Pinkham from the Polaris Project, an anti-trafficking organization, who spoke about how students could fight various forms of human trafficking, describing her personal journey as an anti-trafficking activist. how she joined and began working for Polaris. Each speaker was given ample time to present their material in a manner which allowed students to better understand the complicated questions surrounding trafficking. The speakers were followed by spoken word poets Sarah Kay and Phil Kaye from Project VOICE (Vocal Outreach Into Creative Expression) V who deftly balanced the competing perspectives in an engaging presentation that showcased their considerable wit and talent. The event concluded with representatives from Invisible Children, a scholarship program for child soldiers rescued from the "Lord's Resistance Army" in Uganda.

The weekend was filled with vigorous debate. Student representatives from a number of different campus organizations were in attendance, many of whom had conducted research in preparation for the event. Many of them said that they came away from the event with a much more nuanced perspective on sex work and how it does and does not relate to human trafficking. The student organizers should be commended for taking such a mature and rigorously academic approach to planning an event that, at many other institutions, might easily have confined itself to presenting only trafficking horror stories, unfounded statistics without regard for methodology, and feel-good "consciousness raising" activities.

Gregory Mitchell is a doctoral candidate in Performance Studies and a Mellon Graduate Fellow in Gender Studies at Northwestern University, where he teaches courses on sexual economies and theories of gender performativity.

Thaddeus Blanchette is an adjunct professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro who specializes in the study of people trafficking, prostitution and sexual tourism.

Whores On Campus: The Sex Worker Arts Show Controversy

Jayne Swift

In 2008, the College of William and Mary forced performers in a touring art show (and their student sponsors) to sign a contract described by the ACLU as discriminatory and unconstitutional. This contract required the art show to comply with state obscenity laws, despite the fact that these laws contained an express exception for performances at institutions of higher education. The contract was aimed only at one group: The Sex Workers' Arts Show. Created by former sex worker and sex workers' rights activist Annie Oakley in an attempt to demystify sex work, the Arts Show was a forum in which the cultural meanings of "sex worker," were redefined and celebrated by those who work in the industry. The Arts Show toured college campuses across the U.S. from 1998-2009, leaving a trail of controversy in its wake.

Many protested the Arts Show as a step on the slippery slope to moral ruin of “innocent” student bodies. The protests involved citizens, alumni and state legislators, who decried the show for, in the words of Delegate Mark Cole, “turning the public property of the College into a bawdy house venue for pimps, prostitutes and dominatrix.” These protests reached a national scale, with conservative news personalities such as Laura Ingraham deriding Annie Oakley on FOX news. Moreover, the controversy over the Arts Show followed it to other college campuses—including Duke and Virginia Commonwealth University. These protests became nothing short of moral panics, compressing cultural anger and anxiety onto the presumed outsider: the scapegoated sex worker. Critics, unwittingly, framed the Art Show as a challenge to the integrity of academic space, due to the Art Show’s frank depiction of commercial sex cultures. For instance, Jo Weldon’s contributions included teaching an audience member how to dance and twirl tassels, while joking she went to graduate school because she wanted to keep stripping. Weldon’s piece points to the pedagogical potential of the Arts Show and hints at the anxieties that fuelled critics’ attempts to separate commercial sexuality from educational institutions. Yet, university departments and student groups frequently invited and allocated student funds for the Art Show (15 out of 32 shows in the 2008 tour took place on college campuses). The fact that students may now be asked to attend events and read texts that feature insider views’ of sex work suggests larger changes in the cultural climate of academia regarding issues of commercial sexuality.

How do we explain this seeming paradox? The Art Show was continually invited into the hallowed halls of academia and often met with resistance for entering. The Art Show’s presence on college campuses functioned to raise questions about the possibilities of sex worker participation in academic communities. The controversy over the Sex Workers’ Art Show dramatizes the epistemic and ontological threats that sex workers are seen as posing to institutions of higher education. These controversies demonstrate the need for greater inquiry into sex workers experiences in academic spaces as well as an acknowledgment of the ways in which we, as sex workers, are already shaping academic knowledge and communities.

Jayne Swift recently completed her M.A. in Cultural Studies at the University of Washington and is currently pursuing doctoral work--where she hopes to continue studying and researching the "strange meeting" of commercial sexuality and academic knowledge. For more information contact: jaynea.swift@gmail.com