



China

**A Case Study
of Sex Worker Organising**

This case study was developed by Heather Larson and designed by Mavi Veloso for the Red Umbrella Fund. It is based on documents provided by the organisation during their grant period with the Red Umbrella Fund, online research, and interviews with two leaders in the organisation. All quotes are from the interviews. The group has requested to stay anonymous and will be referred to in this case study simply as 'sex worker organisation in China' or 'the group'.

The photos in this publication have been edited to protect anonymity of all the activists involved.

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This case study is about a sex worker-led organisation that was founded about ten years ago. It has requested to remain anonymous due to the restrictive environment it operates in. This sex worker organisation promotes access to health care and legal services for highly mobile male and trans sex workers by coordinating an outreach team, operating a drop-in centre and managing an emergency hotline. The group advocates for ending police violence such as arbitrary arrests, extortion, and harassment by participating in seminars and debates around sex work.

Due to economic developments, the city in which the group operates is attracting high numbers of sex workers. A decade ago research was done that showed there was a substantial number of male sex workers in the region. At that time, most attention for sex workers was directed towards female sex workers. **Male and transgender sex workers often experience sex work, and related stigma and violence, in different ways than female sex workers.**

This group was established to focus on the male sex worker minority, creating a social organisation for direct support and advocacy, concerned with movement building and human rights.

Introduction



Male sex worker in China demonstrates solidarity with sex workers in other countries.



Sex worker protests police crackdowns on sex worker venues.

The Challenge

All aspects of sex work are illegal in China and law enforcement carries out seasonal crackdowns on the sex industry, often at month end or quarterly. For example, the police carried out a year-long crackdown in the city of Dongguan, a famous “sex city” in China, in 2014. Its negative impact was felt by the sex worker community and allied organisations in many cities in China. Female sex workers are often arrested in raids on brothels or venues where they work.

Male sex workers usually do not work in brothels, and as a result it is more difficult for police to find and arrest them for selling sex. However, male sex workers are often targeted and arrested for drug related crimes. **Many male sex workers in the country are highly mobile, migrating regularly between cities and provinces, and between mainland China and Hong Kong.**

There is a high prevalence of HIV amongst male sex workers who serve men, and they need access to reliable medical services wherever they go.

The political environment leaves little place for the promotion of critical thinking and political awareness in education and culture. As a result people generally have a limited awareness of human rights and it is a challenge to develop a human rights perspective within the sex worker community. Communication between individuals and organisations is risky, as the government monitors for specific words and phrases, forcing groups to adjust their language. Face-to-face communication is safest, but China’s size and geography is a barrier to this type of inter-organisational communication.

The Changes

Since its foundation, this sex worker organisation has managed to foster a strong sense of community amongst male sex workers through its drop-in centre. It is rare for male sex workers in China to have a place to come together and share their experiences. At the drop-in centre they are able to make friends in their field and become more comfortable with each other and with their work identities, which has led to more self-acceptance as sex workers. Sex workers have developed a network, a group, a society.

“People can come in and share. They have a sense of belonging. A sense of identity. We talk about their work and encourage them to share. So we have an environment of people talking with us.”

The group also provides important legal counsel to sex workers and education on police abuse. Sex workers are encouraged to come to this and other sex worker groups to report police crackdowns and abuse. Often police move from one area to another, and a warning system between a network of groups can help protect sex workers.

The group’s power to build community can be seen among transgender sex workers, mainly male-to-female, who help each other with how to dress, do their make-up, and sell sexual services. The group also organised a sex worker retreat that brought together 30 participants, including male and transgender sex workers, university professors, and volunteers, on a trip outside of their home city. Participants were able to share their life and work experiences freely amongst each other, building trust and solidarity.

Information about the organisation has been spread by word of mouth through networks of highly dispersed and mobile male sex workers.

“We are welcomed by the community. We have a reputation. People are comfortable to seek us out for advice.”

After ten years of work, the organisation has developed a strong network of organisations, including sex worker led groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) serving sex workers. This network serves as an invaluable referral system, through which they can refer



sex workers to organisations specialised in providing health, HIV, and other services. Other organisations recognise the group’s expertise on migrant sex workers and will refer sex workers to them.

The group has made great efforts to build the capacity of the community by hiring sex workers. Despite the barriers of being a small organisation with limited funding, they were able to recruit some staff for administration, allowing the leadership of the group more time for programme and project planning. Staff development was also a priority, and four staff and five volunteers received capacity building training on how HIV and Aids affect the sex worker movement, as well as an introduction to the overseas sex worker movement. The group has developed a strong team of sex workers: “We’ve built a good outreach team. Sex workers know the business. They know the community.”

Having some staff that speak English has been a valuable movement building tool for the organisation. In China, many sex workers know their rights are being violated on a very personal level, without being aware of a wider movement perspective. The ability to communicate with groups and regional networks outside of China has given them the opportunity to learn about



Message from Chinese sex workers for World Aids Day 2013 about providing safe sex services to customers living with HIV.

the global sex worker movement. The group's membership to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) has been fruitful and they have increasingly become involved in international activities. Now the group members are not only concerned with the day-to-day realities of selling sexual services and staying healthy, they are also concerned with how policy and law effect sex work.

“We have a sense of global movement. This is quite meaningful. Advocacy is quite lonely work and we need some sharing and communication. With such geographical and regional and international sharing, we have a feeling that we have mutual support. We have a feeling that we can learn from each other. We can learn from overseas and put it in our local community.”

The group has taken a leading role in the sex worker community in its region, cooperating with and reaching out to sex worker groups and allies in other regions of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Academic partners are useful for their expertise in the theories and concepts surrounding sex work and gender. The group has always promoted sex work as work, but has more recently used academic theories gained from partnerships with researchers to improve their approach to advocacy.

“With a gender perspective, we have a better position to talk about sex worker issues, such as male sex workers. Men selling sex have a different experience of discrimination than women. We are using a gender perspective to show that this is a gender issue.”

Outspoken advocacy is difficult and sensitive for sex workers, as they can seldom do press releases or use mass media to talk about their issues; they need a cover. Sometimes a university professor will use her or his platform to talk about how bad policies are affecting sex workers, making the topic less sensitive. This cooperation provides a relatively safe way to talk about their work and the violence they face.

The group also partnered with university professors and students to do community-led advocacy research on trans sex workers in several cities in China. The research took six months and involved sixteen in-depth interviews with trans sex workers. The purpose of the qualitative research was to measure social problems in order to heighten public awareness and provide a catalyst to policy proposals and other possible actions to improve sex workers' social and work environments. As a result of the research, the group now has a stronger relationship with the trans sex worker community. The academic and community interaction helped promote mutual understanding and self- and social- acceptance of sex workers.

Interestingly, the group has achieved significant visibility on the international stage, particularly considering the strict restrictions on movement and speech in its own country. On World AIDS Day the group organised a community workshop and followed up with photos and blogs on websites and social media. The pictures combined semi-nude photos with slogans that expressed sex workers' perspectives on HIV and Aids. Members of the group have attended various regional meetings on Aids, health or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) issues, sharing their perspectives from China and expanding their network.

The effects of the group's advocacy can be seen in some sectors where social norms around sex work are slowly changing. Most progress is being made amongst university communities, mainly in social science departments, where the acceptance levels of sex work are higher. The HIV sector and the LGBT community also show higher acceptance levels. But social discrimination is still very high amongst the general public and in mass media, which is controlled by the government.



What next?

The group has recently been experiencing increased oppression and regular raids of sex worker venues, which has resulted in adjustments to its strategies to publicly focus more on slightly less contentious HIV and LGBT issues. At the local level, its recently re-launched transgender sex worker music and dance group is boosting morale and reaching out to LGBT and sex worker communities through its performances.

What difference did the Red Umbrella Fund make?

The Red Umbrella Fund is a sex worker-led fund created in 2012 through a collaboration of donors and sex worker activists. The Red Umbrella Fund supports sex worker-led groups in any country of the world - without geographic limits and open to unregistered organisations - and grants are unrestricted core funding meant to respond to the actual needs of sex workers. In just four years, the Red Umbrella Fund has provided 78 grants in 45 countries to organisations and networks led by sex workers.

The Red Umbrella Fund grant has been instrumental in this anonymous group's organisational development, and has provided a bridge to the regional and global movements for the group.

Part of the Red Umbrella Fund grant went to human resources, giving them the capacity to hire local people to handle daily administration. Another portion of the funding went to their activities and campaigns, including the sex worker camp and advocacy research. During the grant, there was regular communication between the group and Red Umbrella Fund staff. Group members feel that the Red Umbrella Fund helped them to learn what the global sex worker movement is about and has made them feel a part of it.

