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Political Activism, Community Identity and Group Behaviour

Nandini Gooptu

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Nandini Gooptu, Oxford

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of collective action and group behaviour through a case study of a highly successful political organization of poorer sex workers in Calcutta. The paper asks: What stimulated the participation of sex workers in their organization, promoted individual commitment to the group, and engendered co-operative action and group cohesion? What contributed to its success in achieving well being and equity, and in making itself dynamic and sustainable?

In answering these questions, three main arguments are highlighted. First, the paper emphasizes *collective* self-representation and expression of *community* identity as the motor of group activity, rather than the gratification of individual material needs, or subjective personal satisfaction. The attempt here is to go beyond an understanding of group behaviour based on methodological individualism which seeks to explain the operation of groups in terms of the benefits that individuals within a group derive *as individuals* from their participation in a collective. The paper argues that individuals cohere in a group from a genuine belief in the normative superiority of the collectivity, even when little direct or immediate benefit accrues to each individual from participating in such a collectivity. Second, the paper underscores how collective action is propelled by political initiatives to reconfigure extant power relations of domination and subordination, and the struggle to interrogate or challenge established norms of social hierarchy and distribution. This is a largely under-emphasized theme in the literature and practice of development, where 'politics' is usually seen in terms of making claims or advocacy in the interest of disadvantaged groups. This paper shows that the success of the DMSC as a dynamic group lies in outstripping precisely such a limited conception of politics. Finally, this paper demonstrates how political activism enabled the recasting of identity, reconstitution of the 'self' and redefinition of subjectivity. It shows how sex workers as political actors came to reconceptualize their own potentials as human subjects, which in turn helped them to sustain collective action and enlarge its scope.

I INTRODUCTION

In November 1997, the First National Conference of Sex Workers in India was held in Calcutta, with three and a half thousand participants, attending over three days. They claimed their rights as workers and citizens of the nation, and they marked their emphatic presence in the public arena in an effort to overturn their social exclusion and moral stigmatization by 'respectable' society. The driving force behind this Conference was the *DMSC—Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* (Durbar Women's Co-ordination or Collaborative Committee, in which 'durbar' means indomitable or unstoppable). Formed in July 1995, the DMSC is the organization of poorer sex workers who work in and around Calcutta at the lowest end of the sex trade. Prostitutes, as they are usually called, had never before asserted themselves politically in this way. Some sections of them were known to have aided the anti-colonial nationalist movement through public fund-raising initiatives in the early part of this century. In this case, though, their political act was a mere side-show in the grand theatre of nationalism, and did not involve any demands for themselves, either individually or collectively, nor a public expression of their identity as a marginalized community. It was only the virtue that accrued from lending support to nationalism that had enabled them to reveal their identity in the political sphere at all. The sex workers are a socially marginalized and stigmatized occupational group, repressed from expressing themselves in public, often by the law, which 'criminalizes' them. They lack a history of political activism or collective mobilization. Moreover, individual sex workers usually suffer from intense poverty and frequently lack literacy, and are thus believed to be ignorant and incapable of developing political consciousness. The formation and consolidation of a powerful political organization of sex workers is, thus, widely seen to be an unusual and noteworthy development. Equally importantly, the sex trade is highly competitive, with much secrecy and suspicion among the workers. The population of sex workers is also stratified, socially heterogeneous, mobile and protean. All these factors tend to preclude the possibility of the sex workers developing a sense of shared identity and interest, or group cohesion. Yet, the DMSC is not only a highly active political organization, it is also based on a sense of collective identity, group rights and solidarity in action among a large number of Calcutta sex workers, who have succeeded in surmounting their personal and commercial rivalries to present themselves as a united group in the public political arena. Of course, the sex trade continues to be conflict ridden and fraught with animosities and distrust. However, for their political organization, the sex workers highlight their unity and mutual support, and place the concept of the collectivity over the individual. Most

remarkably, prostitutes who usually tend to conceal their identity in public, now identify themselves unequivocally as 'sex workers', or '*jouno kormi*' in their local Bengali language, in the context of their group activism and under the organizational canopy of the DMSC.

This case of the Calcutta sex workers raises interesting questions for the analysis of group formation and group behaviour. Why and how was it possible to form an organization and to forge a common identity, in the face of both social constraints and internal fragmentation within the putative community of sex workers? How does the involvement of individual sex workers in the organization influence and modify their self-perceptions and patterns of public behaviour? In other words, how is a group formally constituted and group identity constructed, and once it is in existence, how is it sustained by generating significant changes in the behaviour of the sex workers? To answer these questions, the individual motivation of the sex workers would be germane to our discussions. However, the analytical focus in this paper will not be on individual self-interest in a material sense, but on the role of collective identity, conceptions of unity, mutual support and reciprocity. The reason for this analytical focus is not arbitrary. As this introduction has already hinted, and as the following account will reveal, the issues of collective identity and unity in action are at the heart of the emergence and development of the DMSC. An analysis that fails to engage with these themes will not be adequate to the task of understanding the nature of the sex workers' organization and the dynamics of operation of this particular group.

In undertaking this analysis, this essay draws inspiration from historical perspectives on collective action and identity. This perspective emphasizes the importance of *collective* self-representation and expression of *community* identity as the motor of group activity, rather than the gratification of individual material needs, or even subjective personal satisfaction. The attempt here is to go beyond an understanding of group behaviour based on methodological individualism, which refers to a theory of individual choice or preference based on rational utility maximization. This approach, often associated with the discipline of economics, seeks to explain the operation of groups in terms of the benefits that individuals within the group derive *as individuals* from their participation in a collective. Such individual motivation is understood in terms of rational self-interest, usually of a material or economic nature. Even when the instrumental rationality of the *homo œconomicus* is not privileged, the analytical weight still stays with the fulfilment of individual needs and goals as the foundation of wider

solidarities. In this analytical framework, individual aspirations have to be consistent with and achievable through group action, if a group is to function successfully as a cohesive and consensual unit. Even reciprocity and mutuality can be seen to be based on the rational calculation of the advantages that an individual expects to gain from engaging in co-operative behaviour within a group, governed by certain collective norms and ideals. Similarly, altruism in this approach can be conceptualized as a mere strategic outcome of an individual's calculation of the relative costs and benefits of indulging in non-altruistic behaviour. The concept of altruism could thus be simply denied any independent motivational force, which would, of course, in turn, negate its analytical significance in understanding human action. Undeniably, individualist motivation must have a role to play in group action. However, it is worth asking whether this is the whole story, and arguably, whether it is even the most important part of the story, which would justify the privileging of such individualism in our analytical methods. The moot point is whether individual self-interest can or should be given analytical primacy. Can this individualist approach countenance the proposition that individuals may become part of a group, not in their own personal interest, however defined, but in the general interest of the group as a collective entity—the 'we' being the more important determinant of action than 'I'? Is it not possible that individuals cohere in a group from a genuine belief in the normative superiority of the collectivity even when little direct or immediate benefit accrues to the individual from participating in such a collectivity? While historians or anthropologists would easily engage with analytical questions of this nature to do with belief or meaning, economists have, by and large, shied away from such issues, perhaps because of the abstract and non-quantifiable, indeed irrational or non-rational, nature of such motivation. This essay seeks to use the case study of the Calcutta sex workers to illuminate these themes. The choice of this case was determined by an important factor. The DMSC, as we shall see, was formed in the context of a 'development intervention' to do with the promotion of sexual health among sex workers by internationally funded NGOs and government medical institutes. This enables us to gain insight into the ways in which successful collective action can be generated by development initiatives, and can, in turn, promote equity and well being, as well as other developmental aims in a sustainable way.

An additional point could be usefully raised in this introduction about the foundations of co-operative group action. In recent analytical literature, especially in writing inspired by the concepts of social capital or trust, the key assumptions about the necessary preconditions for co-operative mode of group action include a history of co-operative action, a lack of internal

conflict among members of the group, the presence of a set of well defined societal and cultural norms, and the impetus of powerful institutional incentives. However, all these are conspicuous by their absence in the case of the DMSC. Clearly, it is necessary to extend the framework for our understanding of co-operative behaviour. We need to address the question *how co-operation can be forged through action*, rather than being inherited historically, or bequeathed culturally, or derived from favourable social conditions. This demands scepticism about interpreting social capital or trust as a pre-given fund or stock which can be readily drawn upon, and requires an attempt to conceptualize these in terms of a dynamic process of crafting through power struggles and political conflict. In the case of the DMSC, as we shall see, it was a process of social and political activism that helped to generate co-operation, surmounting both societal and historical impediments. The analytical emphasis then has to be on collective action itself as a dynamic force in generating and consolidating co-operative group behaviour. Such an analysis would also help us to grasp how engagement in group action significantly structures individual motivation and behaviour, rather than the traffic flowing in the opposite direction. This kind of understanding of the process of forging co-operative behaviour within a collective is important for developmental initiatives. Otherwise, we would be in danger of assuming that those without a history of co-operation would be forever doomed to non-co-operative interaction, and thus to developmental deficit.

This paper emphasizes two points relating to the centrality of political action in shaping group dynamics. First, the paper examines how political activism enables the reconstitution of the 'self' and redefinition of subjectivity. It is analysed how political actors come to reconceptualize their own capabilities and potentials as human subjects, which in turn helps them to sustain collective action and enlarge its scope. Secondly, the paper underscores how collective action is propelled by struggles against extant relations of domination and subordination, and the struggle to interrogate or challenge the accepted norms of social hierarchy and distribution. The focus here is on 'politics' defined as action undertaken to reconfigure power relations. This is a largely under-emphasized theme in the literature and practice of development as managed change, where 'politics' is usually seen in the limited terms of making claims or advocacy in the interest of disadvantaged groups. However, this paper hopes to show that the success of the DMSC as a dynamic group lies in outstripping precisely such a limited conception of politics.

II DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

A few words about the nature of this research are relevant at this stage. I first became aware of the DMSC in 1995 through an old friend, Nandinee Bandyopadhyay. In that year, she was involved in an ODA evaluation of the HIV-STD Intervention Programme (SHIP) among Calcutta sex workers and, in the report, commented on the DMSC, which had been formed by sex workers who were involved in SHIP. Later on, she started working with SHIP and the DMSC as a gender consultant, and over the years I have been following their development and keeping abreast of their activities as an interested observer. Recently, in March 1999, I conducted fieldwork among sex workers, and probed further into the workings of the DMSC and its relations with SHIP. I read printed material produced by and available at the DMSC-SHIP office, perused press-cuttings from 1993 onwards on the sex workers' political mobilization, and listened to an audio recording of a meeting (13 March 1999) of sex workers with invited members of the Calcutta intelligentsia to discuss the conditions and rights of minorities in India and the importance of the sex workers' political activism.[1] I conducted a lengthy group discussion (17 March) with about 50 sex workers on their experience of forming the DMSC and the significance of their political action. I held personal unstructured interviews with several sex workers and with the personnel of SHIP (15-26 March). I visited health clinics run by SHIP and DMSC for sex workers in red light districts. I also attended a number of meetings of sex workers as an observer, most notably the following:

1. Annual meeting of the Usha Co-operative Society of the sex workers. (15 March)
2. A group discussion of sex workers, conducted by the staff of SHIP, on the impact of the DMSC on forms of violence in the social and occupational milieu of the sex workers. (19 March)
3. Day workshop on capacity building and for planning the 1999 annual state conference of the DMSC. This workshops was attended by a few SHIP staff, office bearers of the DMSC and a large number of general sex workers. The workshop was held to evaluate past performance and activities of the DMSC; to clarify its aims and objectives; and to chart the way forward for strengthening the organization. (25 March)
4. Meeting of the DMSC Central Executive Committee, composed mainly of sex workers, supported by advisors from SHIP. (26 March)

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[1] Although this evening meeting took place during the period of my fieldwork, I was unable to attend and, hence, had to rely on the audiotapes.

III THE DMSC AND ITS SOCIAL SETTING

The DMSC, with 54 branches in early 1999 throughout the state of West Bengal, draws its formal fee-paying membership of about 2000, as well as its wider constituency of support of 40,000 (as claimed by DMSC members) from the sex workers of Calcutta and several of the districts of West Bengal. The core of the organization and activities is, however, based in the various red light areas of Calcutta and its vicinity, which together have an estimated population of 18,000 sex workers, coming from different parts of India, Bangladesh and Nepal. This article concentrates on the Calcutta scene. The history of brothel-based sex work or commercial prostitution in Calcutta can be traced to the 19th century,[2] when this new colonial city registered the settlement of a diverse population ranging from British administrators and Indian commercial and landed magnates at one end of the social spectrum to clerical workers and manual labourers at the other. While the market for sex work was created by these diverse groups, the supply came largely from women of rural families of diverse backgrounds, as they faced major social and economic disruption in the process of colonial transition. The market for sex work was, of course, a stratified one, depending on the social and economic status of the clientele. This stratification was reflected in social distinction and economic differentiation among the sex workers themselves, as well as in patterns of neighbourhood diversification, with women in some red light localities entertaining more affluent men than others.

Returning to the present, the DMSC is largely an organization of brothel-based sex workers, who are usually resident in known red light areas or work there regularly. Most of them come from economically poor backgrounds. They operate at the least lucrative end of the sex trade, with a clientele drawn from the middle classes and poorer sections of society. While some 'floating' sex workers come daily from outside to the various red light districts to attract clients, those involved in the DMSC live and work in the red light districts more permanently. Some of them operate on their own, renting rooms directly from owners of local houses, and 'stand in line' on the street each evening to solicit custom. A handful of such independent sex workers also act as madams or *malkins* themselves and employ a few others. A large number of sex workers, however, remain under the tutelage of malkins or pimps, to whom they surrender either all or a fixed portion of their income. In return, they get a living-cum-working room, or a part thereof, and secure the

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[2] For a history of sex work in Bengal, see Banerjee, S. (1998) *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century Bengal.* Seagull: Calcutta.

approval of the madam to work in the brothel, and sometimes they get food. While working conditions and social relations within the sex trade remain iniquitous and oppressive for almost all sex workers, for some the situation is particularly dire. They find themselves in a relationship of virtual bondage to the malkins, whom they are not permitted to leave. Physical and mental abuse by madams and pimps are also not unknown to the sex workers. Yet, they have little choice but to accept the control of the madams or pimps and to remain in a subordinate position in the social and commercial hierarchy of the sex trade. Social constraints, frequently coupled with economic compulsions, almost invariably prevent sex workers from returning to their homes or from starting their own families and finding employment outside the context of the red light areas and prostitution. In addition to the control of madams and pimps, the sex workers find themselves exposed to harassment and violence from the police as well as from local toughs or hooligans, some of whom are pimps. These toughs, called *goondas* or *mastaans* in local parlance, in their more benign incarnation are mere neighbourhood bullies, who make their living or find avenues of recreation by exacting money or protection fees from local populations under threat of actual or potential violence. The more menacing among the goondas, from the sex workers' perspective, are those embroiled in theft, extortion, drugs and other criminal activities. Sex workers are particularly vulnerable prey to all these goondas who seek to exact money from them, and non-compliance frequently elicits the response of rape and other forms of physical violence, including torture, knifing and arson.

While the world that the sex workers inhabit is, thus, characterized by deprivation, subordination and brutality, their experience is also crucially marked by social marginalization and exclusion. The social construction of prostitution is no less relevant to the life of the prostitutes than the structures of power within the sex trade and its local neighbourhood context. Not unlike many other places in the world, prostitution in Calcutta is seen, not only as an undesirable occupation, but as a moral malaise. However, the nature of evolution of attitudes towards sex workers specifically in Calcutta can be understood in terms of the moral and legal segregation of prostitutes during the colonial period, moulded by the cross-cutting discourses of colonial administration, public order and social reform as well as by conceptions of social respectability and Victorian morality as internalized by the colonial Bengali middle classes.[3] Within this long-term ideological context, sex work is rarely treated as a legitimate occupation, but as an immoral activity of

[3] For a history of social attitudes towards sex workers in Bengal, see Banerjee, S. (1998) *op. cit.*

deviant, or at best duped and poverty stricken, women who pose a threat, variously, to 'public health, civic order, social stability and sexual morality'.[4] Sex workers thus often find themselves targets either of law and order drives or of initiatives to achieve civic regeneration and urban improvement, when prostitutes and occupants of brothels face eviction from their areas of work and living. When treated with a less punitive, disciplining or sanitizing approach, and with a more benevolent, charitable, patronizing or philanthropic orientation, they are made the objects of moral uplift, reform, improvement and rehabilitation or rescue from their fallen condition.[5] Even in these cases sex workers are treated with pity and disdain, and they remain relegated outside the pale of society until rehabilitated. When rehabilitated, they seldom find full social acceptance unless their identity as erstwhile prostitutes is concealed. Even in the exceptional cases, where sex workers gained public acclaim as talented performers on the Bengali stage and screen, their social position remained ambivalent.[6] From the sex worker's perspective, then, once a woman becomes *identified* as a fallen person, she is banished by society and doomed forever to what is perceived as a life of darkness, secrecy and private misery, trapped in the web of the sex trade. Madhavi Jaiswal and Gita De, sex workers, are not atypical in visualizing their lives as being confined to 'dark alleys' and 'imprisoned in the darkness ... [of] a closed room'.[7]

While the sex workers do not see their own work as necessarily physically degrading and morally debasing, nor as economically any worse than other options of menial low-paid labour, yet many still seek to escape this world precisely because of the social diminution and rejection that they face. They do not dislike their work *per se*, and see themselves as akin to all workers who hire out their bodies and physical labour, and sell manual skills in the market.[8] Indeed, the key slogan at the First National Conference of Sex

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4 Smarajit Jana, Nandinee Bandyopadhyay, Sadhana Mukherjee, N. Datta, A. Saha, 'STD/HIV intervention with sex workers in West Bengal' (mimeo, undated: 2-3). This paper is available at the SHIP office. A version of this paper has been published as follows, but it was not available to me: Jana, S., N. Bandyopadhyay, S. Mukherjee, N. Datta, A. Saha (1998) 'STD/HIV intervention with sex workers in West Bengal, India', *AIDS*, 12, Suppl. B: 101-8. Lippincott-Raven Publishers.

5 *Ibid.:* 2-3.

6 Banerjee, S. (1998) *op. cit.:* 126-41.

7 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *The 'Fallen' Learn to Rise: The Social Impact of STD-HIV Intervention Programme* (2nd edition: 32, 34). DMSC: Calcutta.

8 Interview with Putul Singh, sex worker and member of DMSC, 25.3.99.

Workers, coined by the DMSC, was: 'We labour with our bodies; We demand the rights of labourers' OR 'Sex work is legitimate work: We want workers' rights'. Despite this however, they do feel oppressed by the social and personal misery that sex work brings, as expressed repeatedly by references to their claustrophobic world of darkness. To describe their own plight, the sex workers frequently deploy the metaphors of dark blind alleys; of the prison, cage and fetters, and of lower depths or the underground.[9] Their account of their own fraught existence is rarely cast in terms of bodily violation or moral depravity and sin, but usually recounted through an acute sense of powerlessness, social rejection, and almost metaphysical unease associated with the denial of recognition as normal human beings.[10] The social condemnation and dehumanization that the sex workers face do not cease with their own generation, but taint their offspring too. Like the sex workers themselves, their progeny remain socially stigmatized, unless they conceal their parentage. For them, there is often little hope of a normal future life, denied access, as they are, to decent education and employment opportunities.

Within the sex trade no one individual sex worker can act alone to surmount this plight, even to achieve minimal material redressal, let alone addressing the problem of social exclusion. Collective action could be the only potential solution, but this is scarcely possible in the lonely and stratified world of the prostitutes. Brothel keepers and madams prevent social mingling among sex workers and breed an intense sense of rivalry. Sex workers themselves are fragmented by a stratified market and they are also highly competitive in their own interactions with each as they vie for access to clients. Often they are geographically dispersed in various neighbourhoods and they move frequently from one red light area to another in search of work or to flee local violence and oppression. This is evidently a bitterly divided and conflictual milieu. How then does the DMSC come into being despite such seemingly insurmountable impediments to collective action? Is it because the sex workers come to realize that the pursuit of their individual self-interest would be best advanced through the formation of a trade union type organization? Is it because they feel that defining a new community identity through social action and political struggle would help to reverse their collective marginalization and powerlessness?

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[9] Group discussion, 19.3.99.

[10] Group discussion, 19.3.99.

IV DEVELOPMENTAL INTERVENTION AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE DMSC

For an organized group or self-defined collectivity to emerge, where none existed before, and to sustain itself successfully, it is necessary for some significant political and ideological changes to occur as the stimulant, catalyst or trigger. For the Calcutta sex workers in the 1990s, this came in the form of initiatives to combat AIDS, sponsored by international development and donor organizations, and implemented by a government public health institute and local NGOs. The scene for sex workers' mobilization was set by the opening up of new discursive and political spaces by a globalized market of aid for AIDS containment and an increasingly active local NGO culture, nurtured by international development discourse and funding. With the outbreak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, sex workers everywhere soon found themselves identified as a high-risk group. Not only did they encounter increasing public scrutiny worldwide, but they were also frequently made targets of HIV/AIDS control measures. This was especially the case in the Third World, where condom use among sex workers is believed to be low. Moreover, it is also often believed by many of those involved in development policy and practice, that 'the more extreme conditions of poverty, deprivation and disadvantage that characterize sex work in developing countries' make these sex workers especially prone to HIV/AIDS,[11] presumably because they are supposed to have low levels of health and hygiene awareness, as well as a lack of ability to practise safe sex arising from the economic compulsion to secure clients, including those who demand unprotected sex. Development organizations and international donor agencies have, thus, from the 1980s increasingly directed funds towards HIV/AIDS interventions among Third World sex workers, and, in this, local NGOs have found a convenient opportunity to develop a particular line of activity.

In the case of the Calcutta sex workers, an intervention programme to control STD and HIV infections set the context for the formation of their own political organization, the DMSC, and for their collective mobilization. Following a WHO-sponsored pilot survey into the incidence of HIV/AIDS

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[11] Evans, C. (1999) 'An international review of the rationale, role and evaluation of community development approaches in interventions to reduce HIV transmission in sex work' (mimeo: 6). Horizons Project, Population Council, Regional Office for South & East Asia: New Delhi.

and STD among sex workers in some areas of Calcutta in 1992,[12] an intervention programme was launched towards the end of that year under the auspices of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, and with government support. The actual programme was run by a consortium of NGOs and community-based organizations, and was initially funded by WHO, followed by NORAD from December 1992 to September 1994, and then by the ODA (latterly DFID) from October 1994, which still continues to fund the programme in 2000. This STD-HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP) involved running health clinics for sex workers in their locality, distribution of condoms, and a related awareness campaign, under a programme entitled 'information-education-communication'.[13] SHIP was run with the participation and co-operation of youth clubs or neighbourhood groups in the red light districts. From the outset, SHIP espoused a community-based approach and inducted local sex workers into the programme to act as 'peer educators'. WHO had been advocating such a community-based approach from 1989, and when SHIP was launched in 1992, the desirability of adopting this strategy was widely accepted but rarely tried in practice successfully.[14] The peer educators or peers, as they came to be called by all concerned, including the sex workers themselves (in preference to the formal Bengali translation *samakormi*), were provided training for six weeks. SHIP's training was geared to enable the peer educators to approach their co-workers to disseminate information and raise consciousness about the epidemiology and pathology of STD and HIV infection, with the ultimate aim of both improving general health conditions and minimizing exposure to HIV infection by advocating the practice of safe sex and the use of condoms. These peers, initially half a dozen of them, but numbering 125 in early 1999 in Calcutta (180, if the districts of West Bengal are included), were partly based at the clinics, where they explained the problems of STD and HIV to other sex workers, with pictorial illustrations provided on flip charts, designed to be comprehensible and accessible to a non-literate audience. More importantly, they visited brothels for door-to-door campaigns with their flip charts to

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12 The survey was organized by the WHO (GPA) funded National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) in India, and conducted by the All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health, Calcutta (AIIH&PH).

13 For the early history of SHIP, see O'Reilly, K. R., T. Mertens, G. Sethi, L. Bhutani, N. Bandyopadhyay (1996) 'Evaluation of the Sonagachi Project, Calcutta: October 31st - November 14th, 1995'. (Sonagachi is the main red light area in Calcutta where SHIP was first launched in 1992). [Note: This evaluation of SHIP, at the time funded by the ODA, was organized by the British Council, Calcutta, at the request of the Minister of Health and Welfare, Government of West Bengal.]

14 Evans, C. (1999) *op. cit.*: 10-12.

persuade sex workers to visit the clinics for health checks, immunization or treatment.[15]

The public health impact of SHIP has been recognized to be a significant success,[16] with a notable decline in the incidence of STD,[17] a major increase in condom use (2.2 per cent in 1992 to 81.7 per cent in 1995),[18] and the achievement of a progressively lower rate of HIV prevalence among Calcutta sex workers in comparison to all other metropolitan towns of Asia.[19] For the purpose of this paper and indeed for the sex workers themselves, however, the most important impact of SHIP has been the formation of their own organization and political mobilization. The specific form and nature of intervention adopted by SHIP played an instrumental role in this.

SHIP's own brochure defines its approach as one based on the concepts of 'Reliance, Respect and Recognition: Giving due respect to the SWs [sex workers], recognizing their profession and relying on their understandings'.[20] Moreover, SHIP was open to entertaining and promoting 'a number of varied activities unrelated to AIDS...as we put priority to the *perceptive* [sic, emphasis added] needs of the community [of sex workers]'.[21] The feedback from the early peers made SHIP personnel realize quickly that an integrated approach was necessary, for sexual behaviour cannot be changed for better health in isolation from other aspects of the life of the sex workers to do with their social position in the sex trade and more generally. SHIP recognized that it was necessary to go beyond the behavioural change model, and address

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15 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *A Dream, A Pledge, A Fulfilment: Five Years' Stint at Sonagachi.* AIIH & PH: Calcutta.

16 O'Reilly, K. R., T. Mertens, G. Sethi, L. Bhutani, N. Bandyopadhyay (1996) *op. cit.*: 16-22.

17 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *op. cit.:* 17 [For example, between 1992–5, decline of 70.1%t in N. gonorrhoea smear/culture; reduction of 11.7% in T. Vaginalis (wet mouth); reduction of 72.4% in C.albicans (culture); reduction of 15.6% in syphilis (VDRL)].

18 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *op. cit.*: 16-19.

19 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op cit.*: 21, cites *The Telegraph*, 18 September, 1995: Sonagachi (the main red-light area in Calcutta where SHIP was first launched in 1992) was hailed as the biggest brothel in Asia with a record negative growth rate of AIDS; *Newsweek,* 15 February, 1999: A report on the DMSC, entitled 'India: Red Light Revolution', mentions that HIV incidence among sex workers in Sonagachi is 5% as compared to over 45% in Bombay brothels.

20 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *op. cit.*: 7.

21 *Ibid.:* 6.

several other issues confronting sex workers. As a result, 'the project concentrated on the broader and more fundamental issue of social power relations which shape peoples "behaviour" and adopted strategies for empowerment of sex workers'.[22] In order to create the preconditions for sex workers to deal with their social rejection, their lack of bargaining power and their exposure to local mafias and the 'nexus of landlords, politicians, policemen',[23] SHIP identified the following clusters of problems that required attention:[24]

1. 'Lack of social acceptance of sex work as a profession ... Judgmental approach towards sex trade and profession. ... Socially imposed insecurity ... (the root of which is lying in the social construct [sic] of sex and sexuality).'
2. The perpetuation of gender inequality in society and sexual division of labour as well as the exercise of control over women's reproductive behaviour in the interest of maintenance of private property and patriarchy, all of which have implications for branding as immoral or deviant any sexual intercourse outside 'legitimate' heterosexual, monogamous, matrimonial alliances.[25]
3. 'Low socioeconomic status of SWs—not the economic poverty but the poverty which consists in the lack of power to resist oppression, inability to understand the rights, and the lack of opportunity to organize themselves to overcome the inhuman and exploitative conditions'.
4. 'Legal ambiguity of sex work',[26] which makes sex workers prone to police oppression.

With this understanding of the problems besetting sex workers, SHIP gradually came to adopt an approach that emphasized at its heart 'the empowerment of SWs both at community and societal level[s]'. SHIP did not attempt to involve itself directly in the everyday struggles of the sex workers, but sought to create the conditions which would enable the sex workers to attain confidence, skills as well as social power, thus equipping them to initiate their own struggles. SHIP's attempt to facilitate the empowerment of sex workers covered three broad areas.

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22 Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.*: 6.

23 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *op. cit.*: 9.

24 *Ibid.:* 9; Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.*: 4-6.

25 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1997) *Sex Workers' Manifesto: The First National Conference of Sex Workers organized by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, Calcutta,* DMSC: Calcutta.

26 *Ibid.*; *The Telegraph*, 16 March, 1998.

First, the problem of legal ambiguity of sex work was addressed by demanding recognition of it under the law and the abolition of the *Prevention of Immoral Trafficking in Women Act, 1986* (PITA), which effectively criminalizes sex workers. Under PITA, sexual intercourse for monetary considerations is defined as illicit and soliciting in public is outlawed, thus exposing sex workers to legal and punitive action. Although the rationale behind this act was to protect young women, seen as victims, from pimps and others who traffic in women by force or fraud, in actual practice, the emphasis on immorality focuses police and legal attention on the sex workers themselves rather than punishing those who traffic in women.[27] SHIP argued that sex workers should have the same status as any other self-employed professional group with their own institutional mechanisms (such as an autonomous board) for the internal regulation of the sex trade. It was further claimed that sex workers should have similar rights as other workers or employees to engage in industrial action to achieve better working conditions and remuneration.[28] All this would ensure that sex workers have greater rights and bargaining power within the trade and can thus bring about significant beneficial changes both in their sexual behaviour and in their lives more generally. Above all, it was urged that sex workers should come under the purview of general civil, criminal and labour laws of the land, and should not be legally stigmatized and denied rights as full citizens by being confined to the jurisdiction of special laws for prostitution.[29]

Secondly, SHIP extended the ambit of its brief beyond public health and took practical measures to engage with the broader question of empowerment. This meant that the training programme for peers or the peer education programme did not only deal with STD issues, but was also designed 'for attainment of self reliance, confidence and dignity, and transfer that image to influence other members of the community' (sic), with the ultimate aim of undertaking effective collective bargaining. The peers were envisaged not simply to be health educators, but to act as community leader, community mobilizer and an agent of social change.[30] In order to fortify this more encompassing role of

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27 'Memorandum on Reform of Laws relating to Prostitution in India', prepared by the Centre for Feminist Legal Research, January 1999.

28 *Gatar Khatiye Khai, Shramiker Adhikar Chai* [Sex work is legitimate work: We want workers' rights] (Press Release for the First National Conference of Sex Workers, November 1997).

29 *Ibid.*

30 All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (1997) *op. cit.*: 9.

the peers, non-formal education classes were organized for them by SHIP. Indeed, the peers themselves demanded such classes in order to equip themselves with knowledge and skills to perform effectively their broader role as community leaders—a role that they themselves began to assume in the course of their more limited clinical work. The non-formal classes dealt not only with basic literacy, numeracy and health education, but also with a very large range of areas and themes to do with matters that impinge upon the sex workers' lives, ranging from medicine, science, history, politics, civics and human rights.[31] The classes came to be oriented towards gaining knowledge of histories of political struggles, politics of gender and patriarchy, politics of medicine, as well as poetry, literature and music.[32]

Thirdly, an important element in SHIP's strategy of empowerment of sex workers was the forging of a positive identity of the sex workers in defiance of their socially constructed image. SHIP realized early in its experience that the peer educators needed 'to ensure that the entire body of sex workers in the locality developed a positive self-image, had self-esteem and confidence'.[33] SHIP was also unequivocal that 'the success of any intervention programme working with sex workers depend on the possibilities the Project can create for the sex workers to negotiate and re-interpret the dominant discourses that frame them'.[34]

Neither the integrated community-based approach of involving the active participation of the target development group, nor the idea of achieving empowerment through development initiatives were radically new concepts in the literature on development interventions in the 1990s.[35] However, as applied to sex workers, this form of developmental intervention was fairly rare, even though it was advocated by WHO.[36] Most interventions, including other contemporary ones in Calcutta, have been rehabilitation oriented. From the sex workers' perspective, the SHIP approach was significant and more

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31 Bandyopadhyay, S. (undated) 'They Speak Their Word: A Note on the Education Programme for the Calcutta Sex Workers'. AIIH & PH: Calcutta.

32 A leaflet produced by SHIP to explicate the creation of a 'background primer' for the non-formal education of the peers acknowledges the intellectual influence of Paulo Freire. Sandip Bandyopadhyay, *Amader A -Aa-Ka-Kha* [Our ABC]: *Learning to Read, Write and Rise* (undated). AIIH & PH: Calcutta.

33 Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.*: 6.

34 *Ibid.:* 10.

35 Evans, C. (1999), *op. cit.*, *passim.*

36 *Ibid.:* 10-12.

meaningful than rehabilitation ventures. It enabled them not simply to develop and pursue their collective interests within the trade, but also provided them the opportunity to define their identity as a community; enunciate their rights as workers and citizens; articulate their needs, feelings and emotions; and express themselves creatively in public. All these could be achieved within the favourable context created by the SHIP Programme, although not directly as part of SHIP. It is not surprising then that the peers soon came to form the core of the DMSC, the organization that would, in effect, pursue the goal of the community and societal empowerment of sex workers. It should be borne in mind that the peers played a very significant role in enabling SHIP to realize that an integrated approach was necessary, and it is to SHIP's credit that it registered this need and responded to it actively by taking on board the perceptive needs of the community and giving a central place to these in their activities.[37] In the peers' own version, they were themselves the agents of this change.

It is worth noting here briefly the ways in which SHIP could contain the potential opposition to its work, particularly from the 'power brokers' within the sex trade. SHIP was careful from the outset to ensure that any destabilizing or disruptive tendencies were diffused. SHIP personnel adroitly involved madams and pimps in some of its activities by emphasizing the common benefits that would accrue to the sex trade in general by augmenting public health conditions. It could even be argued that the control of STD and HIV would help to boost the sex trade by allaying the clients' fear of disease contagion. Moreover, SHIP dampened the potential wrath of the 'power brokers' by entirely avoiding a rehabilitation type approach, thus signalling that the trade itself was not intended to be eradicated nor any major structural changes to be attempted which might demolish the hierarchy within the sex industry.[38]

V FROM PEER EDUCATORS TO DMSC ACTIVISTS: COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

To turn away from SHIP and towards the sex workers' side of the story, it is now necessary to ask how and why the peers educators came to form the DMSC. The answer to this question has to be sought in the reasons why the

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[37] Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.*: 4.

[38] *Ibid.:* 9.

sex workers initially volunteered to become peers and what it meant to them to act as peers. While SHIP expected elderly, retired and under-employed sex workers to offer themselves to act as peers as a form of livelihood (SHIP pays a salary to the peer educators),[39] in actual practice younger women with children, those who had already been locally active in organizing collectively, and many others joined as peers. Anima Banerjee, who no longer operates actively as a sex worker but remains branded as one, was urged by her son, a local school teacher, to become a peer, for this would be a socially meaningful activity.[40] Mala Singh, another former sex worker who now lives with a stable partner in a red light area and runs an illicit liquor shop, joined at the behest of her partner, who had been locally active in combatting incidents of violence on women. In her view, her illegal trade in alcohol was thus morally counteracted by the socially useful work of SHIP, and then DMSC. She perceived this as a matter of morality or ethical principle (*neetigata byapar*).[41] Kohinoor Begum joined because she felt that compared to the low status of sex work, working as a peer was a legitimate form of occupation. She could see herself as a paid employee as any other worker in society.[42] Munni Singh too emphasized the importance of the 'job': 'I had been so engrossed in the last 23 years of my life in providing pleasure to innumerable menfolk that I had forgotten my own happiness. I came to know the thrills of a job after joining the project'.[43] In Madhavi Jaiswal's view, being a peer and joining the Project had 'enabled her to face society with confidence.... [and] to emerge out of the dark alleys and venture into light'. She saw the project as a means of improving herself and as a form of self-expression.[44] Mamata Ghosh expressed very similar sentiments: 'Earlier I could not speak to anyone, but now I speak to all people'.[45] Gita De, a practising sex worker, felt that it was not the money that made her eager to join SHIP as a peer. For, 'even [if] I did not get much money, I would get a job at least. I would be able to interact with many people. ... I felt I had been imprisoned in the darkness before I had joined the project and that I had gained a new life. I felt I was released from a closed room and could see the sunlight'.[46] Chobi celebrated a similar sense of

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39 *Ibid.:* 5.

40 Group discussion, 17.3.99.

41 *Ibid.*

42 Personal interview, 18.3.99.

43 Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.*: 20.

44 *Ibid.:* 32.

45 *Ibid.:* 20.

46 *Ibid.:* 34.

liberation: 'We were in a jailkhana [prison]. It is the project that has taken us out into the outer world'.[47] For Uma Mondal, the use of the term 'sex worker' by SHIP was a revelation. This term was, to her, very different from the large number of insulting and abusive words with which prostitutes were usually addressed. This was a major factor in enthusing her to work as a peer. Equally importantly, though, she felt that as a peer, and later through the DMSC, she found the opportunity to act in unison with other sex workers through a legitimate channel.[48] Her most coveted experience as a peer was the sense of unity and solidarity with other sex workers.

A few of the women who came to SHIP as peer educators had a history of local self-assertion, both individual and collective, and for them SHIP could be the refuge of rebels. Sadhana Mukherjee, who would become the first secretary of the DMSC, had personally tried to resist the oppression of local goondas in her neighbourhood, and had often been frustrated in her efforts. SHIP provided her the hope of launching collective offensive against them and of strengthening the sex workers in general.[49] When Putul Singh and a number of others from the Sethbagan red light area joined SHIP, they already had an experience of collective local activism. Unlike sex workers in most other areas of Calcutta, women in Sethbagan had formed a neighbourhood vigilante organization in 1984-5, several years before the inception of SHIP. This organization, called the Shramajibi Mahila Sangha (or the Association of Labouring Women), by highlighting their identity as workers, had anticipated the arguments about workers' rights for sex work that SHIP would advance in the 1990s. The main impetus behind the formation of the Mahila Sangha had been to tackle the menace of local goondas, which the women of the association did with great success. In addition, the group gathered funds from voluntary contributions by sex workers and their clients to introduce free health care locally for sex workers and to initiate literacy classes for their children.[50] They did not, however, find it easy to sustain their organization and activities, and internal squabbles, especially over money, undermined

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[47] *Ibid.:* 15.

[48] Group discussion, 17.3.99.

[49] *Ibid.*

[50] Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.*: 10-11; Putul Singh (in association with Mamata Das), *'Sethbagane Mahila Sangha gorey othar suchana'* [The Origin and Development of the Mahila Sangha in Sethbagan], *Souvenir of the First National Conference of Sex Workers, 14-16 November, 1997, Calcutta,* DMSC: Calcutta, (pages not numbered).

their unity and effectiveness.[51] Thus, when SHIP emerged, the women of Mahila Sangha amalgamated their organization with SHIP, and subsequently with the DMSC, and most women started working as peers. Putul Singh says, 'We joined the programme [SHIP], because in it we found an opportunity to continue with our struggle'.[52] She also claims that although women in Sethbagan still have their personal disagreements and animosities, they now sink their differences and unite over the work of the Mahila Sangha and the DMSC, and for their political struggle.[53]

All this evidence of the sex workers' reasons for joining SHIP suggests that contrary to the expectation of SHIP, a large number of peers joined the project less for money or work than for self-image, self-expression, self-worth, respectability, social recognition and standing, sense of social responsibility and involvement. It is scarcely surprising though that, given the low social status of their work, the sex workers would be interested in defining their identity, both individually and collectively, through this window of opportunity opened to them by SHIP. Moreover, those who already had a history of collective mobilization expected their association with SHIP to facilitate their endeavours. There is, however, an interesting paradox here. It appears that a number of peers, with time, left the sex trade and came to devote their time to paid employment as peers of SHIP, which provided them livelihood, and also enabled them act as unpaid volunteers of the DMSC.[54] These very women are the most vocal and active in the DMSC in proclaiming the rights and identities of sex workers. Moreover, in their public pronouncements they emphatically claim to be sex workers, rather than 'erstwhile' sex workers. They have evidently taken the opportunity provided by SHIP to escape the everyday material oppression of the sex trade. Yet, at the same time, they did not take that same opportunity to deny or conceal their identity as sex workers. Indeed, they now appear to be far more articulate and confident about expressing and projecting their identity. This paradox of politically highly mobilized sex workers leaving the profession while at the same time continuing to publicly define themselves as sex workers reinforces the point that their reason for joining SHIP had a great deal to do with the question of identity and self-expression.

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[51] Personal interview with Putul Singh, 17.3.99 and 25.3.99.

[52] Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op.cit.*: 10-11.

[53] Personal interview with Putul Singh, 17.3.99 and 25.3.99.

[54] Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.*: 20.

Once they became peers, this issue of identity, especially collective identity, assumed increasing importance to them. If they had initially joined SHIP as peer educators out of an individual motivation to redefine their identity and gain personal respectability, thereafter it became more and more a matter of forging a new collective identity, eventually leading to the formation of the DMSC, in which the collective would come to assume primacy over the individual. This transition can be best understood by exploring some salient facets of the sex workers' experience as peer educators. An important marker of identity of the peers is the uniform worn at clinics and during door-to-door brothel visits. The uniform consists of a green apron coat with a red-cross symbol printed on it, along with an identity card. In the sex workers' perception, this garment has a symbolic transformative quality. It is seen almost like a sacred, sanctifying vestment that invests them with special status and enables them to transcend their lowly daily grind. As Pushpa, a sex worker, says: 'This apron has changed my life, my identity. Now I can tell others that I am a social worker, a health worker'.[55] A SHIP report comments, 'the uniform ... stand[s] for self-esteem. They prefer it to costly sarees because they knew (sic) that a uniform is a symbol of social recognition'.[56] Of course, a uniform is also a symbol of belonging and of being part of a group or institutional entity. This in itself is a highly valued experience to those who are outcast and marginal, and who can not legitimately associate themselves with or belong to any social collectivity. Uma Mondal says that the apron is of immense value (*prochure dam*); it enjoins special social responsibilities to and bestows public authority upon the peers, and they thus have to conduct themselves accordingly. The peers feel obliged to act altruistically in the common interest of all sex workers and act unitedly to help all others: 'we think of others first before we think of ourselves'.[57] Bonani, another sex worker, was quoted in a Calcutta newspaper saying: 'All my life I lived a wretched life. It is entirely a different feeling to share other's worries and help people get out of their problems'.[58] Uma Mondal feels that it is this altruistic, public role that inspires and animates the peers, and now also enables them to reveal themselves confidently and without shame in society as socially responsible sex workers.[59]

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[55] *Ibid.:* 15.

[56] *Ibid.:* 15.

[57] Group discussion and personal interview, 17.3.99.

[58] *The Telegraph,* 9 May 1998.

[59] Group discussion and personal interview, 17.3.99.

Similar to wearing the uniform, the experience of being identified by the epithet 'peer' soon came to assume distinctive meaning and special significance. It would not be an exaggeration to view the term peer as a poignant polysemic neologism in the local vernacular of the sex trade, laden with multiple connotations. At one level, it is a term marking social distinction and personal achievement. This is evident from the sex workers' testimonies documented in a SHIP publication, in which they express an obvious pride at what they see as being the honour of being appointed peer educators by SHIP.[60] The term peer, thus, signals social worth and standing to the sex workers. Introducing themselves as peers of SHIP seems almost like identifying themselves as doctors or lawyers or similar individuals with socially coveted stature. At another level, the term peer has assumed cognate status to 'comrade' or 'mate' in other contexts, signifying equality, community and unity. Of course, in the English language, the word peer does mean equal, but this is not known to the sex workers. To them, the sense of equality contained in the term peer is socially and experientially constructed. It also seems to have assumed the status of a fictive kinship term, denoting sorority and solidarity. Doing collective work for ones 'sisters' and acting in unison as peers gradually seems to have acquired superior normative and ethical power among the sex workers. This element of acting in concert and rallying together would come to play a central role in the genesis of the DMSC.

Through the collective experience of being peers and through the sense of belonging and commonality that it generated, the peer educators soon felt that the self was important only within the broader framework of the collective and by belonging to it. In their case, being part of the group defined the individual's status and identity as the peer. The focus then inevitably shifted to more political activist, social movement type initiatives to redefine their collective identity as a socially acceptable community and to further their shared goals. It was not individual self-interest but the construction and consolidation of the collectivity that had to be crucial. This made it imperative for the sex workers to envisage a commitment to group action and identity in preference to the promotion of their individual interest. As some of the major functionaries of SHIP point out and as the ODA Evaluation Report of SHIP reiterates, the peer educators realized that 'given the asymmetrical power relations within the sex industry and their social exclusion, the only way the sex workers could gain greater control over their own bodies, sexuality, income, health or life was through mutual support, collective bargaining and

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[60] Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op.cit.*: 32-4.

united action'.[61] This sentiment was echoed resoundingly, if a little theatrically, by the sex workers themselves in interviews and in a group discussion that I conducted, where several of the sex workers stressed that they were fighting for all and for future generations, not for themselves personally. Thus, for instance, Putul Singh argues that 'even if we do not ourselves reap the benefits of our own struggle, surely those who come after us will do so'.[62] Pushpo Sarkar says: 'Now we all stand together and for each other. ... We may die [fighting], but our work must go on, our organization [DMSC] must forge ahead, we will never look back'.[63] Uma Mondal says: '[In the struggle], I may die personally, a few more of us may die, even a 100 or a 1000, but we are not afraid to die, for there are 40,000 [believed to the size of the constituency of support for the DMSC in West Bengal] behind us. Those who kill us will not be spared by anybody [other sex workers], they will be pickled by the others. This is why we do not fear to embrace death. We *are* surging forward apace and we *will* surge forward even further; we do not have the time to look back'.[64] Evidently, their realization of the importance of collective action bred strong sentiments of group cohesion and unity, as well as co-operative conduct.

The institutional confidence that the sex workers gained from their experience of being peer educators of SHIP,[65] as well as their valorization of collective action, laid the foundation upon which the edifice of the DMSC would be built. A brief account of the actual process of formation of the DMSC and the role of the sex workers is necessary at this stage.[66] While being engaged in their clinical work with SHIP for sexual health from 1992, some of the early peers soon realized the limitations of the approach and envisaged the need to enlarge the ambit of their activities. Moreover, the peers began to feel emboldened to act collectively against their local oppressors. However, they also realized that such activities could not be undertaken directly as part of the health intervention project, and that they needed an organization of their own. In 1993, with the support of SHIP and with advice from Dr Smarajit Jana, director of SHIP, the sex workers formed the nucleus of an organization with

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61 Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) p. 6.

62 Personal interview with Putul Singh, 25.3.99.

63 Group discussion, 17.3.99.

64 *Ibid.*

65 For the impact of SHIP on peer educators, see O'Reilly, K. R. *et al.* (1996) *op. cit.*: 27-30.

66 The following account is based on Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op.cit.*: 21-2; Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.:* 7; Group discussion, 17.3.99.

13 members or convenors. This informal core group, at the time called the Interlink Committee, with representatives from 12 red light districts in Calcutta, assumed a more formal character in 1995, when it was registered under the law, with a constitution, as the DMSC. Under this new formal structure, branch committees of the DMSC were formed in various neighbourhoods (54 such branches existed in West Bengal in early 1999), with an apex central executive committee consisting of representatives from the branch committees. Officers of these committees were appointed through internal organizational elections from 1997. The branches and the central committee hold regular meetings which are open not only to the formal fee-paying members or associate members, including SHIP personnel who frequently play the role of facilitators or arbiters, but to all interested sex workers, although voting rights are restricted according to the stipulations in the constitution. Various major and minor issues are discussed, and then decisions taken, at these meetings, which are usually lively occasions with animated debates and much excitement.

From 1993, and even more so after its formal registration in 1995, the DMSC has undertaken major campaigns in the red light areas against perceived acts of oppression or injustice, which have both demonstrated its might to dominant groups and drawn in the support of ever larger numbers of sex workers. While the fee-paying membership of the DMSC was about 2,000 in early 1999, many hundreds more are associated with the organization. DMSC activists claim that they have the statewide support of 40,000 sex workers, based on the numbers who have attended meetings, procession and demonstrations. Interestingly, the sex workers' own version of the genesis of the DMSC, as expressed in the group discussion that I organized, claims a significant role for themselves, while not denying the contribution of SHIP and their indebtedness to the paternal buttress of Dr Jana, the director of SHIP. However, SHIP seems inclined to present the DMSC primarily as a by-product of the intervention programme, as evident from the title of a publication produced by SHIP on behalf of and in the name of the DMSC in 1997. This 50-page publication about sex workers' mobilization and the DMSC, entitled *The 'Fallen' Learn to Rise*, is subtitled *The Social Impact of STD-HIV Intervention Programme*. This booklet was published soon after the ODA evaluation of SHIP in 1995 (reported in March 1996) and coincided with the publication of a cognate SHIP-AIIH&PH brochure in 1997, entitled *A Dream, A Pledge, A Fulfilment: Five Years' Stint at Sonagachi*. In all of these publications, the instrumental role of SHIP in the creation of the DMSC is emphasized. Indeed, it does seem that the DMSC is very much a creature of SHIP and fully backed by it. SHIP has assisted the DMSC to attract foreign

funding, and it provides logistical support, advisory personnel, strategic planning, office infrastructure, as well as masterminding much of the DMSC's activities, at least until recently. Often SHIP and DMSC are difficult to distinguish in actual practice by an outsider, despite formal, constitutional distinction. However, despite the singular importance of SHIP, it is of utmost significance that the sex workers did provide the woman power and commitment behind the DMSC. Most importantly, the sex workers see the DMSC as their own creation and appropriate it for themselves, as evident from the group discussion and in several interviews that I conducted. Indeed, in the group discussion, at the very outset some of sex workers declared that they were going to recount the 'true' history of the DMSC rather than the version usually peddled out for the benefit of visitors—donor agencies and the press, it seems. I was granted this privileged access to the 'truth', because I was introduced to the sex workers as an interested and sympathetic friend seeking to help and understand the DMSC, and not a project evaluator, who can determine funding, or a journalist, who can trumpet an authorized version for favourable public consumption. In this 'truthful' narrative to which they made me privy, while they repeatedly acknowledged the undeniable value of the canopy provided by SHIP and the paternal authority of Dr Jana (they even orchestrated a round of applause in appreciation of his support during the discussion), they stressed their own struggles and action, and expressed a keen sense of their own agency and initiative. They hardly presented themselves as forming the social impact of SHIP, as the *Fallen* book proposed, but as the historical agents of their own autonomous action and political struggle. Anima Banerjee pointed out that when they were simply 'peers' of SHIP, outsiders who showed an interest in their work were only concerned with AIDS, not about the sex workers themselves. However, with the growing strength of their *own* organization—DMSC—extensive interest has been generated about the sex workers themselves, their problems and their struggle.[67] The important point thrown up by the sex workers' appropriation of the DMSC as their own in this way is that here too we see the centrality of the issues of identity, belonging, authorship, ownership, sense of agency and power.

This sense of ownership and appropriation is also evident in the claim made about the name of the organization. The word 'durbar', meaning unstoppable, indomitable or irrepressible, appeared in the organizational title of the DMSC entirely by accident, rather than by design on the part of the sex workers or

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[67] Group Discussion, 17.3.99.

SHIP.[68] When the leaders of the DMSC sought to register the organization as the Mahila Samanwaya Committee in 1995, the registrar pointed out that a similarly named organization already existed from which they would be required to distinguish themselves by incorporating an additional term in the title. Apparently, the registrar himself then suggested a few options, of which 'durbar' was one, which the sex workers eventually selected for their purpose. However, when asked about the provenance of the term 'durbar', I was told that the sex workers had chosen it themselves to signify their unrestrained surge forward as a newly mobilized community.[69] It may well be that the history behind the name of the organization is not well known and it is not common knowledge that the unlikely person of the official registrar was the source of the word durbar. Even if this is the case, it still remains significant that the sex workers' own agency in naming their organization was stressed, in the absence of any other known explanation.

A similar instance of the sex workers' quest to register their ownership of the DMSC relates to the proceedings of the First National Conference of Sex Workers in November 1997, convened by the DMSC.[70] This conference was largely organized and masterminded by SHIP personnel, with the help of the top leadership of the DMSC and a number of prominent peer educators. On the first day of the three-day meeting, the usual format of a large national conference was adhered to, with a formal inaugural ceremony consisting of speeches by government ministers, important officials and administrators, and the head of SHIP. The rationale behind devising such a programme was obviously to raise the public profile of sex workers' politics by involving important political figures and other influential individuals in the conference. To the large number of Calcutta sex workers who had turned up to attend the meeting, however, the agenda offered little of interest. Interestingly though, their apathetic presence was soon to change into excited engagement. During a period of lull in the proceedings on the first day of the conference, one of the organizers decided to solicit participation from the audience. The sex workers were invited to mount the stage to sing, dance or recite verses as they wished, or to ascend the official podium to speak their minds. This invitation elicited unexpected response, and soon the entire formal, stilted tenor of the proceedings changed to register the vocal and active involvement of the sex workers. During the following two days, the sex workers seized the initiative

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68 Information given by Dr. Jana, Director of SHIP in 1999.

69 Personal interview with Kabita Ray, President of the DMSC in early 1999.

70 Personal interview with Nandinee Bandyopadhyay, Gender Consultant to SHIP and DMSC, 26.3.99.

and set the agenda for the remainder of the conference. They took the leading role in the workshops organized to discuss various issues to do with sex work. Personnel of SHIP became increasingly marginal in the face of the animated and passionate engagement of the sex workers. The general scene at the conference venue, a large sports stadium, changed too. The sex workers arrived at the conference from the second day with their children, families and partners and the site assumed the atmosphere of a festive street carnival rather than that of a formal political conference. No longer was this a solemn, almost stylized, political meeting, but an exhilarated, effusive, ebullient self-expression of hitherto repressed and secluded women in the public arena, and a joyous celebration of their ability and potential. This event achieved the conquest of the public space by the sex workers much more effectively than the recognition accorded to the sex workers by the inaugural parade of dignitaries on the proscenium. Indeed, this was the sex workers' own mode of conquering the public sphere, as opposed to SHIP's style of gaining public recognition for sex workers through the blessings of the great and the good. In the process, the sex workers seized the ownership and the initiative of their own political action and the DMSC. Personnel of SHIP acknowledge this event as a defining symbolic moment in the history of the DMSC, not so much because a national conference had been successfully staged, but because the Calcutta sex workers who were present there had indeed proved themselves to be the agents of their own struggle and articulated their identity as a community in public with confidence and aplomb. They were clearly well on their way to outgrowing SHIP and spearheading their own politics.

These issues of identity, agency and political struggle would, of course, recur throughout the entire gamut of the multipronged activities of the DMSC, to which we now turn.

VI DMSC IN ACTION: COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE, POWER AND POLITICS

The DMSC has undertaken several social and political initiatives from 1993 onwards. One of the early activities of the DMSC was to contend with the thugs and goondas. Under the leadership of the DMSC, local women in a number of red light districts organized themselves as vigilantes, confronted the hooligans, captured them, and then turned them over to the police. These women now refuse to suffer the extortion and violence of the goondas in silence, and retaliate against them whenever necessary. They launch rallies

and demonstrations against the trouble caused by hooligans and succeed in securing remedial intervention from the police force, which had until recently simply ignored any complaints by sex workers. In their anti-goonda initiatives, the sex workers have even found the courage, with SHIP support of course, to petition politicians, councillors, and other locally influential notables and professional people. By building up public opinion in this way against the goondas, they have been able to pressurize the police to take effective action against the goondas. The sex workers now claim that the regime of goondas has been virtually abolished in their areas, and have stories to tell about some erstwhile fearsome thugs who offered not only verbal contrition but also monetary help to the DMSC![71] They also reported to the correspondent of an international newsmagazine that street-corner thugs now address them reverentially as *didi* (elder sister).[72] Similarly, the sex workers resisted the seasonal menace of forcible exaction of subscription by local youth for the periodic public celebration of religious festivals. In the past sex workers had paid up in terror, but their collective refusal to do so and their public demonstrations in protest have now put an end to such extortion.[73] The sex workers also organized public meetings, processions and rallies against police raids in brothels, harassment and extortion. They have surrounded police stations and sat on vigil until assurance was given to them against unlawful and coercive police action.[74] They now derive immense satisfaction from the fact that the police no longer dare to treat them publicly as undesirable criminals, but interact with them with politeness and even overt respect. At police stations, instead of being kept waiting for long hours for a hearing and then refused the right even to lodge first information reports on cases of assault and violence against them, they are now readily attended to, offered chairs, and addressed as didi.[75] The sex workers have also mounted successful protests against urban local councils to prevent the eviction of individual or groups of sex workers from brothels or their removal from red light areas, which would have dispossessed them and robbed them of their livelihood and habitat.[76] In all these endeavours, the DMSC was able to rally the mass of the sex workers. DMSC activists argue that they have successfully curbed the arbitrary power of goondas, police or local administrators, firstly, because they have demonstrated in practice their

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71 Group discussion, 17.3.99; Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.*

72 *Newsweek,* 15 February, 1999.

73 Group discussion, 17.3.99; Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.:* 22.

74 *Ibid.*; Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.:* 7.

75 Group discussion, 17.3.99, especially comments by Mala Singh.

76 Group discussion, 17.3.99.

strength of unity and might of organization; secondly, because they are no longer scared to protest; and thirdly, above all, because they have become fully aware of their rights as citizens and are unflinching in ensuring that their rights are recognized.[77] As Arati Ghosh puts it: 'We now know the law and our rights, and we have found firm terrain for ourselves to stand on'.[78] Nirmala reiterates: 'We have got a voice now', as does Mala Singh: 'We have now learnt to speak; we are no longer silent. ... Even the usually docile Nepalis are now fighting.'[79] (Sex workers coming from Nepal are believed within the trade to be quiet and compliant, not least because they are linguistically disadvantaged in the largely Bengali- and Hindi-speaking milieu of Calcutta.) Evidently, their passage from mute suffering to effective, active and vocal collective resistance is considered a major achievement by all sex workers. Moreover, interestingly, they projected themselves as upright, moral and law-abiding citizens, acting in the interest of the law and public order, in complete reversal of their usual socially imputed image of immoral and illegal operatives.

The DMSC has also taken the initiative in altering the terms of exchange within the sex trade. Members of DMSC have organized local women against unjust acts and assault by madams and pimps. In response to reports made by sex workers about physical abuse or financial extortion by madams or pimps, DMSC activists have regularly intervened to act as negotiators or to arrange protest demonstrations and police action against the offending parties, who have usually capitulated and mended their ways for fear of the law or the disruption of their business. In this way, the DMSC has undertaken crisis management and attempts to improve the immediate working conditions of the mass of the sex workers.[80]

In addition to engaging in agitational protest against various forms of injustice and oppression in the red light areas, the DMSC has intervened decisively on a number of occasions to either terminate or draw attention to illegal, unethical and unauthorized immunization or drug trials for HIV infection and forcible AIDS surveillance, perpetrated on sex workers.[81] Unlike sexual intercourse in which they engage voluntarily or willingly as their occupation,

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77 Group Discussion, 17.3.99.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.*

80 *Ibid.*; Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.:* 22; Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.:* 7.

81 *Ibid.*

vaccine experiments and AIDS monitoring were seen as acts of violence, a violation of their body, and a subversion of their autonomy, as these were conducted either without their knowledge or without their informed consent.[82] Uma Mondal remembers that during one of the early incidents of protest, she delivered a speech at a public meeting in which she venomously condemned the evil doctors who dare to 'experiment' on sex workers. For, she argued, the doctors betray even greater contempt and lack of respect for the sex workers than for chimpanzees, monkeys and other animals who have to be purchased at a high price for experiments, while sex workers can be coerced into compliance or lured with minimal recompense by exploiting their poverty. She expressed her towering rage that no value was attached to the sex workers as human beings, and their lives were considered entirely dispensable.[83] Such expressions of protest, while possibly not entirely effective in preventing AIDS screening or drug trials, have nonetheless had the significant effect of enabling the sex workers to proclaim their own self-worth and rights as humans—an identity which they feel they are denied by society.

A major initiative of the DMSC, with SHIP advice, was to launch, in June 1995, the sex workers' own savings-credit and consumer co-operative society —the Usha Multipurpose Co-operative, which was registered under the West Bengal Co-operative Societies Act, 1983. At its inception, the co-operative received the personal support of the government minister for the department of co-operatives, who agreed to provide Rs 1 Lakh from his departmental funds to initiate the co-operative. The co-operative in early 1999 had six governing body members, all of whom were sex workers, and the treasurer was a retired government official who had worked in the co-operatives department and offered his friendly voluntary services to the co-operative. The original aim of the society was to achieve self-reliance for sex workers in securing financial loans to meet unforeseen special needs or to tide over emergencies and periods of enforced idleness from work due to ill health or family problems. Loans have been usually secured by sex workers from local usurers at exorbitant rates of interest, which frequently forces them into long periods of indebtedness and adds to their financial insecurity and poverty. The Usha co-operative aims to surmount this problem by accepting regular deposits from the sex workers, from which loans are advanced to those in need. The co-operative also seeks to address issues like old-age security and availability of products for daily use at affordable prices, which includes the

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[82] Group discussion on violence, 19.3.99.

[83] Group discussion, 17.3.99.

social marketing of condoms. While the savings and credit aspects of the co-operative's work, as well as the marketing of condoms, are now well established, the other functions are being gradually developed. In particular, a home for elderly or retired sex workers is being planned, for which land has been purchased, where vocational training and self-employment schemes for them would be introduced, such as the production of handicrafts for sale. Future plans include the provision of evening or nighttime nursery or crèche facilities for the children of practising sex workers.[84]

While self-reliance and economic security are central to the establishment of this co-operative society, interestingly, issues of identity and social recognition are also integral to its formation and operation. At the time of the registration of the co-operative, official objection was raised about prostitutes forming such a co-operative, for it would violate a clause in the regulations which stipulated that only persons of 'high moral character' were eligible. After much negotiation and direct appeals to the government, the minister for co-operatives agreed to omit the requirement 'of high moral character' from the relevant clause to pave the way to the formation of the Usha co-operative.[85] Moreover, the sex workers had been advised by the officials concerned to register their co-operative under the virtuous category of 'housewives', but they refused to hide behind this euphemistic epithet and insisted on retaining their own description as sex workers (the Bengali term *jouno kormi*).[86] This victory over ensuring the acceptance of their identity as sex workers was no less significant to them than the actual achievement of organizing and successfully running the co-operative. In pursuance of this identity through the co-operatives movement, the office-bearers now make it a point to attend various government meetings and training sessions for co-operative societies and their members, as well as participating in the Annual Co-operatives Fair (*Samabaya Mela*). Saraswati Sarkar, the secretary of the co-operative argued at the 1999 Annual General Meeting of the Usha Co-operative,[87] that she did not always learn much from these meetings about the running of a co-operative society, but she felt that the main purpose was to register their presence as sex workers among the personnel of other co-operatives. She recounted that sex workers attending these meetings have

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84 Personal interview with Saraswati Sarkar, sex worker and secretary of Usha Co-operative, 19.3.99; Some information was also gleaned from my attendance at the Annual General Meeting of the Usha Co-operative on 15.3.1999.

85 Information supplied by Dr. Jana, director of SHIP.

86 Jana, S., *et al.* (1998) *op. cit.:* 8.

87 I attended this meeting on 15.3.99.

often been ostracized by other participants, and have, at times, been meted out ill-treatment by officials when it comes to accommodation, food or reimbursement of travel expenses. However, despite this humiliating experience, she was determined to continue representing the Usha co-operative at these public meetings to earn the sex workers their rights and to wrest the proper treatment to which they, like all others, were entitled. Moreover, following discussions at the AGM about seeking official redressal, she undertook to despatch a letter of protest to the co-operatives department. Significantly, a great deal of the time of the AGM was taken up for discussion of this issue, alongside other agenda items to do with accounts and activities. This case of the Usha co-operative is an interesting example of the inextricable interplay of practical material concerns with the urge to express identity and rights by the sex workers. It may be principally due to the latter reason that the sex workers who are members of the co-operative show their full commitment to the society, depositing their money with regularity and rarely defaulting on repayment of loan interests.[88] It is also worth noting that several sex workers who came to join the co-operative over time mentioned that initially they had been wary of the co-operative, expecting it to be yet another organization aiming to rob them of their money. However, they soon came to realize that the distinguishing feature of this co-operative was that it was their own and run by themselves.[89] It was evidently this sense of ownership that gave them the confidence to commit their hard-earned money to the Usha co-operative and to comply scrupulously with the savings and credit rules.

It is obvious from all these activities that sex workers have gained important material or practical advantages as a result of the formation of, and their participation in, the DMSC. They have been able to achieve greater power and economic standing within the sex trade and its social milieu. They have successfully resisted oppression in many cases and improved their bargaining power considerably vis-à-vis the power brokers in the trade. In addition to these tangible benefits, they have developed a perceived sense of exercising their own newly acquired power to reverse the relations of dominance in the locality. Above all, they have nurtured a notion of solidarity and experienced the exhilaration of collective action. The DMSC's activities have gathered increasing momentum, fuelled by the heady brew of standing together publicly and challenging powerful groups with success. One sex worker pointed out during a group discussion, while many of the others concurred,

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[88] Personal interview with Saraswati Sarkar, 19.3.99.

[89] Group discussion, 17.3.99.

that the most poignant and emblematic moment in the DMSC's career was a midnight procession of sex workers with flaming torches on Labour Day, 1st of May 1998.[90] Not only did they seek to establish their identity as workers by celebrating Labour Day, but equally crucially, they dared to transgress the spatial and symbolic boundaries etched out for them by society. Through this procession, all those who work furtively in the nocturnal darkness of the back lanes burst forth triumphantly on to the main streets of the city, without shame or fear, glowing and illuminated with their own firelight. This was an event of great exuberance, expressive of the sex workers' new found power, inner strength and confidence.

Instances like these suggest that political activism and social mobilization have themselves acted as the main motor in driving group action forward, and in generating a strong belief in and commitment to community cohesion and collective political assertion. If the DMSC's activities had been confined to practical achievements alone, then the organization is most likely to have been a protean or transient one, in which women participated fitfully or spasmodically based on specific issues at particular times. Moreover, instead of being based on co-operation, the organization may well have become the focus of conflict and competition of rival sections of sex workers, each seeking to gain control over material and practical benefits. Indeed, this is what seems to have happened to the Shramajibi Mahila Sangha in Sethbagan a few years earlier, mentioned above. Brought together in pursuit of practical goals, this organization seems to have failed to elicit the enduring commitment or cohesive action of its participants. In contrast, the DMSC has been able to sustain itself as a united entity, with a continuing organizational presence. This has been possible because all of the activities of the DMSC, described so far, have implicitly or explicitly encompassed the elements of collective mobilization, political struggle and community identity. As we shall now see, all of these elements would be far more overtly expressed in some of the other major activities of the DMSC.

One of the key initiatives of the DMSC, frequently and usually with advice and assistance from SHIP, has been to enhance the profile of sex workers as a socially responsible community in the public sphere. In a group discussion, a majority of sex workers stated that as a result of the activities of the DMSC in this particular respect, they have been able to meet people from all walks of life with confidence, to present themselves in society with dignity, and to

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90 *Ibid. (*statement of Anima Banerjee).

stand up in society in equal terms as other citizens.[91] In this regard, the DMSC's initiatives are many and varied.[92] From 1993, every year, the DMSC (or its precursor, the Interlink Committee) has participated in the Calcutta Book Fair, the single most important annual intellectual and cultural event in the city of Calcutta. They have sold and distributed published material which explains their problems, needs and struggle. Through such participation, the DMSC has sought a footing in society for the sex workers.[93] The DMSC has also convened regular national and state level meetings and conferences to register their presence in public politics, and the organization has sought to ensure that such occasions are graced by the presence of influential public personalities, including government ministers and politicians, who now covet the electoral support of this highly mobilized constituency of sex workers. The association of prominent figures and dignitaries with the DMSC has earned the organization much needed public attention and recognition. This has also permitted the DMSC to locate itself in the mainstream of institutional political life of the state. On the one hand, this has greatly boosted the power they can now exercise in their locality. On the other hand, it has given the sex workers a collective sense of authority and confidence. An international news magazine quotes a sex worker who revels in the following fact: 'Now we sit across from public officials and discuss our health and welfare.'[94] In addition to political meets, a number of discussion sessions have been hosted by the DMSC with members of the Calcutta intelligentsia, who have historically played a key role in moulding dominant social discourses in the city and in setting the public agenda of ideological debates. At these discussions, the sex workers, now vocal and articulate, armed with arguments generated initially by the ideologues of SHIP but reinterpreted, appropriated and elaborated by themselves, have reasoned and argued on equal terms with the most adept of Calcutta's chattering classes. The DMSC, with advice from SHIP, was shrewd enough to realize that in order to define a new collective identity for themselves, which would be socially acceptable, they would need to convince the opinion moulders and win them over. More recently, some sex workers have also expressed their own eagerness to reach out directly to and win over, not just influential people but ordinary men and women—'our domestic sisters' (*grihasta bonera)*. They hope to achieve this by staging plays and cultural programmes in residential neighbourhoods and street-corners, which

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[91] Group discussion, 17.3.99.

[92] An exhaustive list of the DMSC's activities until 1997 can be found in Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.:* 35-40, 42-3.

[93] *Ibid.:* 5.

[94] *Newsweek,* 15 February, 1999.

would delineate the plight of the sex workers and explicate the justice of their cause.[95] This approach differs from the strategy for social recognition adopted by the DMSC so far with SHIP advice. However, the fact that ordinary members of DMSC and the new peer educators expressed their own distinctive suggestions for outreach activities at a recent capacity building workshop, indicates that more and more sex workers are attempting to put their own stamp on the activities of the DMSC and evolving their own strategies to gain public acceptance of their cause.

It is not simply through publicity, meetings, verbal persuasion or words alone, but through deeds too, that the sex workers of the DMSC have sought to make themselves socially acceptable as a community. It has been seen earlier that the sex workers have consistently sought to present themselves as morally upright and law-abiding, with a sense of civic duty. In addition, the DMSC has attempted to contribute to what they project as socially valuable work. Two areas of work have been particularly emphasized—the prevention of AIDS and child prostitution, in both of which the sex workers can make a particularly significant intervention. The sex workers have not only sought to contain AIDS by altering their own sexual practices, but they have launched AIDS awareness campaigns in the city, organized candle-lit vigils in memory of AIDS victims, attended international conferences on AIDS control, and have introduced a telephone advisory service on AIDS—the 'Positive Hotline', womanned by the sex workers themselves. This hotline, which was started on 18 November 1998, with the unmistakable hand of SHIP behind it, offers emotional counselling, health information and legal advice, as well as free blood test for HIV/AIDS screening to interested callers. Although the problem of AIDS is perhaps not one that overly exercises respectable society in Calcutta, this initiative has gained the DMSC international acclaim, which has, in turn, augmented the social standing of sex workers in Calcutta. Moreover, they have been able to portray their AIDS work as designed for public health benefits and the greater good of society, rather than for the self-interested needs of the sex workers alone. The DMSC has also attempted to prevent the entry of minors into the profession and rescued several young girls and sent them back to their families. The established or ageing sex workers, of course, have an obvious interest in restricting the induction of desirable young women into the trade to retain their own clientele. However, until the formation of the DMSC, it was not possible for the sex workers to achieve this end. The much publicized success that the DMSC has now

[95] Discussion at the day-workshop on capacity building of the DMSC and on future plans, 25.3.99.

attained in containing under-aged prostitution[96] has enhanced the image of the sex workers as responsible citizens.

It is worth bearing in mind here that in the 1980s and 90s, globally considerable value was attached to these two areas of work—AIDS and child labour. In the world of international development, with percolating effects on most Third World states, the 1980s saw a celebration of AIDS related work, while the 1990s have been consumed with attempts to eradicate child labour. The DMSC, with SHIP assistance no doubt, did not miss the obvious developmental kudos and social or political mileage to be gained from promoting work on AIDS and on child prostitution, arguably the most exploitative and damaging form of child labour. The sex workers of DMSC have been able to locate their work successfully in the interstices of these global trends to define themselves as a community of virtue. Indeed, work in these two areas has secured the DMSC international recognition, which has, in turn, enabled them to promote their virtuous image within their immediate social context in Calcutta. In an age of globalization in diverse facets of the economy and the society, the elevation of the status of sex workers in global arenas has helped them to carve out a niche for themselves in Calcutta society and politics. While it is possible for external observers to be cynical about the sex workers' strategic use of the issues of AIDS and child labour, it would be incorrect, however, to assume that the sex workers engaged in these activities merely to leap on to the bandwagon for instrumental reasons to do with publicity. We shall be misinterpreting the situation if we assume quite simply that these were propaganda ploys, masterminded by SHIP, to augment the visibility and the respectability of the sex workers. While being fully alive to the propaganda benefits, the sex workers themselves have also evidently taken their role in social work very seriously, and internalized the self-image of being responsible, socially aware citizens. In group discussions and in personal interviews, several of them argued that they feel it to be their social duty to act in the interest of public good, especially in the case of AIDS, where they have evidently much to contribute. It was pointed out that in the past, because of lack of confidence and low self-esteem, they had been immobilized and failed to act as socially responsible people. However, with their experience of doing social work as peers in the SHIP project and their newly gained knowledge about STD and AIDS, they now feel able to undertake public work in this sphere. One sex worker expanded the significance of this transformation to say that in the past, if she saw an injured

[96] According to SHIP surveys, in 1995, 1 in 5 sex workers was aged 19 or less, while in 1998, 1 in 30 was in that age group.

person involved in a road accident, she would simply have stayed aloof and walked away with the view that she was a lowly social outcast, who had neither the right nor skills to step in and help. However, now she feels that she too can act like any other citizen and help such a person.[97] It is indeed with this spirit of duty and newly acquired capacity that they attempt to carve out a role for themselves in what they describe as social work.

This new identity defined through conceptions of civic awareness and social duty and a right to intervene in public issues have been fleshed out in some other initiatives of the DMSC. The DMSC has taken part in women's day celebrations, and attended meetings in 1998 in protest against nuclear detonation by the Indian government. Similarly, in one of their meetings with intellectuals recently in March 1999, sex workers of the DMSC set the agenda to discuss the plight of minorities in India and public policy safeguards for them. This selection of theme appears to have been influenced by the recent persecution of Christians and other minorities by Hindu chauvinist groups in India. The sex workers of the DMSC expressed their empathy for the predicament of the persecuted as akin to their own social experience, and argued for the entitlement of all minorities to special treatment and affirmative action by the state. Interestingly, in Indian politics, the term 'minority community' refers less to the small numerical size of a community and more to historical exploitation and social deprivation faced by such a community. By aligning and identifying themselves with the minorities, the sex workers are seeking to root their community identity in a history of social oppression and exclusion. In all of these initiatives then, we repeatedly come back to the central issue of community identity in the politics of the DMSC.

In the cultural initiatives undertaken by the DMSC, with the help and advice of SHIP, we again find the central issue of community identity. The DMSC has formed a cultural front—*Komal Gandhar*—'to express ourselves through music, dance, plays, painting and writing'.[98] The sex workers of the DMSC have staged cultural performances of their own and undertaken creative writing themselves, some of which has been published in the regular journal of SHIP, entitled *Namaskar,* meaning greeting or salutation, seemingly alluding to the initiation of the sex workers' dialogue and communication with wider society. Art competitions and cultural programmes have also been organized involving the children of the sex workers. All this is intended to

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[97] Group Discussion, 17.3.99, and personal interviews with Putul Singh and Kohinoor Begum, 18.3.99.

[98] Leaflet of *Komal Gandhar,* available from the DMSC/SHIP office.

give the sex workers and their children 'an opportunity to claim the right to enjoy ourselves through cultural expression'.[99] However, cultural pursuits are not simply about recreation and entertainment alone, but about the right of free, open and public self-expression for those who are denied such rights. Moreover, the sex workers also expect that cultural activities would help in 'neutralizing some of the brutalizing experiences' that they and their children face.[100] As Reba Mitra put it, cultural endeavours allow them to reveal their hidden and repressed talents. Cultural activities enable the inner light or latent spark in their children to shine forth and be ignited into creative efflorescence, ultimately inspiring them to seek enlightenment and knowledge.[101] Sex workers devote themselves to original, creative work, for they feel that such expressions of their talent earn them the right to place themselves in the midst of respectable society by virtue of their own cultural achievements. Their cultural performances have, above all, provided the opportunity to sex workers to define themselves as a community with a distinctive culture and history.

At the national level, much recent interest has been shown by cultural elites in recovering the performing traditions of courtesans and other folk or public entertainers, whose genres of music or dance have been rendered nearly obsolete by the steady ascendance of public service and commercial broadcasting, television and cinema for almost a century. *Guria*, an organization based in Delhi, sought specifically to provide a public forum for the art of courtesans and public or fallen women by organizing a national cultural festival in 1998.[102] *Guria* had a supplementary aim that commercial stage performances would provide sources of livelihood to prostitutes and help in their social rehabilitation.[103] The sex workers of DMSC are not, of course, oriented towards rehabilitation. What is more, they do not have a distinctive performing tradition today. Particular forms of popular music and dance did prevail among sex workers in the nineteenth century, but these had been subjected to systematic reformist onslaught by the respectable classes for

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99 *Ibid.*

100 *Ibid.*

101 Group Discussion, 17.3.99.

102 *Nav Bharat Times,* 29 March, 1998; *The Pioneer*, 27 March, 1998.

103 *Hindusthan*, 1 April, 1998; *Swatantra Bharat*, 1 April, 1998; *Times of India*, 23 April, 1998.

being vulgar, immoral and unrefined.[104] By the early twentieth century, the performing arts of the sex workers had been effaced, to be gradually replaced by song and dance forms inspired by the burgeoning film industry. Undeterred by this, however, members of *Komal Gandhar* seized the opportunity provided by *Guria*. They staged a musical play, entitled *Amader Katha* (Our Story), which was not merely intended as an aesthetic production, but aimed to express and construct a historical and cultural identity of the sex workers. *Amader Katha* depicted the story of young women driven by poverty to red light districts, and then being exploited by police, madams and toughs, and forced to perform unprotected sex.[105] The play poignantly portrayed the emotions of anger and pain of the sex workers, and won the highest award at the festival. More recent productions of *Komal Gandhar* delineate the creation of forms of royal and priestly power and the historical development of prostitution, and relate these to the present predicament of the sex workers and the genesis of their united protest with the DMSC.[106] In this way, the sex workers are actively constructing a history for themselves as a community, while at the same time attempting to root their experience in the general history of humankind.

Following their spectacular success in the *Guria* sponsored festival, the performers of *Komal Gandhar* have participated in a number of national and international cultural festivals with similar skill and commitment, and have been much feted. Most notably, they performed at the 12th World AIDS Conference in Geneva, where, after an initial audition, they were invited to stage their performance at the inaugural session.[107] The enormity of this great honour, as they see it, has entrenched this event in the collective memory of the sex workers with great symbolic significance. This achievement was recounted to me by a large number of sex workers as if it was personally attained by each of them, although only a handful of them actually travelled to Geneva. All of them partake of the glory of the few, and the winning of cultural recognition has been a source of extraordinary confidence and pride, not only to the performers themselves, but to all others. For, this achievement

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[104] For the reform of popular performing traditions, including those of sex workers, see Banerjee, S. (1989) *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta.* Calcutta.

[105] Personal interview with Mala Singh, 17.3.99; Undated press-cuttings from *Nai Duniya* and *Dainik Jagaran,* held at the DMSC office.

[106] Personal interview with Sudipta Biswas, sex worker and performer with *Komal Gandhar*, 18.3.99.

[107] *The Telegraph,* 28 July, 1998; personal interviews with a number of sex workers.

is seen by all to be a proof that sex workers are capable of marking their place in the arena of high culture and art. To them, their cultural excellence has exploded the myth that the sex workers are uncultured, unrefined or coarse.[108] Putul Singh thus joyously declares that it has now been demonstrated that 'we do not lag behind anybody; we are not backward women'.[109] Evidently, the struggle of the sex workers is not only about tangible exercise of power, but also about contesting their exclusion from symbolic and cultural forms of power.

The DMSC has also striven to gain the formal recognition of the rights of sex workers under the law, as originally proposed by SHIP. They ask for the legal recognition of sex work as a legitimate profession and argue for the abolition of PITA, the 1986 Act governing the control of prostitution. They have demanded the rights of workers, as well as those of ordinary citizens. They have also expressed their need for an autonomous board, like those constituted by the professional associations of lawyers, doctors or teachers. They demand the right to create such a board with formal state recognition for the internal regulation of the sex trade. However, all these demands are not merely about formal, legal rights, but encapsulates their keen need to surmount the dehumanizing and mortifying social experience of being sex workers. At a capacity building workshop of the DMSC attended by a large number of ordinary members, the benefits to be gained from legal recognition, workers' rights and the constitution of an autonomous board were described not simply in terms of gaining legal power to contend more effectively with madams, pimps, landlords, police or hooligans, but also in the following ways:

> We shall be able to stand with our heads held high in society. We shall be able to stand on our own feet. Society [*samaj*] will be forced to accept that we too have the right to be alive and exist as humans. We had been as good as dead in the past, but now we can live again as human beings. We will be able to regain our rights over our bodies [*shorirer adhikar*]. We will have those rights that women usually enjoy in society [which are denied to sex workers as 'socially deviant females']. We shall be able to protest against injustice.[110]

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[108] Group discussion, 17.3.99; personal interviews with Mala Singh and Putul Singh, 17.3.99 and 18.3.99.

[109] Group discussion, 17.3.99; personal interview with Putul Singh, 18.3.99.

[110] DMSC day-workshop on capacity building and future plans, 25.3.99.

Here we see a combination of identity issues and the need for practical empowerment through legal rights. It is relevant to note in this respect that sex workers feel that legal recognition would allow them to reveal their identity in public, without fear of criminalization. Many of them are already eschewing secrecy with the confidence that they have gained from political mobilization. Increasingly, they feel that as an organized community they can relinquish their anonymity as they can now stand proudly with their 'heads held high',[111] and legal recognition would further buttress this process.

Lest all of what has been said so far has portrayed an idealized image of sex workers' political mobilization as wonderfully moving and romantic, beckoning us to celebrate the true struggles of real, and particularly wretched, people, let me hasten to disabuse this impression. It needs reiteration that this is all about hard political strife and a messy, bitter struggle. The sex workers have to rock the edifice of historically inherited and socially reproduced prejudices, as well as uproot entrenched structures of power. Their political activity is thus not about pretty cultural programmes and high spirited symbolic gestures, as might appear on the surface. Their political struggle is also rather far from the anodyne social impact of SHIP, as it has been characterized in the brochure entitled *The Fallen Learn to Rise.* With a keen sense of political realities, the sex workers have addressed themselves beyond the confines of the city and sought legitimacy and endorsement from abroad and from the development community. They have evidently come to understand the importance of this political game well, and some talk of the need to be *au fait* with the art of *kutniti*—Machiavellian diplomacy.[112] All are aware of the visitors and always in readiness to present a positive and development-friendly public face—a combination of exploited innocence, confidence and achievement. However, under the niceties of a development intervention, what is unfolding here is a serious and fierce struggle, and it is indeed this dimension of struggle for redefinition of collective identity and entitlement to rights and power that makes the DMSC as a group effective, dynamic and successful in achieving what may be termed as equity and well-being from their own perspective. Not only have public health indicators improved dramatically as SHIP would remind us, but as DMSC activists emphasize, the sex workers are now proud, confident, in control of their lives and destinies, socially and politically assertive, and able to fight to defend their rights as workers and citizens in an environment in which they are themselves redefining the extant relations of power. Indeed, these were the

111 Personal interview with Putul Singh, 25.3.99.

112 Group discussion, 17.3.99, especially comments by Mala Singh.

elements emphasized by all those who attended group discussions during my research and responded eagerly and enthusiastically, often emotionally, to the questions why they participate in the DMSC and what they have gained. Moreover, arguably, their capacity to elicit practical benefits, be it from madams or the police or local authorities or the state or development agencies, has been greatly augmented by their ability to present themselves publicly as a cohesive group, based in turn on their successful definition of collective self-identity. Even the spectacular public health successes of SHIP are ultimately undoubtedly based on the interplay of SHIP with the collective action of the DMSC.

VII CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can we draw from this case of sex workers about motivation for group formation and group mobilization, and about the nature of vibrant group activity? In other words, what stimulated participation in group action, promoted individual commitment to the group, and engendered co-operative action and group cohesion? What contributed to its success in achieving well-being and equity, and in making itself dynamic and sustainable? Three main points can be highlighted:

i. Recasting of identity, reconceptualization of capabilities, and redefinition of subjectivity.
ii. Construction of community.
iii. Political action to challenge extant forms of power, and the role of such political struggle in impelling the sustained and committed engagement of sex workers in DMSC politics.

Undeniably, the practical benefits that the sex workers hoped to gain, initially from joining the SHIP project as peer educators, and then by forming the DMSC, played an important role in motivating them to engage in collective action. However, arguably, the attraction of these practical incentives alone may well have confined their engagement in group activity to self-interested *quid pro quo* type transactions. Moreover, group activity based entirely on the tangible, material benefits reaped by members can easily cause a group to become riven with internal conflict over spoils, and is also unlikely to inspire either consensual collective action or enduring participation. However, the case of the sex workers show that the salience of the issues of community, identity and struggle for power has engendered both co-operation and

continued participation. These points will be elaborated below in this concluding discussion, drawing together and underscoring some arguments presented in the course of this paper.

7.1 The role of SHIP, community construction and the political conception of empowerment

The specific nature of the development intervention in this case study is significant, for SHIP emphasized a community-based approach and empowerment.[113] Of course, these are now catch phrases in development discourse, and deployed indiscriminately. What is interesting and important about SHIP is the specific interpretation of this 'community-based approach' and the notion of 'empowerment', coupled with the ways in which SHIP sought to facilitate their implementation and realization in practice. Community-based approaches often assume that there is a community already in existence, bounded and easily identifiable even if internally stratified, heterogeneous or conflictual, which can be made the target of development interventions. However, SHIP rightly realized that sex workers were not a community in any sense, a point that is now well recognized in the development literature on HIV/AIDS interventions.[114] Sex workers lack the usual identifiable community attributes of shared sense of belonging, experience, history, memory, origin or abode as well as common social codes and ideas. The important interventional issue then is not to find a community for development that does not exist in the first place, but to facilitate the ideological definition and discursive construction of a community, which would then animate the action of the newly constructed group. Community-based approaches which assume that a group exists out there and can be simply and unproblematically targetted is flawed to begin with. Instead, for community mobilization, be it for political activism or development policy intervention and managed change, communities have to be constructed, both ideologically and through collective action, in such a way as to generate common purpose over some specific goals. It is indeed this approach that SHIP seems to have taken. SHIP and DMSC succeed because a community identity has been defined on which consensus over group action is based. This does not, of course, imply that all sex workers are entirely united in all aspects of their lives. However, it does mean that they see themselves as a community *within the context of their group action and their political struggle.* It is only here, and crucially here, that they stand as a cohesive and united entity. It is in

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113 For community development approaches to HIV/AIDS intervention, see Evans, C. (1999) *op. cit.*: *passim:* 12-13, 15, 33-4.

114 *Ibid.:* 12-13.

this context that they perceive themselves as a community, and project themselves as such, variously for social recognition, practical benefits and power struggles.

The second important dimension of SHIP's intervention relates to empowerment. Empowerment here, certainly unusually although not uniquely in the history of development interventions, has been interpreted not simply to mean better economic conditions or bargaining power, but more broadly to encompass a struggle through which extant social perceptions are challenged and through which alterations are sought in power relations. This is an overtly political conception of empowerment, which has to be operationalized through political mobilization and social action. In development literature and practice, even when empowerment is seen in its broader sense, the need for political action to translate this into practice is seldom, if ever, acknowledged. Of course, this is partly because excessive emphasis on political struggle in development initiatives can elicit adverse responses from power-holders and the state, and can even put off donors for the potentially destabilizing political consequences. Moreover, the underlying aim of development interventions is rarely to reconfigure power relations through wholesale structural changes in society and politics. In development practice, therefore, political action is hardly ever envisaged as a means of realigning power relations. Instead, 'advocacy' for better policy regimes or redirection of resources in favour of the disadvantaged appear to be the favoured mode of action for empowerment, and political initiatives are framed in this limited sense.[115] Interestingly, SHIP too does not seem to have escaped the problems inherent in political mobilization within a developmental context, despite its broader understanding of the concept of empowerment. SHIP often seems prone to masking the obvious political dimension of DMSC's activism under the description of the social impact of STD/HIV intervention programme. Thus, while SHIP seems to have unleashed what are in essence serious political struggles, yet these are categorized under the developmentally acceptable terminology of an integrated approach to managed change that steps beyond public health interventions and incorporates some wider aspects of the problems faced by the target group of sex workers. Moreover, the problem of political resistance to DMSC by powerful groups was, to some extent, diffused by emphasizing that the DMSC's aim was not to be disruptive of political order and by presenting mobilized sex workers as socially responsible citizens engaged in social work. In addition, now that a certain

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115 Mencher, J. (1999) 'NGOs: Are they a force for change?', *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 34, No. 30: 2083.

degree of mobilization has been achieved, and this has also served the purpose of advancing the public health cause, SHIP appears to be favouring a more restrained or limited approach. As we shall soon see, concerns over the institutionalization of DMSC and its organizational sustainability seem to be taking precedence over activist political struggles and mounting radical ideological or social challenges. Despite these ambiguities however, SHIP's interpretation of empowerment in terms of a social, political and ideological struggle has gone a long way in enabling group activity to succeed by allowing the political activism of the DMSC.[116]

Based on the above, then, we can argue that the specific nature of SHIP's intervention contributed to, and created an enabling environment for, the successful functioning of the DMSC and the attainment of many of its goals.

7.2 The DMSC and collective identity

It is obvious from the case of the sex workers that, for such a group to emerge and then to function effectively and remain dynamic, the issue of definition of collective identity is paramount. As Dr Jana, director of SHIP, puts it, the most important aim was to 'develop in these women a sense of identity which they have lost ... [and] this awakening is the most significant thing that the [SHIP] programme has achieved. These women are now challenging the age-old notions and trying to reconstruct their identity'.[117] From the perspective of the sex workers, as we have seen, the urgent need is to redefine who they are socially and what they are capable of, in order to escape from dark, blind alleys into brightness and light, and to live a 'public' life, in which they have equal rights to all others in society. The sex workers' statements and action are a constant reminder of the fact that without the issue of identity, to them most action would be meaningless—truly devoid of meaning, and only partially relevant to their needs. Of course, as we have seen, this definition of identity is about belonging and a sense of community, and thus about the primacy of the collective or the group. Had the issue of collective, as opposed to individual, identity not been at the centre of the activities of DMSC, the group might never have coalesced, let alone achieved its various success. To return to a point I raised in the introduction to this paper, methodological individualism prevents us from engaging with this central issue in group

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[116] It is worth noting here that the success of another organization of women in India, the well-known SEWA, an association of the self-employed for micro-level enterprise development, has also been attributed partly to the fact that SEWA does 'focus their [i.e., the women's] power and agitate when necessary'. *Ibid.:* 2082-83.

[117] Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) *op. cit.:* 20.

dynamics, and thus undermines the ways in which group action and behaviour can be effectively conceptualized. The centrality of collective identity, in the case of the sex workers, clearly underpinned the individuals' commitment to the group and encouraged altruism, co-operation and cohesion among its members.

7.3 Political struggle as the motor of group action and cohesion

The importance of political struggles has already been partly discussed earlier in this concluding section when analysing the significance of SHIP's interpretation of the concept of empowerment. Moreover, in the course of the paper, we have seen that exhilaration and excitement generated by agitational politics and activism played a crucial role in propelling forward the sex workers in their group activity. The successes achieved against the powerful through political struggles, as well as the dramatic, spectacular and symbolic elements of political mobilization, bred ever greater conviction and enthusiasm among the sex workers and gave a major fillip to group activity. Individual commitment to group activity was thus, to a large extent, predicated on political activism. Most importantly, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that the sex workers view their political struggles as the single most important *raison d'être* of their organization—the DMSC. This was most emphatically brought out at a recent meeting of the central executive committee of the DMSC on 26 March 1999, where the future of the DMSC was one of the main items on the agenda. In early 1999, it was planned that the DMSC would gradually take over the actual running of the STD/HIV intervention programme, and in this context, the meeting explored the questions of organizational enlargement, sustainability and capacity building of the DMSC. Issues initially addressed at the meeting, partly encouraged and framed by SHIP personnel who were present, included augmenting membership, reaching out to larger numbers of sex workers and involving them in the work of DMSC, improvement in the functioning of the health clinics, fund raising and plans for future organizational consolidation. However, gradually the concerns of the meeting seemed to shift away from themes of organizational continuity and resilience, as DMSC activists began to express the need to expand the range of their political struggles rather than concentrating merely on strengthening the organization. They felt that the organization would begin to stagnate and ossify if they failed to continue to give leadership to all sex workers both in local struggles and in challenging the powerful. Even if the formal membership figures were boosted, they argued, it would not be possible to maintain the commitment and engagement of the constituency of support unless the DMSC stayed in the forefront of the diverse struggles of the sex workers. One sex worker, Sadhana Mukherjee,

former Secretary of the DMSC, stated that their next task, after having successfully tamed hooligans, the police and the power brokers within the sex industry, should be to take on the powerful political parties in an attempt to further the wider political goals of sex workers. Many hurdles and enemies had been overcome, she argued, but many more still remained, including some most formidable ones. Moreover, the fruits of the battles already won had to be vigilantly protected through continuing political activism. The future development of the DMSC depended on the sex workers' ability to face all these challenges. It seemed that in her view, simply fortifying the organization, in the sense of routinized bureaucratic institutionalization, would not help the cause of sustainability. Instead, the need was for the momentum and dynamism of mobilizational activities to be maintained, which had lent the DMSC its early buoyancy and vibrancy. Although no very clear plan emerged at this meeting about the way forward, it was still evident that the sex workers keenly appreciated the importance of political action in maintaining group activity. The key problem of capacity building was seen by them in a specific light here, not to do with organizational efficiency but with a will and conviction to mount political struggles.

A further point about the relevance of political struggles in moulding group action can be raised here. As briefly mentioned in the introduction to this paper, it is usually assumed that co-operative group behaviour derives from a history of shared norms, social capital and unity in action. However, group cohesion in the case of sex workers did not emanate from such a historically inherited stock of social capital, but from the construction of community identity and an activist political struggle. This realization helps us to broaden the discussion about the nature and significance of social capital, if it is taken loosely to mean a set of shared ideas that promote co-operative behaviour. The sex workers' case provides evidence that those who are not fortunate enough to be able to draw upon a pool of pre-given social capital are not forever doomed to destructive fractious strife, but can actually forge such capital through collective political struggle.

7.4 Final methodological musings

The discussion about social capital and group action may be advanced by steering away from the Putnam inspired model, and drawing upon a literature which emphasizes the centrality of 'power' in the operation of 'capital'—both economic and non-economic. Some time before Putnam became fashionable, Pierre Bourdieu theorized the ways in which cultural capital is created and accumulated by dominant groups to establish social and political hegemony, successfully or unsuccessfully. Hegemonic social groups cohere and act in

unison to create and maintain cultural capital in order to sustain and reproduce their own power. They seek to use their cultural capital to elicit compliance of other social groups and to impose social cohesion. In this literature, cultural capital is not a unifying or consensual force in society at large, but a divisive, even coercive, one. Its accumulation unleashes contestation over its control and generates struggles for power. Those seeking to challenge hegemonic groups and their cultural capital formulate opposing discourses, and these oppositional or subordinate groups then act unitedly against dominant ones. If we locate our study of the case of the sex workers in this understanding of non-economic capital, it shows us how sex workers seek to create their own counter-hegemonic cultural and social capital, and how that, in turn, fuels and underpins their group action. In other words, dynamic group action can emanate from struggles to create counter-hegemonic social or cultural capital, rather than being nurtured and facilitated by pre-existing, apparently consensual social capital, as conceived by Putnam and others writing within that frame of analysis.

A final conceptual point, suggested by the case of the sex workers and relevant to an interpretation of group behaviour, is worth emphasizing here. If we are to take groups seriously and put them at the centre of our analysis as a heuristic category, then we have to go beyond methodological individualism, as the empirical case of the sex workers show. Here we see how individuals find meaning in and identify themselves with the group, and how the group defines their identity, and shapes their goals and patterns of behaviour. If we try to understand group dynamics only in terms of what individuals bring to and gain from groups, then we undermine the determining influence of groups themselves on individual action and motivation. Unless we are able to conceptualize how groups shape individuals, we cannot fully unravel how groups function successfully, co-operatively and sustainably, as well as achieve well-being and equity for its members collectively.