

Article 2

An Interview with Jo Doezema, of the Network of Sex Work Projects: Does attention to trafficking adversely affect sex workers' rights?

by Elaine Murphy and Karin Ringheim

Question #1: As one of the earliest activists in the Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), can you tell us why NSWP was established and what it does?

I was not one of the founders of the NSWP, but came on board soon after it was set up. The original impetus for the NSWP came from the huge amount of interest in sex workers due to the AIDS pandemic. Vast amounts of resources were pumped into projects and research to stop sex workers from spreading AIDS, often to the detriment of sex workers themselves. The NSWP was set up as a network of health projects that were committed to putting the interests of sex workers foremost. All projects and individuals connected to the NSWP share the view of prostitution as legitimate labour, and are committed to fighting human rights abuses of sex workers.

In more recent years, the NSWP has expanded its focus to include more general human rights work, in particular the rights of migrant sex workers. The NSWP aims to provide practical information and opportunities for information-sharing among organizations and projects which provide services to women, men, and transsexuals who work in the sex industry. It also works to develop and maintain links between service providers, sex worker organizations and relevant international institutions and agencies. To achieve these ends, the NSWP has a website (www.walnet.org/NSWP) and an email list, as well as an over-worked and non-paid coordinator who runs the NSWP secretariat in Cape Town, South Africa. Another important function of the NSWP is to advocate at regional and global levels for policies and action which further the human rights of sex workers.

Question #2: Recently you published an article entitled, “Forced to Choose: Beyond the Voluntary-versus-Forced Prostitution Dichotomy, “ (in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, Routledge, 1998). If we under-

One might think that there would be no objections to reaching out to help trafficked persons. However, as this interview with Jo Doezema of the Network of Sex Work Projects reveals, even well-intended efforts to help one group can sometimes cause harm to another group. In this case, attempts to rescue trafficked girls from brothels can trample on the rights of voluntary sex workers. In addition, some groups inappropriately label all sex workers as trafficked persons, believing mistakenly that no one would willingly enter or stay in this occupation.

stand your position correctly, you and NSWP are concerned that directing attention to the trafficking issue will detract from the broader agenda of the sex worker rights movement. Can you elaborate on the reasons for this concern and, if possible, give an example to illustrate your concern?

One reason for our concern is the fact that most campaigns against trafficking focus exclusively on human rights violations committed by “pimps” or traffickers against “innocent women,” who are often understood to be non-sex workers. By contrast, sex worker organizations the world over identify the state, particularly the police, as the prime violators of sex workers’ rights. The result of shifting the locus of concern from state repression of sex workers to the individual acts of violent traffickers (reprehensible as these are) is that anti-trafficking campaigns often lack a critical attitude towards the state. Ironically, the lack of recognition of state repression of sex workers means that measures to combat trafficking often strengthen the hand of the state at the expense of sex workers. Historically, efforts to combat trafficking (earlier called “white slavery”) have ended up justifying repressive measures against prostitutes themselves. Efforts to combat trafficking thus often combine measures to punish traffickers with those to prevent women from entering or staying in the sex industry voluntarily.

This impulse to “protect” is combined, in these xenophobic and anti-immigrant times, with the desire to keep out “undesirable” aliens. The practical results of these sentiments are restrictions on movement and migration for women, increased surveillance of sex workers, and increased deportation of migrant sex workers. This point was made forcefully by Radhika Coomariswamy, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, at a recent conference (“Prostitution, Trafficking and the Global Sex Trade in Women,” at New York University Law School, March 2, 2001). Arguing that trafficking and prostitution should not be linked, she described how many Asian governments were responding to trafficking fears by legislating to restrict women’s freedom of movement. Deportations of sex workers are commonplace; one recent example is the UK, where the police raided London brothels and sent migrant sex workers packing. In the Netherlands, illegal migration/trafficking fears have led to a law which requires all sex workers to carry identification papers—the only occupational group for whom this is required.

Question #3: Please provide an example of a successful advocacy effort for sex workers’ rights undertaken by NSWP.

The NSWP carries out advocacy work at regional and international levels, particularly at international conferences, such as the international conferences on AIDS. In this type of forum, the NSWP has continually demanded a voice for sex workers in conference planning, the selection of conference presentations, on panels, and as conference participants.

Years of pressure have yielded some positive results. Sex workers are now a very visible presence at these conferences, both at an official level as presenters and unofficially as a still-needed voice of protest. (There is a full report on the NSWP Website of NSWP activities at the 2000 AIDS conference in Durban, South Africa.) These efforts have also led to changes in the wider context of HIV projects and research. In contrast to anti-trafficking projects, it is widely recognized in the health field that active participation of sex workers in projects and research is necessary to their success.

Question #4: Is there common ground between NSWP and organizations like PATH that seek to increase awareness of trafficking and to identify appropriate ways to combat involuntary labor of all types?

The NSWP has worked with anti-trafficking organizations, most recently in Vienna during the negotiations for a new UN agreement on trafficking in persons. Involuntary labour in the sex industry is taken seriously by sex worker organizations. For example, the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Calcutta (also known as the Sonagachi Project) has set up a programme run by sex workers to combat involuntary and child labour in the sex industry. Sex worker organizations see the non-recognition of sex work as legitimate labour as a primary factor behind the lack of decent working conditions, ranging from poor access to health care to bonded labour. Unfortunately, sex workers' commitment to ending involuntary labour is seldom reciprocated by an equal commitment to sex workers' rights on the part of anti-trafficking organizations. While many anti-trafficking organizations agree that prostitution should be recognized as legitimate labour, few put their campaigning muscle behind this idea.

Questions #5: If you could make three changes in the ways that sex workers are treated in most countries of the world, what would they be?

1. Treat sex workers as legitimate workers rather than as illegal or illegitimate threats to public order, moral values or feminist goals.
2. Treat sex workers as men and women capable of taking decisions about their own lives, rather than as victims of false consciousness or of their “backward” cultures.
3. Treat sex workers as multi-varied personalities with lives that are not defined or bounded by their experience in the sex industry, and not as “naughty rent boys” or pathetic sex slaves.