Developing Empowerment and Leadership from the Ground Up:

A case study on Costa Rican Sex Workers

Mzilikazi Koné

Ph.D Candidate

UCLA

Department of Political Science

I. Introduction

La Sala had finally received some funding. Finally. After almost six months of fieldwork there, a grant came through. At this point in time, the women of La Sala had been leading the project alone for about nine months. While they previously had both professional and academic leadership, the women were now on their own. There were supposed to be a number of grants in the pipeline to the project, but the dates on receiving any of them of them had continued to be pushed back. With this new funding from a United Nations agency, the women of La Sala could pay five months of back rent at their space and finally start work on a new project that they had been thinking about for a long time. La Sala organizers had been planning to create their own network of sex worker organizations in the country, modeled after RedTraSex, an international organization of sex workers in Latin America, of which La Sala is a member organization, and the Argentine sex worker organization AMMAR[[1]](#endnote--1). The organization AMMAR has various chapters represented in cities throughout the country. Their organization represents one of the more well funded and well-organized sex worker projects in Latin America. La Sala organizers want to develop other branches of their group in order to develop a national network of sex workers within the Costa Rica. Members affirm that there are many sex workers throughout the country, and that they remain largely unorganized as a group of workers.

One weekend in June 2012, the main organizers of the project journeyed to the south of Costa Rica in the dusty and commercial border town of Paso Canoas. It was decided that this location, six hours south from the capital city of San José, would host the first workshop organized *for* and *by* sex workers. The town seems to have sprung around and out from the centrally located border crossing with Panama. Strip malls and market booths line the streets with goods that were marketed as cheaper deals than you could find in the capital city. This was our second trip to the city, the first occurring only two weeks prior when we had come to make plans for this workshop. On the first trip, we went to Bar Felix, a small bar and brothel with about 10 men and women in it, the jukebox playing loud Dominican bachatas. La Sala members, Yasmin[[2]](#endnote-0), Nubia and Grettel went to the bar to look for the manager. They started discussing the workshop with a woman behind the bar, Evangeline, the Panamanian bar manager. The women explained who they were and their desire to have a workshop for sex workers to discuss the issues of HIV/AIDS, and discuss the possibilities of a network of sex workers in Costa Rica. To the surprise of La Sala members, Evangeline quickly agreed to help out and assured the attendance of 25 women, more women in fact then there had been funding for. This commitment to deliver participants to the workshop excited the women of La Sala, who promised to return in two weeks time. That night Evangeline’s commitment, along with easily locating and reserving space in which to hold the event, was a relatively swift and meaningful achievement. The project idea, funding, and event planning represented a major accomplishment for the women of La Sala. It was the first La Sala event to be created, run and organized by the new sex worker leadership of La Sala.

When I first went to La Sala, I found three women bravely holding down the project. Apparently, this is a far cry from the project in older days of consistent funding. As I would come to learn during my fieldwork, La Sala, like many non -profit organizations, experienced positive moments where the funding was available and abundant to the point of being able to offer services like free visits with a psychologist, workshops and holiday celebrations for women and their families. In January 2012, the lack of funding whittled down La Sala’s consistent participation to three remaining members who believed in the project enough to struggle to continue to keep the doors open. As the coordinator Nubia Ordoñez once told me, “somos las ultimas sobrevivientes del proyecto” (We are the last survivors of the project). This is an appropriate way to describe the membership at the time.

The story of La Sala is about the partnerships between sex workers as organizers, active agents in their process of education and empowerment and/or as service users of La Sala, and their connection to professionals and academics that had been connected to the project. The last year at La Sala reflects a point in which La Sala finally became an organization *for* and *by* sex workers, finally meeting a project goal set out in the 1997 Project Manual’s “Cycle of Empowerment”. The cycle is represented by 1) *wellbeing* (providing resources to the population), 2) *access* (being able to access the resources), 3) *consciousness raising* (critically analyze discrimination), 4) *participation* (having the population involved be a part of their own process of defining needs and project goals), and 5) *control* (with the group running the project and defining the direction of the project) (Van Wijk, 11). The recent transition to sex worker leadership is due to a multitude of reasons including strained finances at the project, tensions between the women and the academic leadership, and the lack of leadership and decision making abilities by the sex workers in the project. Furthermore, La Sala’s participation in the Latin American sex worker network RedTraSex also played a role in pressuring La Sala to develop and push for sex worker leadership at the project. The tensions and resulting conflict lead to the challenge by the women to push for a sex worker president. This eventual shift in the leadership of the project reflects a case in which we can question what it means to be collectively empowered and to assume leadership of this project. Since its start, La Sala has attempted to train and develop a collective consciousness around sex work as labor, encourage leadership skills in the women, and assert the goal of empowerment as both a personal and political process for sex workers.

The goal of this paper is to develop a complex perspective on La Sala around the issues of empowerment and leadership development at the project. It was always the goal of the Dutch Social Worker and founder of the project, Karina Van Wijk, that the sex workers eventually run the organization. This transition only took place in 2011, after 17 years of existence. Why did it take so long for the sex workers to lead the project? This paper will develop the goals and objectives of the original project and consider the affect of participation in RedTraSex in the development of empowerment and leadership at La Sala. Empowerment is popular concept, though it is often unclear what empowerment actually looks like. I will consider contemporary thinkers on the process of empowerment to address the question of what empowerment looks like at the project. The academic, professional and sex worker connection that has existed around La Sala highlights a unique organizing relationship not noted in the literature on sex worker movements or organizing. The study of La Sala suggests spaces for solidarity building and empowerment practices between these various groups of people, including sex workers, academics, practitioners and students. This project focuses on sex workers as organizers of the project and as local activists, actively attempting to shape the politics around sex work in Costa Rica and in the region.

II. Theoretical Framework

Empowerment is a concept that is used throughout various fields, from questions around collective action and social movement building to the language of development. Often times however the word is used without providing a clear understanding of what empowerment looks like. What does an empowered person look like? Rowlands (1997) explains the concept as related to various types of power, “In this framework, empowerment can be classified as a process in which people gain power over (resisting manipulation), power to (creating new possibilities), power with (acting in a group) and power from within (enhancing self- respect and self-acceptance)” (Samman and Santos, 8). In most circumstances, it is clear that empowerment is about a transfer of power from people who apparently understand it, or have access to it, to



Image 1- The old Canada Dry building where La Sala is located. La Sala is in the center. The yellow window shudder marks the left side of La Sala’s space. Photo by author.

people who do not. This process can be individual or community based. In the Research for Sex Work Newsletter’s Empowerment Issue (2000) empowerment is generally reflected by a play on three different types: personal, social and community empowerment. In Rowlands (1997) and Van Wijk (2000) note that though this concept is translated into Spanish as *empoderamiento*, it is still a bulky translation that is not universally understood. Rowlands suggests that the concept as more closely related to Friere’s (1970) ‘*conscientisation*’, translated to English as ‘consciousness raising’. In consciousness raising, the community itself has to find its own solutions to its problems. Rowlands (1997) reflects that this concept highlights, “individuals becoming subjects in their own lives and developing a critical consciousness- that is, an understanding of their circumstances and the social environment, that leads to action”(16) With both terms, the result of a heightened recognition of what is happening in the broader world, and the individuals connection/role in this larger world, is representative of a political process that affectively becomes political when people connect to others. Empowerment is often described as a process that is both internal and external (Rowlands 1997).

There are many interesting writings on the empowerment concept, as well as critiques of its intent to give power to people without power. Agustín (1988) reflects on the term:

A word used by those who view themselves as fighters for social justice, *empowerment* is the current politically correct way to talk about helping. But *empower* is a transitive verb whose subject is the person doing the empowering a technology aimed at ‘constituting active and participatory citizens’ and simultaneously linking subjects with their own subjection” (158).

This highlights the potential problematic in that people, who seem to have a lack of access to what we consider to be ‘power’, need people who have more resources (in educational attainment, access to funding, ties to a NGO, etc.), to teach or awaken to their individual or collective power. It highlights the idea that there is a certain amount of power, and that with the right trainings or activities, those without power can be taught, or trained to activate, engage, or take power. This seems to highlight an important class distinction around the concept.

Other scholars have been explicit in making the connection around consciousness raising as a distinctly political process. This is important to be explicit about the potential political outcomes of the process:

Consciousness-raising is also a collective activity, not only because speaking is a social activity, but because anger becomes a political resource only when it is collective. Consciousness-raising begins with the claiming of public space and political language for what were private feelings and personal sorrows… Public space is necessary to consciousness-raising in order that the process of becoming angry can be recovered by the collectivity as part of its own past… The psychological symptom is transformed into a political issue in that it reflects a collective experience. (Lyman, Peter 1981:69 in Boler, 115)

This reflects the importance of emotions and personal experiences in the making of a political process. This is the process of making individual experiences a part of a larger collective experience that is representative of a process of politicization. For women specifically, the shared emotional experiences can continue to affirm that private experiences are also political, and when they become collective experiences, they are transformed into a communal political process.

The empowerment and conscious raising processes can be considered when reflecting on people’s attempts to increase their own personal and collective empowerment. In the case of sex workers and empowerment, how does the process work? How do we know when we have encountered an empowered sex worker? There is growing literature on sex workers organizations, self-advocacy and activism that address the development, leadership, and progression of these movements (Agustín 1988, Berger 2004, Cabezas 2009, Chapkiss 1997, Garofello, Jenness 1993, Kempadoo and Doezema, 1998 Laverack and Whipple 2010, Majic 2010). A lot of sex worker activism has been engaged by the HIV epidemic, as well as sex workers’ desire to have a more active role on how national and international policies, prevention practices and policing affects sex workers practices and rights within the community. This has had both positive and negative externalities for the sex workers community as a movement. While positively, it has engaged and politicized sex workers both as agents and peer educators around issues around health and human rights. As a consequence, much of the funding that these organizations tend to receive is around the question of HIV/AIDS. The benefit is the positive information being spread within the sex worker community, though negatively, it also continues to focus on sex workers as central to prevention nodes in the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This has an effect of making it difficult to develop other projects within these organizations besides those that deal with HIV/AIDS. Cabezas (2009) notes that sex workers are highly surveiled people around public health concerns, and so it makes sense that health is the primary way in which sex worker organizations receive access to funding. They are often the target for education and prevention, and as a consequence, this remains an primary way these types of groups are able to receive funding. In looking at empowerment, Wolffers (2000) notes that the constant focus on HIV is actually disempowering for sex workers, while others who focus on the question of empowerment rarely consider professionalization of sex work as empowering, though he suggests that it as a possible source for empowerment development. Interestingly, many sex worker interviewees in my sample noted that they as workers had received numerous trainings on sexually transmitted infections (STI) and HIV prevention, and many interviewees asserted that their male clients need greater education on HIV/AIDS and consistent condom use. The continued financial focus on HIV prevention affects the extent to which different organizations are able to develop beyond the sole focus of sexual health.

Other literature around sex worker empowerment focuses on political changes around sex work. Whipple and Laverack (2010) make explicit connections between New Zealand sex workers organizing to their ability to affect that countries political process, leading to increased health resources and eventual legalization of sex work. Sex worker organizing led to a push to be more engaged in the political process to push for more rights. The authors reflect, “Giving sex workers the power to run their own organization has resulted in improved partnerships and relationships with law enforcement, politicians, public health officials, and with society at large” (37). Here the authors are noting the importance of organizing on interacting with other groups of power. Interestingly, they use the language “giving…power”, again highlighting that when we consider sex workers and power, other people are apparently needed to bestow the power, or a willingness to even listen to them as a group. Positively, the informal process that first engaged these workers to meet informally to share in their experiences, over time led to a politicization and desire to more broadly affect political change around sex work. In this article, the sex workers go from being described as powerless people, to empowered people as a result of their political success. In this case, organizing was important to the empowerment process, though the real test of achieving power was whether they were able to engage with the political system. The authors are also able to critically view what needs to be in place within the political system in order to achieve political success: “left leaning parties, proportional representation, high union density, strong civil society, and a commitment to democratic participation” (34). This speaks to the broader political state needed to be able to push for sex worker rights. In the case of Costa Rica, it is both democratic and has proportional representation.

In the case of La Sala, its foundation rests firmly rooted in the acknowledgement that sex work is work, La Sala has always emphasized a need for solidarity amongst the women as people, and as workers, and as participants in the project. There has been a lot either written about La Sala as a project, or many articles that have used the space as a base to meet sex workers to conduct projects more broadly on sex workers. The fundamental writing of the project is the Project Manual (Van Wijk, 1997) that serves as the theoretical foundation for the project. It was written six years after the organization began, putting into words the theoretical framework the project was founded on, as well as includes a plethora of activities to be done with sex workers to work on the various themes, including empowerment and leadership development. The manual presents practical activities for empowerment development, self esteem building, and leadership trainings. There are other writings on the project, including a number of university theses. I am aware of at least five university theses having been conducted about La Sala.[[3]](#endnote-1) The presence of these documents helps to create a longer narrative on the development of the project.

III. Discussion

*a. The Project*

The Asociación La Sala was born out a project from the Instituto Lationamericano de Prevención y Educación (ILPES-The Latin American Institute of Prevention and Education), an organization out of Holland that targeted sex workers for education on HIV/AIDS, sexuality education and self esteem building. The initial project plan for La Sala was to create a series of workshops for a group of sex workers that could later be replicated and shared through them with other sex workers (Van Wijk, 4). From there, the cycle of education between workers could extend though multiple groups of women, perhaps even extending to clients (Carvajal 2012).

The primary objective of La Sala was to prevent HIV infection in sex workers. It was not long before the goal of the project grew to address women’s empowerment:

A little after the beginning the objective of the project grew to promote the empowerment of them (the women) as much on a personal level as well as work related, giving us awareness that to achieve consciousness raising on the use of condoms implied, principally for the women, satisfying of the other immediate needs of the visitors” (Van Wijk, 4-5).[[4]](#endnote-2)

Thus individual and group empowerment has long been a primary goal of the project. Since the beginning, the idea for the project was to provide services to this community of women, but to also include them in leadership roles in the project. From the start, the long- term vision for the project was for the women to one day lead the project. The project was to help inspire self-determination and encourage women to fight for their rights, both as women and as workers. Though the goal for the project has always been that the sex workers take an active role in the running of the organization, from serving on the board, to working as volunteers, to training to be leaders (Van Wijk, 2000).

The project goals include themes that are related to social justice and movement building goals. Besides HIV prevention and education around STI’s, there are direct goals around the empowerment of the women as individuals and as a group, and to build solidarity between sex workers (Van Wijk, 5). These goals are directly related to the politicization of the women as individuals in the way they think of their work, as well as how they think collectively about sex work. This is a particularly political process. Van Wijk (2000) notes the difficulty of this for a number of reasons including the socialization of women to be competitive with one another, the inherent competiveness of the location and the work, and the double standard around sex workers that can have an effect on women’s self esteem. This double moral allows men to visit sex workers, but blames and stigmatizes women for being sex workers. This acts as an additionally factor limiting women’s willingness to “come out” as sex workers. All these factors have a direct effect on whether women were or are able to become organized and politicized around the project. Arguably the women who have stayed at the project have been affected and energized by the goals of the project.



Image 2: The sign in front of La Sala. It reads “A place for us. Association ‘La Sala’. Workers and Ex Sex Workers Fighting for Our Rights”. Photo by author.

As an organization, La Sala can be described and imagined in very different ways. It serves as a mix of a service provider to the women who work in San Jose’s Zona Roja—most recently housing once a week sexually transmitted infections exams from La Caja Costariccense de Seguro Social (Costa Rica’s Social Security), public health resources, provided primarily to the women working in the district. I’ve heard La Sala described by Nubia Ordoñez, the project coordinator, as a civil society organization, and have seen it serve as community service organization where local university students can complete the 300 community service hours needed to graduate from the University of Costa Rica. In the past, La Sala has had numerous workshops, services, and events for women working in the area. Years earlier while located in their previous location, La Sala was able to provide free and inexpensive dental visits, free psychological services, and events for the women and their families, including a mother’s day event, movie nights and holiday parties amongst other activities.

La Sala’s existence has also been tumultuous, it has sometimes been funded by successful grants, allowing for various programs and services for the women, and other times has been devoid of grants, and has been funded by the women themselves. Similar to other organizations with staying power, there are a lot of stories as well as myths that exist around it, how people perceive it, and how it started. La Sala is simultaneously central and peripheral to the community of sex workers who work around it, both spatially in the Zona Roja, as a service provider, and as a comfortable and safe place for workers to rest, warm up a meal, or use the restroom. The consistently changing workers in the area, means that La Sala members have to continuously try and introduce new workers to the presence of organization and thee project goals.

*b. The People*

The current leadership of La Sala is Nubia, Grettel, and Yasmin. Nubia is a 51-year-old mulatta woman. She is a mother, grandmother, and owns a pulperia in the front of her house. She is the coordinator of the project. She has been involved in community leadership, having served on neighborhood councils in her community. She has been the coordinator of La Sala for 12 years, and has been connected to the project since 1998, originally attracted to the project through the inexpensive dentist services that were provided through the group. Nubia’s family and community are aware of her role at the project. She is very proud of the group and her work. Since the La Sala’s transition to sex worker leadership, she successfully got women a job distributing condoms and doing male and female condom demonstrations in the brothels in the city. Grettel is an extremely vocal and expressive leader of the project. She has been connected to La Sala for at least 14 years. She truly believes in the project, and is one of the few sex workers I met who was very vocal about the work, with La Sala identifies as a sex worker. She and Nubia have both appeared on television and magazines as sex workers. Grettel is 45-year-old mother of five, a grandmother, and has been a part of the project for at least 14 years. She has been on television news and appeared in magazines as a sex worker. Yasmin is a 50-year-old trigueña, a mother of two, and grandmother. She is very sweet, welcoming and kind to those who come to the space, and people have an affinity for her as a result. While not as public about her work, she remains very committed to the project, and participates to the extent of her comfort level. All three women have remained connected and dedicated to the project, as well as brave as the women decided to run the project on their own.

The original president and coordinator of the project was Karina Van Wijk, a Social Worker from Holland. Karina only began to phase out of La Sala as recently as five years ago. By all accounts, she was extremely dedicated to the project. While I did not have the opportunity to meet with her personally, others people spoke very highly of her commenting that she was extremely dedicated to the perseverance and success of the project. As the author of the project manual, she notes the difficulties in being successful at this because the project was foreign, and so was she. Furthermore, Karina Van Wijk is a social worker, thus a professional woman trying both facilitating service provision to the women and someone trying to motivate change and political activity in a community she is not from, nor a part of. Her level of education, professionalization, and nationality separated her from the women, though many women from in and around the project spoke very fondly of her and her work, and her down to earth nature and comfort in moving around the brothels, reaching out to the workers there. She has been described as kind, non judgmental and committed. Arguably, Van Wijk was coming from an experience in Europe where it is often legal, and rarely criminalized women, and thus is far more progressive in terms of its thinking on sex work. The presence and work of La Sala has made inroads into public thinking about sex work in San José that have been visible both in coverage of the project on television and in the print media.

Like many organizations La Sala has consistently needed to seek outside support and funding during the whole process of their existence. By the time that Van Wijk left the project, La Sala had long developed a relationship with the University of Costa Rica (UCR), in which students could complete their Trabajo Comunal Universiario (TCU- Communal University Work), hours that students complete in different types of community with various organizations throughout the city, one of which was La Sala. In order to graduate, each student has to complete 300 hours of mandatory volunteer work with a community organization. Due to various factors, one of course being the need to operate on a small budget, La Sala has always depended on volunteers. When La Sala first reached out for help to the university, they did so in an effort to garner direct support in the form of student volunteers. This highlights that for a long time, La Sala has had and depended on a relationship with university students. It continues to do so in some really interesting ways. Students at various universities in Costa Rica who have worked with the group, either as volunteers working on their TCU requirements, and many who return after completing the TCU project there to conduct a thesis project at La Sala. Over the six months I was there, I met at least eleven students at La Sala who were in various states of volunteering, developing or working on projects with La Sala.

Early in the project, the faculty contact person at the UCR for the TCU at La Sala had been Dr. Alvaro Carvajal. Carvajal has a PhD in Philosophy and he currently teaches at the University of Costa Rica. The connection between the University and La Sala began back in 1995. In the beginning, Alvaro Carvajal helped to coordinate projects at La Sala, working with Van Wijk to bring students into the project. He and Van Wijk had previously worked together to coordinate the students through the TCU program, and when Van Wijk was leaving the project, she tapped him to help lead the project. He was later chosen to follow her as the president of La Sala, and he was involved with the project directly for four years. In total, he spent eight years connected to the project, four as the former head of the TCU with La Sala, two as Vice President and two as the President. Like any new leader, this created some benefits as well as challenges with the project.

With so many students having gone through the project, it is interesting and important to imagine the connections, contributions and solidarities built between La Sala members and the University students. Carvajal (2012) notes the positive spaces of solidarity between the groups. He notes that the benefits of having students around is that after participating with the group, many were now impacted and changed having had first hand experience with sex workers. This led to former TCU participants to write articles about La Sala, Carvajal noting “At the beginning, the students were very afraid, they didn’t know how to behave but afterwards there is a learning process, and an acknowledgement of the other, and they identify with the women, and so the students learn a lot in the process. They give, but they also receive” (Carvajal 2012). This highlights the relationship between the students and the women, highlighting the role of identification between the students and the women that helps build solidarity with the goals of the project. The importance of students as a workforce, as potential helpers and trainers, as implementers of projects highlights a number of things: that La Sala is unique in its connection to university students. La Sala provides direct connection of educated students presumably training to be professionals, while working with some of the most marginalized workers in the city. These are connections that can lead to more people becoming aware of and supporting the space, while willing having direct contact and building solidarity with sex workers in the city.

While Carvajal no longer works with the project, Jacqueline García, a professor at the University of Costa Rica, now coordinates the TCU students who work with La Sala.

*c. Sex Worker Activism in Latin America: the Development and Politics of REDTRASEX*

“We cannot forget: one drop of water barely wets, but together we make a downpour.”(RedTraSex)

REDTRASEX is a network of organizations made up of sex workers throughout Latin America. The original plan came out of a conference of sex worker organizations in Costa Rica in 1997. In two years, the network was officially formalized. It is a network of organizations in sixteen different countries in Latin America including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. The executive regional secretary of the group is based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The home organization of sex workers at AMMAR Argentina have organized and been accepted into a union, which adds additional inspiration to the other organizations throughout Latin America about the possibilities of unionizing. This network is important for various reasons. One is that it is an active and real transnational organization that organizes sex-workers. Furthermore, the organizers actively meet and participate in conferences through the region, as well as work locally in their local organizations to create sociopolitical goals based on the needs of sex-workers. The goal of the organization is to “Augment the presence and visibility of organizations of female sex workers in political spaces and to make decisions at the national, regional and international level” (redtrasex.org/ar- Nuestros Logros). RedTraSex as a network is very political in orientation, and actively discusses and organizes around HIV/AIDS prevention, human rights, preventing violence, labor, machismo and gender. They are concerned with empowering sex-workers through strengthening women’s organizing, and in promoting an awareness of sex-workers’ rights. REDTRASEX presents a very different image of itself as represented through its website (redtrasex.org.ar).

While REDTRASEX is a network of various organizations throughout countries in Latin America, current or former sex workers make up all the organizations that it encompasses. While there are various groups associated with the network, each group is an autonomous group. While there are growing numbers of sex work organizations, including those made up of advocates and sex-workers, this distinction of who makes up the base of the organization can potentially affect the focus and goals of the organization. The question of sex-worker involvement and leadership is a point of focus for REDTRASEX. In A High Heels Movement (2007), REDTRASEX highlights a strong distinction between NGO’s and groups made up by sex-workers. In defining differences between sex worker advocates and organizations made up by sex-workers, they argue:

We are the base of the organizations. We call it this because the sex-workers are the base, and from this arise the direction of the organizations: we, the people that live the problems, decide to be the protagonists of our destiny, taking it in our hands to transform it. We form the organization and direct it. We decide what issues to work on and how to work on it. Only in these base organizations is the voice really our own. (ibid. 180).

The organizers of REDTRASEX acknowledge the difference between having advocates who are concerned with various issues sex workers deal with and the empowering of sex-workers themselves. REDTRASEX does not advocate against sex-worker advocates, and note that, “Some [organizations] have stifled us, others have sincere concern. They can be very good people, but they will never be true voices of sex-workers” (180). Advocates might have positive intentions, but may or may not work directly with sex-workers on the policies they choose to engage or support. REDTRASEX also speaks to broader differences between them and NGO’s, including the ability to control for workers to control their own funds, make the important decisions about projects to pursue, and control how they form and present their identity to the local community. The text provides a critique about mixed organizations: “Some of us participated in the past in organizations FOR sex workers. But we noticed that we didn’t take a leap. Like one compañera said “It’s been years since we’ve been going to trainings. How many workshops have they given us and still we have not begun to fly with our own strength?” (ibid, 182). This highlights a sentiment about the mixed groups that organizations for sex workers can actually come to stifle leadership and project development on the part of sex workers. Nubia Ordoñez (2012) spoke of a conflict between the sex workers and the then leadership that came about when trying to note that the women wanted to participate in the international network. Their major problem is the distinction that the Red makes with having organizations with sex worker leadership versus the mixed professional and sex worker leadership represented by La Sala.

*d. The Split at La Sala*

La Sala only recently separated from the leadership of Alvaro Carvajal in 2011. This was not an amicable split, and in the end the women left in the project voted him out of his position as president. They felt that one of the women should be the president of the project, while Carvajal refused to continue to work on their behalf if he was not in the leadership role (Carvajal, Ordoñoz 2012). The women used their board of directors, which at that point had a number of sex workers on it, to vote him out of leadership. It seems as that the last straw with the women at La Sala really had to do with conflicts over money, who was getting paid and who was not, and leadership. In discussing the reason they wanted the split, Ordoñez (2012) says about Carvajal’s leadership:

He made us feel ashamed, he made us feel bad, and apart from this, when we had meetings from people from outside the group come to La Sala to meet with us, he, without thought, would tell them that the majority of us could not read, that we didn’t know how to write, that we did not know how to organize ourselves, that we didn’t know how to do the accounting, and a bunch of other things like this, or rather, he would put us down with the people, so we, or at least I that saw this intention of his, and I began to feel bad.

Here, Ordoñez highlights a sentiment that has been expressed in other writings about organizations that are mixed with sex workers and professionals. The difference in educational level and experience can serve to act as a wedge between those involved. On the other hand, Carvajal expressed his own frustration in trying to get organized with the volunteers, complaining that it was difficult to get the women to be consistent in their work, to show their faces at events as sex workers, or stay focused in meetings (2012). Eventually this tension became palpable for some of the women participants, leading them to start to suggest they have a sex worker leader of the project. Consequently, La Sala is now a project created by and for sex workers. Ironically, the sex workers involved in the project appeared to finally take control of the project by force, finally highlighting a push for leadership by the women invested in the project. The conflict that preceded the pushing out of Carvajal reflects tension between the professionals and the sex workers, as well as highlights the important role that the University of Costa Rica has had since the projects beginning.

TCU organizer and professor Jacqueline García spoke of sex workers in charge of the project at La Sala as being both their strength and their weakness of the project (Garcia, Interview 1). In the same sense that it is a good idea to have a sex worker lead the project, she points to some of the problems in having had the women lead the project. According to her, over the years the students have given a number of workshops on development, how to do logistics, project management, financing and managing a calendar. García explained the quantity of preparation that various groups of students had put into trying to help/train members of La Sala over the years, and that many of the trainings never stuck with the women. She felt as though the trainings continued to be repetitive and that as a consequence, the leadership and group abilities were not moving forward or developing as quickly as she believes they could. She notes that model of La Sala as developed by Van Wijk came out of Europe and was not originally developed with the group of women that La Sala worked with in mind. The model had been considered within a European context where women are more educated and are coming from a more liberal cultural context. Both Carvajal and García suggested the need for sex worker leadership, but that the transition should take place in a few more years. While it was the intention that a professional would start the project, but that the women would eventually run the project on their own.

Even given the tensions and doubts among the people at La Sala, who worked in and around La Sala, RedTraSex still provided affirmations to sex worker leadership. They assert the need for the organizers to be both brave and independent in their organizing, offering advice that would have been taken to heart at La Sala, “To be an organizations of sex workers and to get independence its necessary, above all, to have courage and encourage yourself to walk with your own feet” (Tacones Altos, 193). Regardless of the tensions, there remains a political benefit of being connected to the international organization RedTraSex. Furthermore, the push for sex worker leadership back at La Sala acted was pushed for and supported by the other organizations in the network.

*e. Moving On*

On the morning of the Paso Canoas workshop, there was a sense of nervousness as the women gathered their materials for the presentation. There were a number of us there who had come to help at the workshop, Gretel, Yasmin, Nubia, and another La Sala volunteer. Another North American college student who had been volunteering at the project and I went with the group. Making the best of the space, we had moved tables around, set up a computer and projector, set out snacks on the tables for the participants. The women had quickly run through their power point a few days prior, though the reality that they would be presenting it on their own created some visible nervous tension. There was increased calm when women started showing up—it was really happening! Most of the participants arrived early or on time, though throughout the event, there were more people arriving. Though the project only really provided funding for 15 participants, at one point there were 23 adults there, as there was one man in attendance that joined his partner there, and there were two children at the event. Most of the women there were Dominican and a few were Panamanian. The majority of the women were of African descent. That the majority of the women were both black and migrants represented a real contrast to the kinds of sex workers, and which kinds of migrant women work around La Sala.

The bulk of the presentation and activities was on the transmission and prevention of HIV and STI’s. They also explained the differences between HIV and AIDS, showing images to help their explanations. They conducted a group activity in which at the end, two people receive a letter saying that they have been diagnosed with HIV. The women then went into their power point presentation on HIV. The workshop went on to show how to use both male and female condoms, and the women laughed and enjoyed learning how to put a condom on a penis with their mouth. Later, there was a game where pairs of women had to run across the room and back with a blown up condom blown and tied like a balloon resting firmly between them. Though they hammered focused a lot on the point of HIV transmission and condom use, this game seemed mostly for the purpose of having fun. We distributed yellow condom holders with male and female condoms, Sexy and Segura Magazines[[5]](#endnote-3) and other information about condom use.

At the end of the presentation on HIV, Nubia started showing photos from La Sala events and talking to the women about La Sala and their participation in RedTraSex. Given that many of the women in attendance were Dominican, they talked about the leaders of the Dominican sex worker organization MODEMU[[6]](#endnote-4), and how those leaders wanted La Sala to reach out to the Dominican women in the country. Nubia talked to the women about RedTraSex and La Sala’s desire to start an organization in Paso Canoas, to reach out to the women there. Interestingly, this process highlights the role of citizenship and sex worker organizing. Nubia and Grettel emphasized the women’s importance, and that they needed to organize as sex workers—their citizenship or lack thereof did not lessen their need to organize for their rights, nor diminish their rights as workers to support and health care and dignified housing[[7]](#endnote-5). At the end of the workshop, Grettel passionately began to discuss her role in the project, and their need for solidarity:

Being a sex worker does not mean we don’t have a right to health, to a dignified home, and a ton of things like everyone else who works. This is a job, we are not the problem of anyone--we are the solution to many problems. When we are organized and empowered, we are going to have a voice and vote in the state. And we are going to be heard. True? This is not easy, I had 10 years in the organization that I had to experience in order to believe it and eat it. Because I used to say, I’m a sex worker, I don’t have a right to anything-- But I have a right to things like anybody else! I pay …… and I pay taxes too. We need have a right to a pension. This will be when are 80, 90 years old, I still have a lot of sex work, left, but we need to be organized. I still have a lot to give… But we have to be organized to ask for our rights. Its not easy, but we can do it.

The women started getting excited and nodding in agreement as both Grettel and Nubia started discussing their desire to organize as sex workers. When talking about La Sala, Nubia made an important note of how they used to be an organization for sex workers, and that now they were a group *for* and *by* sex workers. Nubia and Grettel did an excellent job of communicating why the women need to work together—for example, that they all deserve access to health insurance. The women seemed attentive while some nodded in apparent agreement with what Grettel and Nubia had to say. As the event came to a close there was a sense of positivity and hope. In an act of solidarity, Grettel went on to extend herself to the women, noting that if any of them needed to be in the capital that they could reach out to La Sala for support. She was very welcoming and inclusive of them, offering her phone number and both her home and the project space as a place where women could stay if they needed to. Many of the workshop participants went to the women of La Sala to express their sincere thanks for the women having had come there to meet with them. They received evaluations of the event, which were all positive. One woman wrote:

“To me it was the people I really liked a lot, it was very good, thank you. The workshop was wonderful. God wants you to keep up this work because we are also valuable, we are also important.”

Other women went up to the organizers to express their thanks at being invited to the project. When La Sala organizers originally approached Evangeline about the workshop, she agreed that she would bring women to the event, even though she explained that there had been similar workshops offered before on HIV prevention. Even given this, the participants of the project expressed having learned new information at the workshop. Furthermore, many women seemed to just enjoy their time in the group. The uniqueness of this meeting came out of sex workers leading and running the workshop all on their own. This highlighted the sense of the project being for and by sex workers, and the other women in attendance appeared to identify with this.

IV. Conclusions

The themes addressed in this paper around the goals of the project, the leadership, and the question of empowerment by sex workers. All of these themes highlight various political perspectives on sex work. The attempt by La Sala to develop a sex worker network, given the present and consistent financial difficulties at the project, highlights a larger desire for increased organization and politicization amongst sex workers. In discussing their desire to do so, the women’s decision to push for the network highlights a desire to be more politically organized as laborers, to show their face to sex workers in the country, and to have the collective power to pressure the state. That the women of La Sala first went to a location and met with sex workers many of whom were not Costa Rica nationals, represents a willingness to meet around common goals around labor, regardless of an individual’s citizenship and nationality. In the Paso Canoas workshop, the women of La Sala highlighted that they knew that most of the women on the border were migrant workers. They attempted to connect to the Dominican women by speaking about the sex worker organization in the Dominican Republic, MODEMU[[8]](#endnote-6). The women of La Sala attempted to make an explicit connection to the participants as migrant workers, affirming that in their struggle for rights that the women were all in it together. The attempt to build a network to begin with is a push to have more women willing to show their faces as sex workers, and thus to have greater collective power. Grettel refers to this by saying that together they will have a “voice and a vote”. She makes an explicit link between their politicization as workers, and the affect that they can have own their own lives and engaging in a political process. When she later extended the space of La Sala, as well as of her own home, she tried to create a connection with the women, and extended to them an act of solidarity as fellow sex workers.

The connection between the University and the women of La Sala is a long and complex one. It is a unique connection that has led to solidarity building between students and workers, with students writing newspaper articles and even theses about the project. There are both benefits and problematics to these ties, including a constant source of volunteers, but also makes La Sala a constant location of study. This can complicate the organizing effect at La Sala, when many reasons women come together relate to their presence in student workshops or participation in studies. However, what one can say is that the production of written material about La Sala, both academically and in the print media and television helps to promote and educate other people to the existence of La Sala. Additionally, it suggests the spaces for empowerment for both students and workers. It is also a complex interconnectedness with the TCU projects and the women of La Sala.

La Sala’s extreme financial challenges have sorely strained their ties in and around the Zona Roja community, where the expectations of services in the project cannot always be met. In noting these tensions, including but not limited to the lack of their ability to offer the most basic of the services they want to: a cup of coffee and someone to listen. However, given this difficulty, they still remain consistent in the space and dedicated conceptually, and when there are funds, in practice to the project. Their decision to develop a network indicates that their conceptualization of La Sala as a larger political project is one that can incorporate the voice and leadership of sex workers across the country. They have continued to go to different provinces in the country, and had the first meeting of sex workers from throughout Costa Rica in October 2012.

Interviews with members of La Sala, Alvaro Carvajal and Jacqueline García, and interaction with numerous university students represents the complex relationship between these various groups of people. While there is a lot of mixed critique around the women of La Sala as leaders of the project, it is undeniable that there is something very important happening here. With such conflict between the former president and the women of the group, there are many doubts on the part of both García and Carvajal as to the future of the project. Clearly, the tensions that have developed over the years are very real. However, given the many critiques of the La Sala’s current leadership, there is something to be said for the women actually pushing Carvajal out. In questioning what sex worker leadership and empowerment actually look like, it appears this act of voting him out was one of the first examples of tangible leadership and empowerment on the part of the sex workers of the project. The women are proud to say now that this project is a project *for* and *by* sex workers. They have achieved “control”, the fifth principle in the cycle of empowerment. While all members involved agreed at the time that the project was not where they wanted it to be, they remained dedicated and connected enough to the project, as well empowered to both take control of it, and continue it. They have maintained the location space, and have continued to expand the project. The organizers at of La Sala, Alvaro Carvajal and Jacqueline García all have different perspectives on the state and the future of the project. However, given the theory the empowerment theory that the project was built on, as well as their empowered actions to become leaders in the project, highlights how far the women have come in their collective empowerment process.

The connection of La Sala to the RedTraSex continues to offer an external motivation and push for sex worker leadership at the project. The conflict of being in between professional leadership at La Sala and having sex worker leaders RedTraSex made it difficult for the women to negotiate their own development and decision making locally. The push for sex worker leadership, and the actual transition at La Sala has been positively welcomed by other member organizations of RedTraSex. La Sala women remain proud and inspired to remain connected to the RedTraSex and in seeing them present about the network in Paso Canoas, one can see that being a sex worker led project connected RedTraSex gives the women a sense of leadership and empowerment.

1. Asociacion Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina en Accion por Nuestros Derechos. An organization of sex workers in Argentina founded in 1994 to defend the rights of sex workers. It is a member organization in REDTRASEX. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. This is not her real name. I will use her sex work pseudonym. Though she is heavily involved in the organizing at La Sala for a number of years now, she is still not “out” to her adult children about being a sex worker. According to her, they aware that she works with women downtown as an apparent office job. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Getting Ahead in the Gringo Gulch: Transnational Sex Tourism in Costa Rica by Megan Rivers-Moore. four from academics within Costa Rica, and one from a Canadian Professor, as well as the pilot study connected to the establishment of the project by Dutch researcher Rudy Van der Berg. Others… [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. “Poco despues de la apertura se amplio el objectivo del proyecto a promover el empoderamiento de ellas tanto nivel personal como laboral, dándo nos cuenta que lograr la concintizacion sobre el uso del condon implicava, para las mujeres primeramente la satisfaccion de otras necesidades inmediatas de las visitantes”(Van Wijk, 4-5). Translation by author. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. This was the second year that this magazine was produced with La Sala. The funding for this project came from the UNFPA, and was directed towards the women working around La Sala. This second annual magazine featured a story about La Sala. TCU students were responsible for working on the original research and work of the first Sexy Segura magazine (Garcia 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Movimiento de Mujeres Unidas [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. Vivienda digna [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
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