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## **“When we get our rights...” Reinterpreting the present and creating trajectories with a symbolic resource<sup>1</sup>**

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### **SUMMARY**

This chapter examines the role of a future-imagining symbolic resource for participants in a collective action movement. A case study of an HIV prevention project led by sex workers in Calcutta is explored in the societal context which makes the symbolic resource of “workers’ rights” meaningful and plausible to sex workers, and the personal and organisational consequences of this symbolic resource. It is suggested that the very non-presentness and unrealism of the state imagined by this symbolic resource is crucial to its ability to change present self-interpretations, and thereby to encourage the work of participants in the project. Acquiring awareness of the concept of “workers’ rights” is recalled by participants as a turning point in their political awareness, producing a past-present-future trajectory.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the context of an interest in the social psychological resources which enable a marginalised group to bring about health-enhancing social change, this chapter examines the role of a future-imagining symbolic resource in a collective action HIV prevention project run by sex workers in Kolkata (Calcutta), India.

The work of a collective action movement can be understood as a process of constructing an actionable environment: for a collective action movement to instigate change, the group has to constitute new arenas for action. This perspective on actor-environment relations rejects a theoretical dichotomy between structure and agency or between social constraint and individual choice. Instead, it relies on a sociocultural perspective, in which the unit of analysis is the recursive relation between person and environment, mediated by practical or symbolic tools. Thus, we can consider people as using culturally-produced tools to change themselves, or their environment, or their relation to the environment (Zittoun *et al.*, 2003). As the person changes, so too does the environment and vice versa (Vygotsky, [1935]/1994).

Many different kinds of resources (e.g. material, social, symbolic) enable efforts by participants in a collective action movement to construct an actionable

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environment. One way in which people can actively construct their environment anew is through imagining an alternative relation between themselves and their environment (Freire, 1970). Symbolic resources are used for such imagining.

Whereas a practical tool is presented in one reality, and used to change that reality, a symbolic resource brings something from one reality (such as an imagined future, or a fairytale, or a novel) into another reality (such as the 'here-and-now'). Berger and Luckmann write of symbols, and particularly language, that they are "capable of 'making present' a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the 'here and now'" (1966, p.54). Symbolic resources can enable us to bring into the 'here and now' imaginations of futures. Such imagined futures give some form to the foggy indeterminacy of one's future, and may give a new form to the present, by contrasting it with an imagined alternative. A symbolic resource is not just a word, but a crystallized meaning-complex that can be interpreted and elaborated in the new reality to which it has been transferred. Its meaningfulness is dependent upon its place with cultural and societal arrangements, and on its place as a useful resource in relation to a problem which a person faces.

My empirical research is a study of an HIV prevention and community development project run by sex workers in Kolkata. A unique part of this project's work is its agenda of politicising participants. A slogan of "Sex work is work! We demand workers' rights!" crystallises the politicising effort. I will conceptualise the slogan of "workers' rights" as a symbolic resource enabling imagination of a future. I will first explore the societal arrangements which support the meaningfulness of this slogan, and then I will ask questions about the consequences of that future-imagining symbolic resource for participants in the project. First, however, I will briefly introduce the setting in which this slogan of "workers' rights" is used: the Sonagachi Project.

## **THE SONAGACHI PROJECT**

The Sonagachi Project is a participatory development project, which aims to protect sex workers' health and security, and is run by sex workers. I will refer to sex workers who also work for the project as "Project workers". Generally, it serves, and is run by less well off sex workers who face problems with police repression, exploitation by local hoodlums, hierarchical working conditions with madams or pimps, and sometimes uncooperative clients. It runs health clinics, trains sex workers to be health educators, and provides fora for community problem solving. These are the everyday practical activities of the project, supported with a range of material and social resources such as funding for educators' salaries, rooms for holding meetings and technologies of organisation for holding problem-solving meetings. With these resources, the daily work of the project is carried out. However, a striking aspect of this project is its emphasis on a far-flung future goal of achieving "workers' rights" for prostitutes. This concept is used to imagine a future societal situation in which sex workers' problems are resolved through the legal provision of rights.

## **THE SOCIETAL CONTEXT OF THE DEMAND FOR**

## “WORKERS’ RIGHTS”

The demand for “workers’ rights” encompasses a view of an alternative future, and problematises the present. For members of historically disadvantaged and marginalised communities in punitive societal circumstances which allow little leeway for action, it is not always easy to imagine that societal conditions could be different, or to mobilize a political movement (Freire, 1973; Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). What is the societal context that enables the Sonagachi Project’s demand for “workers’ rights” to be meaningful to sex workers? How is this proposal of an alternative societal situation plausible and sensible to sex workers? This demand becomes meaningful in a context where sex workers can compare their situation and their movement to those of other oppressed groups which have achieved successes in advancing their position. There is an active women’s movement in India, a tradition of affirmative action to support traditionally marginalised groups, and in Kolkata, a strong workers’ movement and trade union movement. These are all potential sites of comparison, to give meaning to the Sonagachi Project’s political demands. So how have they influenced the Project’s political messages?

The Indian women’s movement, though it is active, and has achieved many successes at a legal level as well as at practical levels, does not appear as a source for the Project’s politicising messages. The main target of the women’s movement has been to protect women from gender-based violence, with a focus on issues of rape (particularly police and landlord/ employer rape); dowry harassment (abuse and murder of young married women by their in-laws, who demand greater dowry); and *sati* (immolation of widows on their husband’s funeral pyre) (Kumar, 1995; Forbes, 1998). While there is a wide range of positions taken by Indian feminists, with Sonagachi Project discussions, “feminists” are often associated with an attitude that prostitution is always sexual exploitation, and that the only appropriate response is to rescue women from the sex trade and rehabilitate them (by training them in alternative vocations). This is the general approach taken by the National Commission for Women, a statutory body formed in order to advise the government on women’s issues. Since the position of the Sonagachi Project is that sex work is a job like any other, and since the Project’s goal to change the conditions of sex work rather than to eradicate it, the Project does not look to the women’s movement, which it associates with a “rescue and rehabilitation” approach, as a source of ideas or as a model.

However, India’s broader political culture offers an important source of support for people’s belief in the possibility of a collective action movement achieving a changed social position for the members of marginalised groups. The Indian government has instituted an affirmative action “reservations” policy for disadvantaged “scheduled castes”, in which certain proportions of university places, government jobs, etc, are allotted to members of “scheduled castes”. In the following quote, the Project Director, himself the son of a sex worker, describes his early politicization when he came to see the situation of the children of sex workers as similar to the situation of children born into an “untouchable” or a “low caste” family.

*Director:* I wrote a letter to the President [of India] through a journalist at that time when they were talking about reservations. Thanks to B. R. Ambedkar, after independence, scheduled castes are no longer untouchable. They are now minorities, quite strong, getting government jobs and leading a prestigious life. But before and even after independence, the children of sex workers are treated as untouchables. Secondly, they [scheduled castes] have fathers, which we don't have and that proves that we are much weaker and more disgraced. We can't go and stay in the society. If our identity is disclosed by any chance, they would stop talking to us. I wrote to the President that we, the children of sex workers, are more eligible for reservations. Children would be able to get admission in good boarding schools, like children under reservations, without competitive exams, and would get a chance in government jobs. The future result would be: the next generation will be much better off and would be able to lead a normal life like any other children in the society. It was big news in all the papers in India and it was front-page news. I continued this movement from 1984-85 and everybody wrote about me.

A conducive political culture is also provided by Kolkata's strong trade union movement. The logic of collective bargaining, for workers in the informal sector, such as tailors, cobblers or rickshaw pullers, as well as for workers in formal employment, is widely recognised and institutionalized within active trade unions. This sex worker leader explicitly links the Project's work with the workers' movement.

*Sex worker leader:* We are working with 40,000 women in [the Project] now, but we started with a few, to protect sex-workers from the exploitation of madams, boyfriends and pimps. We formed an organization and started protesting against wrong doings and protecting ourselves and also fighting for our rights. In the past, labourers worked for long hours and got a nominal amount of money and some got no money at all. Over and above that they were beaten. Then they fought for their rights – 8 hours of work, overtime, etc.

Thus, the example of labourers having fought for their rights and achieving those rights provides a context in which sex workers' struggle for workers' rights becomes a meaningful project. Moreover, the mechanisms of a workers' movement such as holding strikes and rallies are recognised as legitimate forms of protest (both by sex workers, and by politicians), and it is easy for the Project to get permission to organise a large demonstration of sex workers to parade through the streets. By comparing their situation to that of other oppressed groups who have gained better social positions, the idea of "workers' rights" becomes a meaningful symbolic resource.

Having established the societal context which supports the possibility of imagining an alternative future by providing examples of societal change that has come about for other oppressed groups, I now turn to examining the personal and

organisational consequences of the symbolic resource of “workers’ rights” as it is used by sex workers in Kolkata. I will start by examining three different ways in which achieving “workers’ rights” is expected by Project workers to provide a better future.

## **WORKERS’ RIGHTS AS THE BASIS FOR FORMAL RECOGNITION**

The first kind of interest in workers’ rights as a future ideal is one that is expressed by the project director. He describes the origin of their campaign for workers’ rights in their efforts to establish, and register what they call a “self-regulatory board” that would deal with issues of trafficking, and would be largely comprised of sex workers. Apparently, the authorities refused to accept that sex workers could sit on the board. The project had faced a similar problem earlier, in trying to register a cooperative community bank for sex workers, since bureaucrats insisted that sex workers’ did not meet the criteria of being “of good moral character” which was necessary for the registration of a cooperative society in their name.

The director said that, in response to such obstacles, the project leaders took a formal decision that the achievement of workers’ rights would have to be struggled for, as a foundation to the necessary official registering and recognition of their various projects.

In this official usage, being granted workers’ rights has the quality of a concrete future achievement, which is a practical step towards organisational needs to register their organisations. Actions, such as lobbying and demonstrations, can be taken to reach that goal. The slogan mentioned earlier - “Sex work is work. We demand workers’ rights” is printed on project documents, and can be seen as a “mission statement” for the organisation. Such formal recognition is not only an institutional goal, but is also given personal importance by many sex workers, who relate the organisation’s aim for bureaucratic recognition to the achievement of social recognition.

## **WORKERS’ RIGHTS AS SOCIAL RECOGNITION**

The second way in which the workers’ rights idea is used follows the same logic as the previous one: that once rights are granted by the government, their problem will be over. But, in this case, the problem of interest – probably sex workers’ greatest grievance – is their lack of social acceptance. This manifests as stigmatization of women who have been in prostitution, which prevents them from being accepted as family members, or as neighbours who can be invited to festivities, or as families whose daughters are considered eligible for marriage. Achieving workers’ rights is often suggested as a means of bringing the end to each of these problems.

The stigmatization is also experienced as exclusion from normal participation in society. For example, the project director claimed that workers’ rights would put an end to the exploitation of women who leave prostitution to get another job. He explained that currently, if a woman gets a job in a factory and is later found out to

have been from Sonagachi, she will be sexually exploited by her new employer or colleagues and taunted, but claimed that, if workers' rights are granted, that will be prohibited. The granting of workers' rights is posed as a future state which would allow them to "return to the society" from which they are presently outcasts.

Project Worker: We want recognition of our profession from society. When society's children go to school or college, nobody hates them. But when our children go to school or college and if people come to know that their mother is from Sonagachi, they hate them. [...] We want only this much from the government - we are not telling that Sonagachi should be converted to Hatibagan [a nearby middle-class shopping market], and Hatibagan should be converted to Sonagachi. Just like a family's children are educated, we want our children to be educated. [...] If our profession is legalized, we will not be harassed by the local boys, the madams, the landlord.

Interviewer: yes, that's true. But what about the insult [...] now they say 'whore's son' . that term won't change.

Project Worker: then they will be afraid to say that

Interviewer: they will say 'sex-worker's son'?

Project Worker: not even that. They will not have that courage if our profession is legalized.

Here, workers' rights refers to a future situation in which the government recognises their work as legitimate work, and bans all forms of discrimination against prostitutes.

## **FREEDOM FROM REALITY-CONSTRAINTS**

Their determination that social recognition would follow legal recognition was a source of puzzlement to me. As a concrete goal, this does not seem like a realistic choice, but seeing it differently, as a means to legitimize sex work, it makes more sense.

Claiming that sex work is work (the first part of their slogan) is to ask for evaluation on the dimension of work rather than sexual morality. The argument that sex workers are doing a good thing by earning to support themselves and their families is quite often made by the women. Distinguishing their work from robbers, drug-peddlers or beggars, and comparing themselves to rickshaw-pullers or tailors, they can claim a positive identity position as workers.

Thus, being able to imagine that workers' rights could be granted *in principle*, in the future, provides a way of reinterpreting one's present position in a more positive light. Whereas I had been concerned about the lack of realism in this usage of the notion of workers' rights, it is precisely the relative freedom from the strictures of the present reality that makes this future ideal interesting to them.

## **WORKERS' RIGHTS AS THE SOLUTION TO CONCRETE PROBLEMS.**

The third way in which the granting of workers' rights is expected to improve things is in terms of removing the everyday concrete problems faced by sex workers.

With dubious legal standing, they are vulnerable to extortion and harassment by police, landlords do not have to give them rent receipts, leading to disputes about payment of rent, and they are seen by police to have little basis for protest about exploitation by madams or clients. Thus, legal granting of workers' rights is (probably quite reasonably) seen as a basis to end such exploitation.

But this logic does not only apply in the future, the lens of "rights" also changes their understanding of present realities. If, in the future, absence of those troubles could be their right, then the present can seem a distortion, instead of being taken-for-granted. This point of view picks out and names specific rights and abuses happening at present, and suggests that those difficulties are not simply given hazards of the job, but are challengeable and can be protested against.

Project worker: We didn't know before that we also have some self respect and people can't touch us without our permission, now we know that, we have become aware now as we have been told about it.

Project worker: Moreover we can protest, we have become aware that we also have the right to protest against exploitation and wrong doings, which we didn't know in the past.

It seems that imagining the future possibility of a state of workers' rights refigures their grievances as open to challenge and protest. I would not argue that they did not know they had difficulties before, but that they less often considered those difficulties open to challenge.

## **CREATING TRAJECTORIES: "THEN WE THOUGHT.... NOW WE KNOW ...."**

Thus far, the consequence of the future-imagining symbolic resource has been the possibility of a reinterpretation of the present, from the alternative position of the imagined future. The quotes reporting increasing "awareness" bring us to a second consequence: the creation of trajectories.

Learning to interpret their difficulties as abuses of rights creates, for many women, a sense of a personal trajectory – through constructing an awareness of that learning as a personal transition. Several of the project workers recall their becoming aware of their rights as a profound selfhood-changing event. From the standpoint of being able to imagine workers' rights, they can reinterpret their own past as naïve or unaware suffering, and recall a turning point after which they had a better understanding of their situation, and a sense of a personal trajectory, progressing towards a desired future. Some people spoke of their change of perspective in terms of coming to light from darkness.



Project worker: We were inside a well before. Now we have come up, we are seeing the light outside.

It is, of course, not necessary to accept this kind of statement as a description of an actual change. Without so doing, we can appreciate such statements as reflecting a present re-imagining of one's past, to create a personal trajectory. I have suggested that acquisition of the symbolic resource of "workers' rights" enabled a re-imagining of present difficulties. Certainly, such acquisition is recalled by sex workers as a instigating a transition in their lives: The symbolic resource which imagines a future allows for a refiguring of both the present environment, and interpreting oneself as being politically aware or unaware of "workers' rights" produces a reinterpretation of one's past, creating a certain past-present-future trajectory.

### **BELIEF IN PROGRESS CREATES A MOVEMENT**

As well as having a new perspective on their personal past, and their personal progress, they also have a new view of an improved future – the possibility of progress for sex workers as a community, or as a movement. In a group discussion, the project director asked the sex worker leaders to explain how their project was different from others. This leader explains, in terms of their affirming goal of workers' rights:

Sex worker leader: Other NGOs also work for sex-workers but it is different, they say they want to empower us, give us basic education, but these are things which they show to bring in more funds, they don't want the sex-workers to come ahead and stand on their own feet. We have realized in our meetings with NGOs, day by day we have seen that they are not thinking of legalization, nobody else except 'Durbar' [the Sonagachi Project] thinks about that. They don't support us. So we were forced to say that, you don't want sex workers to become independent and get their rights. Then you are cheating us. We are sex-workers and we want our rights and we don't want to be cheated. So I was insulted.

For this leader, campaigning for rights and legalization are the characteristics of an organisation that wants sex workers to be independent, to progress and to stand on their own feet. Having this imagined trajectory into the future is valued by her, and the absence of that future trajectory is seen as impoverished or even insulting.

Moreover, having this organisational goal, or "mission statement" provides a project to be committed to. A job as a health educator can become participation in a movement, if there is a rallying cry (such as sex work is work) and a view of a future alternative life as a collective goal. Even if their daily work is not directly aimed at this goal, the shared view of the future, opposed to that of the rival organisations, provides solidarity-material around which their loyalties can coalesce.

## LONG-TERM STRUGGLE

And finally, the organisational trajectory towards workers' rights is envisaged by the project workers as an extended one, as a long-term struggle, and their present position is a temporary one, on a movement towards the realisation of that imagined future in which rights are granted.

Project director: The system is 300-400 years old. We can't stop or change it within 9 years but we are successful to change at least some of it and that is a great victory for us. We are able to change the ideas about sex-workers in the mind of people to some extent.

Often, in recounting their partial successes in their problem-solving work, project workers add that some difficulties still remain – such as police raids or exploitation by madams), that they can not yet achieve all that they wish for, but that maybe when they get workers' rights, then those final problems will be ironed out. A different example is in the name of their organisation, which translates as “unstoppable women's united committee”. I asked the director why they called themselves “women” instead of “sex workers”, given that they are trying to encourage sex workers not to be ashamed of their work. He answered that because society had not yet recognised them, they could not yet publicly announce themselves as sex workers, but that once workers' rights are achieved, then they will be able to.

While acknowledging that their goals are still unfulfilled – so allowing for the incompleteness of their work and preparing themselves for obstacles, they also emphasise the gains they have made, reminding each other of the worse circumstances of the past.

Through their sense of changes from the past to the present, and with the possibility of an imagined future, their relation with the imagined “workers' rights” places them on a trajectory from the awful past, to the better but still unsatisfactory present, striving towards an ideal future. And that future is not so much a concrete goal as a vague and polysemic image, providing the trajectory around which a meaningful movement can take place.

## CONCLUSIONS

Being able to imagine an alternative future problematises the present situation, to make it actionable, and open to change through a political movement. It is not always easy to conceptualise an alternative societal arrangement, and in this chapter, I have shown how the Indian societal context has facilitated the emergence of the symbolic resource of “workers' rights” for sex workers as a workable and politicising resource. The illustration of the uses of the future-imagining symbolic resource of “workers' rights” has produced two important conclusions concerning the consequence of this symbolic resource for the efforts of collective action movements to make the environment an actionable one. Firstly, having a symbolic resource that captures a future allows the sex workers to stand apart from the present, to re-interpret it, or re-evaluate it, from an alternative position. It is the unreality and distance of the future

imagined with a symbolic resource that allows for the sex workers' new interpretations of themselves as workers, and new actions such as protest. This consequence relies precisely upon the non-presentness, or lack of realism, entailed by the symbolic resource. Secondly, as the imagination of the future changes the present, and the relation to the past (as we saw when the sex workers spoke of their personal advances and the organisation's achievements), new trajectories are created - so that the present is a temporary position *en route* to a better destination. Such trajectories have organisational consequences, making sense of partial successes. And they have personal consequences, as the awareness of the possibility of "workers' rights" is interpreted as a profound turning point in a new past-present-future trajectory.

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