

## EXERCISING AGENCY: SEX WORKER ACTIVISTS

by Vanette Schwartz

Chi Adanna Mgbako, *TO LIVE FREELY IN THIS WORLD: SEX WORKER ACTIVISM IN AFRICA*. New York University Press, 2016. 245p. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$30.00, ISBN 978-1479849062.

African sex worker activists “fight for their right to dignity, to health, to work, to reject violence and discrimination — to live freely,” asserts Professor Chi Adanna Mgbako<sup>1</sup> in this report of her research among more than 200 sex workers in seven African countries: Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, South Africa, and Uganda (p. 195). Mgbako’s groundbreaking project champions the human rights and agency of these workers and documents their increasing activism.

The worker activists Mgbako encountered through her research have to fight against the age-old view of sex work as prostitution, and therefore as fundamentally different from other forms of work. The exchange of sex for money is illegal in many countries, viewed as immoral by many religious communities, and stigmatized in most parts of the world. The author points out that even some feminists do not regard sex work as legitimate work but instead consider all sex workers to be “trafficked” victims who need to be rescued from the trade. The reality is that some sex workers are trafficked, but not all are; some have simply exercised their agency and chosen this form of work. Mgbako outlines the major obstacles facing African sex worker activists, including the stigma of prostitution, the lack of recognition of their agency and rights as workers, and the criminalization of sex work.

In her travels and observations with sex worker activists, Mgbako saw firsthand the underlying poverty and social conditions in the countries she visited. Her interviews revealed

the desperate circumstances of many sex workers. Some came from lives of neglect or abuse; others worked at very low-income domestic jobs where they were abused by employers or not paid for their work. Many turned to sex work to survive when they could not support themselves or their families.

The interviewees also related tragic accounts of abuse by clients in the sex trade, from theft to beatings to murder; and by law enforcement officers, whose attitudes are often, “It’s impossible for a prostitute to be raped!” (p. 4). Police refuse to investigate crimes against sex workers, ridicule them when they try to file complaints, or ignore them even when they are seriously injured. Some police officers themselves physically abuse sex workers, steal their money, or demand sexual favors. Mgbako also found sex workers facing discrimination from health care workers. Clinics humiliate them when they come for help and refuse to treat them or provide necessary medications.

Mgbako’s research included transgender, queer, migrant, and HIV-positive sex workers who, because of their sexual identity or orientation, their country of origin, or their health condition, faced even more discrimination and abuse than cisgender, heterosexual, or healthy sex workers who were not migrants.

Mgbako reviews the history of sex worker activism, which began in the early to mid-1990s, concentrating her exploration of the movement in four of the seven countries where her research

took place. But she also acknowledges activist work in some 15 other countries on the African continent and reports that activism has developed most strongly in South Africa and Kenya. The Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force (SWEAT), for instance, was formed in 1994, originally in conjunction with those addressing the AIDS crisis (p. 88). Initially operating through informal networks of individuals and small groups, sex workers supported each other, identified friendly health clinics (pp. 90–91), and developed ways to exercise their rights and protect the members of their community. After about 10 years, South African sex workers formed their own organization, Sisonke (meaning “togetherness” in Zulu, p. 89), and developed peer education programs to bring workers together to learn how to exercise their rights. Strong leadership in South Africa gradually meant the growth of the organization and its influence. In Kenya, a more grassroots approach (which also had its start in response to the AIDS crisis) involved advocates traveling from town to town to help local sex workers form rights groups.

The author also examines less well-developed activism in Namibia and Mauritius. A very strong and committed leader in Namibia, Abel Shinana, built an increasingly effective movement, but without a second tier of leaders, the movement diminished greatly after his death from an auto accident. In Mauritius, fear of discrimination and criminalization has kept

many sex workers from revealing their work, yet small supportive communities are beginning to spur the growth of activism.

Also discussed are the efforts of activists to join forces with other advocacy organizations, such as feminist, LGBT, HIV/AIDS, labor, and anti-poverty groups. Although connections with such groups can build support for sex workers, many mainstream advocacy movements are reluctant to have their causes tainted with the stigma of the sex industry. Convincing these groups of the benefits and strength to be gained by joining forces with sex workers remains a major challenge.

Mgbako analyzes the various methods sex workers use to move their cause forward, including cultivating nondiscriminatory health care and legal aid, promoting political reform, and educating the public to diminish

fears and emphasize the human rights of sex workers. Despite the growth of activism, however, strong opposition continues from anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking groups, from religious groups that regard sex work as abhorrent, and from political groups that consider sex work to be detrimental to national interests.

*To Live Freely in This World* is well-written and engaging. The author includes many notes and a lengthy bibliography of scholarly and legal sources. The greatest strength of the work, however, is the collective testimony Mgbako presents from transcribed interviews with a range of sex workers, revealing their determination and commitment to reach out to other activists locally and globally to move their cause forward. These first-person accounts, coupled with the author's perceptive

analysis of the methods and strategies for building activism, make for a profound work that enhances not only the study of sex workers in particular but also feminist scholarship in general. A vital addition to academic collections.

Note

1. Mgbako is a clinical professor on the faculty of Fordham Law School; she also directs the Walter Leitner International Human Rights Clinic at the Leitner Center for International Law and Justice.

[Vanette Schwartz is the librarian for sociology, anthropology, history, and social work at Illinois State University, where she also develops collections in women's and gender studies.]

