

SWAY

Red Light Rights: Integrating a “New” Community.

by George Norberg

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Christina identified as a sex worker the day she began escorting. She has since done stripping, phone sex, and even professional domination. She enjoyed sex work and couldn't see herself doing anything else, but there were issues she didn't expect. Christina needed specific advice; for example, how do you file taxes on illegal income, and how do you rent a room discreetly?

In addition to all her job-related questions, Christina felt she didn't have a voice. She couldn't discuss her feelings with her family or friends and wanted to find others who were also sex workers, people who had experienced the things she was going through. She learned about \$pread magazine (www.spreadmagazine.org), an all-volunteer magazine produced by and for people in the sex industry. Christina is now \$pread's Media Whore columnist, covering representations of sex workers in the media.

Christina and Will Rockwell, an editor at both \$pread and the Global Network journal, Research for Sex Work, came to Yale to discuss how publications like \$pread help to mitigate the stigma around sex work. \$pread portrays the circumstances of the sex industry through the eyes of sex workers themselves. Since \$pread's inception almost five years ago by a group of three female sex workers, Will, Christina, and thousands of other sex workers of all genders have taken part in a community of equals, and fought against negative stereotypes of sex workers in the media.

Will also spoke on the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, an international network comprised of projects run by and for people who work in the sex industry. Now, there are many men and women who truly enjoy being sex workers, don't need a community and wouldn't trade their jobs for the world. Exact statistics weren't given, but a sizeable portion of sex workers place themselves in this category. But there are also those who do sex work instrumentally, in order to supplement their income or because of a lack of living wage alternatives for example, who do not enjoy it inherently and who wish to reach out to others for community interaction. \$pread magazine and the Global Network exist for both of these groups: to provide a venue for a community that is forced underground because of stigma and criminalization. One example of a successful Global Network member organization is the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Calcutta, where 65,000 male and female sex workers joined voices to fight for legal rights and normative community status. Understand that this is just one small growing piece of the Global Network and you can imagine how powerful the Network is becoming, as member organizations consolidate regionally and also internationally.

Yet on top of finding a safe space to organize, there are numerous legal issues for individual sex workers. Attorney Sienna Baskin of the Urban Justice Center's Sex Workers Project outlined how she helps sex workers who have been criminalized or discriminated against because of their job history. From police who feel free to harass them to immigration and trafficking issues, Sienna is always busy keeping sex workers free from unreasonable treatment by the justice system and other discriminatory bodies. The underlying problem, she explains, is that society has still not learned to accept that sex work is legitimate work and that sex workers are normal people who make rational decisions and deserve the same treatment as people who work any other job.

Spread magazine, the Urban Justice Center, and the Global Network of Sex Work Projects are working hard and succeeding in their effort to change the discourse around sex work, providing a sense of community, supporting the legitimate choices of individuals, and eradicating harmful stigmas from sex work. In a world where many don't even think about these sorts of problems, I'm glad that Christina, Will, and Sienna were all able to come to Yale and enlighten us on the human and labor rights of people in the sex industry.