Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee  Asociación Trabajadoras Sexuales Mujeres del Sur reflects on the ingredients for impact
Founded in 2004, Asociación Trabajadoras Sexuales Mujeres del Sur (the Association of Women Sex Workers of the South) organises and mobilises sex workers, and defends sex workers’ rights. Based in Arequipa, in the South of Peru, the group aims to promote respect for sex workers as workers in both policies and in society at large.

The challenge

In Peru, prostitution is legal for adults over 18 years of age provided they register with municipal authorities and carry a health certificate. Nevertheless, sex workers experience frequent violations of their rights by police in the form of random and illegitimate arrests, extortion, and violence. Few sex workers report cases of violence and other rights violations because of the stigma attached to their work and their lack of confidence, based on experience, that reporting abuse will lead to remedy. “We are a secular state, but the owner of the government is the church,” explains Mujeres del Sur. “The church owns the university and 170 properties in Arequipa alone. The influence of the church is huge. This does not make it easier to change things.”

Prior to the organisation’s founding, there was no support system in Arequipa for sex workers seeking justice, and sex workers had few allies.

It took the organisation four years to become registered because too few sex workers were willing to publicly identify themselves as a leader of a sex worker organisation. When enough women were willing to do so, in 2008, it was the starting point for change. By 2013, Mujeres del Sur had a membership of 55. The number of sex workers who consider themselves part of the organisation and the community that it reaches is even larger.

Influence and its repercussions

Mujeres del Sur describes significant changes for sex workers since they began organising and mobilising as a community, educating and empowering themselves, and speaking out collectively. Thanks to the group’s lobbying efforts, the governor of Arequipa created an internal directive, in line with the law, stipulating that local police should not arrest sex workers for soliciting clients. The directive also states that sex workers have the right to report police abuse and that any police officer violating sex workers’ rights will be investigated and punished. “This was preceded by a lot of ground work,” the group explains. “We engaged with the police and organised ‘sensitisation’ trajectories with them. We entered into an agreement with the Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights to end police violence and extortion. Every time there was a raid, the lawyers of the centre were there. The police saw that what they were doing was noticed. At the same time, we ourselves got trained, to know legislation that affects us, to know our rights, and to know when our rights were violated. We learned the language, and started to use it. Police brutality no longer happened without consequence.”

Mujeres del Sur started legal procedures when sex workers filed complaints, supported by lawyers. They pushed for criminal procedures against five senior officials of the municipality, and against five members of the national police,
and made sure that legal processes were followed. The cases caused great commotion in Arequipa, and, seeking to avoid more legal action, the local authorities decided to stop the raids on sex workers. Mujeres del Sur’s documentation shows a dramatic decrease in police persecution, extortion, and arbitrary arrest of sex workers in Arequipa.

The group also reports an enormous change in their level of influence. In its early years, when the organisation was still getting started and working on its own empowerment, its members participated in multisectoral committees. But they were not equal partners in any negotiations. “It was as if we were behind a wall, isolated,” the group says. “We were there but not really there.” The change came in 2009. “We started focusing on educating ourselves. We built our knowledge, our arguments, our negotiation skills. We gained confidence. We started feeling entitled. Our role changed: from merely present, we became vocal. We became influential. . . . It used to happen that when officials heard one of us speak, they asked: ‘are you a social worker?’ ‘No,’ [we responded], ‘I am a sex worker.’ This changed the image of sex workers. . . . We make valuable contributions. We have knowledge and skills, and we use them. And people start to listen to us. Because of this. They see it. Self representation, our voices, our agenda. That makes the difference.”

“Our most important strength is that we are sex workers speaking up for ourselves,” explains the group. “We learned what our rights are. We learned to use the right language. We accessed spaces and people who are influential. This has caused the image of sex workers to change. A sex worker used to be a bad woman, standing on the corner of the street smoking, waiting for clients. Or, at best, a poor victim that needs to be rescued. We show that we are smart and capable. That we know what we want, that we are perfectly capable of making our own decisions, and that we insist that others respect us, as people and as workers. The image is changing.”

The 2014 local elections are a case in point. Mujeres del Sur had planned visits to candidates to lobby for a sex workers’ rights agenda. But before they approached the candidates, the candidates approached them, coming to their office to talk. The group had been lobbying the local government to buy land and build a home for retired sex workers. Two candidates from different parties came to the group and offered to give them the land and the house in exchange for their support in the election. Another candidate asked to speak at a meeting of the group’s membership. According to Mujeres del Sur, “this shows that our work over the past years has an effect: we are visible, we are a party to negotiate with. Sex workers matter.”

The rise in visibility and influence of Mujeres del Sur has also had repercussions. “We exist, we resist, we demand our rights. We are no longer silent and this has caused some of our opponents to create other strategies to silence us. For example, lately sex worker activists have received personal threats. Neighbourhoods here are governed by neighbourhood councils, the ‘junta vecinal’. It is from these councils that the threats came. Many have strong links with the Catholic church. They organise marches against prostitution. They do everything in their power to get brothels closed. But we are becoming more influential. We are meeting with the mayor. Politicians listen to us. The ways they can hinder us become limited…In response, they threaten and attack activists. This is what we are confronted with—but we know it is a sign we are gaining ground. We are here, and it’s no longer possible to not take us into account.”

Since its founding, Mujeres del Sur has expanded its reach beyond Arequipa. It now provides guidance to a loose coalition of six
grassroots sex worker groups across southern Peru. Mujeres del Sur acts as an advisor and mentor for the groups, and, in the long run, hopes to operate as a regional network in Peru.

Role of Mama Cash

Mujeres del Sur first operated under the umbrella of Miluska Vida y Dignidad, a national sex workers’ organisation based in Lima with partnerships and activities throughout the country. In 2009, however, the group received its first grant, from Mama Cash. At the time, the organisation had no paid staff. The work was done by a president and three coordinators in charge of different areas of the work. These four people, plus two advisors, comprised the board. Six years later, Mujeres del Sur has eight staff members, two receiving a part-time salary and the others a volunteer stipend. Four of the staff members also sit on the board.

According to the group, strengthening the capacities of staff, board, and the (informal) membership has been the most important factor in strengthening the organisation. This became a key focus in 2009. Since then, the staff and board members (all sex workers themselves) and a large proportion of the sex worker community in Arequipa have been trained in human rights, relevant legislation, and advocacy skills. This process has been one of both individual and collective empowerment, and has given the organisation and the movement clout.

“Without Mama Cash’s support everything we achieved could not have happened,” the group insists. “[Mama Cash is] our only source of structural support. We could not exist in this form or do the work in this way without it. The financial support covering the essentials is crucial. We feel supported in doing what we believe is right, without pressure or agenda-setting from [Mama Cash’s] side. What is important is the trust, the connection, the close relationship. It has not all been achievements and good news we have shared over the past couple of years. There have been challenges and setbacks and bad news. But we have been able to share it. It is not a vertical relationship, it is between equals, between allies. The alliance, the solidarity, is really important to us.”

Supported by Mama Cash, Mujeres del Sur has developed stronger connections with the feminist movement, nationally, regionally and internationally. The group has been able to position sex worker issues as feminist issues and part of the women’s rights agenda. “Mama Cash supported us to intervene and participate in feminist spaces,” the group says. “These spaces are extremely important for us. They help us link up with feminist organisations, understand problems from another perspective, insert ourselves into their work plans, and get our issues on the agenda.” For example, Mujeres del Sur’s participated in the 2012 AWID Forum in Turkey, joining other Mama Cash grantees from Peru, Turkey, the United Kingdom and Hungary with which Mujeres del Sur co-organised a session on sex worker rights and economic justice. “A lot of our problems, like exploitation and police violence, are economic ones, and it’s important that they are recognised as such.”

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From 2009-2015, Asociación Trabajadoras Sexuales Mujeres del Sur received a total of €174,200 from Mama Cash, of which €50,000 was for organisation of the Mama Cash Latin American and Caribbean grantee-partner convening, ECOPLAC, in 2014.

[This story of change is based on documents Mujeres del Sur submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; notes of progress review conversations conducted over skype; and a group interview with Ana Luz, Elizabeth, Rocío, and Carol of Mujeres del Sur. All quotes are theirs. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
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