

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

Is cooperativism a channel for formalization and for accessing social security in sexual work? International background and expert opinion on the case of Uruguay

The relationship between sexual work, prostitution and cooperativism can be controversial even in those countries where prostitution has been legalized and the legal status of sexual workers is recognized. In these countries, the cooperative legislation opens the doors to the creation of cooperatives of sexual workers, just as it enables any kind of legal activity to be cooperativised. Even so, there are very few cases in the world where this particular activity has made cooperative initiatives possible.

In this paper we will start by describing the international records and then analyze the case of Uruguay through an investigation of the opinions of female sex workers in relation to their social security and the possibility of creating cooperatives as a way of formalizing their situation in the context of their collective and independent (autonomous) work.

Regarding the international background, we would emphasize that despite the fact that the process of organizing male and female sex workers has increased, through the constitution of unions and other labor protection platforms, it has not developed in a cooperative form. An outstanding example among the few known cases is the cooperative which originated with the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a Forum created in 1995 in East Bengal (India) by sex workers following an awareness campaign about HIV impact in 1992. After intense mobilizations, the Forum had grown to thousands of members. To consolidate their mutual assistance efforts, they established a multipurpose cooperative, Usha, which currently provides financial services, besides selling supplies such as condoms and providing other social services. This experience has triggered a few more in the world, for example the West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals (WCCSIP) of Vancouver (Canada). If we stop to analyze workers cooperatives, there are four cases in the world: one in Germany, another in the Netherlands which could not be set up, the Sealeer cooperative in Ibiza (Spain) and the 'Ángeles en busca de Libertad' coop in Mexico City.

Regarding Uruguay, the cooperative format is a legal possibility which could be accessible for the collective of people who prostitute themselves in this country, since the practise of prostitution has been legalised (17.515 Law) and what is more, the Coop Law (18.407 Law) states that any legal activity may

be cooperativised. Besides, through this independent and collective format a cooperative could solve the workers' difficulties in accessing the social security. However, in fact, there are no workers' cooperatives for those practicing prostitution and almost all the people who prostitute themselves do so without the protection of the social security.

With the above in mind, within the collective of women that practice prostitution in Uruguay, we investigated their situation in matters of social security and their position on an eventual cooperative way out.

This investigation is based on a representative sample of women who practice prostitution in Uruguay, interviewing 190 cases (including work in bars/brothels and on the street). The sample is statistically representative with a 95% confidence interval and a 7.3% limit to the standard error of the mean.

From the interviews, we found that barely 6.4% of the sample had access to social security. The interviews also revealed the general ignorance about their social security rights. Regarding possible opportunities for their work, namely working in a dependent relationship or in a cooperative, the investigation found that a relative majority (36.7%) had a negative opinion of operating as a dependent worker, while 26.6% had a positive opinion. With regard to the cooperative format, the negative opinions rose to 46.3%, although the positive opinions (33%) were slightly higher than for dependent work. Going deeper into the causes that could explain the negative opinion about the cooperative format, we have divided the answers into two main types of answers. On the one hand there are those who think that cooperative work can lead to many difficulties in the context of a quite individualistic and truly competitive working culture. On the other hand, the main core of the answers concerns the difficulties that running a business like this without the presence of a chief could entail. Also, evidence of a negative opinion of a cooperative for operational reasons was collected. This the case of those who think that a cooperative should pay equitable incomes beyond the work done by each one of them, an aspect that is part of the myth about how incomes are distributed in a workers cooperative.

Among the conclusions of this paper we highlight that in general terms, beyond the undeniable advance of cooperativism in recent decades, there is no international evidence that allows us to state that workers' cooperatives have become a channel of access to formalization and social security for the population that practices prostitution, even though the cooperative tool is one of the alternatives that in theory could be used to move forward new formats that guarantee the independence of this group.

Regarding Uruguay, the efforts made by public authorities to formalize the sector, allowing sexual workers to contribute to the social security, have not been very effective. In this situation, the "salaried" solution (apart from its implications from the point of view of procuring) only obtained support from 1/4 of the sample. The cooperative solution on their behalf was not simple for the interviewees to unders-

tand and in the case of those who were motivated to give an opinion, the majority mistrusted its virtues as a self-4organization format.

KEY WORDS: Sexual works, prostitution, cooperativism, social safety.