

**Constructing an actionable environment:
Collective action for HIV prevention among
Kolkata sex workers**

Flora Elizabeth Cornish

London School of Economics and Political Science

August 2004

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Except where indicated by references in the text, and except for help as specified in the acknowledgements, this thesis is a result of my own work.

Abstract

How can marginalised communities organise a project to yield significant social change? This thesis theorises the resources which enable such community organisation to work. Participation, empowerment and conscientisation are understood, not through a logic of quantity which creates linear dimensions, but through a logic of concrete qualities. A pragmatist approach is taken, to define our constructs in terms of the actions being undertaken by participants, within specific, qualitatively distinctive domains. Activity theory is used to theorise participation as a process of collective activity, which is supported by shared rules, a division of labour and shared goals, and which is challenged by divergences of interest. A community case study of the Sonagachi Project, a successful HIV prevention project run by sex workers in Kolkata (India), is used to investigate participation. The case study is based on interviews and group discussions with sex workers and Project workers (sex workers employed by the Project), and observation of the daily activities of the Project. Sex workers relate to the Project as a source of support in solving their individual problems, gaining new powers, but not acting as collectivity members. Project workers are constituted as collectivity members, whose action interlocks with that of their colleagues, through participating in the politicising discourse of the Project, which states that sex workers should be granted “workers’ rights”, and through learning the rules of participation in meetings and the hierarchical division of labour. To be allowed to operate, the Project has to carefully adjust to local power relations, with madams, political parties, and funding agencies, in collaborative-adversarial relationships. In conclusion, the scope of participation is defined as producing significant, yet circumscribed, local change. To intervene in a fractured community is a political process in which the provision of new resources is both necessary and potentially divisive.

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Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis has been by far the hardest thing I have ever done, and it would not have happened without enormous support from many people. Three in particular have been formative in the thesis. My supervisor, Cathy Campbell has been a perfectly motivating presence, both encouraging me by showing me how my work is important, and challenging me to meet higher standards by giving appropriate criticism when things hadn't been properly thought through. It is with pleasure that I recognise her intellectual influence throughout the chapters of this thesis. The quality of the data on which this thesis rests is a result of my happening upon one of the rumoured but rarely-encountered "research-angels". Riddhi Ghosh's extraordinary interpretative and social skills, her energy, commitment, and critical argumentation made the fieldwork easy for me, and made it intellectually and personally rewarding. Alex Gillespie's contribution has to be taken for granted throughout the thesis. Apart from his theoretical interrogations, he has given useful though not always welcome reminders that this or that section really needs more work, that the life of a PhD student is not *that* bad, and that I should just get on with writing.

Formative in my education, Rob Farr, George Gaskell, Sandra Jovchelovitch, Mac MacLachlan and Mick O'Connell have all played a significant part in stimulating the interests that led me here, and teaching me how to address those interests social-psychologically. I have benefited greatly from Tania Zittoun's intellectual enthusiasm as well as her psychological expertise. Conversations with Gerard Duveen helped me to gain a wider perspective on the place of my research in relation to social psychology. Ditte Winther-Lindqvist, Tara Sinclair, Charis Psaltis, Marie-Claude Gervais and Jan Stockdale have all helped and influenced me in significant ways.

In Kolkata, I received a warm welcome and generous commitments of time and energy from the members and associates of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and the staff of the STD/HIV Intervention Programme. Mrinal Kanti Dutta, the Director of the Sonagachi Project, was entirely supportive of my research and inviting of critical dialogue. It was an honour to be helped by the irrepressible energy and expertise of Mala Singh, Sudipta Biswas, and Putul Singh, which are put to such good use in solving

sex workers' problems in Kolkata. At DMSC's office, Rusi Ghosh, Mitra Routh, Rita Moulik, and Reshmi gave me particular help and support. At Abinash and Palatak clinics, Kamaladi, Namitadi and Milidi facilitated my every request. Gita 'Gopaler ma', Radhadi, Kohinoordi, Rasoba bibi, Shikhadi, Pushpadi, and Rebadi all took a personal interest in my work, and gave generously of their time and patience, answering my many questions, helping me to find informants, and advising me on where I might find interesting data. I am very grateful to the many other peer educators and local committee members who also helped me out, but whose names I did not always record. Of course, to everyone who agreed to participate in an interview, or to answer questions informally, I extend sincere thanks for a generosity which I cannot reciprocate.

Conversations with Sarbani Goswami, Seemantini Gupta, Moni Nag, Kavita Punjabi, Indrani Sinha, Sumun Sengupta and Suresh Kumar all helped me to situate my emerging understanding of the work of the Sonagachi Project in relation to local and national concerns. Transcriptions were very effectively done by Eva Mukherjee, Subarna Sen and Eileen Goodall.

This work has been supported financially by an ESRC Postgraduate Studentship, an LSE Research Studentship, an LSE Rosebery Studentship and an award for fieldwork from the University of London Central Research Fund.

Overview

This thesis addresses the functioning of participation by marginalised communities in constructing responses to the challenges which they face. Participation is a development strategy widely recommended in development policy, but one which is heavily criticised and poorly theorised. Through examining a case of a successful participatory project run by sex workers in Kolkata (Calcutta), India, the thesis aims to support the potential of participation, through producing actionable and realistic understandings of its workings. The starting point of the investigation is the empirical question: How has the Sonagachi Project managed to achieve its successes? To address this question, a theoretical perspective of participation as collective activity is developed. This leads to three core questions: How does a collective action project enable community members to take new actions in their environment? How do participants become members of a collectivity, whose actions are aligned with the collective interests? And how can a community project overcome the obstacles raised by societal inequalities of power? In answering these questions, the thesis contributes theoretical and practical understandings of the extent to which, and the means through which, collective action projects can produce social change.

Chapter 1: Locating the Sonagachi Project

The first chapter introduces the concrete context of the research. It outlines the practical process through which the research questions were generated and a research site was chosen. It then introduces important details of the national and local context which impinge upon the lives and health of sex workers, and their opportunities for collective action. Finally, a detailed picture of the lives of sex workers in Sonagachi, and of the work of the Sonagachi Project is painted, to set up the arena in which my investigation of collective action takes place. The chapter raises the question: How has the Sonagachi Project has been so successful?

Chapter 2: Participation, power and sex workers' collective action

Understanding participatory health promotion is the practical problem to which the theoretical and empirical work of this thesis seeks to contribute. This chapter introduces the concept of participation, as it is used in the international development literature, the rationales for its use, and the obstacles to participation which are raised. It argues that our understandings of participation and empowerment are hampered by conceptualising the varieties of participation and empowerment as if they exist on a linear scale, and proposes instead to consider participation and empowerment concretely, in terms of the specific actions being undertaken. Critiques of participation have raised complex issues of power relations in three areas: arguing that participatory rhetoric is a smokescreen for government irresponsibility or control; arguing that participation risks being hijacked by powerful people outside the community; and arguing that an assumption that a community forms a homogenous, mutually supportive group is often mistaken. In order to assess the potential for participation among sex workers, the literature on sex workers is reviewed to assess whether participatory efforts are likely to fall foul of the obstacles identified in those critiques. Finally, a discussion of Paulo Freire's theorisation of "conscientisation" produces a reading of his work to be further pursued in the empirical chapters. Freire's theory engages substantially with problems of power relations, providing a conceptualisation of how communities create actionable environments.

Chapter 3: The theoretical framework: Participation as collective activity

The thesis contributes a clearer understanding of "participation" by investigating it as a social psychological process of collective activity. The investigation is guided by a pragmatist paradigm, in which concepts are to be defined concretely, in terms of the actions, or consequences which they entail. This approach will be taken throughout the thesis, but the core concepts to be investigated in this way are "participation" and "empowerment". The theoretical perspective of activity theory is proposed to answer to this pragmatist demand, leading to a conceptualisation of participation as a process of collective activity in which people collaborate in goal-directed joint activity to gain control over their environment. The model of activity adopted incorporates *tools* which are resources for individuals to take action, and *rules*, a *division of labour*, and a *shared*

motive, which are resources enabling individuals to coordinate their activity, when they take collective action. Activity systems are not harmonious but incorporate divergences of interests. The distinction between people acting according to their individual interests, and acting as part of the collectivity is framed as a distinction between action and activity. Finally, the possibility of participants gaining control over the conditions of their joint activity is discussed in terms of those conditions entering into reflexive discussions. These elements: resources, divergences and reflection, are key conceptual tools for the analysis of the phenomenon of participation as a process of collective activity in this thesis.

Chapter 4: Research design and method

A pragmatist epistemology is outlined as the basis of the kinds of claims the thesis seeks to make. A community case study is discussed as the research strategy. The most controversial methodological issue faced by case studies is how to get from the particularities of the individual case to knowledge with more general application. The issue of generality is addressed, to propose three routes to establishing the generality of a case study. The chapter then moves on to the methods of data collection used to build up the case study. Interviews and group discussions with sex workers were used to tap sex workers' reported problems and available means of solving them. Interviews with Project workers, and group discussions which brought together Project workers and sex workers were used to tap Project workers' perspectives on their work. Observation of the Project's participatory activities provided an observer's perspective on the activities comprising participation. The rationale of each research method is presented, as well as the details of the data collection procedure and the sample obtained. The approach to data analysis is outlined. Attention focuses on a way of operationalising "researcher reflexivity" in data interpretation.

Chapter 5: Sex workers' problems-being-resolved

Case studies of individual sex workers introduce this chapter. The chapter draws on the interviews and group discussions with sex workers and with Project workers (who are also sex workers), to outline the challenges facing sex workers in their everyday life, the resources they have to deal with those challenges, and where the Sonagachi Project

enters into their lives as a resource to deal with the challenges. These challenges are identified at the sites of sex workers' relations with clients, with boyfriends, and with each other, their placement in the organisational system of sex work, their problem of protecting their health and their problem of avoiding and solving conflicts. The difference between individual action and collective activity is highlighted, as the main resources for action which sex workers have gained entail their individually taking advantage of the resources offered by the Project, rather than their taking part in a collective effort to improve their conditions.

Chapter 6: Project workers' participation

Case studies of individual Project workers introduce the chapter. The chapter draws on the interviews with peer educators to describe their tasks as workers for the Project. The resources which they have to carry out their educational and problem-solving work, among sex workers, are detailed. The chapter then turns to considering how Project workers talk about their relation to the Project. It first discusses the personal material and symbolic benefits of participation. It then investigates the ways in which Project workers talk about the Project's official ideology of struggling for "workers' rights", to suggest that this alternative imagined future allows the present to be problematised and provides a shared motive facilitating Project workers' coordination together.

Chapter 7: The daily activity of participation

This chapter presents a detailed description of the organisational work of participation, through presentation of my observational data on two key sites of participation: the daily routine of peer educators doing health promotion; and the weekly community problem-solving meetings. The analysis is structured by the categories of activity theory, focusing on the goals, procedures and objects of Project workers' activity. Conscientisation is discussed in terms of participants' control over the conditions governing their collaboration together, that is, the shared rules, agreed-on division of labour and shared goals.

Chapter 8: Participation in context

This chapter draws on all of the datasets, to examine the relation of the Sonagachi Project to its wider contexts. The analysis presented in the previous three chapters, in terms of the actions which sex workers can take highlights their agency, and thus potentially underestimates the role of external factors which both have enabled the Project to exist and to achieve results, and which have exerted significant constraints upon it. The Project has to achieve a fine balance between adjusting to the constraints set by these contexts, and acting to change the contexts themselves. The chapter considers the relation of the Project to wider contexts in terms of activity systems in which the Project collaborates with (a) the political organisation of the red light area; (b) the hierarchical economic organisation of the red light area and (c) the Project's funding bodies.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

This chapter returns to the questions raised in the early chapters of the thesis, to interpret the implications of the research for the theory and practice of participatory development. The answers which the thesis has produced to the concrete empirical questions concerning how the Sonagachi Project functions are first presented, followed by the responses to the critiques of participation outlined in Chapter 2. I conclude that the scope of participation is to produce significant circumscribed local change, a point of view that demands specification of the particular domains of their lives which participants do and do not have the power to change. I suggest that, in a very unequal context, a hierarchical organisation which retains control over important domains of power can prevent a project from being hijacked by powerful groups. Answering to felt local needs is a means of constituting local interest in and commitment to a project. In learning how to navigate a project's organisational structure, and learning its problematising discourse, participants become incorporated as members of a collectivity. The chapter then assesses the thesis's contribution to activity theory in the form of a set of concepts for the analysis of collective action. Finally, the chapter opens out to the next phase, outlining future research directions and implications for participatory interventions.

Chapter one

Locating the Sonagachi Project

How can disadvantaged communities take a lead role in local health promotion? What are the social psychological resources which enable a traditionally marginalised group to organise a project together to tackle the problems that disadvantage them? And more specifically, how have Kolkata sex workers been able to organise a city-wide project that has reduced sexually transmitted infections, increased condom use, and increased the everyday security of women who sell sex? This thesis develops a set of conceptual tools with which to analyse participation, in order to understand how a participatory project constitutes new powers for its members, how participants become active collectivity members, and how a project can avoid being hijacked by more powerful local groups.

The thesis assumes that social life is produced in the details of people's contextually-structured action, and uses an empirical examination of the Sonagachi Project as its method of investigating participation. Hence, it is necessary to set the concrete context of the research problem, which is the aim of this chapter. It begins by outlining the practical process through which my research questions were generated and the research site was chosen. To establish the context of the lives of sex workers, the gaze then shifts to the macro-social Indian national context, from where we will progressively zoom in to focus on women's movements in India, the role of a community action project in HIV prevention, the sex trade in Kolkata, and the interaction between sex worker and client. Then the Sonagachi Project is introduced and the work it organises is briefly outlined. Thus the present chapter locates the Sonagachi Project in terms of my research, India, Kolkata and the practices sex work.

1.1. Constructing the question

This thesis, like all research, is the product of a historically-situated social process (Latour, 1987). I began this research project with an interest in HIV prevention in the

developing world, wondering whether health psychology had any more to offer to HIV prevention than the design of measurement instruments to assess the population's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour, or inappropriate cross-cultural application of psychological scales. My previous experience of psychological research in the developing world had been a frustrating one, in which I tried to apply western-based psychological scales of mental health and locus of control to a group of young Malawian former refugees (Cornish, Peltzer & MacLachlan, 2000). I found that the scale items were largely meaningless to my interviewees, and bore little relation to the immediate and significant challenges of their lives. My reaction was to take a qualitative approach which quite naïvely sought a “bottom-up” perspective in which participants' voices would shine through unimpeded by the western researcher's constructs. Later, studying social research methods and social psychology at Master's level led me to think more reflexively about the co-construction of qualitative data, and provided me with new conceptual tools and confidence in the possibility of a critical social psychology being able to make significant contributions to understanding problems of community development.

My early thoughts in starting this research were oriented by Sloan's (1996) call for a psychology for developing societies that transcends the individualism and scientism of traditional western psychology, one in which people are placed in their sociocultural, historical and economic contexts, and in which technical solutions are not imposed from above, but social transformation is sought through collective critical engagement. With this in mind, I spent some time as a research advisor to the Mumbai HIV prevention division of an international health promotion NGO (non-governmental organisation). Here I found that my focus on local knowledge produced useful suggestions for intervention design, but more interestingly, I began to apprehend the exclusionary and inegalitarian nature of the expert-client relationships that characterised the organisation I was associated with, as well as others which I visited. NGOs' self-descriptions with terms like “peer education”, “participation” or “enablement” did not necessarily entail any significant sharing of power with community members. I became interested in how health promotion could be organised in a way that engaged community members as genuine partners, rather than simply as the objects of intervention. In the context of vague and unspecified understandings of “participation” in the international development literature, and calls for detailed studies of successful participatory projects,

so that lessons may be learned about how to facilitate such interventions (Kelly & Van Vlaenderen, 1995), I focused my research interest on participation as a health promotion strategy. In the Indian context, Nag (2001) calls for research to identify factors affecting the functioning of HIV/AIDS intervention projects with sex workers. In this spirit, I sought to identify a successful and genuinely participatory programme.

To this end I visited five projects in different parts of India, attended a workshop for NGOs on peer education and HIV prevention in Mumbai and attended the “National Forum of Sex Workers in India” (Mahabalipuram, 28-30 April, 2000). This National Forum was a conference of sex workers and their advocates, held to establish a national platform for sex workers. I found that, as well as traditional expert-client models of intervention with sex workers, there is a strong community-based movement of sex workers in India. Groups participating in this movement tend to engage sex workers as active partners in the decision-making and implementation of their HIV interventions, to address sex workers’ wider problems, and to lobby at a political level on behalf of sex workers (see Sangram, Point of View & Vamp, 2003). The Sonagachi Project, in Kolkata, has been foundational to this movement. It is one of the longest-established and largest of such projects. It is also a very successful project, both in terms of biomedical indicators, and in terms of mobilising sex workers’ enthusiasm. The Project is used as a model project, for the training of other NGOs, by India’s National AIDS Control Organisation, and has achieved international recognition as a successful HIV intervention project (e.g. Horizons, 2000; UNAIDS, 2000; Nath, 2000; Nag, 2001). I chose the Sonagachi Project as my research site, on the basis of its demonstrated success, and its genuinely participatory philosophy and practices. Being well-known, the Project attracts many visitors (e.g. journalists, students, health and development workers) interested in its work, and has established procedures and fees in order to accommodate such visitors. My request to carry out a research on the Sonagachi Project was understood as a request to be one of these visitors, and thus the Project’s Director agreed to my request. Further details on my relation to the Project are presented in Chapter 4 (section 4.4).

Through an in-depth case study of the Sonagachi Project, then, my research seeks to develop our understanding of the social psychological processes which can enable participatory health promotion to work.

1.2. HIV in India

The HIV epidemic emerged relatively late in India, and national prevalence levels continue to be much lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. However, UNAIDS (2002) expresses concern about the continuing potential for an increase in the epidemic, due to inadequate governmental commitment to prevention, as well as high levels of high-risk practices, especially intra-venous drug use and commercial sex, in some geographical areas. Approximately 1% (5.1 million people) of the adult Indian population lives with HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2004), and sexual transmission is estimated to account for 85% of the cases (NACO, 2004). As a group, sex workers show some of the highest rates of HIV infection, though the pattern is very different in different parts of the country, and reliable surveys are few. According to epidemiological modelling by Nagelkerke, Jha, Vlas *et al.* (2002), commercial sex is the single most important site of HIV transmission in India, leading to their optimistic conclusion that “in India, a sex worker intervention would drive the epidemic to extinction” (p.89). UNAIDS’ 2002 epidemiological update cites studies which have produced figures for HIV prevalence among Kolkata sex workers of 11.3% in 1996, 11.9% in 1997, and 5.3% in 1998. (There are no figures after 1998). Sex workers in other Indian cities have certainly been worse hit by HIV, with figures cited, for example, of 51% of sex workers being HIV positive in Mumbai in a 1996 study, 35% in Pune in 1994, 29% in Vasodagame in 1994, and 11% in Agra in 2000. It is very difficult to know to what to attribute these differences. It has been suggested that Mumbai, as India’s commercial hub, experiences very high levels of migrant labour and trading and thus high levels of sexual mixing. It has also been suggested that the organisation of the sex trade in Mumbai, being controlled by powerful mafia, is much more oppressive and inaccessible than is the case in Kolkata. Nevertheless, HIV is still a significant threat to sex workers in Kolkata, and HIV prevention efforts, such as promoting safer sex and greater control over living and working conditions, remain crucial priorities.

1.3. Demography and gender in West Bengal

India’s population, at the census taken in March 2001, was over 1 billion people. Eighty million of these people live in the state of West Bengal (Census of India, 2001), and about 12 million in Kolkata. The city of Kolkata is the capital of West Bengal and the

urban centre for Eastern India, but the state's population is predominantly rural (72%), earning their living through agriculture. According to the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (2001), 44% of the Indian population lives on less than \$1 per day. West Bengal is about at the average level for Indian states, in terms of poverty, but it is flanked by India's poorest two states, Bihar and Orissa (see Drèze and Sen, 1995, p.47), and by two of the world's poorest countries, Nepal and Bangladesh. Women and men from all of these places migrate to Kolkata in search of work, and a significant proportion of sex workers in Kolkata are from such regions. In terms of social stratifications, West Bengal is predominantly Hindu, and Muslims are a significant minority. Despite tragic upheavals and communal violence at the time of partition and the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, today, West Bengal suffers from far less communal violence, or indeed caste-based politics, than do its North Indian neighbours.

The female to male ratio in the Indian population is often cited as indicative of the relative evaluation of men and women in Indian society. In West Bengal, for example, there are 934 women and girls to every 1000 men and boys (Census of India, 2001). (Compare this to ratios of 101 women to 100 men in Indonesia; 99 women to 100 men in Sri Lanka (Drèze & Sen, 1995)). Preference for sons rather than daughters has apparently led to life-threatening neglect of girl children in parts of India. More directly observable, and a topic which has received the sustained attention of Indian feminists, is the usage of foetal sex determination tests, and consequent abortion of female foetuses. Though foetal sex determination has been made illegal, it is still widely practiced, and there are ongoing campaigns to stop it. Amartya Sen poignantly refers to these gender disparities as "India's missing women". The preference for sons evidenced in these gender disparities continues to disadvantage some girls as they grow up, impacting, for example, on poor families' choices of which family member they can afford to send to school.

An important factor implicated in the preference for sons is the tradition of patrilocality: upon marriage, women move to their husband's native home, becoming a part of his family, and acquiring responsibility to care for his family, not for her own native family. Sons are thus valued for their provision of security in a couple's old age, while daughters contribute little to their natal home after marriage. Moreover, the custom of providing dowries – whereby valuable gifts and cash are given by the bride's family to

that of the bridegroom – often causes serious impoverishment to poor families with girl children to be married off.

Despite prevalent assumptions that women will work in the home and be financially supported by male family members, large numbers of Indian women, in fact, have to support themselves and their families. Widowhood, marital breakdown and male out-migration are reportedly leading to increasing numbers of female-headed households. While official estimates of female-headed households cite a figure of 10%, several authors suggest that the real figure is much higher (e.g. 30% (Upadhyay, 2000); 20-35% (Agarwal, 2000)). Women heads of households face significant obstacles to financial security, being disadvantaged in terms of the labour market, and in terms of property ownership. Paid work in India is predominantly carried out by men (Census of India, 2001). Women workers tend to be paid less than men for equal work (Banerjee, 1995), and are more often unskilled and/ or illiterate, due to expectations that their work will centre on the home. Thus, the female labour force being over-represented in agricultural, and service work, and in the informal sector. Workers in the informal sector have absolutely no job security. Rather than receiving a fixed salary, they may be paid by the piece of work they complete, or hired by the day. Ownership of property is another important dimension of gender inequality (Agarwal, 1994; 2000). While women are entitled by law to inherit property almost equally with men, in practice, most Indian women remain propertyless. The perpetuation of this inequality is attributed by Agarwal (2000) at the political level to an unfounded fear that increasing women's economic independence will lead to marital breakdown and disruption of families. At the family level, she mentions the continuing definition of women's position in terms of marriage, home and hearth, rather than by economic activity, as the micro-social mechanism discouraging equitable distribution of economic assets.

Women who become sex workers often cite poverty, rejection by their families, and inability to find other financially sustaining work, as the reasons for their entering sex work.

1.4. Indian women's movements

In the face of such gender inequities, powerful women's movements have arisen in India. The main target of these movements has been 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). Vulnerability to each of these abuses reflects the systematic disempowerment of women which leaves them open to exploitation. Women's activism around these issues has resulted in many cases in legislation to protect the needs and interests of women. However, the persistent gap between legislation and its enforcement in practice draws attention to the insufficiency of legislative change alone (Forbes, 1998). As Agarwal (2000: 37) writes: "In India, as elsewhere, a yawning gap remains between *de jure* and *de facto* rights; between the ever-broadening notion of women's rights as spelt out in global arenas and international conferences, and the limited realization of such rights in local practice". I will return to questions of over-emphasis of legal aspects of gender issues below, where I turn to issues of sex work in India. The divergence between law and local practice also draws attention to the necessity of examining women's experience and emancipation struggles at the grassroots level, which is the approach taken in this thesis.

Grassroots organisations of women, often at the community level, have been an important and often successful force for change in India. The best-known and celebrated example must be the Self-Employed Women's Association, a form of trade union for women working in the informal sector, founded in Gujarat in 1972. Through organising women workers, this organisation strives for reasonable wages for contracted work and income-generating enterprises for women, and has achieved concrete gains in these areas (Sommer, 2001). Developing the psychological resources of awareness of rights, confidence and mutual support among women are seen as central to organising the women workers (Sommer, 2001). A second example of active local women's movements can be seen in anti-alcohol movements, led by women seeking to end the domestic violence and wastage of money perpetrated by their menfolk due to alcohol. At the local level, women have grouped together to close down liquor shops, and to shame liquor sellers and drinkers through public mockery (Kumar, 1993). Furthermore,

these movements have led to prohibition of alcohol in several states of India. I give these examples of women's movements to demonstrate that, despite adverse conditions, disadvantaged Indian women have successfully mobilised and generated domain-specific sources of agency and change.

Mohanty (1991) criticises western feminism for its construction of third world women as passive, oppressed victims, a view which is contradicted by the vitality of many grassroots women's movements in poor countries. She argues that we need to place much more emphasis on the agency generated by women in developing countries, rather than on their victimisation. Likewise, Sen (1999) calls for urgent attention to women's agency, arguing that "nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women" (p.103). By investigating the work of the Sonagachi Project, this research seeks to contribute to understanding the processes through which grassroots groups of marginalised women may develop significant agency.

1.5. Sex workers' community mobilisation: Two political controversies

The present research is necessarily situated in relation to two controversial debates in the literature and activism concerning HIV prevention and sex work.

1.5.1. Societal change or community mobilisation?

Given the extreme levels of absolute poverty, the economic context which disrupts family relationships by sending men and women to the city to work, and the major gender inequalities which leave women with little control over their lives, it may seem that focusing on community responses to HIV is a very small-scale response to a national-scale problem. As de Waal (2003) has argued, in developing countries, there is a desperate need for substantial political responses to HIV, where HIV becomes incorporated as a core issue of governance, rather than leaving the problem of HIV to the NGO sector. The first responses to HIV, which emerged in the USA, within a well-resourced vocal, gay community, already organised around civil rights issues, took the form of a within-community response and a focus on individual human rights. This

form of response was then transplanted to developing countries where affected communities did not have the resources of the USA gay community to construct effective responses.

There is an un-theorised consensus on what an HIV/AIDS programme should look like: it should be founded on voluntary counselling and testing, education (preferably by peers), provision of condoms, efforts to overcome denial, stigma and discrimination, and care and treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS. [...] It is, overwhelmingly, a model of voluntarism and community participation. Even when undertaken by a government ministry, army or private company, it is essentially an NGO model of public action. This model looks as though it is trying to appear as uncontroversial as possible, so as to fit as many fashionable development agendas as possible (de Waal, 2003, p.254).

Community responses cannot substitute for political responses, but, given the urgency of the epidemic, and how slowly government-initiated macro-social change comes about, community responses are essential medium-term efforts. As van der Vliet has put it: “The problem with seeing AIDS as essentially a product of poverty and socio-economic conditions is that prevention and cure must then be postponed till Utopia – or something approaching it” (1996, p.6, cited in de Waal, 2003). If governments are not adequately meeting their responsibilities, then at least community-based organisations can do some useful work to prevent HIV. Ramasubban (1998) argues that activism originating in the community offers the most optimism and potential for effective HIV prevention in India, as community-based organisations can most adequately represent and respond to the interests of the marginalised groups who are particularly vulnerable to HIV, while the state sector lacks the necessary political commitment due to the stigma and moral threat of issues of sexuality.

As UNAIDS’ 2004 *Report on the Epidemic* states, “AIDS is an extraordinary kind of crisis; it is both an emergency *and* a long-term development issue” (2004, p.3). The distinction made by Williams and Campbell (1998), between short, medium and long term efforts to prevent HIV is a very useful approach to conceptualising the range of different, and necessary responses to the challenge of HIV/AIDS. The urgency of the epidemic demands a swift, (admittedly, short-term and palliative) response, such as can

be generated in STD (sexually transmitted disease) treatment programmes. On the other hand, patterns of vulnerability repeat long-standing economic and gender inequalities, which must be the target of long-term, fundamental change. This structural environment, however, is not quickly changed, and in the interim, it is also necessary to work at the community level, firstly to create a community environment that can resist some of the damaging effects of structural inequalities, and secondly, to mobilise communities to demand implementation of social policies that will serve their long term needs and goals (Kabeer, 1994).

1.5.2. Pro-legalisation or anti-legalisation?

Discussions of prostitution in India are dominated by a divisive debate over legalisation (Gangoli, 1998). NGOs working with sex workers, women's groups and feminists are deeply divided between pro- and anti-legalisation camps, and their political stance on this issue structures their work with sex workers and their view of the role of sex workers in the prevention of HIV. On the pro-legalisation side, people tend to emphasise that women have made a certain choice to enter prostitution, that prostitution is a form of economically viable work, that as long as there is a demand, sex work will persist, and that criminalisation serves only to drive prostitution underground and to stigmatise sex workers, making sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and placing them beyond society's protection. They tend to emphasise the agency of sex workers, and give them a key role in the prevention of HIV transmission within the context of commercial sex. On the other hand, opponents of legalisation reject claims that sex workers enter prostitution willingly, they emphasise the trafficking, trickery and violence that are often involved in bringing women into prostitution, and assert that, in a context of desperate poverty, to speak of choice is disingenuous. In their view, commercial sex is always sexual violence, and to legalise it is to legitimise the commodification of women and their sexuality. They argue that legalisation would serve the interests of the procurers, pimps and madams, who make their livelihoods by exploiting young women's bodies. In this view, sex workers should not be burdened with the responsibility of HIV prevention, since the male clients control the sexual encounter, and it is they who should be taking responsibility. NGOs working on these assumptions are unlikely to consider condom promotion part of their remit, and to focus

on rescuing women (or children) from prostitution, and “rehabilitating” them (training them in some other work).

I do not strongly ally myself with either side of this debate. In my view, the political polarisation leads to over-simplification of the issues on both sides. And I feel that here, my relation of being an outsider facilitated the research, in that I did not have to take up one of these politicised positions. Nonetheless, I tend more towards the pro-legalisation side, to the extent that people working on that side are more likely to deal with the immediate reality of sex workers being vulnerable to HIV, and, pragmatically, seek ways of helping sex workers to take control of their situation and protect their health (Wolffers & van Beelen, 2003). (That is, it is not the legalisation issue itself in which I am particularly interested). It is very clear that sex workers do not enter prostitution as an ideal career choice, but out of desperation. However, I argue that *in the present context* of a very unequal, urbanising developing country, the urgency of the HIV epidemic necessitates working within the present context of commercial sex as a medium term measure for preventing HIV. Rather than addressing the ultimate goal for India, with regards to whether prostitution should, in an ideal sense, be legal or illegal (and it is important that Indian people debate this topic), I wish to focus on the present, difficult reality in which many impoverished and unskilled men and women are driven to cities in search of work, work which will often be exploitative, unrewarding, unpleasant and unhealthy. This is not to relativise the personal suffering and stigma experienced by sex workers, but to acknowledge that sometimes sex workers do (and, given similar levels of inequality, will continue to) take up commercial sex work rather than more poorly paid domestic or factory work (Butcher, 2003), suggesting that sex work will continue to be a reality for India, at least until massive economic change takes place.

My approach to understanding prostitution, in this thesis, is not in terms of an exotic or extraordinary horror, but in terms of a difficult, stressful, often exploitative, often shame-inducing, but ultimately ordinary job taken up by women in financial hardship (Preston-Whyte, Varga, Oosthuizen *et al*, 2000; Butcher, 2003). I found support for this approach, after my fieldwork, in reading Kabeer’s *The Power to Choose* (2000), in which the Bangladeshi women garment workers’ stories were instantly recognisable and familiar to me, as they struggled with and celebrated the same issues as did sex workers,

issues of family recognition and acceptance, independence, financial freedom and responsibility. Hence my use of the term “sex worker”. This term is, translated into Bengali (*jouno karmi*), used as an official term by the Sonagachi Project, though it is not widely used amongst sex workers in the red light area, outside of the Project context. More often sex workers use a word equivalent to prostitute (*beshya*), or whore (*khanki*). But they also speak about prostitution as “bad work” (*kharap kaj*), and as being in “the line” (the English word) as in, being in a line of business, though they do not seem to be aware of this meaning, but use it to mean straightforwardly, prostitution. “Sex worker” is also the term used in international HIV prevention circles, in an effort to avoid the stigmatisation associated with the term “prostitute”.

1.6. Sex work in Kolkata

Around the world, economic underdevelopment, population mobility and gender inequalities have been widely demonstrated to be key environmental factors implicated in HIV vulnerability (Parker, Easton & Klein, 2000), as well as civil conflict and social disruption (Barnett & Whiteside, 2002). For sex workers, at a local level, such societal conditions often translate into being at an economic disadvantage relative to the client, having little control over one’s working conditions, lacking significant social support, and facing massive stigmatisation, all of which contribute to sex workers’ significant vulnerability to HIV (Campbell & Cornish, 2003). Predictably, these conditions are observable in the Sonagachi red light area.

Male migrancy is often associated with a high demand for commercial sex (Caldwell, Anarfi & Caldwell, 1997). It is estimated that 30-40% of the male population of large Indian cities are migrants (Verma & Roy, 2002). Such migrants usually have wives in their home village, or expect to marry in the village. Due to male labour migration into Kolkata, there are about four women to every five men in the city (Census of India, 2001). Combined with a construction of male sexuality in which men are understood to have uncontrollable sexual “needs” which must be met, (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001), this pattern of male migrancy leads to a high demand for commercial sex (Verma & Roy, 2002). A small proportion of the economic migrants to Kolkata are women, who may get temporary, insecure work in factories, on building sites, or as domestic workers, and for many, this is supplemented by occasional or part time sex work. Most

sex workers in Kolkata are migrants from rural West Bengal or Bangladesh, who usually cite poverty as the most important factor leading them to take up sex work (Evans & Lambert, 1997).

Kolkata has been governed by a communist Left Front coalition since 1977. While improvement in fields such as health and education have been relatively slow in comparison with other Indian states, significant changes in the balance of power have been evident, with greatly increased potential for collective action at the local level and revitalisation of village-level democracy (Drèze & Sen, 1995). Trade unionism is strong in the city, linking large groups of working class people to political movements. This provides a relatively conducive climate of political culture for sex workers to organise and engage in collective action for change. On the other hand, norms concerning women's proper roles, and women's sexuality place sex workers in a position of extreme symbolic marginalisation and stigmatisation, greatly discouraging them from showing their faces in public, and leading to discrimination in their interactions with health and welfare services.

The legal situation of sex workers in India today derives from the colonial era. With some modifications, the British statutes concerning prostitution remain. Simply to sell sex is not illegal, but several related activities are, often criminalizing the behaviour of sex workers as they go about their working lives. Soliciting for clients is illegal, and since most sex workers need to find ways of meeting clients, these laws, to all intents and purposes make criminals of women selling sex. It is also illegal for an adult to live off the earnings of a sex worker. This law is supposed to prevent exploitative hierarchical working systems, such as madam and pimp systems from developing, but it also prohibits women from supporting their family members or boyfriends through with their earnings from sex work.

The sex trade in Kolkata is mainly carried out in specific "red light areas". It is estimated that about 20,000 female sex workers live and work in these areas (Sleightholme & Sinha, 1996). However, the total number of sex workers in Kolkata is probably much higher, but difficult to estimate, since many "flying" sex workers do not live in a red light area but commute to one to work, others work part-time and some practice sex work outside a red light area (Sleightholme & Sinha, 1996). One estimate

suggests that 50,000 to 100,000 women are engaged in commercial sex work in Kolkata (AIIHPH, 1993).

There are four main systems through which the sex trade is carried out: the madam system, the pimp system, renting a room in the red light area and working independently, or commuting to the red light area (Jana & Banerjee, 1999; Sleightholme & Sinha, 1996; Evans & Lambert, 1997). Many women are introduced by others into the sex trade. These women usually begin working under a madam (*malkhin*). If they were sold by a procurer to a madam, they will be obliged to pay off the amount the madam paid, plus interest. In this case, they may live in a state of bonded labour, as a *chhukri*, entirely under the madam's control until the debt is paid off. Apparently this highly exploitative system is decreasing in Sonagachi, and much more common is the *adhia* system. In this system, a madam (usually a former or older sex worker) employs one or more sex workers (*adhias*), who pay the madam 50% of their earnings, in return for accommodation, food and security. The madams enter the sexual relation as intermediaries between the sex worker and client. A madam's economic interest is tied to the sex workers' earnings, and hence she is unlikely to encourage refusal of a client on the grounds of his refusal to use a condom. However, some madams let sex workers take most of the control over their work. Women in a higher income bracket may make use of a pimp (*dalal*) system. Under this system, the woman does not have to solicit for clients on the street, instead clients are brought to her room by a pimp, who takes 25% commission. Alternatively, women can rent their own room directly from a landlord or landlady, and work independently, finding their own clients, as and when they wish, and paying nobody else out of their earnings. Finally, "flying" sex workers do not live in the red light area, but commute there to work, renting rooms by the half hour, or so, as and when they need a room to take a client to. They work independently, and meet their clients on the street.

The Sonagachi Project has categorised sex workers according to their level of income, into arbitrary categories, which roughly correspond to social divisions within the community. Those who charge more than Rs. 100 (£1.50) per sexual act are in Category A, and they may charge far higher sums. The women at the higher end of this bracket have middle class lifestyles, with televisions, mobile phones, children in boarding schools. Some of them, the Agrawalis (women from Agra) are from North Indian

families for whom sex work is a traditional occupation. They are a group of high social status. Those who earn Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 (£0.75 – £1.50) per sexual act are classed in Category B, and face greater financial difficulties, though many of them maintain significant savings and send money home to their families. Category C is the least well off category, where women charge less than Rs. 50 per sexual act. They are less likely to have any cash to spare. Friendships between sex workers of categories B and C are common, but women in these categories are unlikely to have much social interaction with the women in Category A, who consider themselves socially superior to the poorer women. This research focuses on women in Categories B and C. The peer educators are from these categories, as are most of the people bringing problems to the Project. While a small number of women of Category A are actively involved in the Project, few see the Project as a source of income or of esteem, nor did many of them see participation in my research as particularly worthwhile.

Many of the sex workers send money home to their families, in their home village or suburb. They may pay for a sister's wedding, or a brother's schooling, or contribute to the building of a house, and so on, hoping, through doing so, to ensure that the family will take responsibility to look after the woman in her old age. Most sex workers have long term partners – boyfriends (*babus*) or husbands and about half of them have children, of whom half stay with their mother, and half elsewhere, with other family members. Many of the brothels (even Category B ones) have domestic workers, usually a former sex worker, who fetches tea, alcoholic drinks or groceries, for both sex workers and clients, and does chores like washing and cooking for sex workers and madams. Her payment is Rs. 10 per client.

1.7. The Sonagachi red light area

Sonagachi is Kolkata's largest red light area, in which an estimated 5,000 sex workers live and work, from an estimated 400 brothels (Jana & Banerjee, 1999). It is located to the west of Chittaranjan Avenue, Kolkata's main North-South artery, a couple of miles from the commercial district of the city centre, with residential and market areas surrounding it. It is well-connected to public transport, on many bus routes, and with metro stops nearby. Hand-pulled rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and taxis busily come and go from the area. Sonagachi has been a red light area since at least the mid 19th century

(Banerjee, 1998). It is not a slum area. The buildings are large, three- or four-storey concrete or brick buildings of tenement flats, and are several decades old. Within each building, a central staircase and landings lead to individual rooms, of which there may be 5 to 25 in a building. These are the rooms where sex workers live and work. There are no kitchens, people cook in their rooms or on the landing, on paraffin stoves. And there are insufficient shared toilets. Rooms often have a small drain outlet for disposing of water used for washing, and for urinating. Most buildings have a water pump and drain in the entrance area, which serves the whole building. Electricity is supplied to all the rooms, usually used to run lights and a fan. There is a huge range of standards of decoration and furnishing in different rooms, according to the income of the tenant. Some have flaking paint, a wooden bed, and a suitcase for the woman's possessions, and little else. Others are newly painted, decorated with framed religious pictures, furnished with chairs, a wardrobe, and a television, or fridge.

The sale of sex is the central commercial activity in the area, providing employment and income not only to sex workers, but indirectly to brothel managers or agents, landlords, domestic workers, taxi-drivers, vendors of food, drink, clothes and cosmetics. Much of the area is made up of narrow lanes, wide enough only for pedestrians or hand-pulled rickshaws. The lanes are busy with small shops selling snacks or household goods, with tea stalls, fruit stalls, and all kinds of small businesses. Everything that the sex workers need is available within Sonagachi, some women have never been outside the area, but the richer women go to middle-class markets for their shopping. From the main road, there are few indications of the nature of the activity that goes on there, it looks like the other residential areas nearby, though as it begins to get dark, women start to stand on the main street to seek clients. Some of them wear their saris in more revealing ways than usual, some wear western clothes, and they often wear bright make-up. Within the area, from about 12 noon, women start to stand at the gates to the houses, seeking clients. As it gets dark, it becomes busier, with the streets full of women and men seeking to strike up a deal. By midnight, it becomes quiet.

Apart from the pimps and madams, the police and local hoodlums (*goondas*) are the groups of people with whom sex workers have to contend. Police sometimes carry out raids, looking for minor girls or trafficked women, and sometimes arresting other women too. They may arrest people for soliciting, but generally, in the Sonagachi area,

there did not seem to be a major fear of police, though there were serious problems in other red light areas. Similarly with the local *goondas*, people said that there are fewer problems now, but that previously, gangs of *goondas* would go around demanding sex and stealing money or jewellery.

1.8. The sexual relation activity system

The exchange of sex for money, between sex worker and client, is the economic heart of the red light area, and also the site for potential transmission of HIV. Sex workers explain that their primary interest in this relationship is to earn money, and many of them are skilled at pleasing the customer in ways likely to lead to repeat visits or tips. Many hope to meet men who could become financially supportive long-term partners, allowing them to leave sex work. However, they typically acknowledge that, in general, boyfriends (*babus*) in the red light area are “eaters” (of a sex worker’s earnings) rather than “givers”, and some express appreciation of their freedom and independence from men. As well as meeting immediate financial needs for food and rent, and sometimes debts, many women financially support their parents, siblings or children, thereby winning appreciation and security for their old age, which are otherwise threatened by their occupying the stigmatised position of sex worker. Regarding condoms, most women are aware of their health-protective value, and value them for a sense of cleanliness and hygiene. However, given their need for income, women are sometimes unwilling to turn a customer away or to risk losing his repeat custom by insisting on condoms if he is averse to them.

For men, the main purpose of visiting a sex worker is to fulfil a natural compulsion to achieve sexual release and satisfaction, while sometimes seeking a longer-term intimate relationship. The reason that participants (both men and women) give for men visiting the red light area is that they do not get the sex they want at home, either because they are unmarried, or because they cannot have sex in front of their grown-up children (in a context where families live in one room) or their wife will not agree to the particular sexual practice, such as oral sex, which they desire. Condoms are seen by men as obstacles to sexual pleasure and satisfaction, though they are also aware of their health-protective value, and appeals to the man’s responsibility for his family’s health are sometimes used by sex workers as arguments for condom use.

Clients are usually met on the street by the sex worker, where a price is negotiated, and then they are brought inside, to the room the woman works in. If a “known” client does not find the sex worker he knows on the street, he may approach her in her room. She may have the room to herself if she works independently, or if her madam has enough rooms. Otherwise, several sex workers share a room with two to four beds, separated by curtains. It is assumed that penetrative sex in the “missionary position” is the kind of sex to be performed, unless the man requests something else (most commonly, oral sex), which he will usually do after the pair enter the room. Condoms will first be mentioned at this time, and according to the women, neither men nor women feel embarrassed to talk about sex or condoms. If he agrees to use a condom, the sex worker usually provides the condom, and fits it onto the man’s penis, to ensure he does not cheat. Condoms are distributed free or for a nominal fee by the Sonagachi Project, and sex workers can sometimes charge customers for the condom(s) they use. Money may be exchanged before or after sex. Tips may be added, and are not shared with madams.

If the sex worker works independently, she may have a certain amount of control in her interaction with the client. A “good” client – one who pays well, and returns regularly – will be treated almost like a husband. The woman will offer to get him alcoholic or soft drinks (taking a commission) and will make conversation. She may tell him she loves him, and allow him to touch her body before intercourse. While sex workers usually emphasise that their friendly treatment of clients is a functional way to get a better income, they also state that with some clients they enjoy the friendship and the sexual relations. With most clients, however, sexual relations are shorter and to the point. The woman may not allow the man to touch her body, and may not undress, just “lifting her sari”, exchanging few words. Without a special relationship with a client, the woman has little bargaining power, and he takes more control over the sexual encounter. Sex workers are in a hurry to get the man out of the door as soon as intercourse is over. The man washes, dresses and leaves, and the woman prepares herself to return to the street to find another client.

1.9. The activity system of the Sonagachi Project

In 1992, the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIIHPH) was commissioned by the World Health Organisation's Global Program on AIDS (WHO/GPA) to carry an epidemiological study of the prevalence of HIV and STDs among Sonagachi sex workers, to form the basis of an STD/HIV control programme. The study found high levels of STDs, very low levels of condom use, and 1.13% HIV positive. Thus, an HIV/STD control programme was initiated with the specific aim of HIV prevention. A conglomerate of local governmental, non-governmental and community-based organisations came together to implement the Project. Condom promotion, STD treatment and dissemination of HIV-related information were the key activities. A sexual health clinic was set up, and sex workers were recruited and trained to be peer educators who would promote safer sex and clinic attendance.

The Project was initially funded by the WHO, later by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and, since 1994, has been funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID, formerly ODA). It is funded specifically as an HIV prevention project. An external evaluation of the project found it to be "perhaps one of the best interventions for [sex workers] in the world" (O'Reilly, Mertens, Sethi *et al.*, 1996, p.2), both in terms of HIV prevention (percentage of sex workers using condoms 'always' increased from 1.1% in 1992 to 50.4% in 1998; HIV prevalence has slowly increased from 1.13% in 1992 to 5.5% in 1998 – an increase, but a very small one in comparison to the situation in comparable Indian urban centres) and community mobilisation (increase in numbers of sex workers joining the organisation each year). The evaluation commended the Project's valuable attention to wider issues of social justice and quality of life, but suggested that HIV prevention should remain centre stage in the Project's activities, reminding us that no matter how far a project strives to implement a participatory project, in the end it is accountable to its funding agencies as much as (or more than) its local stakeholders.

From an early stage, the founder of the Project, and Project staff located their activities and sex workers' health within a wider context, noting that HIV was not considered a priority by most sex workers, and that transmitting information and skills would not in itself guarantee condom use and better health in the existing social and economic

climate. They therefore began to broaden their activities to more general community development and mobilisation. To do so, they drew on the experience and enthusiasm of a group of sex workers who had tried to set up a problem-solving committee several years earlier. This broadening of the agenda was seen as both a means to gain sex workers' enthusiasm and trust for the HIV prevention activities, and as a movement toward constructing a more health-enabling environment. The Project takes the view that the transmission of HIV is very concretely related to conditions of economic and political exploitation, as well as social stigmatisation. Thus, the activities currently taking place, as well as directly addressing HIV, also address wider factors impinging on the sex workers' quality of life such as police harassment, exploitation by brothel managers, economic insecurity, the legislative position of prostitution and societal attitudes to sex workers. Project documentation describes the philosophy of the Project (in English) in terms of:

3 R's: *Respect, Recognition and Reliance*. That is *respect* of sex workers and their profession; *recognising* their profession, and their rights; and *reliance* on their understanding and capability (Jana & Banerjee, 1999, p.11).

The Project is officially committed to active involvement of sex workers in all aspects of the programme, and sex workers have been taking on an increasing range of roles in the Project, including leadership and decision-making roles.

The Project has an explicit political stance, which it both presents to the wider society, through the media, and meetings with politicians, for example, and through which it seeks to politicise sex workers and encourage them to join the Project. This political position is that sex work is a legitimate form of work like any other, and should be recognised as such by the government granting sex workers "workers' rights". This includes the idea that sex workers can form a trade union, so that if they are united, they will be able to face up to their adversaries such as local *goondas*, or police. Through the solidarity of a trade union they will also be able to develop a standard code of practice of universal condom use with clients, and will be able to rely on their peers to enforce that standard, thus not needing to fear that if they insist on condom use, a client can just find someone else to fulfil his demand. Part of this discourse is to assert that sex work is

not “bad work”, but simply work, and that sex workers should not be ashamed of what they are doing, for they are respectably supporting their families with their earnings.

The origin of this politicising discourse of the Project is in an international discourse of sex workers’ rights, and in a local discourse of trade unionism. Highly committed and energetic activists brought together these ideas, the funding of an HIV prevention project, and a strong set of peer educators, in order to constitute the beginnings of a collective action movement. The language and methods of the Project rely heavily on the expertise and experience of these outside interventionists, which might lead some to question the authenticity of this “sex worker-led project”. Who is speaking when the sex workers say that they demand “workers’ rights”? As Lykes, Terre Blanche and Hamber (2003) argue, there can be no strict division between the authentic voices of grassroots community members and the voices of the professionals or activists with whom they engage. Describing their collaborations with community groups to effect social change, Lykes *et al.* argue that there is no pure unmediated community voice, but that these voices are “always already mediated – speaking through layers of language and by means of technologies that are cultural products and not natural givens. (Lykes *et al.*, 2003, p.89).” Community voices are historically shaped, at the meetings of various knowledge systems. The groups described by Lykes *et al.* were engaged in representing themselves in public fora in ways that they had never done before. These were transgressive and novel actions, and to carry them out, the groups needed assistance from professionals in the appropriate use of language, technologies and representational practices that would get their voices heard in the media. It is unlikely that sex workers would have been able to organise a successful project together without significant external funding, and professionals’ organisational experience. Kabeer (1994, p.258) quotes one of the leaders of SEWA, a union of informal sector workers in India, who, when challenged about the role of middle class people in leading a workers’ movement, responded “if the poor had that capacity already, they would not have been exploited”. Participation has to be understood as a fragile co-construction between partners. My own position as an outsider is similarly complex, (and will be addressed in Chapter 4.)

1.10. Central components of the Sonagachi Project

The Sonagachi Project is a large organisation, with administration and decision-making taking place at the central office. Office employees are mainly non-sex worker professionals, who co-ordinate the different intervention work of the Project, overseeing, for example, the interventions in the rural districts, or the education programme, who produce reports to funding bodies, and manage the accounts. They are overseen by the Project Director, Mr Mrinal Kanti Dutta. He grew up in a red light area in Kolkata, a son of a sex worker, and was active politically, trying to improve the situation of sex workers when the Project began. He joined it as a supervisor, and was promoted to Director, taking over from the founder of the Project, in 1999.

There are two central components to the Project's work: health promotion and community problem-solving. The health promotion work is based at sexual health clinics, run by the STD/HIV Intervention Programme, and the problem-solving work is run by committees set up by the sex workers' organisation, DMSC (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee). The name of their organisation translates roughly as "Unstoppable United Women's Committee", and it is often referred as "Durbar". The health promotion and community problem-solving are the Project activities focused on in this research. A third important component is their credit union, "Usha bank". It enters into this research, but is not a focus of it.

1.10.1. Sexual health promotion

Two medical clinics operate in the Sonagachi area, one in the premises of a local social club, and one in a newly-acquired building. While emphasis is on sexual health, general medical services are also provided. Treatment is provided to sex workers, their children and clients and free condoms are provided. A medical doctor and nursing staff run the clinic for 2 hours every morning. Peer educators are based at the clinics, where they also have their meetings to organise their work. They work as peer educators from 10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. each day, and are paid a relatively small sum for this work. To become peer educators, sex workers are trained with information about sexual health and HIV, symptoms of STDs, the role of condoms, the reasons for visiting the clinic in order to promote health to their peers. Part of their job is also to encourage people to save money

with the Project's credit union, and to join their organisation, DMSC, as a member. Peer educators can be promoted to be "Supervisors", who have greater responsibility for overseeing the work of peer educators, and work a longer day. Peer educators and supervisors report to a clinic co-ordinator. To date, the co-ordinators are all non-sex-workers. They are social workers, and are responsible for organising the peer education side of the clinic's work, and liaising between the office and the clinic. A medical doctor is in charge of the medical side of the clinic's work.

1.10.2. Problem-solving committees

The core work of the sex workers' organisation (DMSC) is to constitute local committees of women (sometimes sex workers, but more often madams or landladies), with a Secretary, a President and a Treasurer. Elections through a show of hands in support of nominated candidates is the means of choosing these committee members. Committee members are not paid. The responsibility of local committees is to solve any conflicts or problems that their local sex workers have. If a sex worker is arrested, or has a dispute with a client or a madam, or is abused by a local *goonda*, she may bring her problems to her local committee. The meetings also offer opportunities to communicate between the administration of the Project and the grassroots workers, and to let people know about forthcoming events. If the local committee cannot solve a local problem, the problem can be brought to one of the weekly Central Committee meetings, held at the Project office. These meetings are chaired by sex worker leaders, elected onto the Committee through a secret ballot, who have become expert in solving problems, and are widely respected by sex workers. The people holding these offices used to be former supervisors, who had been trained through the health promotion wing of the Project, but during my fieldwork, the Project was trying to extend the range of women involved in leadership positions, and thus sought its Central Committee members from outside of the health promotion wing of the Project. These women take part in the administrative decision-making, in communication with the media, and in solving complex and large-scale problems. I will refer to the peer educators, supervisors, and committee members collectively, in this thesis, as "Project workers". This category includes all of the sex workers who are formally involved in the Project. To distinguish the sex workers who are Project workers from those who are not, I will

sometimes refer to the women who are not formally involved in the Project as “ordinary sex workers”, following the language used in the Project.

1.10.3. Savings and micro-loan co-operative

To address sex workers’ vulnerability to extortionate rates of interest charged by moneylenders, and their long term economic security, the Project set up a co-operative society which functions as a credit union. Locally this is referred to as “Usha Bank.” Project workers encourage sex workers to save a fixed amount of money daily, rather than spending it all, in case of an emergency, or in case they do not earn for a few days, or for their old age. To ensure regular saving, Project workers visit sex workers in their homes daily, to collect their lodgements, which are recorded in bankbooks. After a certain amount has been saved, the sex worker can take out a loan at a reasonable rate if she needs to. They also provide a form of life insurance, providing funds for funeral expenses upon a member’s death. It took much struggle to be allowed to set up a cooperative society, since under West Bengal law, society members must be of good ‘moral character’, a status which sex workers unfortunately are generally not accorded. Refusing to accept the officials’ suggestion to state their occupation as the more acceptable “housewife”, the sex workers, with Project support, eventually persuaded the state government to drop the moral clause from the legislation, and the co-operative was registered.

1.11. The questions

This introductory chapter has situated the work of the Sonagachi Project within a very complex context of national economic and gender relations, international funding regimes, politicised debates over how to intervene with sex workers, and the hierarchical structure of the sex trade. Sex workers are embedded in complex relations with clients, with madams, with their families, and with activists and the Project. The Project enters into this complex set of relations, aiming to constitute new ways of protecting the health and security of sex workers and having to adjust its procedures to existing conditions. Bringing in ideas from international discourses of health and rights, and local cultures of organising, the founding activists set up a Project structure, which evolved over the years, with sex workers’ input, and which has been increasingly run by

sex workers themselves. To set up the interest in investigating this Project as a case study of participatory development, Chapter 2 will position the study within the international literature on participatory development. To develop a productive framework with which to approach the complexity which I have suggested characterises the intervention process, Chapter 3 will establish an activity-theoretical framework, and Chapter 4 will present the methodological procedures followed. Then the focus returns to Sonagachi. Beginning with an analysis of sex workers' actions in Chapter 5, attention will progressively zoom out again, to Project workers' actions in Chapter 6, the participatory process of the Project in Chapter 7, and the Project in its wider context in Chapter 8.

To understand the functioning of the Project, four questions will be addressed:

- How does the Sonagachi Project enable sex workers to take new actions?
(Chapter 5)
- How do Project workers relate to the Project? (Chapter 6)
- What social psychological resources enable the collective action project to coalesce and hang together? (Chapter 7)
- How is the Project influenced by its position within wider societal contexts?
(Chapter 8)

These empirical research questions are the starting point for the investigation. The method pursued in the thesis is to achieve theoretical development in our understanding of participation through asking concrete questions about the functioning of the Sonagachi Project. These questions gain a wider interest in relation to the literature on participation, which will be presented in the following chapter. Elaboration of a theoretical framework in Chapter 3 will produce theoretically re-specified research questions.

Chapter two

Participation, power and sex workers' collective action

How can participation by marginalised communities play a significant role in producing social change? It is a long-standing commitment of health and development policies to engage the participation of community members in projects which affect them. The frequency with which the commitment is restated, however, is not matched by substantial conceptualisations of participation which would facilitate its implementation in ways which transform the social order. Moreover, the practice of participation is often complicated by sets of divisive power relations which permeate communities, along axes such as gender, employment status or political power, overturning optimistic ideals of mutually supportive collaboration among equals. This chapter has two aims: firstly, to specify the concept of participation, and secondly, to assess the potential for participation as an intervention strategy for sex workers in developing countries.

The chapter begins by introducing the problematic status of the concept “participation” in the international development literature, and developing an approach to participation as a process of collective action for social change, in which participants develop powers to act in new domains. Critiques of participation have raised complex issues of power relations, and in order to assess the potential for participation among sex workers, the literature on sex workers is reviewed to assess whether participatory efforts are likely to fall foul of the obstacles identified in those critiques. How might such obstacles to participation be overcome, to allow a collective action project to work? The final section of the chapter discusses Paulo Freire’s work on collective action, as a theory which engages substantially with problems of power relations, to establish actionable concepts for the analysis of collective action.

2.1. Defining participation and empowerment

As a concept, ‘community participation’ is one of the most overused, but least understood concepts in developing countries (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000, p. 41)

The participation of community members in the design and implementation of health interventions which concern them is a core commitment of national (National AIDS Control Organisation, [India], 2003; Department for International Development, [UK], 1998) and international (World Health Organisation, 1978; 1986; 1997) health policies. However, “participation”, and the closely associated term “empowerment”, remain very vaguely understood and poorly theorised (Bhattacharya, 1995; Kelly & Van Vlaenderen, 1995; Zakus & Lysack, 1998; Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands *et al.*, 1999; Botes & van Rensburg, 2000). The confusing variety of activities to which the term “participation” is applied have led to calls for the concept to be clarified in order to provide critical and actionable understandings of the notion (Arnstein, 1971; Kelly & Van Vlaenderen, 1995; Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996).

“Participation” refers to the relation between members of a target community and an organisational entity, but the term is used to refer to a wide variety of relations. It can be used to refer to community members simply *accessing* available services such as health services or health insurance schemes. It can mean community members *electing* the members of a decision-making committee, such as a school’s board of governors. It can mean governmental services and local NGOs developing *partnerships* in order to offer integrated and efficient services. It can mean training members of the target community to be the agents of a health promotion intervention, as in the case of *peer education* as an HIV prevention method. Or it can mean the establishment of a forum in which community members can formulate their priorities and plans in a *collective action* movement to achieve structural change. Three forms of participation taking place within the Sonagachi Project will be addressed in this thesis: collective action, peer education and service use.

Concern has been expressed that the absence of precise specifications of “participation” has allowed the concept to be emptied of its radical potential to devolve real power to

the community, so that it risks becoming no more than a buzzword which can be used to add legitimacy to any and all community development projects (Kelly & van Vlaenderen, 1995; Cleaver, 2001). Arnstein (1971) has sought to clarify the meaning of participation in order to prevent it being co-opted in this way. For Arnstein, participation is essentially about redistributing decision-making power from professionals to community members. To make explicit the variability in the extent to which projects described as “participatory” actually allow community members to take on real power, she describes a “ladder of participation” (See Figure 2.1). This ladder captures the “gradations of citizen participation” (1971, p.73), from the “non-participation” of placing citizens on rubber-stamp advisory committees, to the “tokenistic” consulting of citizens’ opinion without any guarantee that their opinions will be acted upon, to the genuine “citizen power”, in which citizens have full control over the management and decision-making of a programme and direct relationships with the funding organisation.

Figure 2.1: “Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation” (adapted from Arnstein, 1971, p.70)

8	Citizen Control	DEGREES OF CITIZEN POWER
7	Delegated Power	
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	DEGREES OF TOKENISM
4	Consultation	
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	NON-PARTICIPATION
1	Manipulation	

Arnstein’s ladder foregrounds the problem of power relations between professionals and community. Community members need to be empowered to join the participatory process, and empowered to take decisions that will have real effects. To understand participation, we will also need to understand empowerment. However, the concept of empowerment is as poorly specified as is participation (Rissel, 1994). While

empowerment is a central interest of community psychology (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000), its theorisation in this literature is also problematic. Firstly, empowerment is often defined circularly and vaguely, in terms of participation. For instance, Zimmerman and Rappaport define empowerment as “a process by which individuals gain mastery or control over their own lives and democratic participation in the life of their community” (1988, p.726). Wallerstein (1992) considers empowerment in terms of community members collectively developing a critical awareness of their problems and routes to their solution. In these definitions, empowerment seems to be equated with being able to participate and to produce changes. From these perspectives, we would say that people who are participating in the modes at the lower rungs of Arnstein’s ladder are not empowered, and only those who are taking part in the ways described by the upper rungs are genuinely empowered. But the concept of empowerment, in this scheme, does not give us any extra purchase on *how* people may gain the powers to effectively participate, or *what* powers they need, in order to participate.

The second problematic issue in the conceptualisation of empowerment arises from the effort to conceptualise it as a measurable construct. In order to make empowerment analytically tractable, community psychology research usually treats empowerment as a variable, or as a composite of other variables. In this approach, empowerment is a state which a person can occupy. This allows for investigations of statistical relations between empowerment and other social or psychological phenomena such as health status, or level of participation (Zimmerman, 2000), or for investigations of psychological components of empowerment (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Stein, 1997). However, viewing empowerment abstractly, as a state which can be occupied, or something that can be increased, tends to suggest a view of empowerment as varying on a linear scale, mirroring the form of the “ladder of participation”. Using the term empowerment in this way, it becomes difficult to conceptualise the multiple and contradictory powers and disempowerments which people experience and enact.

For example, in an international review of empowerment projects for women, Kar, Pascual & Chickering (1999, p.1432) offer a conclusion that “powerless women can and do lead successful movements”. If women are leading successful movements, they are surely not powerless. They may have little power in relation to the labour market, or in

their relationships with their male partners, for example, but they must have powers of participation and leadership. Using the word “power” or “empowerment” without specifying what it is that people have the power to do, obscures the multiplicity of domains in which people may or may not have powers. Riger (2001) identifies as a key dilemma or paradox for feminist psychology, the need to recognise women's powers, at the same time as recognising their oppression. From the point of view that we can be simultaneously empowered in one domain while being disempowered in another, this “dilemma” becomes an assumption rather than being a problem.

Returning to the ladder of participation, we can see that the metaphor of a ladder expresses the variation among participatory projects in terms of a scale of low to high *degrees* of participation. Considering participatory through a logic of quantity conceptualises their variation along a dimension of the amount of power given over to the community. But such interventions also vary greatly in their *qualities*. For instance, very different institutional supports and capacity building, or in other words, different powers, are required for a peer education programme or for increasing accessibility of a service to users. Thus, the terms participation and empowerment need to be distinguished. Participation is a social practice relating community members to an organised change process. To preserve the critical and transformatory potential of participation, it should be understood as a process of collective action which seeks to produce societal change (Cleaver, 2001). Empowerment happens when people gain a concrete, content-full new *power to do something* – power to take some specific action (Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands *et al.*, 1999). People may need to gain new powers to participate (through the provision of accessible fora and participatory skills for example) and the participatory process may yield new powers for community members (through producing solutions to community conflicts for example).

This thesis focuses on the qualities of participation and empowerment, rather than their quantitative aspects. It focuses on collective action as a form of participation, and on community members’ concrete, contentful and bounded powers. In order to do so, a theoretical perspective on participation as a concrete activity will be built up, drawing on the work of Freire (discussed in section 2.6., below), and on activity theory (discussed in Chapter 3). Before building up the theoretical perspective, the next sections of this chapter deal with further substantive issues concerning participation.

2.2. Why participation?

Even in the absence of any consensus on what participation entails, good rationales exist for participation as an HIV prevention strategy. Two different rationales for participation are offered: participation as a means to a more effective intervention, and participation as a desirable end in itself (Madan, 1987; Nelson & Wright, 1995; Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996).

Firstly, participation is argued to be an effective means of preventing HIV. These arguments rest on the social nature of HIV vulnerability (Aggleton, O'Reilly, Slutkin & Davies, 1994). While individual-level interventions have been the predominant approach to HIV prevention (Waldo & Coates, 2000), strong theoretical arguments and empirical evidence back up an approach to HIV/AIDS which places HIV vulnerability and intervention in their community and societal contexts. Beginning with the observation that sexual behaviour change is not often dependent upon individual volition alone, the “structural” and “enabling” approaches to HIV prevention go on to pinpoint a range of social factors constraining people’s active uptake of behaviour change messages, including sexual norms, gendered power relations, the legal environment and policing practices, economic insecurity, and political will to provide non-judgemental information and services (Aggleton *et al.*, 1994; Sweat & Denison, 1995; O'Reilly & Piot, 1996; Parker, Easton & Klein, 2000; Parker, 2001). As a community process, participation has the potential to address some of these social factors constituting HIV vulnerability.

Several mechanisms are proposed through which participation may be linked to improved health. Campbell, Cornish and McLean (forthcoming) outline three important routes. Firstly, involvement of community members in the design of a health project can ensure the appropriateness of services to local conditions (Ramella & de la Cruz, 2000). Secondly, on the understanding that health behaviours are products of social norms rather than individual knowledge (e.g. Kippax & Crawford, 1993), bringing community members together in a participatory project allows for the renegotiation of community norms, and their subsequent diffusion. Thirdly, simply taking part in the social practice of participation may indirectly improve health through increasing levels of social capital, health-enhancing social support and perceived self-efficacy (Campbell 2000). A

collective action process can be a vehicle for each of these mechanisms, as well as, more generally, constituting an environment for community members to identify the threats to their health, establish their priorities, and take action on those problems. These theoretical reasons for participation are backed up with empirical support. While participation has met with failure in some cases (e.g. Campbell, 2003), in other contexts, participatory projects have produced significant reductions in HIV-related risky behaviour (Kelly, St Lawrence, Stevenson, *et al.*, 1992; Ngugi Wilson, Sebstad *et al.*, 1996; O'Reilly & Piot, 1996; Jana, Bandyopadhyay, Mukherjee, *et al.*, 1998; Pequegnat & Stover, 2000).

However, the interest in participation does not derive only from its usefulness as a means of intervention, but in its value as an end in itself. Amartya Sen (1999) has argued that the ideology of development has too long been concerned solely with Gross National Product as the criterion by which development success is measured. From this instrumental perspective, participation would be evaluated according to its contribution to improving the economically productive capacity of a community. Sen argues that public goods such as political freedom, availability of education and health care, accountable governments, and physical security, should all be considered as valued ends in themselves, not only as means to achieving greater industrialisation or increased GNP. From Sen's perspective, for community members to have the opportunity to take part in determining the development programmes which affect them should be an ethical principle, an end in itself. In the context of HIV prevention for sex workers, the argument would be that sex workers have a right to take part in the design and implementation of HIV prevention projects, irrespective of the relative merits of such a project methodology in relation to the specific goal of limiting HIV transmission.

For the purposes of this thesis, it is an *assumption* that participation is appropriate for addressing HIV-prevention needs, both in terms of means and ends. Making this assumption allows me to focus attention on the processes of collective action *per se*. Evaluation of participatory projects to determine whether they achieve successful outcomes is one essential part of the social scientific understanding of participation, but an equally essential part is played by investigation of the concrete processes through which interventions function (Aggleton, Young, Moody *et al.*, 1992; Campbell & Williams, 1998).

2.3. Obstacles to participation: Problems of power relations

Is it realistic to expect participation by grassroots communities to lead to significant social change? In spite of the good reasons presented above for participation, such an endeavour will face many obstacles in the marginalised communities for whom it is so often recommended (Kelly & van Vlaenderen, 1995). The development studies literature on participation sounds variously strident notes of caution to counter the optimistic view of participation often promulgated in descriptions of policy and practice. The critiques focus on issues of power, and fall into three main areas: questioning the fundamental project of participation; examining “external” power relations between the “target” community members and other local groups; and examining powers “internal” to the community. After outlining these critiques, as obstacles to participation, I will use their structure to assess the potential for participatory projects for sex workers.

Firstly, the whole project of participation, as presently conceived by governments and development agencies, is targeted in critiques informed by societal theories of power. From a Marxist perspective, placing the responsibility with communities to bring about small-scale local changes can sound like an opportunity for the state to sidestep its responsibility to provide proper healthcare to its citizens. Participation can be criticised for allowing only for palliative local change rather than significant change to the societal inequalities causing the citizens’ disadvantage (Labonte, 1999; Campbell & Murray, 2004). From a Foucauldian perspective, the imperative on participating subjects to be conscientious, responsible, self-monitoring and unselfish in the pursuit of rational administrative ends is criticised (Peterson & Lupton, 1996). In a similar vein, Kothari (2001) argues that the rhetoric of liberation attached to participation masks the less overt, but more insidious forms of control that pervade participatory projects, as interventionists claiming “neutrality” seek a non-existent consensus on “local norms”. Such critiques seek to discredit participation as a development strategy.

Secondly, the scope for highly marginalised communities to achieve significant health and social change, under conflictual and exploitative social conditions, is questioned in several empirical studies of participatory projects. In a study of efforts to instigate participatory HIV prevention among South African miners, for example, Campbell

(2003) describes how the disinterest of the miners' employers undermined attempts to mobilise the men themselves. Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) detail the failure of a participatory effort with sex workers in Madras, India, describing how the context of police repression and social stigma inhibit women from joining together in any public way, to participate in a project. Divergences between community views on a project and its goals, and those of donors or the implementing agency can be another source of project breakdown (Kelly & van Vlaenderen, 1996). In these cases, "external" power relations: relations between the target community and other powerful social actors limit the potential of participation to succeed.

The third set of cautions about the potential of participatory intervention addresses factors "internal" to the community. A set of people defined as a group according to a particular health vulnerability may not constitute a "community" that has shared interests and solidarity (Madan, 1987). When a community is divided in terms of interests and powers, those who are already relatively empowered may be the ones to take up the opportunity to participate, benefiting their own interests, and thus further entrenching inequalities and divisions (Beall, 1997; Hildyard, Hegde, Wolvekamp & Reddy, 2001). Moreover, to take part and to take decisions in a collective action project require a set of organisational skills and resources for participation that often are lacking within historically disadvantaged communities (Eyben & Ladbury, 1995; Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; Campbell, Cornish & McLean, forthcoming).

2.4. Obstacles to participation among sex workers

These three sets of critiques of participation provide a useful framework through which to examine the potential of participation in any particular social environment. This section reviews the literature on female sex workers in developing countries, to consider whether participatory HIV prevention interventions with sex workers are likely to fall foul of such critiques. The issue of participation is not directly addressed in the literature, which focuses instead on describing sex workers' life circumstances, or the progress of various forms of intervention projects. My review thus picks out the concrete details of sex workers' lives presented in this literature which are relevant to the interest in obstacles to participation.

2.4.1. Processes internal to the group

Processes internal to groups of sex workers, which impact upon the likelihood of successful participation include the following issues: the possibilities for mutually supportive relationships of solidarity to be a basis for participatory cooperation; the extent to which the problem of HIV can mobilise sufficient interest among sex workers, given their other pressing problems; and the existence among sex workers of the specific skills and capacities for running a complex project. I will discuss each of these issues in turn.

Solidarity as a basis for participation

Although “commercial sex workers” comprise a meaningful category from the public health point of view, this does not mean that sex workers form meaningful social groups from their own point of view. Relationships between sex workers living or working within a particular geographical area can range from supportive, to disinterested, to conflictual. Almost universally, economic competitiveness between sex workers is cited as a factor increasing their vulnerability to HIV and STDs, since under competitive conditions, sex workers cannot afford to turn away a client who resists using a condom (in Zimbabwe, Wilson, Simbanda, Mboye *et al.*, 1990; in South Africa, Abdool Karim, Abdool Karim, Soldan & Zondi, 1995; in Kolkata, Jana *et al.*, 1998; in Cambodia, Busza & Schunter, 2001). These authors recommend developing solidarity among sex workers in order to establish their confidence in a unified position regarding condom use, so that they need not fear losing a client to somebody with less stringent demands. However, the very existence of this competitiveness also undermines the possibility of a supportive collective action process developing (Campbell, 2003).

A second factor militating against the development of an effective group process is the high mobility and turnover of sex workers in some contexts, preventing supportive, sustained social relationships from developing. Sex work is for many women an informal and occasional trade, involving migration to an area for short periods of time, or moving from one area to another when clients are thought to favour “new faces” (e.g. in Thailand, Vitsutaratna, 1995; in Malawi, Walden, Mwangulube & Makhumula-Nkhoma, 1999; in Indonesia Ford, Wirawan, Reed *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, in many instances, sex workers work outside of a brothel system and thus have few opportunities

to meet with other sex workers. Such women may work from home, may commute to a red light area to sell sex occasionally, or may sell sex “indirectly” in the course of offering other hospitality services (e.g. in Chennai, India, Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; in Cambodia, Ohshige, Morio & Mizushima, 2000; in the Philippines, Morisky, Pena, Tiglao & Liu, 2002). For any form of intervention, it is a challenge to gain sustained access to women who sell sex under such circumstances, but the absence of a pre-existing coherent social group poses particular problems for participatory interventions (Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996). Conversely, in other situations, there are well-established brothels and brothel complexes, where sex workers live, work and socialise for significant periods of time (e.g. in Kolkata, India, Jana *et al.*, 1998; in Indonesia, Sedyaningsih-Mamahit, 1999).

A third important factor undermining the likelihood of sex workers joining together in a participatory project is the stigmatised position of their profession. People who sell sex do not necessarily identify with the term “sex worker” or “prostitute”, as such a designation does not constitute a respectable social identity (in the Philippines, Ratliff, 1999; in South Africa, Campbell, 2000). The multiple stigmas associated with prostitution, with having multiple partners, with HIV and with STDs all militate against sex workers’ willingness to associate themselves with programmes explicitly dealing with these sensitive issues (e.g. in Mumbai, India, Bhave, Lindan, Hudes, *et al.*, 1995). Ford and Koetsawang (1999) highlight the aversion of Thai sex workers to prevention programmes that have implicitly blamed sex workers and relied on the fear-provoking consequences of negative messages about HIV/AIDS. In contrast, they sought to design an open, positive, respectful and non-judgemental prevention programme, inviting sex workers to collaborate in the development of the intervention, and seeking to promote their sense of self-worth and self-respect. The authors attribute the project’s success as much to the non-judgemental ethos of their programme as to its formal content. Their study suggests that a collective action project, such as the Sonagachi Project may be attractive to sex workers due to its recognition of their expertise and agency.

Interest in the issue of HIV

HIV is not always seen by sex workers as an important topic requiring their attention. When sex workers face immediate challenges to their financial and physical security,

the threat of dying from AIDS in ten years' time can lack immediacy. In South Africa, Varga (2001) describes a fatalistic attitude among sex workers, who spoke of AIDS as an inevitability, and as one among many job-related hazards such as rape, violence, arrest or poverty. As part of a general environment of hazards, health may not be given the same priority by sex workers as it is given by public health workers. For sex workers in Kolkata, "health" often means the ability to keep on working, rather than the absence of any symptoms, and health-seeking strategies focus on value for money (Evans & Lambert, 1997). In such circumstances, a programme focused specifically on HIV prevention may hold neither intellectual nor material interest for women who sell sex. A decline of interest in HIV prevention projects, over time, as the "novelty value" wears off has been reported in some contexts (in South Africa, Campbell, 2003; in Cambodia, Busza & Baker, 2004).

Capacity to run a participatory project

Little attention has been given this particular issue, since there has not been a strong focus on sex workers as project workers, in the literature. Asthana & Oostvogels (1996) attributed the failure of an HIV prevention project in Chennai, in part, to the lack of management expertise and political leverage on the part of the local NGO running the project. In the context of a peer education project in South Africa, Campbell (2003) describes the significant efforts that went in to developing the professionalism of the sex workers, in terms of issues such as discipline, self-respect, punctuality and sobriety, in order to facilitate effective group meetings. Organisational skills, including abilities to negotiate and coordinate with government agencies and donors, are essential for the construction of collective action projects, and significant capacity-building may need to be done when a highly marginalised group of sex workers is being encouraged to take part in a collective action movement. The skills and resources which project workers need in order to carry out their work comprise an important topic of Chapters 6 and 7.

2.4.2. Processes external to the group: Sex workers' relations with others

In many contexts, sex workers have to contend with adversarial relationships with other powerful groups as they go about their work. Three important groups can be identified: intermediaries between sex worker and client, clients and boyfriends, and police.

Intermediaries in the sexual exchange

Particularly in Asian contexts, where the provision of commercial sex is often organised hierarchically, sex workers may work under madams, pimps, or other intermediaries who exert significant control over their working conditions, including the likelihood of condom use (in India, Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; Jana *et al.*, 1998; in the Philippines, Morisky, Tiglao, Sneed *et al.*, 1998; in Cambodia, Busza & Schunter, 2001).

Consequently, there are repeated calls for such intermediaries to be brought inside by HIV prevention interventions, so that they can exert their power over sex workers in a more health-promoting way (Wawer, Podhista, Kanungsukkasem *et al.*, 1996; Sedyaningsih-Mamahit & Gortmaker, 1999; Morisky *et al.*, 2002). Sanctions for commercial sex establishments in which condom use is not enforced and educational programmes with intermediaries which emphasise the economic gain of healthy sex workers are among the recommendations offered. Relationships with intermediaries are not always exploitative, however. In Uganda, Gysels, Pool and Bwanika (2002) report that sex workers gladly use the services of middlemen who broker deals between sex worker and client, ensuring that the client pays, and often that he pays well. They suggest that the middlemen, as upwardly mobile entrepreneurs who are becoming increasingly professional, could potentially incorporate expertise on the importance of condom use and safer sex into their brokering practices.

Madams' control over sex workers affects not only their condom use, but also their ability to participate in intervention projects. A participatory project in Svay Pak, Cambodia, faced severe obstacles due to madams' reluctance to let their sex workers socialise with sex workers from other brothels, due to economic competition, risk of arrest by police, and the possibility of the sex worker running away before paying her debts (Busza & Schunter, 2001; Busza & Baker, 2004). This made it difficult for the research and the intervention to gain access to sex workers.

Clients and boyfriends

Focusing on sex workers as the targets of an intervention is problematised by the fact that condom use depends not only on the intentions of sex workers, but at a minimum, it depends upon the co-operation of a client or boyfriend. Having economic power, male clients can often insist on unprotected sex, by offering to pay more or by threatening to

leave (in Zimbabwe, Wilson *et al.*, 1990; in South Africa, Varga, 2001; in China, Lau, Tsui, Siah *et al.*, 2002). The use of condoms with boyfriends, on the other hand, is undermined by very widespread social norms which associate condoms with distrust and thus, define them as inappropriate for long-term relationships (Varga, 2001). Thus, consistent condom use depends not only on changes among sex workers but also among clients, and to focus on sex workers only is only half of the picture. Without addressing the power relationships with clients and boyfriends, or seeking to change the attitudes of clients and boyfriends, interventions with sex workers may have little effect.

In response to the gendered power relation in the sexual encounter, efforts are underway to provide female-controlled methods of HIV prevention, such as the female condom and vaginal microbicides, which, in some circumstances, may be used without the client's knowledge (Tiglaio, Morisky, Tempongko *et al.*, 1996; Kilmarx, Limpakarnjanarat, Mastro *et al.*, 1998; Ray, van de Wijgert, Mason *et al.*, 2001; Busza & Baker, 2004). Such efforts are an essential part of increasing women's possibilities within the sexual encounter. On the other hand, however, sex workers' victimhood should not be taken for granted as inevitable (Wojcicki & Malala, 2001). As well as working within existing power relations, it is also necessary to work on changing them. Provision of economic supports in terms of credit, savings facilities, such as provided by the Sonagachi Project's bank, or training in entrepreneurial skills are means of increasing sex workers' economic power (Cohen & Alexander, 1995; Gysels, Pool & Nnalusiba, 2002).

Gender relations may specifically undermine the prospects of women's collective action, if men resist women's efforts to increase their power, or if gender relations prescribe that women's proper domain is private, and men are ones who are the public actors (Stein, 1997; Bujra & Baylies, 1999). In a peer education programme in South Africa, sex workers' boyfriends discouraged them from participating, ridiculed their efforts to organise, and devalued their expertise with "What is there that anyone could learn from a whore?" (Campbell & Cornish, 2003, p.169; Campbell, 2003). Stories circulated in the community about women's inability to collaborate to organise anything. Participatory interventions which seek to engage and empower women as the agents of the intervention may well have to overcome such negative expectations of women's participation in the public realm.

Police and other guardians of civic order

In contexts where selling sex or related activities are criminalised, sex workers often suffer from police repression. Fearing arrest, they may be unwilling to make themselves known as sex workers by congregating in public, or by making use of HIV outreach services (in India, Bhave, Lindan & Tripathi, 1995; Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; in Indonesia, Ford, Wirawan, Fajans *et al.*, 1996; in Thailand, van Griensven, Limanonda, Sgaokeow *et al.*, 1998). Thus criminalisation and the associated expectation of repressive police action cause difficulties for any kind of intervention to access sex workers, and causes particular difficulty for participatory interventions which require sex workers to come together publicly. For instance, an HIV prevention intervention in Delhi created a video in which sex workers appeared, giving a safer sex message, to be shown in brothels (Singh and Malaviya, 1994). The sex workers were concerned that the video should be prevented from reaching any law enforcement agencies, fearing that their appearance in the video would make them vulnerable to arrest. Reassurances were given, and the intervention carried out, but criminalisation is clearly not a conducive environment for sex workers appearing in public as part of a collective action movement.

In other contexts, where a community is controlled by organised crime, or self-appointed guardians of the civic order, sex workers are often vulnerable to exploitation and repression. In a South African project, for instance, local male “gangsters” who made up an unelected “Committee” considering themselves guardians of the civic order, backed up by violence, had to be accommodated in order to allow for the project’s access to the community of sex workers. They had to be offered exaggerated gestures of respect, and to receive payment for the hire of their minibus, in order for the project to be permitted to continue (Campbell, 2003). They also became actively involved in the project, punitively enforcing sex workers’ attendance at meetings. Kolkata’s red light areas are often run by political parties and associated men’s clubs or *goondas* (hoodlums) whose cooperation must be sought by NGOs seeking to carry out an intervention (Sleightholme & Sinha, 1996). The interests of these groups (promoting their members’ political, economic and social power) are not those of sex workers, and the tricky process of co-operation with interest groups antagonistic to sex workers is a

dilemma that will have to be faced by any effort to implement an intervention for sex workers.

In the course of assessing these “internal” and “external” obstacles to participation, it has become clear that the distinction is not absolute. “Internal” problems (such as lack of solidarity) are constituted by wider, external, power relations (such as social stigma or criminalisation). Nonetheless, if we consider this distinction in terms of which specific domains of their social relations sex workers may be able to gain power over (as I suggested in the discussion on empowerment), we see that some domains, such as solidarity, and capacity are more within their control than are others such as the relations with madams or police. In this way, the distinction between “internal” and “external” obstacles may be upheld.

2.4.3. Can participation play any appropriate role in sex worker interventions?

Macrosocial or community level intervention?

The discussion of factors “internal” and “external” to the sex worker group has made it clear that severe obstacles to the successful operation of participatory projects among sex workers exist, and that many of these derive from macrosocial conditions such as economic and gender inequalities or legislation which is punitive to sex workers. Under such profoundly disempowering societal conditions, can participation among sex workers in developing countries play a meaningful role in HIV prevention? Or is the responsibility, rather, with governments, who should implement economic and social policies which provide education and employment for disadvantaged women (Wawer *et al.*, 1996), and laws which do not penalise sex workers? As I have argued in the previous chapter, work at both macrosocial and community levels simultaneously is essential, and not contradictory. Beyrer’s (2001) suggestions for the appropriate responses to the desperate situation of women in the conflict-ridden Shan states of Burma provides a good example of this position. The chronic poverty, instability and danger in the Shan states have led to large numbers of women migrating or being trafficked into prostitution in Thailand. As illegal immigrants, unfamiliar with the Thai language, they are vulnerable to all kinds of abuse. Beyrer argues for simultaneous work at community and international levels. International pressure on Burma’s military junta

to seek a resolution to the conflict is required. However, Beyrer argues that even with such a resolution, women will continue to be trafficked in the absence of significant change in their local communities. At the community level, publicising the existence of trafficking in source communities, and providing accessible services and supports in the towns to which Shan women are trafficked offer essential means of supporting individual women. From this perspective, community responses do not absolve governments of their responsibility, but create opportunities and protection for people facing immediate threats.

A governmental response: Thailand's 100% Condom Policy

While structural change is essential to bringing about positive changes in patterns of vulnerability to HIV, government policies cannot be assumed to be fulfilling their responsibilities in a problem-free manner. Thailand's "100% condom use" programme is often cited as an effective structural HIV prevention effort. The Thai government was relatively quick to recognise the urgency and magnitude of the HIV threat, and implemented a nationwide policy to enforce 100% condom use within commercial sexual interactions. Under this policy, brothel managers, local health clinics and police collaborate to monitor levels of STIs among sex workers, and enforce condom use. The strategy has been shown to have successfully reduced the incidence of HIV (Rojanapithayakorn & Hanenberg, 1996), leading to the establishment of similar policies in Indonesia and Cambodia, and enthusiasm for the method (Joesoef, Kio, Linnan *et al.*, 2000). The Thai government has certainly shown leadership in its willingness to address the HIV threat directly and publicly. However, the details of the 100% condom policy, particularly its facilitation of brothel managers' and police officers' repressive powers over sex workers, have been a cause for concern (Loff, Overs & Longo, 2003). Cohen and Alexander (1995) point out that historically, mandatory health schemes monitoring registered sex workers have had little success in reducing the prevalence of STDs. They also query the efficacy of using people seen by sex workers to discriminate against them (such as police, health services) as the agents of persuasion.

There is evidence of adverse effects of the 100% condom policy in Thailand. The inconvenience of police pressure on brothels has led sex workers to leave brothels, to

carry out their work from more informal alternative sites (Hanenberg & Rojanapithayakorn, 1998). Moreover, the bad public image of prostitution due to AIDS campaigning has led to the conduct of commercial sex in more ambiguous ways, such as through massage parlours, bars, and relationships which suggest intimacy and thereby allow for a denial of the risky nature of the interaction (Lyttleton & Amarapibal, 2002). Pushing the sex trade underground limits any form of formal service provision or organisation among sex workers. Moreover, Loff *et al.*, (2003) report instances of sex workers being taken to clinics under military or police escort, paying fees for certificates to show that they are healthy, photographs of sex workers who have engaged in risky practices being displayed, and kickbacks being paid to the authorities inspecting brothels to ensure a favourable result. Loff *et al.* argue that, in the corrupt environments in which sex work often exists, giving further powers to police, clinics and brothel managers is likely to lead to serious abuses of sex workers' human rights. Governmental public commitment to HIV prevention is certainly crucial, but whether the agents of intervention should be groups who already suppress sex workers is less obvious. As Loff *et al.* argue, sex workers' organisations may be the groups best suited to implementing 100% condom policies. More generally, community action groups are vital to critically monitoring the implementation of government-sponsored programmes, so that they are prevented from perpetuating the inequalities that caused the vulnerability in the first place (Altman, 1995).

The power relation between professionals and community

The Foucault-inspired critique of participation concerns the power relation between the outsider initiators of a participatory process and the local community members (e.g. Cooke & Kothari, 2001). In the literature on sex workers which I have reviewed, given its public health focus, there is little data presented or reflection on the relation between the initiators of a project and the local community. The one theme does commonly arise in this literature is the importance of sustained institutional support for projects which engage sex workers as the agents of the project (in Ghana, Asamoah-Adu, Weir, Pappoe, *et al.*, 1994; in India, Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; in Malawi, Walden *et al.*, 1999). In each of these studies, the absence of external support led to cessation of the peer educators' HIV prevention activities. Such findings suggest that engagement with external institutions and activists in fact comprise essential supports to sex workers'

participation in interventions. This is unsurprising if we consider the systematic disempowerment which characterises many sex worker communities, and the significant barriers to participation such as have been identified above. In such circumstances, the support of professionals with experience of community organising is likely to be essential.

Thus, rather than dismissing the engagement of professionals with community as an exploitative process of colonisation, a more fruitful approach is to take on the challenge of such engagement, recognising the complexities and dilemmas of the relation (van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2004). Busza and Schunter (2001) provide an example of such reflection, describing the dilemma of “research goals versus community-defined needs” in their participatory action research project. From the international health perspective, HIV may be a priority, and participation the most enlightened intervention strategy, but if HIV is not a local priority, how far will the project initiators permit participatory goal-setting? In response to some resistance to their research in the community, and to their own concerns about the possibility of gaining informed consent under the coercive life conditions of debt-bonded brothel-based sex workers, a set of participatory activities were implemented. These activities allowed sex workers to collectively elaborate the benefits and risks of participating in the project, as a basis for their informed consent as well as the adjustment of the programme to their concerns. Such participatory practices, if they allow sex workers’ concerns to shape the design of the project, would be located on the upper rungs of Arnstein’s ladder.

2.5. Power and participation

This review of the literature on sex workers has shown that the conditions under which sex work takes place, in many contexts, raise significant obstacles to participation. Efforts to organise sex workers are likely to meet not only with a lack of commitment and capacity from the divided or isolated sex workers, but also with resistance and discouragement by the powerful groups who take advantage of them. Moreover, the democratic spirit of participation is threatened by tendencies to define participation in ways that do not need to relinquish power to the community, as Arnstein has shown. How can such obstacles to participation be overcome, to allow a collective action project to work? Furthermore, as I argued in the first section of this chapter, we need

ways of conceptualising the concrete, contentful processes through which participation occurs, beyond considering only the “degrees” to which it occurs. How can we conceptualise the concrete processes of participation? The work of Paulo Freire has been foundational to participatory development, and represents one of the only attempts to theorise the processes of participation, in terms of what concretely goes on within a collective action process. Moreover, his theorisation of “critical consciousness” is an approach to conceptualising collective action by marginalised communities which engages substantially with problems of power relations. This work provides part of the conceptual framework of this thesis, and will be considered here. The conceptual framework will be further established in the following chapter, which will develop an activity theory perspective in which resources for collective action are the counterpart to the destructive obstacles identified above.

2.6. Conscientisation

Paulo Freire theorises how marginalised communities can create a collective action process that produces social change. “Conscientisation” is the core process, a dialogical engagement between activists and community members, in which a reflective understanding of the community’s problems and the routes to their solution is constructed. Freire’s problem-posing educative method has been extensively put to use by community psychologists who work practically with marginalised communities, particularly in Latin America (de Freitas, 2001; Montero, 2002), but also in other developing country contexts (Purdey, Adhikari, Robinson, & Cox, 1994; Kelly & van Vlaenderen, 1995; Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001; Campbell, 2003). The idea of “conscientisation” has been foundational, at a theoretical level, to community psychology in North America (Wallerstein, 1992; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003), though there are few concrete examples in this literature of the empirical realities of a conscientisation process. One of the aims of this thesis is to concretely examine the manifestation and role of conscientisation in the Sonagachi Project. Freire’s theory deals very explicitly with issues of power. In relation to the obstacles identified above, his theory deals specifically with the capacity “internal” to a community and with the relations between community and outsider activists. *Conscientisation*, for Freire, is the means for producing committed, skilled members of a collectivity, and open, egalitarian

dialogue is the means of ensuring that respectfulness and a redistribution of power between activist and community is enforced.

2.6.1. The conscientisation process

Freire's liberation pedagogy is based on a Marxist understanding of humans as being fundamentally motivated to collectively interact with the world to transform it, name it, and make it their own. This understanding entails a dialectical model of the relation between person and environment, where the person acts to change the environment in order to change herself. In this dialectical view, instability and change is at the heart of social order, so that social order is always in-the-making, and humans are creating their own environments or worlds.

As men [and women] relate to the world by responding to the challenges of the environment, they begin to dynamize, to master, and to humanize reality. They add to it something of their own making, by giving temporal meaning to geographic space, by creating culture. This interplay of men's relations with the world and with their fellows does not (except in cases of repressive power) permit societal or cultural immobility. As men create, re-create, and decide, historical epochs begin to take shape. And it is by creating, re-creating and deciding *that men should participate* in these epochs (Freire, 1973, p.5).

For Freire, this conceptualisation is both a description of the way that humans actually relate to the world, and an ethical and political demand for how they should be enabled to act on the world in order to change it. However, he argues, under repressive social conditions, such as colonialism or dictatorship, people are systematically deprived of the opportunities to develop collective understandings or responses to the challenges of their world (Freire, 1973). Under such conditions, he argues, people do not see their environment as open to their transformative action, but instead, have learned to adapt to its repressive conditions. Thus, his method of literacy education aimed to constitute the appropriate environment in which oppressed people could collectively develop, in dialogue, critical understandings of their social situation and the means through which they could transform it. This process Freire called “conscientização”, rendered into English as “conscientisation” or sometimes “raising critical consciousness”. Taking

critical action is the essential counterpart to the reflective understandings developed in conscientisation (Freire, 1970). Reflection without action comprises empty verbiage, useless “blah”, and action without reflection, Freire calls “mere activism”, which risks falling into uncritical sectarianism (Freire, 1970). The unity of reflection and action comprises *praxis*. The opportunities for critical action to flow from critical reflection may be curtailed by conditions of societal domination and disempowerment, and thus effort is necessary to create opportunities for action as well as for reflection.

2.6.2. What is the nature of “critical consciousness”?

Is “critical consciousness” a stage which is reached by an individual mind or is it a form of social knowledge shared by a community? In some of his work, Freire gives a very psychological interpretation of critical consciousness, as the endpoint of a succession of stages that human consciousnesses variously occupy. In *Education: The practice of freedom*, to explain the state of critical consciousness, and the process by which it is reached, Freire contrasts it to alternative states of consciousness. He outlines a “magical” form of “semi-intransitive” consciousness, in which the problems of life are so challenging, immediate and apparently irresolvable, that people can understand them only in a “magical” way, in which causality is supernatural, and there is no sense of oneself and one’s problems as historically situated, and no sense of an appropriate route to exerting agency (Freire, 1973, p.17). As people start to enter into dialogue with each other about their world, and start to find ways of talking about their situation in a problematic world, Freire argues, they make a transition to a “naïve transitivity” of consciousness. The characteristic features of this state include “oversimplification of problems”; “a lack of interest in investigation”; “fragility of argument” and “practice of polemics rather than dialogue” (p.18). Though their “horizons have expanded” and thus participants have a wider conceptualisation of their problems and alternatives, they may seize on unrealistic ideas or choose non-dialogical methods. Without full opportunities for authentic dialogue, Freire cautions, the naïve transitivity can be diverted, to become sectarian, or fanatical. To ensure the attainment of “critical transitivity”, he argues, requires “an active, dialogical educational program concerned with social and political responsibility, and prepared to avoid the danger of massification” (p.19).

Supported by such an educational effort, “critical transitivity” will be reached, in which participants develop beyond both the attitude of fatalism which accepts the social order as natural, and the attitude of naïve transitivity which incorporates conceptualisations of the historical order, but inflexible ones. The state of “critical transitivity” entails a conceptual understanding of the societal source of one’s problem, how that relates to one’s life, and how one’s organisation or community group can take action to change those social conditions. It is characterised by, among other things, “the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analysing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by dialogue rather than polemics” (p.18). Freire’s presentation of these forms of consciousness, with their lists of characteristic psychological attributes (in *Education: The practice of freedom* and *Education for critical consciousness*), seems to render them as personal cognitive states or cognitive sets which force one particular way of understanding the world upon a person. The division of consciousnesses into three stages provides an attractive shorthand, and a useful didactic tool, for Freire’s complex work. However, this psychological interpretation is not one which is promulgated in Freire’s other works, in which conscientisation appears much more as a social process rather than a state of mind (Freire, 1973). As Roberts (1996) suggests, the conceptual simplicity of this “stages” scheme has led to its over-emphasis and further formalisation and individualisation by subsequent authors (Smith, 1976; Altschuler, 1976) who have sought to constitute conscientisation as a measurable and operationalised concept.

The psychological interpretation of conscientisation is not the one which I intend to take forward in this thesis. Instead, I will argue for an understanding of critical consciousness in terms of a body of social knowledge in which the social world is constructed in a critical and actionable way. From this, more pragmatist, reading, no person’s consciousness can be said to be ultimately more advanced than any other, but for the purposes of certain goals, certain forms of knowledge are more useful. To make this argument, I will draw on Berger’s (1974) critique of Freire’s “three stages model”.

Berger strongly objects to the suggestion which he finds in Freire’s stages model that human consciousnesses can be ordered upon a hierarchy, and thus, that the intervention of a more critically-conscious outsider can “raise” the consciousness of the previously

unaware “magical” or “naïve” thinker. He argues that it is philosophically in error to suggest that some people have “more” or “higher” consciousness than others, asserting that humans are all equally endowed when it comes to having consciousness. Thus he writes:

Human beings have produced an immense variety of ways in which they have sought to relate to reality, to give order to experience and to live meaningful lives. There is neither a philosophical nor a scientific method by which this variety can be arranged in a hierarchy from lower to higher (or, more precisely, there are many different hierarchies in terms of which, with equal plausibility, the empirically available structures can be arranged). (Berger, 1974, p.142)

Within Berger’s parentheses, here, is the pragmatist angle from which “critical consciousness” can be a productive concept, without claiming that *ultimately*, one consciousness is higher than another. The core idea here is that different people may have different awareness of *specific topics*, and that one’s awareness of such topics may be increased, but that this awareness of a specific topic does not constitute a qualitative advance in one’s thinking. The structural sources of a community’s problems, and the potential routes to political action comprise one possible topic for reflection. Intellectuals or activists may have reflective knowledge useful for political action. But subsistence farmers will certainly have useful and reflective knowledge about how to co-ordinate the community’s use of common resources, how to avoid conflicts with landowners or local political leaders, and so on. For the purposes of constituting a politically active community movement, there are techniques, ideas, and models which outsider activists can contribute, which facilitate reflection on the political dimensions of one’s situation. From this perspective, we can accept that there is no absolute hierarchy of consciousness or knowledge, but that, for the purposes of social change, some forms of knowledge are more useful than others.

The nature of critical consciousness, from this perspective, is social, not psychological. The form of knowledge (e.g. “magical”, “sectarian”, “critical”) which is under observation, from this perspective, is a body of social knowledge rather than an individual cognitive mindset. That is, people collectively develop ways of understanding and responding to their world. Faced by a world which is miserly in the

opportunities for action offered, fatalistic interpretations may be likely to develop. These interpretations refer to specific parts of the world, that is, they have content, they are not automatic cognitive processes. For example, sex workers may share an understanding that, in relation to their madams, they have little power, and that the best thing is not to cause trouble, but to accommodate to the madams' demands. This is a contentful body of social knowledge which is a response to the harsh conditions of living. It does not represent a cognitive mechanism that is applied to all incoming information, and that always produces a fatalistic response. This is the approach to critical consciousness pursued in this thesis. The following chapter will develop further the theorisation of reflection, and these ideas will be pursued in empirical detail in Chapter 6.

2.6.3. How is critical consciousness brought about?

The method which Freire proposes for the development of critical consciousness relies upon the encounter with difference, through open dialogue. Critical consciousness is a stepping out of one's immersion in the world, to reflect on that world. Through "naming the world", the world is problematised, so that it is no longer natural but questionable. Freire's educational method is a "problem-posing method", which seeks to continually question, to make problematic the world that we know, the assumptions that we make. This is the opposite of the problem-solving often offered by development consultants or "extension workers", who offer small-scale solutions to problems, without questioning the source of the problem within the wider social structure. As Montero (2002) suggests, one way of problem-posing is to contrast the living situation of one social group with that of another group in the same society. If the social order then can be seen as arbitrary, if alternatives can seem possible, then the world becomes one which is open to change, through transformative action. Thus:

"in problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world, *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 1970, p.64).

The creativity of dialogue, and the possibility of problem-posing, depend upon the juxtaposition of different perspectives. Hence, Freire gives an important role to collaborations between outsider-activists and communities as means of confronting each other with problem-posing difference. The divergences between these groups are valuable, though they often co-occur with power asymmetries which can make that dialogue difficult. For Freire, it is the commitment of all participants to the openness of dialogue that is the means of minimising the destructive effects of power asymmetries within the participatory process.

Dialogue, however, is a fragile thing to put one's faith in, and it should not be romanticised. It cannot be assumed that historically disadvantaged communities have the same capacity to participate in formulating goals, or dialoguing with professionals, as do the professionals with whom they are supposed to engage. In response to this problem, Kelly and van der Riet (2001) suggest seeing dialogue as the *goal* of the participatory process, as well as the means: it is an ideal to be strived for, the achievement of which will depend on significant group-building efforts and capacity-building. The "internal" and "external" obstacles to participation among sex workers made clear the need to actively construct supportive environments for such dialogue. Infrastructures, and supportive resources can be developed to safeguard the possibility of dialogue. The capacity of historically disadvantaged community members may need to be built up, to counter their "democratic inexperience" (Freire, 1973, p.21; Purdey *et al.*, 1994). Equally importantly, domination of the dialogue by outsiders, or by the most powerful insiders must be guarded against (Habermas, 1989; Jovchelovitch, 1997), and certain social techniques may be able to help in this instance, such as having a neutral chairperson, or building in to the programme a formal structure which encourages divergences or complaints to be aired (van Vlaenderen, 2001).

This commitment to dialogue also, ideally, prevents a conscientisation process from become fixed, inflexible, or dominated by one position. The process of conscientisation is always unfinished. There is no endpoint, nobody has the ultimate correct version of reality. There is only a continual process of critical questioning, re-thinking, acting and again questioning. For instance, from a contemporary perspective, some of Freire's writing seems to exhibit "naïve transitivity". Writing of a homogenous category of "the oppressed" struggling under the yoke of ignorance seems to reflect a certain

“oversimplification of problems”, and an “underestimation of the common [person]” (Freire’s description of “naïve transitivity”, 1973, p.18). Freire’s emphasis on the need for a continual dialogue, and re-questioning suggests that he would welcome such critical attention.

2.6.4. *The role of conscientisation in collective action*

Freire’s work provides a theorisation of the conditions under which effective community mobilisation may come about. Certain forms of knowledge are particularly suited to enabling community organisation, and these are the kinds of knowledge to be promoted in a conscientisation process. If community members have problematised the *status quo* and have developed understandings of their environment as an actionable one, they have a rationale to come together to take action, and a starting point from which to plan their collective action (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). Critical consciousness is thus both the glue which holds a group together and the means for them to develop their action strategy. The empirical chapters will continue the dialogue with Freire’s work. Through investigating the ways in which sex workers and Project workers talk about their organisation, Chapters 5 and 6 will dialogue with the theoretical concept of conscientisation. Chapter 7 will consider the organisational procedures which allow the Sonagachi Project’s dialogues to take place.

2.7. Conclusion

I began this chapter with two aims: to specify the concept of participation and to assess the potential for participation among sex workers. The review of the sex worker literature revealed significant obstacles to sex workers coming together to form a collective action movement, and to their being allowed by other powerful groups to increase their powers through participating. The discussion of Freire presented the concepts of conscientisation and dialogue as means of overcoming obstacles within the participating group, and in the relation between the community and outsider activists, respectively. By investigating the successful case of the Sonagachi Project, this thesis will examine how the Project has overcome such obstacles, seeking to develop recommendations for participation in other contexts.

The conceptual approach which this chapter has taken to understanding participation is to specify it in concrete terms of the qualities of the actions being undertaken, rather than ranging the qualities along a quasi-quantitative dimension of the “degree” of participation. Participating as a service user, as a peer educator, or as a decision-maker entail different forms of activity. I have applied the same concretising approach to the concept of empowerment, and to conscientisation. Thus, empowerment is not something which varies on a single dimension of degrees of empowerment, but different activities necessitate qualitatively different powers. And critical consciousness is not a general or abstract psychological state, but always refers to a specific domain of one’s life, which comes under conscious reflection thanks to the existence of a relevant body of social knowledge. Thus, I have sought to shift from abstract understandings, which conceptualise participation, empowerment, or conscientisation as existing upon singular, hierarchical dimensions, to concrete understandings of the various qualitative phenomena to which we give the terms participation, empowerment or conscientisation. The empirical chapters of this thesis will specify the qualitative phenomena which comprise participation in the case of the Sonagachi Project. The paradigm which yields this conceptual shift is a pragmatist one. The following chapter describes this pragmatist perspective, and, setting activity theory within this perspective, establishes a comprehensive set of conceptual tools with which to analyse participation.

Chapter three

Theoretical framework: Participation as collective activity

[The pragmatic method:] The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, “categories”, supposed necessities, and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.

William James (1995 [1907], p.57)

The paradigm for this thesis is a pragmatist one. The pragmatist attitude avoids posing abstractions as the motivating forces “underlying” events, takes human action as the site where reality is produced, and sees persons and environments, subjects and objects as co-emerging through their interaction. The indivisible unit of analysis is thus a person-acting-on-an-environment.

This chapter, first, situates the present pragmatist paradigm in relation to Cartesian and Hegelian philosophical traditions. The pragmatist epistemology produces a demand to define our concepts, such as “participation”, concretely, in terms of “fruits, consequences, facts”. This demand will be met by the theoretical perspective of activity theory, through which we can conceptualise “participation” as a process of collective action in which people collaborate in goal-directed joint activity to gain control over their environment. Activity theory has traditionally dealt primarily with individual action, and the question of how it can be applied to collective activity is addressed. Finally, conceptual tools from activity theory are used to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of participatory development as a process of collective action.

3.1. Cartesian and Hegelian paradigms

As Marková (1982) has argued, a fundamental division between psychological traditions can be made on whether they are based in a Cartesian or a Hegelian tradition of philosophy. Although rationalism and empiricism are often considered as paradigmatically oppositional approaches to psychology, Marková demonstrates that rationalism and empiricism are both paradigmatically Cartesian, and as such share a static cause-effect determinism. She argues that the larger-scale opposition in psychology is between a Cartesian and a Hegelian paradigm. Hegelian philosophy begins with processes rather than static objects, arguing that the activity and creativity evident in living processes cannot be accounted for in the mechanical universe of Cartesian geometry. The Hegelian approach can be distinguished from the Cartesian by its prioritising of relationships rather than elements, change processes rather than stable states, and processes of mutual constitution rather than one-way, cause-effect determinism (Marková, 1982; Mead, 1936). Whereas the Cartesian paradigm starts with objects, to later observe relations between them, in the Hegelian paradigm, objects arise out of relationships, and as relationships change, the objects also change.

Pragmatism and Marxism are two philosophical traditions growing out of the Hegelian paradigm. Both pragmatism and Marxism share the Hegelian emphasis on relationships over objects, and mutual constitution over one-way causation, and both developed out of a materialist critique of Hegelianism. Pragmatism and Marxism conceive of relationships and mutual constitution in materialistic terms, specifically, in terms of *activity*. Paulo Freire, whose work is located in a Hegelian paradigm describes activity as a process in which “the *actors* intersubjectively direct their action upon an *object* (*reality*, which mediates them) with the humanization of men (to be achieved by transforming that reality) as their objective.” (Freire, 1970, p.116). Activity thus relates person and environment in a continual process of transformation. The present thesis is situated at the intersection between pragmatist and Marxist traditions. Although these traditions developed largely on opposite sides of the globe (the USA and Russia), they are, for my purposes, complementary. I will use pragmatism to develop my philosophical, epistemological and methodological stance, while using activity theory to specify the psychological dimension, in terms of a model of action.

3.2. The pragmatist attitude

The pragmatist attitude is opposed both to the epistemology of rationalism and to that of naïve empiricism. The pragmatist approach is constructivist, viewing our knowledge as a product of our interested interaction with the world. The knowledge is true to the extent that it serves our purposes. It is not true by virtue of coming closer to representing an underlying ultimate “essence of reality”. Pragmatists see no gain in posing such an underlying essential reality, which they find only leads to unnecessary conceptual confusions. The “appearance-reality” dualism is thus wholeheartedly rejected. In rejecting the search for the eternal unchanging truth, pragmatists open up the possibility of change as the core interest of their philosophy. Thus, Rorty (1999, p.30) asserts that “The effect of Hegel on both Marx and Dewey was to switch attention from the Kantian question, ‘What are the ahistorical conditions of possibility?’ to the question ‘How can we make the present into a richer future?’” For both pragmatism and Marxism, we understand the world in order to change it. The question for both is: what knowledge is most useful? The difference between the two lies in the tendency of Marxist work to refer to laws of history, and fundamental causes in a determinist way. The pragmatist approach is more open-ended, uncertain, and avoids any mention of laws or fundamental causes.

3.2.1. Practical validity as an epistemological criterion

From a pragmatist perspective, knowledge is about opening up the world to action. Just as I have suggested that sex workers, in their collective action project, are collaborating to construct an actionable environment, social science also seeks to construct its environment, which is its empirical world, as an actionable environment (Mead, 1936). This social scientific action includes the action of thought as well as practical action. Thus, theories provide sets of tools which allow the empirical world to be acted upon in thought as well as yielding recommendations for professional practice. As Mead writes:

when we speak of a scientist’s apparatus we are thinking of the very ideas of which he can make use, just as he can use the things which he has in his laboratory. An idea of a certain type, such as that of the energy of an atom,

becomes a tool by means of which one is able to construct the picture of a star as a source of energy (1936, p.351).

From the pragmatist viewpoint, these theoretical tools which scientists produce are not claimed to represent the world in an objective way, but to construct the world in a useful way. The usefulness of a theory depends both upon the knower and upon the object of knowledge. Usefulness is always for someone with a certain interest and way of understanding, and to be useful, the knowledge must provide a productive way of understanding the object of knowledge, one which does not meet with too much resistance from the object. The knower, the knowledge, and its object are understood relationally, as one changes, so do the others. “The scientist is himself a creator of Nature and the world Knowledge *is* activity and it changes both the scientist and the world he lives in” (Marková, 1982, p.185). The problem of the validity of the knowledge produced becomes not a question of how closely the knowledge approximates a representation of the reality, but a question of the extent to which the knowledge works, in guiding interpretative and practical action. It is from such a pragmatist perspective that I understand Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach:

The question of whether human thinking attains objective truth is not a question of theory but a *practical* question. It is in practice that man must prove the truth, the actuality and power, the subjective aspect and validity of his thinking. Argument about the actuality or non-actuality of thinking, where thinking is taken in isolation from practice, is a purely *scholastic* question. (1845, II)

A pragmatist interpretation of this thesis is as an argument that, rather than seeking to establish the validity of our scientific knowledge from first principles, we should look to the enactment of the knowledge in practice, as the determining criterion of its validity. Validity cannot be proven by epistemological argumentation or scholastic thinking, but is established when the knowledge is put into practice. The pragmatist epistemological standard to which this thesis aspires is the production of *useful knowledge*. While it is beyond the remit of the thesis to investigate its usefulness in terms of putting the knowledge into professional practice, in the methodological Chapter 4, I will outline some means of increasing the likelihood that the knowledge produced here may be useful in other contexts.

3.2.2. Getting to where the action is

This thesis makes pragmatist assumptions about the status of the knowledge it is to produce. The aim is that the knowledge constructs a usefully actionable world, not that it presents a glimpse of an unchanging reality. But how does pragmatism help us to construct such useful knowledge? Does pragmatism help us to make progress in overcoming the problems I outlined in the previous chapter with our knowledge of “participation” and “empowerment”? To do this, we need the pragmatist method of thinking.

In order to clarify the meaning of the concept of “participation”, I will draw on the advice of Charles Sanders Peirce on “How to make our ideas clear” (1995 [1878]). Peirce argues that the function of thought is to yield actions, and thus that the distinctions which we make in our thinking, if they are to make any sense, must entail distinctions in our actions. Our idea of something, he argues, “is our idea of its sensible effects” (1995 [1878], p.43). Hence, he proposes the following “rule for attaining clearness of apprehension”:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object (1995[1878], p.44).

For the purposes of this thesis, the practical demands of the pragmatist attitude are met by going to “where the action is” (Goffman, 1969; Becker, 1996) regarding the concepts with which we are dealing: where it is, in the world of social action, that “participation” or “empowerment” are arising in the course of people’s actions. Thus, Peirce’s “practical effects” will be examined in terms of the range of concrete actions in which “participation” manifests. Blumer (1969) explains this method by contrasting it to the approach which seeks to investigate a concept by narrowly operationalising it into a single measure. By contrast, his method of “inspection” seeks “to identify the nature of the analytical element by an intense scrutiny of its instances in the empirical world” (p.45). Attention focuses on the occurrence of the topic of interest in its natural context and the range of ways in which the concept may be instantiated in the everyday world, rather than on efforts to apply universal schematics to each concrete context.

To illustrate this pragmatist approach, let us consider how it provides a response to the difficulties in conceptualising “participation” and “empowerment” which I identified in the previous chapter. Applying the pragmatist approach, the first step to understanding such concepts is to identify the concrete different forms of social action in which “participation” or “empowerment” take place. Thus, in the Sonagachi Project, for example, “participation” may be seen in the actions of accessing a clinic, or of bringing a problem to a meeting, or of volunteering to be a committee member, or of suggesting new goals for the organisation, or of representing sex workers in a meeting with politicians. These are the concrete actions which *are* participation.

We can apply the same method of thinking to the concept of “empowerment”. When psychologists seek to define empowerment as a measurable variable with quantitative properties, various psychological “components”, and specified correlations with other individual variables such as health status or level of participation, they are understanding “empowerment” abstractly. The concept of empowerment has been reified as something “underlying” a person’s behaviour, and this abstract construct of empowerment itself becomes the object of study, with efforts to discover its particular qualities. The pragmatist approach, in contrast, instead of *defining* empowerment, seeks to *materialise* empowerment, asking: What are the concrete events in which we see “empowerment”? Where and how does “empowerment” concretely take place? Thus, we can define empowerment in terms of gaining the power to take a specific action. Different forms of empowerment take place when one becomes able to mention a condom promotion argument to a client, becomes skilled in the conduct of formal meetings, or builds up financial savings which bring independence. This is the method of thinking applied in this thesis: to define concepts concretely in terms of the actions which they entail.

How will we go about inspecting “participation” concretely? We will need a way to get some psychological purchase on the phenomenon. The next section develops an activity-theoretical approach, in order to understand “participation” as a process of collective action.

3.3. Activity theory

Activity theory takes humans' historically-situated activity as its basic material, and as its entry point into understanding psychological and social change (Engeström, 1987; Chaiklin, 1996). It is a contemporary psychological and social psychological development of Marx's approach to understanding human labour. The strand of activity theory which I will rely on in this thesis is one concerned particularly with social organisation and social change. This strand developed from Vygotsky's work on the role of cultural activity in the development of higher mental processes through semiotic mediation, through Leont'ev's extension to the analysis of collective activity, to Engeström's contemporary work which focuses on change processes in organisational settings. It places activity as the kernel of human social life, where people are purposeful actors, collaborating and creating change through their reflective activity, which is structured by its situation in a societal context. Two core themes of this Russian/ Nordic school of psychology are fundamental to this thesis. The first is the Hegelian idea that the person and the environment co-emerge through tool-mediated activity, so that each is defined in relation to the other, neither being primary. The second builds on the first, to understand human development as a process of people coming to "control their behavior from the outside" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.40).

The first section below outlines these paradigmatic issues in activity theory, which stretch from Vygotsky's original work to contemporary concerns. However, Vygotsky's interest was specifically in the development of psychological functioning, and thus the second section turns to Leont'ev's efforts to extend Vygotsky's work to investigate collective activity as the object of inquiry. Coming closer to building up the model which will be pursued in this thesis, Engeström's developmental work research will be discussed in the third section.

3.3.1. Vygotsky: *Semiotically-mediated action*

What is the relation between person and environment proposed in Vygotsky's psychology? In his lecture on "*The problem of the environment*", Vygotsky (1994 [1935]) argues that the significance of a person's environment emerges in relation to the person's particular needs, interests and capacities, so that we should not seek to analyse

the environment as having objective properties, with uniform effects. He gives an example of a family comprised of an alcoholic mother and three children, where the development of each of the children was affected in a different way by their family environment. It was in meeting with the specific capacities and needs of each child that the mother's alcoholism (as part of the children's environment) came to affect the child's development. Thus, an environment is always an environment for someone with a particular set of interests, vulnerabilities or skills, and those skills or vulnerabilities emerge in relation to particular features of the environment which pick them out as relevant. To understand this relation, Vygotsky's demand is that we need to be specific about how the environment meets with the experience and history of the person to become a significant environment. Avoiding the subject-object or person-environment dualism of behaviourism was a goal both for Vygotsky and for the pragmatists. Vygotsky sought a unit of analysis for psychology which was non-reductive, which could preserve the characteristics of the whole meaningful event, and which, through internal contradictions, is capable of development (Zinchenko, 1985). Vygotsky's unit of analysis was "tool-mediated action", or more specifically, semiotically-mediated action.

Tool-mediated action, as a unit of analysis, overcomes subject-object dualism in a psychologically concrete way, by theorising the development of mind as learning to use psychological tools which are cultural resources, first presented on the outside, in the course of culturally meaningful activity, later to become part of the thinking process (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's project was to reinstate the study of consciousness which had been denied by behaviourism, but not to do so in the manner of 19th century mentalistic psychology, which he criticised for trying to explain consciousness by reference to consciousness (Kozulin, 1985). By analogy with the physical tools used to act on the physical world, Vygotsky suggested that the "higher mental processes" of consciousness develop through learning to use psychological tools. For instance, a knot in a handkerchief can be used as a mnemonic device to enhance basic associational memory capacities, and used by the person to control their own memory. In this case, the knot exists in the physical world, as a tool to act upon oneself. But we also develop wholly internal mnemonic devices, such as grouping things together in order to remember them, or making associations between images, again, acting on our own memory through the use of tools. Returning to Vygotsky's conception of the relation of

the person to the environment, it is important to recognise that tools do not exist in themselves. Rather, tools arise as resources that answer to ongoing problems. Moreover, this relation is mutually constitutive such that the provision of a new tool can suggest to the actor a new problem to be acted upon. This unit of tool-mediated-action-upon-a-problem will be the minimal unit to be considered in the investigation of the empirical material of this thesis. It is the unit which is foundational to Chapters 5 and 6, which investigate sex workers' and Project workers' actions.

In semiotic mediation, the thinker gains control over his or her action, through the use of signs. Signs can represent aspects of one's environment, ideal states, moral principles, and so on, and allow one to guide one's response to the environment, according to conceptual ideas. Between perception and acting on that perception, a concept introduces a mediating space where operations can be performed on the percept, and a certain control over action generated (Vygotsky, 1978). By being able to operate on the world in mind, non-existing states can be envisioned, and can become goals. Through guiding her action in relation to these goals, the person is a purposive actor.

The goals of activity manifest themselves as images of the foreseen result of the creative effort. The transforming and purposeful character of activity allows the subject to step beyond the frames of a given situation and to see it in a wider historical and societal context (Davydov, 1999, p.39).

Stepping beyond the frames of the present situation, to guide one's action according to a state of the environment that only exists in the imagination, is a route to producing transformative change. The collective elaboration of such goals and working towards them will be elaborated in section 3.4.3 below, as part of the theoretical apparatus of this thesis, and will be investigated in empirical detail in Chapter 6.

In Vygotsky's work, the reason for focusing on activity is as an explanatory principle in the effort to understand psychological functioning. Most contemporary work in this vein, in socio-cultural psychology (e.g. Valsiner, 1998), or in a situated learning perspective (Chaiklin & Lave, 1996), has as its core interest the social nature of mind and learning. This work tends to investigate the development of people's "higher mental

processes” or their practical skills through their participation in a collectivity. But the collectivity itself is not its focus. The foregoing has introduced the basic elements of Vygotsky’s way of understanding consciousness, but what does activity theory have to say about collective action?

3.3.2. Leont’ev and the focus on collaborative activity

Leont’ev positioned himself as Vygotsky’s heir, and reworked Vygotsky’s ideas into a more orthodox Soviet Marxism, which resulted in an increased focus on collaborative *practical* activity, rather than the more “ideal” aspects of semiotic mediation of psychological function, and increased emphasis on the societal and historical structuring of activity (Leont’ev, 1978; Leontjev, 1981). Part of this work provides useful means of addressing problems of collectivity, particularly through the role of motives (collective goals) as organising people’s collective activity, and the relations that individual actors have to the shared motive. He presents this theoretical work through a discussion of the “primaeval collective hunt”, and particularly, the role of the beater in the hunt. The role of the beater is to frighten the animals away from him. Now, this action is in no direct way linked with the goal of acquiring food. Alone, that action is opposed to acquiring food. It can only be linked with the goal of acquiring food through the social relations in which others perform the other actions (the ambush) which will lead to the capture of the animals and the availability of food. To understand collectivity, then, we need concepts which differentiate between the work of the individual and of the group. Thus Leont’ev distinguishes action from activity: “we can say, for example, that the beater’s activity is the hunt, and the frightening of the game his action” (1981, p.210). The shared activity is guided by a shared motive, but the individual action taken does not by itself meet that motive. The individual action has another object, which must be combined with others’ actions to achieve the collective motive. So, in addressing collective action, it is necessary to be aware both of the collective activities and their related motives, and of the individual actions and their related objects and goals, which will not coincide directly with the motives. This difference will be discussed further below, in developing my conceptual categories for the analysis of the data.

For Leont’ev, it is collective activity which distinguishes humans from other animals. In collective activity, people’s action is not based upon the natural material conditions to

which they respond on the basis of biological need, but their action must be based on social relations, where participants must be able to rely upon each other to complete their individual parts of the activity. Thus, other people's actions constitute the activity context in which a person acts. Moreover, the possibility of achieving the motive is distant from the person's action. It is not immediate, and for the person to carry out their part of the activity, the motive and the social relations which will bring it to fruition must be kept in mind by the actor.

[T]he sight of the game cannot in itself of course prompt frightening of it. For man to take on the function of a beater it is necessary for his actions to have a relation that connects their result with the outcome of the collective activity; it is necessary for this relation to be subjectively reflected by him so that it becomes 'existent for him'; it is necessary in other words for the sense of his actions to be revealed to him, to be comprehended by him (1981, p.212).

Collective action depends upon an awareness among the actors of the role of their specific actions in achieving the overall shared motive. Concepts and language which are able to represent to the person his or her relation to the collective activity are essential to the existence of collective activity. To understand collective activity then, participants' knowledge of their role and their relation to others in the achievement of their shared motive, will be of fundamental importance (and will be explored in Chapter 7).

3.4. Developing activity theory to understand social organisation

While Leont'ev provided these useful means of thinking about collectivity, it was the role of collectivity in producing psychological phenomena that comprised his core interest, not so much the phenomena of organisation *per se*. Contemporary developments of activity theory are extending the theory in order to understand the functioning and development of complex systems of human social organisation themselves (e.g. Engeström, 1996; Hedegaard, 1999). "Developmental work research" is an activity-theoretical approach which has been productively applied to problems of understanding changes in organisational settings such as schools (Engeström, Engeström & Suntuo, 2002), courts (Engeström, Brown, Christopher & Gregory, 1997),

health care settings (Engeström, 1996; Engeström, Engeström & Vähäaho, 1999), the corporate sector (Engeström & Ahonen, 2000) and NGO-run development projects (van Vlaenderen, 2001; Kontinen, 2003). The present effort to produce an activity theory analysis of the Sonagachi Project extends the domain of application of activity theory to analysing a grassroots collective action movement.

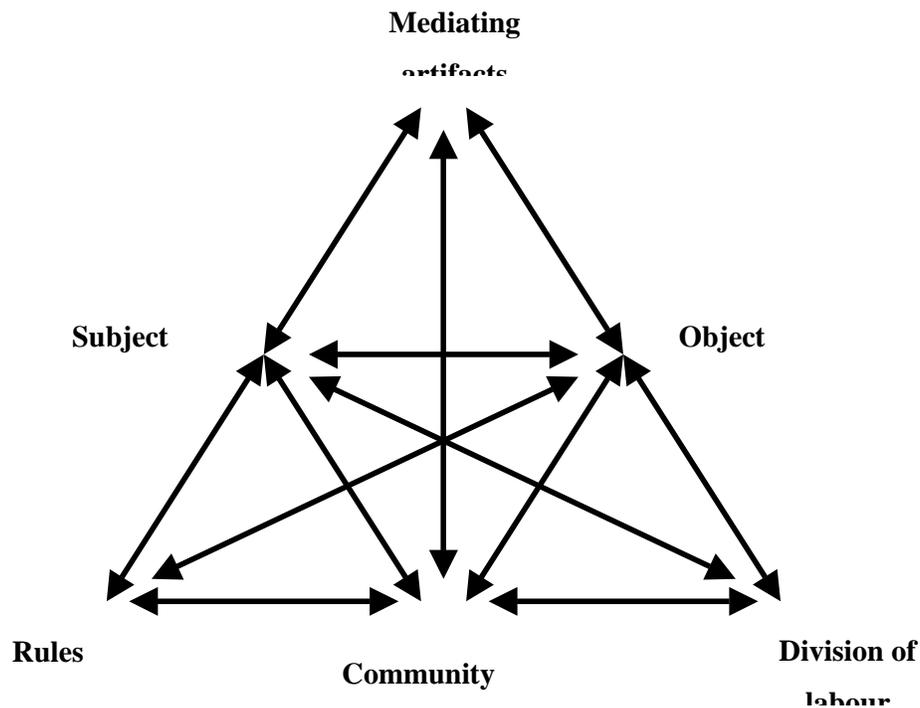
In the extension of activity theory to apply to collective activity *per se*, the theoretical perspective in which tool-mediated activity is the generative core of human life, yielding both the character of the subjects and of the objects remains as the paradigmatic starting point, as does the interest in problems of change and novelty. The translation of concepts from the psychological to the social psychological realm is not unproblematic, and necessitates the construction of a new set of conceptual tools which refer to the organisational features of activity. This thesis will build on Engeström's model of activity systems in order to construct the conceptual tools with which to understand the Sonagachi Project as a process of collective action. Activity theory does not prescribe a well-established formula or set of categories with which to approach any particular domain. Rather, it provides a general approach, which has to be concretised in the form of analytical tools, developed for the specific contexts and problematics of the empirical issue under investigation (Engeström, 1996; 1999). Three core ideas for the investigation of coordinated collective activity will be pursued in this thesis: the concept of resources for collective action; a focus on divergences and convergences among co-present actors; and a focus on participants' reflection on the conditions of their activity as a means of transformative change. These three conceptual issues will be discussed in turn.

3.4.1. Activity systems: Resources for collective action

From Vygotsky and Leont'ev's kernel of tool-mediated action, Engeström builds up a model of this action as taking place within a wider activity system (Engeström, 1987; 1999. See Figure 3.1). Thus, at the micro-level of action, there is a "subject", acting on an "object" through "mediational artifacts" or "tools". To place this subject's action within his or her culturally meaningful and socio-economically structured context, the collective constructs of "rules", "community", "division of labour" and "motive" need to be added to the model of action. "Rules" refer to the generally accepted conventions

which guide participants' appropriate action within the activity system. The "community" is the set of people who are brought together in the activity system through their collaboration around a shared goal or motive. The "division of labour" refers to the different roles which the different participants have in this organised activity system. Each subject's action gains meaning only in the context of a "motive" or anticipated outcome, which is one shared, or at least validated by the community. Finally, the particular form which the components of the activity system take reflects their position within particular societal structures, so the tools which are available, the rules which are deemed acceptable, the freedom with which people can take on different roles, and so on, all depend upon socio-economic and cultural structures within the wider societal context.

Figure 3.1: Engeström's (1987; 1999) model of an activity system



A core orienting idea for the analysis of the data in this thesis is that these components of the activity comprise *resources* for action and collective activity. In order to understand what helps an activity system to function smoothly, we may investigate the tools which enable people to take action, and the shared rules, division of labour, and motive, which enable the coordination of joint activity. The particular form taken by each one of these resources also sets constraints on the actions and activity which can take place. Specifying the resources which are being used is a means through which to understand “empowerment” concretely. In a similar way, Engeström and Ahonen (2000) argue that to understand the “social capital” which holds a community together, we can focus on the material artefacts through which those social relations are reinforced. Such social capital is embedded in material infrastructures such as whiteboards with useful contact information and things to do, lists of practical rules of the work to be done by people holding various roles, and so on. When a resource is something that is being actively mobilised by someone to solve a problem (such as the use of a condom promotion argument), I will consider that resource to be a tool (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie *et al*, 2003). Other resources may exist in the background, structuring action, but not actively mobilised. Rules and a division of labour may be institutionalised solutions to old problems, which prevent disputes arising over what is appropriate behaviour or whose responsibility it is to carry out a particular task.

Using the concept of resources for collective activity as a way of describing the processes of participation and empowerment leads to a set of concrete questions about sex workers’ activity. The concept of resources for action and activity is foundational to the presentation of data in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Tools are resources enabling individual action. The development of new tools allows for new actions to be taken. To understand sex workers’ abilities to act on their environments, we can ask: What are the mediational artefacts or tools used by sex workers to manage the problems of their lives in the red light area? This is the question guiding the presentation of data in Chapter 5. To understand peer educators’ duties, we can ask: What are the tools with which peer educators are carrying out their work to promote health to their peers? (Chapter 6). To understand the co-ordination of participants’ joint activity, we can ask: What are the rules, division of labour and motives that enable collaboration? (Chapter 7).

3.4.2. Problems and divergences in fractured activity systems

Tools, and other resources, do not exist on their own, of course. They only exist in relation to problems. Problems call for the mobilisation of tools to address the problem, and the availability of certain tools will make problems visible. In the analysis of data for this thesis, problems will always be identified in relation to the resources that people are using to negotiate them. Thus, the examination is not of problems-in-themselves, but rather of problems-being-resolved. Following Leont'ev's distinction between action and activity, we can see that there may be problems of action and problems of activity. People confront problems of action in relation to their individual goals (such as earning a sufficient income), or in relation to their task as part of a collective activity (such as bringing people to a clinic to be treated by a doctor). Activity systems confront problems of activity in relation to their shared motives (such as when disagreement over rules leads to a breakdown of co-operation). Moreover, there are important relations between problems of action and activity systems. Often, individuals' problems of action are solved through participation in a collective activity (such as trade unionism). And sometimes, as a person seeks to solve her problem of action, it conflicts with the motive of the shared activity. Such contradictions of interests are a further core interest in the analysis of the data. This difference between individual action and collective activity will be important in the analysis both of sex workers' relation to the Sonagachi Project (Chapter 5) and of Project workers' relation to the Project (Chapter 6).

As well as helping to point out the resources which *enable* action, activity theory has also contributed significantly to understanding the breakdowns in action, through attending to contradictions. Engeström (2004) proposes looking for breakdowns or contradictions in an activity system as a methodological heuristic for gaining an understanding of how that system works. When something goes wrong, when goals are not achieved or conflicts arise, this provides a very useful entry into understanding the functioning of the activity system. As Peirce (1995 [1878]) pointed out, it is when action is disrupted that our mental reflection on it is stimulated. When action proceeds unproblematically, not meeting disruptions, blockages, or forks in the road that have to be decided upon, the actors do not need to reflect upon their action, nor is it easy for the observer to find a foothold from which to gain analytical purchase on the functioning of the system. Thus breakdowns provide illuminating points that shed light on the

functioning of the system around them. Such disruptions are not always easily localised or pinpointed. Indeed, the activity system may be encountered by the researcher before the breakdown takes place. In such cases, the concept of *contradictions* is a further means of identifying problematic areas. Contradictions may exist between different parts of an activity system, for example, if a hierarchical division of labour in a community is at odds with that community's own definition of egalitarian rules as the ideal. Or contradictions may exist between the definitions of the situation among the different actors who comprise the collective activity system.

Van Vlaenderen (2001) puts the concept of contradiction to very effective use as a tool for the action evaluation of a conservation development project in Eastern Africa. This project brought together a foreign donor, local organisations, and trainees in order to develop a botanical conservation programme. Such projects can encounter the problems of “external” power relations identified in the previous chapter. Contradictions between the understandings of each others' roles held by the multiple and divergent stakeholders in a project can be a significant obstacle to a project's success, leading to breakdown (Kelly & Van Vlaenderen, 1995). In her action evaluation workshops, Van Vlaenderen encouraged contradictions between different stakeholders' definitions of the programme goals and participants' roles to emerge, so that they could be addressed. Over the course of the project, some of these contradictions were resolved, thus removing some potential sources of breakdown for the project.

In this thesis, tensions between divergences and convergences in people's goals are very important. Engeström and Miettinen (1999) suggest that activity theory needs to do more to understand divergences between different actors or activities. It has been suggested that the way to do this is to look at the intersection of multiple activity systems (Engeström, Engeström & Vähäaho, 1999). Alternatively, I suggest that to understand the divergences that matter, we can still use a single activity system model, claiming that, to the extent that people have to engage with each other, even if they have many divergent interests and goals, we may consider them to be part of the same activity system. By taking the action around a particular *object* as the kernel of the activity system, I consider that people with partially diverging goals are in the same activity system. Madams, pimps, clients and sex workers collaborate to achieve a sexual transaction, although many of their individual interests are divergent, even opposed to

each other. The object holds them together, even though they have divergent interests in it.

In this proposed approach, the “community” is more fractured than is implied in traditional understandings of “community”, in which a high degree of shared interests or identities are assumed. The community which I consider is the group of heterogeneous people who have to collaborate around some object. For this reason, I conceptualise the people such as pimps, madams, or *goondas*, with whom sex workers often have conflictual relationships as “sex workers’ collaborator-adversaries”. Usually, these groups are considered to be sex workers’ adversaries, as groups which only cause trouble to sex workers and which are diametrically opposed to sex workers’ interests. However, not only is there important practical collaboration between these groups and sex workers, to organise the sexual transaction, but also there are often supportive relationships between them, appreciated by both sides. We need to acknowledge the complexity of their relation, and the certain forms of mutual interdependence that exist, even while many of their interests diverge. It is to capture this contradictory position (and I would argue that all relationships between people encompass such contradictions to some extent), that I use the term “collaborator-adversaries”. Such collaborative-adversarial relationships are the topic of Chapter 8.

3.4.3. Reconstructing the conditions of collective activity through reflection

As well as gaining resources to enable individual and collective action, an important part of a grassroots collective action movement is that people may gain control over the conditions of their collective action, to constitute their own self-organisation. As Raeithel (1996, p.321) suggests, this question can be addressed through studying the “semiotic self-regulation of groups”, in which group members use signs to co-ordinate their work together. Not only are group members’ actions guided by background rules, a division of labour, and a shared motive, but these rules, roles and goals can enter into reflective discussion, as group members seek to influence each others’ action so that it coordinates with their own.

As Engeström (1999) argues, far more attention has been given in activity theory to processes of *internalisation*, as people acquire culturally available artefacts, to the

neglect of processes of creativity and *externalisation*, as new artefacts, and new social relations are constituted through collective activity. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the means through which collective action can produce such social change, as grassroots community members gain some control over their environment. Their environment includes the structure of their collective activity – the rules and motives under which they operate. Their environment also includes their relations to other activity systems, such as legal systems, systems of family relations, economic relations with employers, and so on. How might we understand this process of coming to gain control over such environments? Following Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Freire, we can propose that people start to gain control over their environment as they conceptualise it, so that they can change it in their minds, or in debate, before those changes come about in the world.

In this thesis, gaining control over the environment will be considered in terms of which parts of the environment come under participants' reflective attention at any particular point in time (Bateson, 1972; Engeström, Brown, Christopher & Gregory, 1997). In relation to any action (such as promoting condoms to one's peers, or reporting an obstacle to one's work), a whole set of rules, division of labour and implied motives may be considered to constitute a background. But such background rules may themselves become the objects of participants' attention, may be debated, asserted, renegotiated, and again settle down to become institutionalised. If it is part of the design of a participatory collective action project to allow its rules to be renegotiated by participants, then this process of active reflection and debate will indeed lead to a change in the conditions of their joint activity. On the other hand, the potential for their discussion of external conditions of their action (such as their legal or economic positions) to lead to their control over those conditions is much smaller. But, if tackling those legal or economic situations becomes one of the shared motives of the collective action group, they may find opportunities to direct their activity fruitfully towards that motive.

Reconstructing the conditions of joint activity will be considered in terms of participants' reflection upon the parts of the activity system in which they are embedded. By investigating this process of reflection upon rules and motives in terms of which aspect of a particular activity system comes under the actors' critical attention,

I seek to make such reflection concrete and very ordinary, so that it is not a mysterious cognitive advance to a higher level of reflective functioning (as I have argued in the previous chapter, in relation to Freire). For example, when peer educators turn their attention away from their concrete task of condom promotion and reflect, say, on the geographical distribution of their division of labour, they are again taking concrete tool-mediated action, perhaps mediated by maps, or by heuristics concerning how to ensure a fair workload, and so on. They are still following generally taken for granted rules, such as a rule that everyone should take part in a discussion, or a rule that the co-ordinator has the authority to take the decision. It is in relation to one particular act that we can describe another act as “reflection”. But that reflective act is still a concrete act. Furthermore, the designations of certain phenomena as “rules”, others as “tools”, etc, are all made with specific reference to a particular concrete action. Sometimes, if somebody breaks an implicit rule, that rule becomes mobilised into discourse by their co-actor, and used as a tool, to remind the transgressor of how they are expected to behave. When it is actively used in this way, it is a tool, prior to this, it was an implicit rule. The important point is that the rules that are in the background of an activity at time one, can become the objects of participants’ attention at time two. In Chapter 7, which discusses the daily work of participation in the Sonagachi Project, attention will be given to the emergence of project rules, of the division of labour and of the Project’s motives as objects of participants’ critical attention and activity.

3.5. The theoretical framework of collective action

According to the theoretical specification of action and activity presented here, the term, “collective action”, in the title of this thesis, is contradictory. I have stated that action is individual while activity is collective. The term “collective action” is widely understood within health promotion, social psychology and beyond, to refer to people coming together to take action which they would not be able to take individually. For this reason, it remains a useful term. But, fortuitously, there is an even better, theoretical reason which makes “collective action” the correct term to describe the interest of this thesis. A key part of my argument, and a key interest of the thesis, is in the simultaneously collaborative and conflictual nature of acting together. I mentioned that individual interests can be at odds with the collective interests of a particular activity. I also described co-actors as “collaborator-adversaries”. From this point of view, the

contradiction-encompassing concept of “collective action” is ideal. Acting together, we are at once individuals with idiosyncratic action goals, and collectivity members who must adjust our action to fit in with that of our co-actors. The term, “collective action”, as theoretically specified here, is used in this thesis to encompass the simultaneous divergences and convergences that characterise acting together.

Three broad conceptual tools have been advanced for the purposes of analysing the work of the Sonagachi Project: (i) resources for collective action; (ii) contradictions between individual and collective interests, and between the interests of opposing groups; (iii) reflection on the conditions of activity. These will be put to use in the analysis of the empirical data.

Resources can be identified which enable people to take their individual actions, either in relation to their individual interests not connected to the Project, or in relation to their individual tasks as Project members. Chapter 5 will document the problems-being-resolved of sex workers, through asking: What are the tools which sex workers use to solve their problems of managing life in the red light area? Chapter 6 will ask: What are the tools which peer educators apply in carrying out their tasks as peer educators? A shared motive is a resource facilitating the co-ordination of members of a collective project, and Chapter 6 will continue by asking: What is the role of the shared motive of “workers’ rights” in organising the Project? Shared rules, and division of labour are further resources for everyday coordination of activity, and these are examined in Chapter 7, which considers the daily work of participation, as enacted by Project workers, to ask: What are the resources enabling the coordination of participants’ activity in the Project? I have proposed that reflection upon the activity system in which one is embedded is a route to gaining control over that activity. Chapter 7 also considers the ways in which participants reflect on the conditions of their collaboration together. And I have proposed that convergences and divergences between individual and collective interests, and between different local actors have significant consequences for a Project’s functioning. Divergences between individual and collective interests will be addressed in considering the relations of sex workers and Project workers to the Project, in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 8 details the full complexity of the fractured activity systems in which the Project collaborates with other interest groups, including funding agencies, the hierarchical economic structure of the red light area, and the political

organisation of the red light area, asking: How is the Project constrained by its relation to other activity systems, and to what extent is it gaining control over these relations? Before reaching the presentation of the data, however, the methodological approach of the thesis will be elaborated.

Chapter four

Research design and method

Q. Does the creation of design admit constraint?

A. Design depends largely on constraints.

[...]

Q. Have you been forced to accept compromises?

A. I have never been forced to accept compromises but I have willingly accepted constraints.

(Design Q&A, 1969, Charles Eames interviewed by Mme. L. Amic)

The research design is a response to the multiple constraints of the research question and the empirical field: constraints both theoretical and practical. Such constraints set up the kinds of questions which are to be asked, and set limits on the possible means of answering these questions. The skill of research design is to provide the best solution to these multiple constraints. The design, in turn sets constraints on the kind of knowledge that is to be produced. The aim of this chapter to present the methodological responses to the constraints of the research problem. Detailing the procedures through which I constructed my data and my interpretations, seeks to enable readers to follow my analytical process, to see how I reached my conclusions, even if those conclusions are not the only valid ones (Kvale, 1996; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000).

The chapter begins with the epistemological and substantive reasons (constraints) for the case study as the research design. The most controversial methodological issue which emerges in relation to case studies is how to get from the particularities of the individual case to knowledge with more general application, and I address this issue comprehensively, in order to develop a set of means for achieving generality, which will be the criteria the thesis seeks to meet. The chapter then moves on to detailing the specific methods of data collection used: interviews, group discussions, and observation of Project activities. The approach to data analysis is outlined, with particular attention

to the concept of “researcher reflexivity”. I offer a concrete way of operationalising the concept. The subsequent empirical chapters are each based on a separate data analysis, and consequently, the specific details of each analytic procedure employed are presented in the relevant chapters.

4.1. Epistemological reasons for the case study

From a pragmatist and activity-theoretical perspective, human activity, is the basic material of social science. The complexity, context-dependence and reflexivity of human activity set complex conditions for the form that social scientific knowledge can take. It is due to this complex character of human social activity that social theorists have argued that we should not expect social scientific knowledge to take the same form as the predictive theories of the natural sciences (Giddens, 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Gergen, 1973). In Flyvbjerg’s analysis, the crux of the difference between natural-scientific and social-scientific theorising rests on the skilful context-dependence that characterises human action. Predictive, natural-scientific theories claim to describe phenomena that are independent of context, or that vary with context in a systematic way. On the basis of psychological research on expertise, which shows that the actions of experts cannot be described in terms of a set of rules, but are unpredictably sensitive to context, Flyvbjerg argues that human action cannot be described in the form of a predictive, testable theory. According to Flyvbjerg, such predictability is simply not the nature of human action, evidenced in the failure of artificial intelligence systems, that is, rule-based systems, to accurately model human performance.

So what kind of knowledge can social scientists produce, if it is not predictive, explanatory theory? Flyvbjerg argues that scientists’ skill, like laypeople’s, is based on experience in a range of concrete contexts, which produces a skilled sensitivity to the phenomenon in its context, allowing for skilled working with that phenomenon. This skill is often tacit, the kind of skill that characterises the fluid expertise based on experience which enables doctors, pilots or soccer players to adjust their skilled action precisely to the ever new contexts in which their knowledge is called upon. Social scientists need to learn to understand the complexity of social life through exposure to the complex details of individual social arenas. The research strategy which can meet the criteria of doing justice to the concrete local particulars, and can reflect the situation

of these particulars in their context is an in-depth community case study (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

This focusing on the local detail does not mean that theory is absent from such concrete case studies. Conceptual frameworks are necessary to pick out the phenomena of study, and to produce interesting and productive questions (such as an interest in conscientisation, or reflection on rules, or production of tools). From the pragmatist perspective (discussed in section 3.2.1.), theories make the environment of the researcher actionable (Mead, 1936). Theories, however, do not necessarily provide testable propositions. There are many alternative paths of action that can be made visible with theory. For example, theory can make a mass of data navigable, it can point out a new and interesting phenomenon, it can make suggestions for interventions and it can provide people with heuristics for action. The goal of the present thesis is to create theory which will facilitate researchers' and interventionists' thinking about participation, and thus, this is the criterion by which it should be judged.

4.2. Constraints indicating a community case study method

Each research question and context entail certain constraints, and the central methodological question for the researcher is: Which method is “indicated”, in the context of this particular set of constraints? (Flick, 1998; 2004; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000). In the present case, it is not only the epistemological principle of concreteness that indicates a case study method. There are also substantive reasons for the community case study. HIV prevention interventions can be conceptualised as operating at the individual, community, and macro-social levels (O'Reilly & Piot, 1996). Theoretically, on the understanding that community phenomena such as social norms, economic relations or social capital play crucial roles in the constitution of HIV vulnerability and of communities' responses to HIV, attention to the community level of analysis is essential (van de Ven & Aggleton, 1999; Campbell & Cornish, 2003). And practically, community interventions (rather than population-level approaches, for example) are presently being widely used and recommended in the context of marginalised communities in developing countries, since HIV-vulnerability is often concentrated in localisable communities (Horizons, 1999). “Communities” of sex workers, or male migrant workers, or schoolgoing young people, for example, are the units at which

interventions are targeted, and community members may be the agents of the intervention, in the models of best participatory and empowering practice. Community action is becoming accepted as the norm for best practice among HIV/AIDS policy-makers, practitioners and activists, with resultant calls in the 2004 Bangkok AIDS conference, for increased research attention to the good practices of effective projects, to facilitate “learning by doing” (Greene, Camara, Mbonde *et al.*, 2004). In this context, there are two important conceptual issues which particularly indicate an in-depth study of communities as the appropriate research strategy: the social psychological processes through which such community interventions function, and the contextual constitution of health and of participation.

4.2.1. Processes not outcomes

It has been widely argued in HIV prevention discussions, that the tendency to value randomised controlled trials as the ‘gold standard’ for HIV prevention research neglects the crucial importance of detailed qualitative investigation of local cases (van de Ven & Aggleton, 1999; McPhail & Campbell, 1999). Quantitative evaluations of community projects can demonstrate their level of success or failure (Ngugi, Wilson, Sebstad *et al.*, 1996; Jana *et al.*, 1998), and they show mixed results. But such analyses cannot show how and why the projects achieved their outcomes – the *processes* through which outcomes were reached (Campbell & Williams, 1998; McPhail & Campbell, 1999; van de Ven & Aggleton, 1999; Kippax, 2003). And this is where community case studies can contribute: in investigating the concrete social psychological processes through which community projects function, or fail. How do communities construct effective preventive responses? What can they do that works, and what is it that obstructs or facilitates their collective action? These are questions about the qualities, the forms and actions of community response to HIV, and to understand these concrete and contentful actions, researchers need to go to “where the action is” (Goffman, 1969; Becker, 1996). Such questions are the “how” questions to which case studies are particularly suited (Yin, 1994).

4.2.2. Understanding the context

The second important conceptual issue for HIV prevention science which community case studies contribute to, is understanding the contextual constitution of health and interventions. Following the community psychological understanding of the “person-in-context” as the minimal unit of analysis, a person’s behaviour cannot be understood outside of its location in a particular context. And from the theoretical perspective which I outlined, to understand participatory intervention as “constructing an actionable environment”, the object of study is precisely the concrete relations between actors and their changing environments, thus again indicating a community case study which provides for flexibility and contextual subtlety.

4.3. From particularity to generality

The major challenge levelled at the case study method is the argument that the contextual particularity of an individual case prevents the case study from generalising to any other context. A study designated as a “case study” is claiming, implicitly or explicitly, to be *a case of something interesting*. I want to address this controversial issue of achieving generality, firstly by discussing under what conditions the particularity of local conditions do constitute a problem for social research, and then going on to detail the constructive ways in which researchers seek to achieve generality in their case studies. I will conclude with the approach followed in this thesis.

4.3.1. When particularity is a problem

In research on HIV interventions, a bounded community usually comprises the case investigated. This is the case for interventions conceptualised at the individual level, as well as at the community level. The community is the site of research for reasons of convenience – a community is where an intervention happens. Through the investigation of a single community (or a small number of communities), HIV prevention researchers seek to develop knowledge with more general application. For work conceptualised at the individual level, wider generality is claimed on the presumption that the cognitive or motivational processes accessed in the community case are universal ones (e.g. that a similar role will be found for “perceived behavioural

control” or “subjective norms” in determining behaviour in many situations). In such work, the local context of the community case constitutes an obstacle to observing the fundamental associations between individual variables. Van Griensven *et al.* (1998), for example, report a social cognition-based intervention among sex workers in Thailand, which was hampered due to a sudden wave of police raids and repression. The authors report this event as an unfortunate one-off event that happened to impede an otherwise unproblematic individual-level intervention, so that the increases in knowledge and perceived vulnerability did not have the predicted impact on behaviour. In such cases, the particularity and contingency of the local community case create problems for efforts to glimpse universal psychological processes.

On the other hand, in research which targets the community as the level of analysis, such contextual structuring of health and intervention, is itself the object of study. Phenomena such as police repression, madams’ control over sex workers, stigmatisation of prostitution and HIV, economic disempowerment are the phenomena which analyses at the community level seek to understand. These phenomena are often carefully analysed and presented, to build up a complex picture of the details of the local context which impact on an intervention. Busza and Schunter (2001), for example, detail an innovative and promising intervention designed for sex workers in Cambodia, while highlighting how complex conflicts of interests between powerful madams and less powerful sex workers undermined the feasibility of the intervention. Such careful detailing does justice to the complexity of community life and intervention, and enables readers to understand the particular intervention and community studied. But generality can pose a problem for such context-focused research, and reading such studies can be frustrating, in the absence of suggestions as to how wider lessons may be drawn.

Hence, the core methodological problematic for case studies is *how to get from the local particulars to knowledge with more general application*. In the literature on qualitative research, three responses to this problematic can be distinguished.

4.3.2. Three responses to the problem of generality

(1) Rely on 'human judgement'

Following from the argument that human realities and actions are not rule-governed, but are always particular to local conditions, authors such as Lincoln and Guba (2000 [1985]) and Flyvbjerg (2001) argue that it should not be the aim of social science to produce generalised context-free rules, but that we should rely on “human judgement” to decide whether and how the detailed complex findings from one context apply to another. So, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that human expertise-building takes place through a tacit learning process of encountering and dealing with concrete detailed particulars, not through learning abstract rules: we become experts through studying cases, and use our ‘human judgement’ to decide whether findings from one case have implications for another. This approach relies upon the skilled interpretative work of experienced social researchers. But are there techniques for providing good grounds for such interpretative/intuitive generalisation?

Lincoln and Guba suggest, firstly, considering the “findings” of a piece of research as a “working hypothesis” which is tentatively held to describe the situation studied, and other situations. As a “working hypothesis”, the statement does not make a grand claim to “generalisation” to all contexts, but a very modest suggestion that some transferability to other settings may be achieved. In their terms, they ask “How can one tell whether a working hypothesis developed in Context A might be applicable in Context B? We suggest that the answer to that question must be empirical: the degree of *transferability* is a direct function of the *similarity* between the two contexts” (2000 [1985], p.40). But how is such similarity between contexts to be established? Lincoln and Guba, drawing upon Geertz (1973), suggest that a “thick description” of the phenomenon and its context should be provided by the inquirer, as the optimal base for others to assess, using their “human judgement”, whether the findings can reasonably be transferred to a specified new context. Deferring the establishment of generality until somebody uses that finding to make sense of a new context is an important pragmatist step to thinking differently about the proof of generality. The presentation of sufficient detail to allow for a vicarious learning of the tacit skills of interpreting complexity is also essential to permitting generality in community case studies. But Lincoln and

Guba's formulation does not propose how we decide which are the important aspects of a complex case that must be specified to allow for generalising. Two means can be distinguished, for more formally establishing comparability: by establishing the "typical case" and by establishing the "theoretical case".

(2) The "typical case": generalising to a population of cases

The criticism that case studies are not generalisable usually comes from the survey research logic where random sampling is used to yield data representative of the population, and generalisation is a process of moving from the sample to the population. One approach to generalising from case studies responds within this logic, seeking to establish procedures for choosing a 'representative' case.

The procedures rely on the idea of a case being an instance of a type. This approach accepts that there is a certain population of cases, say, schools, and that it is possible to study a typical case and then extrapolate to the population. The typicality can be demonstrated by surveying the cases on a number of key variables (such as size of school, socio-economic location, etc), and choosing a case to study which is typical on these variables (Seale, 1999; Hammersley, 1992). Then the expectation is that, if another case mirrors the one studied, on those variables, the findings will be transferable to that other case. This approach sets up a formal procedure through which a case investigation can put in place the information allowing generalisations to be made. The main difficulty with this approach is how to define which variables are the most important ones, which ones define the type. This decision is a theoretical one, so different theories will suggest different core variables.

Moreover there are often good reasons not to pick a typical case but to pick an exceptional one. A typical case may, for example, reflect the current state of affairs in communities vulnerable to HIV. But from a critical theory perspective, which seeks to identify possibilities for progressive change, a researcher may choose to study a highly unusual case, so that it might point toward possible avenues for future change. From this perspective, though the case chosen is not representative of the full population of cases, there is an expectation that it could become representative, by the others becoming more like the case studied.

(3) Making the “theoretical case”: generalising to theory

The third approach has been called “theoretical generalisation” (to distinguish it from statistical generalisation). In this approach, case investigations gain their generality through the production of useful concepts which apply in a range of contexts (Walton, 1992). A case is chosen not because it is typical of a population but because it is interesting in relation to a theory. To place the case within a theoretical context, and to further the theoretical understanding of the case, the question “What is this a case of?” should continually be asked (Walton, 1992), as the researcher seeks the most effective concepts to capture and analyse the case. My research began by taking the Sonagachi Project as a case of a successful participatory project, and as a case of HIV prevention, and thus as a study with the potential to identify successful strategies which might be implemented elsewhere. As I started to conceptualise the Project, it became a case of a critical-consciousness-raising process, and an activity-theoretical case of collective action. Through further analysis, my interpretations yielded a dialogue with the theoretical perspectives.

Cases have an important role to play in the generation of theory. Noting the key contribution to sociological theory of several classic case studies, such as Goffman’s (1961) “*Asylums*”, Walton suggests that their classic status derives from their providing “models capable of instructive transferability to other settings” (p.126). Goffman’s interpretation of the workings of mental institutions transfers to understanding ‘total institutions’ in general. Goffman provides a way of looking at institutions which emerged out of the detailed study of a single case of an institution. In a Vygotskian way, we use the concrete world of the case as a mediational means to support out thinking in a complex theoretical way. Seale (1999) suggests referring to this form of case-based work as “generating theory” rather than “generalising to theory”, since the generality is not demonstrated within the case study, but can only be established by the research which follows.

However, cases are useful not only to develop “concrete generalities”, but as means of dialoguing with existing theories, common to a community of scientists. In this sense, a case, if it engages with a common theory, is not merely a single case, but is a part of the large set of observations and conceptual work that contribute to the development of the

theory. The particularities of case studies are often a good source of challenges to general theories. Thus, case study has a place in the logic of falsification: a single case can be the “black swan” that falsifies the general theory that all swans are white (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In this logic, a particular case would be chosen to study on the basis of being the case least likely to support a particular theory. By choosing an apparently unlikely case, either the theory will be falsified, or else it will gain strong support.

This logic works for efforts to test theoretical statements about whether something is true or false, but does not so obviously apply to the instances of seeking to develop theories of the *processes* of community change, to investigate *how* things work. In relation to such theoretical questions, a case study is often a good way of challenging and complexifying a theory (Flyvbjerg, 2001). A case study enables us to investigate how a particular theory or policy, which might sound impressive at an abstract level, actually plays out in its instantiation on the ground, in practice. It is through examining the applicability of a theory to the details of what is going on in the real world, that theoretical advance is stimulated. For example, in the context of optimism about the potential for participation to deliver significant health-promoting change, the case studies of participatory intervention by Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) and Campbell (2003), reveal the complex interplay of institutional and community barriers to the smooth and effective functioning of participation. Through the investigation of the particulars of the workings of the Sonagachi Project, my research aims to contribute to the development of Freirean theory and activity theory, as means of understanding collective action in development projects.

By attaching my research to a common theory, I have sought to facilitate the research’s generality, but the achievement of generality will only take place when the interpretation proves useful to understand another context. This route to generality has been called “reader generalisation” (Seale, 1999; Kvale, 1996). When, in this thesis, I draw on the research of Asthana & Oostvogels (1996) in Madras, or Campbell (2003) in South Africa, to help interpret the case of the Sonagachi Project, I am producing some generality for those studies. I am extending them into new contexts. In research which takes a random sample from a population, as the basis of its generalisation, the guarantee of generality is within the study itself, but in a case study, the achievement of generality cannot be guaranteed by methodological procedures within the case study

itself. The methodological process of generalising takes place beyond the individual case study, in the communication among researchers through the research literature and seminars. The test of my research's generality will be whether the concepts and observations prove useful to future research.

This approach is entirely embedded in the pragmatist paradigm which conceives that the "truth" is always in the future. We have expectations and if they work, then they are called "true". Thus, in so far as knowledge is always oriented to the future, the extent of its generality and indeed, its validity is to be found in the future as well. Deferring generality to the future is not abdicating all responsibility for generality. This piece of research contributes to the generality of the empirical and theoretical studies on which it draws, and aims to present itself in a such a way that enables the knowledge to be taken up and used.

4.3.3. Facilitating generality

The Sonagachi Project is one project, with unique intervention methods and a unique context. My study does not claim to represent the position for all sex workers in India, nor for all participatory projects, nor should it be taken as a blueprint. Three approaches to achieving generality are taken in this thesis. Firstly, in order to facilitate "reader generalisation", the thesis aims to provide sufficient methodological and empirical details to enable complex comprehension, and thus afford generality through "human judgement" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000 [1985]). Secondly, through a dialogue with theoretical understandings of participation, conscientisation and collective action, the analysis of the data claims a wider interest. However, the generality can only be confirmed with the application of the theoretical work in another context, or its use by another researcher. Thirdly, to facilitate such application, the Conclusion chapter offers a set of suggestions which we might draw for other projects, from the case of the Sonagachi Project. The generality of those conclusions can only proven by their future use.

4.4. An outsider approaches the research field

4.4.1. Mediators of my relation to informants

My relation to research informants was mediated by the route through which I approached them, namely, through the official structures of the Sonagachi Project, first the Project Director, then the clinic co-ordinators, and the supervisors and peer educators who were my intermediaries with sex workers. This relation was further mediated by my highly skilled interpreter, Ms Riddhi Ghosh. My initial access to the Project was granted by the Project Director, on the basis of an outline research proposal, which had been accepted by the Project's Ethical Review Committee. He instructed clinic co-ordinators and other Project workers to facilitate my interviews and observation, and gave me permission to attend any of the Project's activities (except the meetings of the central administrative decision-making board). We often checked with the Director for his permission, before attending an event which we had not previously attended (such as a Doctors' meeting, or a police training meeting). Checking with the Director for permission or his opinion on a decision is a very common procedure when something new is proposed, for all Project workers.

Since I relied on Project workers to facilitate my work, taking up a significant portion of their time during their duty hours, I paid to the Project a "service charge" which amounted to Rs 30,000 (about £450) over the 6 months of field work. The Project Director was concerned that I should have a positive and productive experience, and periodically asked me if everything was going well. When I was having difficulty getting sex workers to commit to being interviewed, he was determined to find a solution to my problem, saying that, since I was a "client" of the Project, the Project must meet my needs. Together, we devised a plan to conduct group discussions. The Director was very pleased with having produced a solution that made me happy, and told other office staff about the solution, as an example of effective problem-solving, to serve a customer who should thereby report positively on her experience and bring the Project more custom and recognition.

With the Director's say-so, the clinic co-ordinators were willing to facilitate my work. For the first day or two, co-ordinators were unsure as to my role and the extent of access

that I was supposed to get. I got the impression that they were comfortable with me interviewing experienced supervisors at the clinic, but were not sure about me taking up peer educators' time, by interviewing them during their duty hours, or asking them to help recruit ordinary sex workers for interviews. The co-ordinators checked with the director, and after a couple of days, they facilitated all of my requests. As the clinic co-ordinator is the person with responsibility for ensuring that all the necessary work gets done at the clinic, I had to get the co-ordinator's agreement when I wished to ask for the help of a particular peer educator, to check that that person did not have an essential job to do on that day.

Thus, for clinic co-ordinators, and peer educators whom I approached through the clinic, compliance with my requests for interviews and assistance was largely seen as part of their job, authorised by the Project Director. I showed my gratitude for their significant support by buying tea and sweets or snacks for everyone at the clinic on a few occasions. For the most part, my work coincided with the working hours of the people who helped me, so again, it fitted in as another work-related task. Some Project workers took a personal interest in my work, and developed personal friendships with me and my interpreter. They were willing to help to organise interviews or group discussions outside their work hours. Project workers are familiar with having outsiders such as journalists, funding bodies, representatives of other health-related projects, or politicians visiting the Project to examine its means of working, to see its achievements, to learn lessons, or to lend recognition to the Project. Thus, I often fitted in as one of these visitors who had come to hear their "life stories". To some extent, this led to my hearing standardised positive stories of the work of the Project, but as time went on, I was allowed to hear a range of different opinions, as will become clear in the presentation of the data. For instance, on one occasion, a group of supervisors said that they were bored of talking about the Project and their life stories, so I gladly said that we would talk about general red light area gossip instead. On another occasion, a supervisor said that she was not supposed to say this, but that there are still sex workers who do not use condoms. By this time, we had already heard this from sex workers themselves, but these instances illustrate that we were presented with a range of different views.

Most people referred to my research as either my job or my study, in which I would learn about them, write about them, and go back and tell the people of my country. In the following excerpt from a group discussion, we asked the supervisor helping us to introduce us to the group of sex workers:

Interpreter: And tell them, who we are?

Supervisor: She [Flora] has come from England, and she [interpreter] is Bengali. She would translate what we say to her, in English. She studies in a college. She is researching on us. That is her test and that is why she has come here. (int 37)

My research depended greatly on the support of Project workers, who not only agreed to be interviewed themselves, but also introduced me to informants, arranged group discussions, or suggested to me how I could go about finding out about the issues I was interested in. My relation to sex worker informants, who were not employed by the Project was mediated almost entirely through the Project. In the marginal, exploitative context of a large, competitive red light area, where exposure to outsiders is feared due to the illegal and stigmatised nature of their work, it is only possible to gain access to potential interviewees through well-known and trusted community members. Again, mediation through the Project led sex workers to see my research as something to do with the Project. Their willingness to participate in the research depended greatly upon their personal relationship with the Project workers who approached them on my behalf. Sex workers are periodically asked by Project workers to do things like attend meetings, or visit the clinic, and it was my impression that my research fitted into such requests in a similar way. In general, people approached were willing to be interviewed. Project workers were more likely to approach people with whom they had a good relationship. Some of these women were curious about me, and if they was not busy with cooking or washing or expecting to meet clients, they usually assented to being interviewed. Some people refused on the basis that they would not get any benefit. Others refused to be tape-recorded, for fear of their identity being revealed in public. Particular difficulties in recruiting informants arose when some supervisors had been changed around so that they did not know the local people so well, and in the days after a television crew had been filming in the area, which made sex workers angry and anxious about being identified. Finally, it was difficult for me to access sex workers considered to be in the higher social categories – mainly those who charge high rates for sex. These women see

the Project, with its free clinic, as serving poor people, and not appropriate for them, and by extension, they have little interest in complying with requests by Project workers.

Thus, it is clear that I have heard from that section of the community that has a relatively good relationship with and favourable attitudes towards the Project. I have not tapped the views of those people who are disinterested or antagonistic towards the Project. Nonetheless, a variety of opinions and experiences were reported, including both positive and negative comments about the Project. For the purposes of my research interest in the mode of functioning of the Project, the sampling process was sufficient, giving me access to those people who are involved in some way in the Project.

As well as being mediated by the Project, informants' relationship to my research depended more on their relationship with my interpreter, than with myself. Ms Riddhi Ghosh, a highly-skilled Bengali colleague, acted as interpreter for this study. Based on my explanations of my research questions, the topic guides, and continual discussions about the emerging data and the questions, Ms Ghosh introduced the research to participants, actively sought out opportunities to talk to people who could provide information on these topics, and paid careful attention to anything that was said by Project workers which related to the research interests, and ran the interviews and group discussions. The trust which we gained, the openness and willingness of sex workers to talk of their private lives, and the consequent quality of my data are, I am sure, due to the exceptional research skills, social skills and flexibility of Ms Ghosh. While she was clearly an "outsider" in relation to sex workers, in the sense that she is a highly-educated middle class person, informants often remarked that she was like them and that she understood them. Few young middle class Bengali women would consider entering a red light area and conversing with sex workers, nor would their families permit them. In contrast, Ms Ghosh had previously worked with sex workers, and felt comfortable interacting with them on their own terms, adopting their "bad" language, sharing food and drink with them, chatting and joking. Some of the informants were familiar with supportive middle class advocates who are associated with the Project, a role which Ms Ghosh seemed to match.

4.4.2. Ethical considerations in my relation to informants

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to informants, both in terms of the direct inter-personal relationship which exists between researcher and informant, and in terms of the collective interests of the informant group (Finch, 1993). Ethical considerations which arose in the data collection relationship concern avoiding harm to informants, and the suitability of “empowering” research methods. In relation to sex workers’ collective interests, I evaluated my position as an outsider, and the kind of knowledge which I was producing.

Avoiding harm to individual participants

The standard requirements of anonymity and confidentiality are the first important step to avoiding causing harm to participants. This is particularly important in the case of sex workers who often take careful steps to hide their profession from their family or acquaintances. The assurance of confidentiality was very important for some women, and some refused to allow their voice to be recorded, fearing it would be revealed. Others asked whether I had a camera and said that I could not take photographs, (though I never had a camera with me when interviewing, nor asked to take photos). Stories of bad experiences of being photographed or named by journalists were told by sex workers, which may have limited the women’s willingness to speak to me. Some women said boldly that I was welcome to reveal their names. However, throughout the thesis I have disguised the identity of informants (except the Project Director), in case I have presented something in a way which the speakers, or their acquaintances would not appreciate.

In the interest of respecting informants’ commitment of time to my research, I began the Project with the intention of paying informants for their participation in interviews. However, the Project Director did not agree with this plan, on the basis that he was concerned that people would start to expect payment by the Project for participating in any of its activities, and that, if the money was significant, it would be seen as very unfair that I chose to interview some sex workers and not others. So I did not pay informants (to start with), but relied on their goodwill, and their having time, when I called upon them in their rooms, for an interview. (As outlined above, we later agreed to

pay Rs. 50 to participants in group discussions. Rs. 50 is the amount that a poorer sex worker might earn from one client).

I sought to emphasise, in presenting my requests for interviews or group discussions, that the research would not be of direct benefit to participants. While research may contribute in the long-term to the collective interest of the informant group, I could not assume that my informants had a particular commitment to such long-term collective interests. Thus, I sought to make it clear that it was basically a personal favour to me if sex workers agreed to participate in the research. The fact that people did refuse indicates that they were not under coercive pressure to participate if they did not want to. Despite my efforts to emphasise that my research would not bring more funds to the Project, or result in any particular solutions, as a foreigner, I think I was inevitably linked with the powerful positions of funding agencies.

The suitability of participatory or empowering research methods

Given my research interest in participation and empowerment, and my interest in progressive social change, should I have chosen research methods which would themselves be participatory and empowering in themselves, as called for by many feminist social scientists (e.g. Mies, 1983)? For instance, group discussions may be used in a Freirean way, to achieve a dialogue that is “revelatory not only about the social connections to life’s difficulties but also about alternative social arrangements that could improve the subjects’ lives” (Padilla, 1993, p.153). Involving participants in research design may contribute to building their skills to carry out their own research (Mies, 1983). I decided not to attempt to implement particularly participatory or empowering methods, for the following reasons. Firstly, participation and empowerment are gradual and fragile processes requiring long-term institutional commitment (as this thesis will argue), and it is unrealistic and unsustainable to create and resolve problems within the course of a single research project. Secondly, instead of intervening myself, my research investigates a very successful intervention project. My aim is to learn from this Project rather than to intervene. The Project already carries out politicising and problem-solving activities, supported by a long-term institutional structure. And thirdly, I asked myself, following my pragmatist method: What might “participatory” or “empowering” methods empower sex workers to do? Sex workers

were not particularly keen to learn to carry out research themselves. There had been an interest, in the Project, to teach some sex workers to be research assistants, but this interest had dissipated when I came to do my fieldwork. Thus, I took a traditional approach to the research, seeking to engage informants in a respectful way, but not treating them as co-investigators. The only active interventions which my interpreter and I made were to clarify facts about HIV/AIDS, if we encountered misunderstandings in the course of interviews, and occasionally to offer advice as to where people might go to solve problems which they mentioned.

My status as an outsider and sex workers' collective interests

As a white westerner, with no personal experience of prostitution, I am an outsider to the lives of my informants. The research was designed and carried out with the attitude that sex workers are carrying out a difficult and stigmatised job, but that it is a job like any other. We sought to make it clear to informants that we considered their work to be a reasonable and respectable response to difficult conditions, and to cultivate friendly, egalitarian, mutually respectful relationships with them. With many women, we did develop good relationships. However, our outsider status was ever-present, even if rarely made explicit, and we were treated as respectable women of “society”. On occasion, the difference between us, in terms of our work, was brought into the foreground, by people who we had got to know quite well. Once, a group of supervisors, while we chatted together, started debating how much Ms Ghosh or I could earn by selling sex, asking if we wanted them to make a phone call to a rich client, and asking me about my own sex life. They did so jokingly but also challengingly, breaking the usually taken-for-granted boundaries. My immediate, horrified reaction to their suggestion that I could sell sex brought home to me the reality that, to me, it is not a job like any other, and the great difference between our lives. In my relation to informants, then, I certainly cannot claim a “fictitious sympathy” with their life conditions (Coyle, 1996; Foster, 2001). Yet we do share certain things, namely, a wish to improve their living and working conditions, and with some of the participants, I share an understanding of their problems as basically social problems, to which organising sex workers may be an effective response. On the other hand, as I have mentioned, my outsider status helped me to keep a critical distance both from the absolutist statements about the Project’s success or its wrongdoing, and from the polarised discussions in

Kolkata about whether sex work should be “legalised” or not. The observer position also enabled me to see, and to question taken-for-granted aspects of life in the red light area, or of the running of the Project.

The outsider status entails an important responsibility to sex workers’ collective interests, as well as to relationships with individual sex workers. The outsider status presents dilemmas at the political level of my symbolic power to assert particular representations of sex workers (Edwards, 1996; Nencel, 2001), and their collective interest in not being exoticised, romanticised, or infantilised in the familiar ways in which westerners have often represented non-western people (Said, 1978; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). These dilemmas translate into two concrete questions: whether outsiders can make any legitimate claims to represent Kolkata sex workers, and how to avoid perpetuating stigmatising representations.

Although the relationship between outsiders and research informants is problematic, this does not necessarily mean that researchers should not study people who differ from them. As Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996) argue, if we confined ourselves only to “speaking only for ourselves”, unfortunately this would leave us with only knowledge about a peculiar group of academics. It is not clear that this would further the interests of the women in developing countries who less often have access to the public research fora, or that it would produce any pressure to challenge the universalising assumptions and discourses which critical research tries to overcome. I have argued above that there are good intellectual and practical reasons for a case study of a successful participatory HIV prevention project. At present, local people are not carrying out this kind of research. Privileged western researchers have access to public spheres of academic knowledge-making and dissemination, which entails an opportunity and a responsibility to challenge stigmatising representations, and to present critical versions of other people’s lives (Edwards, 1996).

Complex issues of the politics of representation emerged at the research site, as well as in the course of writing up the research. During my fieldwork, World AIDS Day took place, and a group of NGOs in Kolkata held a huge rally, at which I was one of thousands of participants. As one of the only white faces, my photograph appeared in several of the next day’s newspapers. My explanation of this interest in my face is that it

had novelty value, and possibly that it demonstrated international interest in the event. Personally, I felt bad that someone (me) quite irrelevant to the important work on HIV/AIDS being done by large numbers of people in Kolkata, was picked out for photographing. Others had a different view, however. When I met the head of the West Bengal State AIDS Society later, he said that it was a good thing, because if my photo had a little more interest value, then it helped to bring attention to the issues.

In interpreting and presenting my research, I have been concerned to avoid romanticising, exoticising, or individualising the work of the Project and my informants, as my response to the politics of representation. In the section on data analysis, below, I detail the means through which I sought to reflect on the kind of knowledge which I was producing, and the means of avoiding producing damaging knowledge.

4.5. Data collection

Within the overall research strategy of a single community case study, my research methods aimed to produce both local actors' perspectives on their situation, and an observer's perspective on the unspoken forms and rules of community life (Becker and Geer, 1957; Farr, 1982). The stated aims and situational constraints "indicated" (Flick, 1998) the construction of two data sets: interviews and group discussions with sex workers and Project workers, which provided data on actors' perspectives, and observation of participatory fora, which yielded an observer's perspective.

Interpretation of these core datasets is supported by ethnographic observation of community life and Project activities, by Project documentation, and interviews with other community members. Each dataset provides a different form of data, regarding different parts of the phenomenon of community participation. The following sections address each dataset in turn. The sections begin with the rationale for the method, to explain how the method relates to the research questions. Then, descriptions of how the methods were implemented are presented in sections on procedure. These are followed by sections on sampling.

4.6. Observation: Getting where the action is

4.6.1. Rationale

Given the interest of this thesis in the constitution of a collective action project, and following the pragmatist demand to “get where the action is” (Goffman, 1969; Becker, 1996), observation of the Project’s participatory activities comprises a core dataset. Ethnography provides a means of understanding the communicative practices through which a group’s activity is coordinated, in order to understand the “semiotic self-regulation” of groups (Raeithel, 1996). It provides an opportunity to observe what actions people need to be able to take, in order to be participants in the Project, and is particularly suited to understanding the unsaid rules and procedures governing participants’ collective action. Such rules and procedures may not be suited to efforts to re-construct them in interviews, if they are outside of participants’ conscious awareness.

The activities of the Project are diverse, often informal, and dispersed in different locations around the red light area, and thus “participation” happens in a wide range of sites and formats, involving an equally wide range of different participants, from meetings between local police stations and the Project, to participation in a World AIDS Day rally, to Project workers distributing condoms or encouraging a sex worker to take her full course of antibiotics. I have chosen to focus on two areas as the core arenas (“operationalisation”) of participation: the peer educators’ daily activity, based at the clinic, and the weekly problem-solving meetings run by the sex workers’ organisation, DMSC. Choosing the peer educators’ daily activity and the problem-solving meetings as the sites for observing participation in action allowed me to meet the constraints of getting as close as possible to the phenomenon of interest, namely the process of participation; of addressing both the health promotion and the problem-solving activity of the Project; and of having a bounded space where my time would effectively be spent observing the processes of participation. Observation in these specific sites was complemented by ethnographic observation of the range of participants’ activities and everyday interactions. For the purpose of this thesis, these more wide-ranging observations are not analysed in depth, but are used as background information.

4.6.2. Procedure: Observing the peer educators' daily activity

Observation of Project activities was carried out between July and December 2001. During this time, I attended as many Project activities as possible, while focusing on the peer educators' daily activity and DMSC's weekly meetings. I would usually arrive at the clinic in the morning at the same time as the peer educators arrived, for their morning meeting. This meeting was not always formally held, and so there was not always something structured to observe. If there was not, we would informally chat with the peer educators present. Then, usually, when it was time for the peer educators to go and do their rounds, one or other would be asked, by the clinic's co-ordinator, or on my request, to accompany me and my interpreter to request interviews from sex workers. As we sought potential interviewees, the peer educator who was our guide often did some of her peer-education work, and offered us the chance to witness peer education in action. Of course, this is not the same as direct access to peer educators' fieldwork. But it provides an indication of their strategies and tools. Moreover, the activity of asking people for interviews shares some features of asking them to attend the clinic or listen to a story of why they should join DMSC and use condoms. To this extent, our efforts to recruit interviewees also allowed observation of the relations between peer educators and sex workers. Then, as the peer educators' hours for being in the field came to an end, at 1 o'clock, the peer educator would be anxious to get back to the clinic for the education session. We would return to the clinic, sometimes to observe the education session.

Certain research interests guided the topics which I wanted to observe. Making these explicit enabled my interpreter to attend to and pursue the events or conversations which would prove particularly useful. Table 4.1 presents the topics under which observational data were sought.

During the day, I took brief notes to remind me of the points that I wanted to remember, and each night, wrote up those notes in extensive detail in a fieldwork diary. I also kept a record of methodological and theoretical reflections and changes of direction stimulated by the fieldwork. This produced a diary totalling over 70,000 words.

Table 4.1: Topics guiding the observational note-taking

1. Life in Sonagachi	Social organisation of the sale of sex Sex workers' problems and their solutions Sex workers' family relations
2. Project activity	Aims of Project activities Messages communicated to Project workers Procedures enabling co-ordination
3. Project workers' relations to sex workers	Project workers and sex workers conversations, responses to each other regarding Project messages (condoms, workers' rights, etc) Mutual responsibilities
4. Project workers' relations to the Project	Advantages and disadvantages of participating Project workers' discussion of official messages
5. Project in context	Contextual factors impacting on the format and success of the Project's work

4.6.3. Sampling peer educators' daily activity

The analysis of the peer educators' daily activity is based on observations of 9 of their morning meetings; 5 of their education sessions and one 2-day teacher training workshop; and my daily informal observations of their interactions with sex workers in the red light area.

The Project has a continuous programme of formal networking and communication activities such as meetings, workshops and demonstrations. As well as these, there are several regular activities that are part of the running of the Project. I attended such activities whenever the opportunity arose, and took notes on the proceedings, to describe the enactment of participation - what it actually entails when implemented on the ground. Table 4.2 lists the Project activities (apart from the weekly community meetings described below) which I attended. At each of these activities, I noted who

participates, the goals and assumptions of the activity, the information presented, and the resolution recommended.

Table 4.2: The Project activities observed

Intra-Community activities
5 Education classes for peer educators
9 Peer educators' morning meetings
3 Condom distribution
2 Elections to local committees
1 Local committee meeting
1 Teacher training
1 Project doctors' meeting

Inter-Community activities
1 NGO AIDS coalition meeting
2 Press conferences
1 Anti-terrorism rally
1 Police training
1 Youth club members meeting
1 World AIDS day rally

4.6.4. Procedure: Observing the meetings

Weekly meetings are held at the Sonagachi office, in which peer educators and supervisors from all of the interventions sites in Kolkata meet to discuss and solve community problems, to develop public speaking and problem-solving skills, and to discuss and solve any issues concerning the operation of the Project in general. Attendance at the weekly meetings is optional, there are several key supervisors who regularly attend, others attend when there is a problem from their particular intervention site, or if they get news that an important issue will be discussed. Usually about 45 to 60 people attend. These meetings are chaired by experienced sex worker leaders, and last

for about 2 hours. Once a month, a compulsory meeting is held for all field staff – non sex workers as well as sex worker employees of the Project – in which issues facing the organisation as a whole, or problems which could not be solved in the weekly meeting are raised. The Director of the Project chairs the monthly meetings.

My interest in the meetings was in the role that the meetings fulfil for the community. I noted the form that the meetings took, particularly the procedures and organisational skills of holding meetings and collective decision-making. I was also interested in the use that community members make of the meetings – the types of problems they bring to it; the means of solving problems; and how skill-building and “conscientisation” might be take place through the meetings.

4.6.5. Sampling the meetings

During my fieldwork period, I attended 19 meetings. Of these, 11 were weekly meetings, and 5, monthly meetings. Four of the meetings were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, the others were observed and recorded through note-taking. Verbatim transcriptions of all of the meetings would have been ideal, but was not possible for practical reasons. It was very difficult to make out voices from a meeting held on an open rooftop, often with forty to sixty participants.

4.7. Interviews

4.7.1. Rationale

Interviews provide information on both “factual” and “meaning” levels (Kvale, 1996, p.32). At a factual level, because so much of Sonagachi life is inaccessible to me, I used interviews to re-construct aspects of the community and the relationships which I could not directly witness. Taking what people say as just that – talk – and no more may entail fewest epistemological complications (e.g., Potter, 2004). However, given the practical constraints of conducting research in a red light area, on a complex community intervention, interviews are a route to understanding that context without having to observe its every aspect. Thus interviews sought sex workers’ expert knowledge of the workings of the red light area, for example, concerning pimps, madams, *goondas* and

the police. Such factual information is only available to those with many years' experience of living and working in Sonagachi. One particularly inaccessible aspect of Sonagachi life, for which the interviews provided invaluable information, concerns the actual practices of selling sex.

At the level of meaning, interviews provide access to actors' perspectives on themselves and on their world (Farr, 1982). Through investigative questioning, an interview facilitates the development of an understanding of how interviewees construct their world (Duveen & Gilligan, 2004). Interviews with sex workers, peer educators and other community members tapped their verbalised knowledge of the Project, and their perspectives on their problems and their solutions. Specific issues examined at this level included sex workers' and Project workers' personal life histories, their understanding of the Project and its role, their interest in, and relation to the Project.

As my presentation of group discussions (below) demonstrates, groups are ideally suited to gathering data on topics of debate. In contrast, if painstaking detail of individual lives is sought, a group is an unsuitable context, and individual interviews much more suitable. Groups can produce "what everybody knows about X", while interviews offer the opportunity to question people in detail about their personal position in relation to "what everybody knows".

The interviews were guided by a topic guide structured to cover information in three broad areas:

- 1) Contextual information on life-history; community structure; sex workers' priorities; living and working conditions
- 2) Knowledge and attitudes relating to condom use and sexuality
- 3) Involvement with and appraisal of the Project

The actors who are central to this study are sex workers and Project workers, who together constitute the functioning of the Sonagachi Project as a project impacting on the lives of sex workers. Thus sex workers, including Project workers, are the central group of informants. However, there are several other groups of important people who have significant relationships with sex workers, forming part of their context, and co-

constructing their world. Thus, I also sought “context interviews” with others who live or work in the red light area who have significant interactions with sex workers, such as brothel managers (*malkhins*), pimps (*dalals*), boyfriends (*babus*), clients and Project staff.

4.7.2. Procedure

Interviews with Project employees (non sex worker staff, peer educators and supervisors) were usually carried out at their place of work – at the office, or at the clinic, and they were interviewed during their duty hours. Interviews with red light area residents not employed by the Project (sex workers; madams) usually took place during the peer educators’ morning rounds, and in the room of the interviewee. Potential interviewees’ permission to audio-record interviews was requested and confidentiality and anonymity were assured. It was explained that I wanted to learn and write about their lives and the Project, to hear about their experiences and opinions. Audio-recorded individual in-depth interviews lasted, on average, 1 hour, 20 minutes. Refreshments were provided during interviews.

A sample topic guide is presented in Appendix 1. The topics followed were slightly different for the various groups of people interviewed. Three topics were always highlighted: community life; sex workers’ condom use; involvement with and perceptions of the Project. Interviews with supervisors and peer educators treated these people simultaneously as community experts, as sex workers, and as Project employees, and sought their knowledge of living and working conditions in the community; the different systems of sex work; changes in the community; personal life-history; relationships with madams, pimps, clients, boyfriends and other sex workers, sexuality and condom use; representations of sex work; their role and duties in the Project; perceived value and role of the Project. For sex workers, the topics introduced were: life-history; living and working conditions; relationships with madams, pimps, clients, boyfriends and other sex workers, sexuality and condom use; representations of sex work; knowledge and perceived value of the Project. For non-sex worker red light area residents, interviews focused on their interaction with and representation of sex workers; condom use; and perceptions of the Project. Interviews with non-sex worker

staff members focused on their role with respect to sex workers and their representations of sex work.

The topic guide provided only a starting point for the discussions. The interview genre of a list of short questions requesting long answers was unfamiliar and uncomfortable in this situation. Thus, interviews took a conversational format. They were informal and wide-ranging, depending on the pre-occupations of the informant as well as on the topic guide. They did not adhere to the questions on the topic guide, or to the ordering. I had planned to begin the interviews with a person's life history, to set a chronological context for the interview, but it emerged that this was a difficult way to start. For many sex workers, their history was a sensitive topic. Asking for very personal information, including where they came from was an uncomfortable way to initiate the relation between interviewers and informants. Hence, we usually began by asking informants generally about the Project, and their relation to it. This would lead easily onto discussions about sex workers' problems, their health and condom use, and the working of the red light area.

During the majority of interviews with people not employed by the Project, the peer educator or supervisor who introduced me to the interviewee remained in the room, and occasionally contributed to the conversation. On the one hand, the presence of a Project employee probably constrained the degree of criticism of the Project that could be expressed, and did not offer the interviewee a very private situation. However, this social situation was more suitable to this community than formal, one-to-one interviewing. It is very usual in this community, when meeting strangers, to have a friend or advocate accompanying and supporting one. For example, one of the peer educators' jobs is to bring women to the clinic, accompanying them to the consultation with the doctor. This support is considered an essential component of a doctor visit, to visit the doctor alone is simply inconceivable and does not happen. Having a trusted peer educator in attendance at the interview put interviewees at ease. Peer educators introduced us, and reassured informants of the confidentiality of all interviews. If an interviewee was reticent, they encouraged her to speak, sometimes reframing the question in a way she would better understand. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in sex workers' own rooms, and it was not unusual for a room-mate or friend to be in the room at the same time, or to enter during the interview. In general, these

people were welcomed and often joined in the interview. Thus the “individual interviews” are not very individual. Usually, the people joining in have similar demographic characteristics to the interviewee. However, there are also cases where others such as boyfriends or domestic workers joined in. This naturalistic, informal approach was necessary to make people comfortable. In interpreting the data, I take account which other people are present.

4.7.3. Sampling

Employees of the Project, including non sex worker Project staff, peer educators (sex workers and former sex workers), supervisors (promoted peer educators) and male peer educators (boyfriends of sex workers) were usually approached directly with a request for an interview. At the early stage, supervisors were nominated for interview by Project staff. As the Project workers became more familiar with us, we were able to approach people directly for interview. Most of the ordinary sex workers (non Project employed) who were interviewed were introduced to me by peer educators and supervisors.

Within the constraints of the sampling situation, I tried to maximise diversity in the sample (Bauer, 2000) through several strategies (both for the in-depth interviews and for the group discussions). Firstly, I used a variety of intermediaries to introduce me to interviewees. Intermediaries were from different parts of Sonagachi or other red light areas, had differing degrees of involvement and commitment to the Project, and were acquainted with sex workers in different systems of sex work. I was introduced to informants (for both interviews and focus groups) by a total of 15 different intermediaries. Secondly, I interviewed a diverse range of community members, including madams, boyfriends and staff members, in order to acquire differing perspectives. Thirdly, I sought to cover the various categories of sex workers in my sampling, using stratifications of system of sex work, age group, and degree of involvement in the Project. I explicitly asked intermediaries to introduce me to specific groups of sex workers (e.g. flying sex workers; younger sex workers etc), in order to cover the range of experiences in Sonagachi. Despite these efforts at diversity, as I mentioned, interviewees were overwhelmingly accessed through the Project, and thus unlikely to be downright hostile to it. To tap criticisms of the Project, I relied on more external perspectives, interviewing the director of a rival NGO, an academic in

women’s studies, and followed newspaper reporting of the Project. Tables 4.3 and 4.4 present summaries of the people interviewed. The majority of my interviewees are from the relatively economically poor Categories B and C, which make up the majority of Sonagachi sex workers (B and C categories comprise 80% of the sex workers in Sonagachi according to 1992 data, reported in Jana and Banerjee, 1999). Most of these women are from West Bengal, some from Bangladesh, and others from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, or Nepal. Appendix 2 presents basic details describing participants in each of the interviews. When presenting quotes from my data, I will report the interview number in which the quote appeared.

In practice, I ended up with most of my interviews being conducted with peer educators, and relying on the group discussions to access sex workers’ perspectives. This is because the interviews were less successful with sex workers than with peer educators, as sex workers often proved to be shy and uncomfortable in the unusual situation of being interviewed by two strange women.

Table 4.3: Sample of sex worker in-depth interviews

Participant	n
Sex workers	11
Peer educators	5
Supervisors & leaders	14
Total	30

Table 4.4: Sample of context interviews

Participant	n
Staff	7
Clients & boyfriends	7
Landladies & madams	4
Local political party worker	1
Worker in a rival NGO	1
Total	20

4.8. Group discussions

4.8.1. Rationale

The choice of the group discussion as a method evolved out of the experience with the interviews. Finding that ordinary sex workers were reticent and not very comfortable in the individual interview situation, in discussion with the Project Director, we settled on group discussions as a means of facilitating a more relaxed atmosphere, and as a means of creating debates and discussions around the issues which the Project seeks to address and to problematise. Whereas the “outsiders” (my interpreter and I) were prominent in the context of individual interviews, we were far outnumbered in the context of group discussions, and the participants’ attention shifted from us to each other. Flick (1998) notes that group discussions are particularly suited to research questions focusing on the social dynamics of generating opinions in groups, and draws attention to the advantages of natural groups as groups of people who have a collective and continuing interest in the topic under discussion and who have a history of shared interactions and common understandings. Natural groups of friends and neighbours were used in this study, in an effort to mimic the discussions going on in the ordinary course of peer educators’ interactions with sex workers, and sex workers discussions.

The Project creates, and tries to promote, new ideas about solidarity, new versions of sex worker identities, and an interest in a collective action movement. Peer educators and supervisors are the people who bring many of these ideas to the sex workers. Group discussions thus sought to approximate the naturalistic context of argumentation over these issues among sex workers. The argumentative dimension was stimulated by mixing sex workers who had little involvement with the Project with peer educators who were conversant with the politicising messages of the Project. Thus, group discussions aimed to replicate, under conditions where my interpreter and I were present, and recording the data, the process of argumentation through which the Project’s ideas are being received and constructed. In practice, the group discussions also functioned similarly to interviews, covering many of the same topics as specified on the topic guide for interviews, including: life in the red light area, condom use and sex workers’ problems.

Group discussions were planned in order to overcome sex workers' reticent responses to being interviewed, by holding a more familiar "*adda*", in the presence of more familiar people. If sex workers did not want to elaborate about themselves, were the group discussions an unethical manipulation to try to put them in a more comfortable situation, to make them forget my presence, in order to produce "better" data? Researchers may be concerned to get "beyond" the artifice of self-presentation to something more "naturalistic", but is this an effort to deny participants the opportunity to present themselves to the researcher or to the public world in a self-conscious way? I considered this ethical issue and decided that my own presence, as a visible outsider, and the visibility of the tape-recorder in every group discussion were safeguards against deceiving participants as to the nature of the discussion. Thinking it through further, I felt that my assumption that interviews were a baseline, against which group discussions emerged as a manipulation, was simply a response to a particular historical circumstance in which interviews are more familiar research methods. Group discussions could equally well be taken for granted, and interviews seen as peculiarly intrusive. On this basis, in both interviews and group discussions, I aimed to present myself and my research honestly and respectfully to participants.

4.8.2. Procedure

The help of prominent sex worker community members was enlisted to organise the group discussions. The organisers were usually supervisors employed by the Project. Each organiser was asked to arrange for 5-6 ordinary sex worker participants and 1-3 peer educators or supervisors (including herself) to attend and she hosted the focus group in her room. While the interviews had relied on finding people who were willing to give us an hour or two there and then, when we appeared at their doorstep, for the group discussions, participants had to timetable us in to their day, and to make the effort to gather at a certain place. Thus, they were paid a small honorarium of Rs.50, and refreshments were served throughout the discussions. The focus group was introduced as an "*adda*" – a Bengali expression for a congenial get-together for chatting and debating. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed at the start, and it was explained that there were no right or wrong answers but that we wanted to hear their opinions. It was explained that I wanted to learn and write about their lives and about the Project, and their permission to audio-record the discussion was requested. The key

topics for discussion were condom use and sex worker identity, but in practice, discussion ranged across all of my topics of interest. To deliberately address the process of negotiation and argumentation, the peer educators in attendance were invited to respond, argue with, and convince the other participants of their more politicised point of view. Participants said that they found the format and discussion topics interesting and stimulating, and the group discussions provided my richest source of data. They lasted an average of 2 hours 35 minutes.

4.8.3. Sampling

Ten group discussions were carried out. The core participants (3 to 7) were sex workers who had little involvement with the Project (with the exception of Group 5), who lived in the same house or neighbouring houses, and who were known to each other. Their “expert” interlocutors (1 to 3) were supervisors or peer educators from the same area. In order to tap the diversity of ways in which sex worker identity and condom use may be constructed, the groups were stratified among different neighbourhoods and belonged to different age groups and systems of sex work. Table 4.5 summarises the characteristics of each group.

Table 4.5: Summary of sample for group discussions

Group no.	Duration (minutes)	No. of sex workers	Others	System of sex work	Age group	Neighbourhood
G1	120	6	2 PE	Madam system	20-25	Central Sonagachi
G2	180	6	2 Sr	Independent	30-35	Khiddirpur (small RLA)
G3	75	3	1 PE	Madam system	25-30	Edge of Sonagachi (mixed)
G4	240	5	3 Srs	Former sex workers	40-45	Sub-area of Sonagachi
G5	195	6	Male leader	Sex worker leaders	35-45	Varied
G6	135	6	1 Sr; 1 PE	Madam sys & indep	22-30	Sub-area of Sonagachi
G7	180	5	1 Sr	Madam system	20-30	Khiddirpur
G8	240	5	1 Sr	Independent	40-45	Mixed area near Sonagachi
G9	120	5	1Sr; 2 PE	Independent	28-40	Tollygunge (small RLA)
G10	60	6	2 PE	‘Flying’ sex workers	25-35	Work near clinic

Key:

“Sr”: supervisor

“PE” peer educator

“mixed”: both brothels and non-brothel houses

“Flying” SWs: sex workers who live outside a red light area, and commute

RLA: red light area

In terms of the division in terms of their experience as sex workers, three groups were comprised of sex workers working under the madam system, and three groups of independent sex workers, and there were one group each of mixed independent and madam system; former sex workers; sex worker leaders; ‘flying’ sex workers (those who live outside the red light area, commute to Sonagachi daily, work independently, and rent rooms for brief periods as needed). The majority of participants belonged to the economic “Category B” (those who charge Rs50 to Rs100 [£0.75 - £1.50] per sexual act). This is the most common economic category in the Sonagachi area. It is likely that some of the participants were in Category C, but did not want to reveal the rate they charged. I tried to arrange a group discussion with high-class “Category A” sex workers, and engaged the interest of two local “Category A” landladies and community leaders to be organisers, but it gradually transpired that Category A sex workers were neither motivated by the honorarium offered, nor were willing to expend the effort to gather together at a specified place and time.

Groups were also stratified according to locality. Five of the groups were based in or close to Sonagachi, each in a different sub-area of Sonagachi, with slightly different characteristics. Two groups were conducted in Khiddirpur, a small, fairly homogenous and organised red light area and one in Tollygunge, another small red light area. The flying sex workers’ group discussion was composed of women who solicit near to one of the Project’s clinics in Sonagachi, and was conducted in the clinic. Finally, the sex worker leaders’ group discussion was composed of leaders from across the intervention areas of the Project who have been involved with the Project for many years, and was conducted in the house of a staff member of the Project.

4.10. Data Analysis

Producing a convincing and useful interpretation relies on tacit skill and experience, backed up by theoretical and substantive knowledge. Interpretative skill is probably impossible to formalise into a set of procedures to guarantee that well-grounded and

interesting findings will result. This is what Potter and Wetherell (1994) refer to when they say that doing discourse analysis is a craft skill like bike riding. However, without denying the complexity of the skills involved, we can try to be reflexive, to make transparent some of the principles or heuristics which we use to segment, categorise, classify, re-organise and interpret our data. By doing so, we may discover useful tools that help us to orientate and organise and critically interpret our data. In this section, I cover only the broad principles and procedures governing the data analysis. Two sets of such procedures are presented: firstly the practical details of analysis, and secondly, a set of interpretative principles used to stimulate critical reflection on the kind of interpretation that was emerging from the analysis. Each empirical chapter is based on a different analysis of the data, and thus, the details of the relevant analytic procedures and coding frames are presented at the beginning of each empirical chapter.

4.10.1. Practicalities of analysis

I placed great emphasis on getting very high quality transcriptions. Interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded, translated and transcribed *verbatim* in English by professional transcribers. However, due to a lack of familiarity with the topic, the context of the red light area, the turns of phrase and language used, these transcripts had significant misinterpretations and gaps. Thus, a final editing of the transcripts was completed by my main interpreter, to correct misinterpretations, fill the gaps, and enter explanations of some peculiar turns of phrase. This procedure resulted in high quality, *verbatim* transcripts, with bracketed additional interpretation of very idiomatic sections. I used the software package ATLAS/ti to organise and code the interview and group discussion transcripts. ATLAS/ti facilitates navigation around a complex data set through attaching codes to specified segments of text (Muhr, 1997). This process of coding does no more than provide an index, where index words are attached to segments of text in such a way as to enable access to all segments of text which refer to a specified concept, or code (Kelle, 1997). As Kelle suggests, “we should address these programs as software for ‘data administration and archiving’ rather than as tools for ‘data analysis’” (1997, paragraph 6.1). The analytical part of the work is not in the coding, but in the construction of the coding frame which will open up the data for interpretation.

The details of the coding frames are presented in the empirical chapters. Each chapter is based on a separate analysis of the data, and is introduced by presenting the details of the analytical procedures followed and the coding frames generated.

4.10.2. Reflexivity principles for data interpretation

I have suggested that the detailed investigation of concrete cases contributes an important role to “complexifying” a general theoretical position. To achieve this, the interpretative processes needs to allow for the data to exceed the researcher’s theoretically-guided expectations. It is suggested that one route to establishing the rigour of a piece of qualitative work is the presentation of evidence that the researcher has considered ‘deviant cases’ which do not fit with the theoretical framework (Becker, 1970; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2001), or that she has considered alternative interpretations, that surprises have emerged (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000). Reflexivity about one’s analytic procedure is a route to allowing alternative interpretations to emerge. Reflexivity is heralded as a key feature of good quality qualitative research (Altheide & Johnson, 1994), but this concept has not been described very concretely. A way to specify and concretise the reflexivity process is to state the perspectives or dimensions along which reflection on the interpretation is constituted.

In interpreting my data, I used four dimensions to stimulate reflexivity on the adequacy of my interpretation. These dimensions emerge out of broad meta-theoretical concerns of contemporary social science. They have both ethical and conceptual implications. This interrogative procedure was an effort to stretch the analysis outside of the constraints inevitably exerted by the particular conceptual tools and analytical procedures that initiated the data analysis. This effort fundamentally affected the interpretations that were produced and that are presented in the following analyses. The dimensions were as follows:

1. Unaware oppressed victims vs. western-style resisters

Historically, research on poor third world women has often cast them as passive victims of “false consciousness” and a repressive patriarchal order (Mohanty, 1991; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). However, in an effort to avoid representing people in such patronising ways, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996) argue, western feminists have often

over-compensated, by instead representing poor women as actively resisting power relations in just the ways that the western feminists would approve of. They caution against projecting onto the people who we study, our own political and social ideals. This caution had a significant impact on my awareness of sex workers' and Project workers' use of the Project to meet their individual goals, rather than on the basis of lofty political ideals (sections 5.8.2.; 5.10 and 6.4), and on my interpretation of the significance of "conscientising" messages to sex workers and Project workers (sections 5.10; 6.6).

2. A homogenous group vs. divergent individual voices

I sought to develop an analysis that could describe the workings of the Project as a whole, and its relation to different groups (sex workers, Project workers). However, this interest could lead to homogenising the people studied into a singular group, presenting a single version of their very diverse situations and experiences, claiming that a quote from one person represents the group as a whole. In order to counter this homogenising tendency, I have tried to present a variety of relations to the Project (on the basis of individual or collective interests, in sections 5.10 and 6.4). In this context, the standardised stories, which I mentioned above (section 4.4.1.), require a different interpretative attitude to the dissenting voices. From this point of view, giving quantitative data on the number of times various positions were expressed would make little sense. The standardised stories are interpreted as a legitimated form of Project discourse, one which co-exists with other voices. Although the standardised stories are more numerous, they are not more important.

I also decided to present case studies of individuals as well as the over-arching general analysis (sections 5.2. and 6.2.). These individuals were selected to present the diversity of the sample.

3. Recognising Project workers' achievements without individualising them

By focusing on the actions being taken as my unit of analysis, I risked neglecting the wider context within which these actions were taken. The analysis focusing on action also emphasised agency, although there is plenty of evidence for structural constraint in the data. As Stavenhagen (1971) argues, it is important not to focus only on the actions

of marginalised people as the site where things go right or wrong, but to place these actions within the societal system which allows them to go right or sets up obstacles to them. Understanding the societal system in which the actions are taken acknowledges that it is not just due to the Sonagachi Project workers' determination and ingenuity that the Project works, while others do not, but that there are a host of important contextual factors at work (see Marks, 1996; 2002). Thus, I try to show how, while the action is agentic, its sphere of influence is limited. I also try to reveal the societal nature of the individual actions, that is how the actions taken are infused with the power relations within which they take place. The final empirical chapter (Chapter 8) was designed to address these contextual factors directly and in full.

4. Instrumentality vs. Symbolic meaning.

Finally, my original analysis which took action-with-tools as the unit of analysis led to a very instrumental picture of the sex workers' lives, neglecting important issues of personal meaning including the personal gains of participation, uses of the Project for individual interests, issues of identity, shame or pride. As Zittoun (2004) argues, socially-available resources come to have value and use for a person only in response to that person's particular personal meanings or experienced needs. A tool is not universally useful for a certain task, but becomes useful always in relation to someone's particular situation. To include such aspects, codes concerning "personal gains" (section 6.4.) were created after the first phase of analysis, before the final round of analysis of the complete dataset. The presentation of individual case studies (sections 5.2. and 6.2.) aims to show how the resources which the Project provides gain meaning within the context of individual people's particular lives and challenges.

4.11. Conclusion

A detailed community case study, I have argued, is a means for social scientists to learn their craft skills of understanding the complexity of human social life. To fulfil this function, and so that knowledge can be taken away from the case study with potential application elsewhere, through the intuitive process of "human judgement", it is necessary to present a detailed picture of community life. The following empirical chapters seek to build up such a complex picture. The multiple methods of observation, interviews and group discussions seek to tap the perspectives of the local actors on their

local events, and to create an observer's perspectives on the parts of social life not often reflected on, and thus reported, by the actors. These multiple methods enable the construction of a multifaceted picture of community life.

It is not only in its concrete detail that a community case study is interesting, but through dialoguing with a common theoretical background, the case study can contribute to conceptual development. Activity theory categories permeate throughout the analysis of the data, so that the case study also becomes an investigation of their applicability and usefulness in opening up a case of collective action to investigation. Moreover, as an instance of a collective action project that seeks to develop a politicised awareness among sex workers of their problems and the role of their organisation in solving them, investigation of this case is also an opportunity to investigate processes of "critical consciousness".

Having built up the theoretical and methodological approaches which set the constraints for the interpretation of the data, the following four chapters present the community case. The series of chapters begins with a focus on the perspectives of sex workers on their problems and on the Project, to progressively zoom out, considering the perspectives of Project workers, the conduct of Project activity, and finally, the Project in its societal context.

Chapter five

Sex workers’ problems-being-resolved

The empirical section of this thesis aims to specify the Sonagachi Project in terms of its empirical consequences. By “consequences”, I do not mean quantitative outcomes, like HIV infection rates or numbers of visits to clinics, but the micro-details of how the Project enters into everyday life, constitutes new tools to act upon problems, comprises a new organisational and ideological environment for Project workers to master, and constitutes new relations with madams, local hoodlums, or funding agencies. Each of the four empirical chapters presents a different perspective on the Project’s role in constituting an actionable environment for sex workers. Across the four empirical chapters, the analysis moves from the sex workers’ actions, to those of the Project workers, to the activity of the Project, to the Project’s relations with the wider context.

Whatever professional capacity building, organisational development or contextual change the Project pursues, however, it is increasing sex workers’ possibilities for action, and solving their everyday lives that comprise the Project’s ultimate object. Sex workers’ perspective on their environment is presented here, in terms of their problems-being-resolved. The chapter asks: What are the problems that concern sex workers, and what resources are they using to solve these problems? And: How does the Sonagachi Project enter into this environment, to contribute new resources for action? The chapter begins by presenting the analytical procedure, and then presents two illustrative cases, before presenting the full analysis of sex workers’ problems-being-resolved.

5.1. Analytic procedure

This chapter is based on the interview and group discussion data produced by sex workers and by Project workers when they spoke of their lives as sex workers. Two basic approaches to constructing a coding frame can be distinguished: it can be “theory-driven”, constructed from prior material such as the theoretical framework adopted, or the research questions, or it can be “data-driven”, emerging from the details of the

empirical material (Tesch, 1990). The analysis of the interviews began with a theoretically-defined unit of analysis: “sex workers’ action-on-a-problem”. But the particular codes to be created emerged from the data, to reflect the problems and actions mentioned by sex workers. From the point of view that problems and actions emerge together, each problem was associated with one or more actions, and each action answered to a problem. The problem provided a code category, within which individual codes were given to the different resources which could be used to tackle each problem. Hence the coding frame had a hierarchical structure. The problems identified by sex workers were located in their relationships with different actors in their environment, as follows: “clients: economic gain”; “clients: condom use”; “managing relationships with other sex workers”; “managing placement in madam system”; “preventing abuse by police or *goondas*”; “family: maintaining respect”. Each of these problems-being-resolved is presented in turn. Finally, sex workers’ explicit knowledge of the Project was coded as “sex workers describe the Project” and is presented here. The coding frame is presented in Appendix 3.

The particular analytic procedure adopted constrained the form of analysis produced in systematic ways. Firstly, by taking sex workers’ actions as the unit of analysis, it is the problems that are already actionable, at least in a minimal way, and thus the moments of sex workers’ agency, that emerge. Each of these actions takes place within a complex set of constraints, some of which I have outlined in Chapter 1, and which will be further pursued in the final empirical chapter. Within this chapter, I try to point to the limits and boundaries of the actionability of sex workers’ environments in commenting on the data.

Secondly, the analysis for this chapter and the next was a cross-case analysis, considering all of the interviews and discussions as a group, to present the full set of problems and resources for sex workers as a group. A consequence of this form of analysis is the fragmentation of individuals’ experience so that the place of such tools in the evolving context of individual lives is lost. In response to my “reflexivity principle” of considering problems and resources as gaining their significance within individuals’ personal lives, this chapter and the next begin by presenting two case examples of sex workers (in the next one, Project workers), their life history, the resources which they use to manage their lives in the red light area, and their relation to the Sonagachi

Project. Two criteria guided selection of case studies for presentation. The first was density of information. I chose to present cases of women who provided me with detailed personal life stories and accounts of their involvement, and whom I also got to know outside of the individual interview. The second criterion was diversity. Not all interviews covered the same Project activities. By examining a table of the number of times each code appears in each interview, I selected women for case studies whose accounts, between them, covered the diversity of tools and resources being put to use; and the diversity of relations to the Project (i.e. new committee member not well acquainted with the Project; sex worker beneficiary; expert leader; sceptical peer educator).

5.2. Illustrative cases

5.2.1. *Basanti (int 1) – an independent sex worker*

Basanti is a sex worker who was introduced to me, to interview, by her friend Kobita, a supervisor. I later encountered Basanti again at the office, as she had been nominated by Kobita to stand for a local committee, had been elected, and thus had to attend meetings at the office. When we started asking Basanti about her life-story, she responded, puzzled, “my life?” and Kobita interrupted, to explain what we were asking as “how did you come to the line? Did somebody tell you a lie to bring you here, or did somebody sell you, or did you come here yourself due to poverty?” Basanti says that she came to the line due to poverty, saying “Poverty spoilt me. That poverty is no more.” Her parents could not arrange her marriage (probably due to lack of a dowry), she had poor prospects of finding work, and so when somebody suggested that she could take up sex work in Kolkata, she was grateful for his advice. She says that she came to the red light area knowingly, and that the person who brought her here did so in order to help her out of her poverty, and never took any money from her, not even so much as 5 rupees for a cup of tea.

Basanti has a son in his late teens, and supports him and her mother with her earnings. She complains that her sister who is also in the line does not support their family. Her other sister is a maid. Basanti’s family knows how she earns her money. She is from Murshidabad, a district of West Bengal where, unusually, it is said to be quite normal

and accepted that young women support their families by selling sex and sending money home. Basanti's son does odd jobs, and she regrets that he does not earn much money, saying "my son is not yet so established that I can depend on him". Basanti has benefited from financial and logistical support from her long-term *babu* who helped her to rent her own room, when she decided to leave the madam system. She has little respect for most of her clients, saying that "mostly drunkards come here. Not many good people come here", She describes chatting with clients in order to please them, "I have to win his heart [...] Not everybody likes it to be only physical" and making sure she "behaves properly", to avoid them spreading rumours about her that would be bad for business.

Asked what DMSC has achieved, Basanti says that sex workers' health has improved since condoms have come into use. She has heard from peer educators about the "new disease", AIDS, and the importance of condoms. She knows that people die from AIDS, and that condoms should be used. When asked what she does if a client refuses a condom, she first says that she turns him away, but then, that if he is known to her, she will agree, because she trusts him to go to no other girl. And that if it is an unknown client, she asks to see his penis. If there are no visible signs of disease, she will accept him without a condom, but she will send him away if she detects signs of disease. Basanti does not visit DMSC's clinic, but goes to a private doctor for her "gastric problems", paying Rs.30 or Rs.40 for a consultation. She is uncertain whether the doctor at the DMSC clinic will treat her. This may reflect the attention given by peer educators, in the course of their communication with sex workers, to the limits of the clinic's remit. They explain that the clinic treats everyday ailments but not emergencies, and gives medicines for sexual diseases free, but not other medicines.

Basanti knows that DMSC is supposed to support sex workers if problems arise, and says that they have reduced the problems caused by madams, police and *goondas*, though she cannot name any specific action that DMSC has taken, only that they encourage the girls and tell them that they are by their side. She says that she has not had any problem that she needed to bring to DMSC, nor have her friends. When asked about the problem of disputes with clients, Basanti says that neighbours come out to support each other, and does not mention DMSC as a source of support. She says that she attends meetings and rallies, but she has never spoken in a meeting, instead, "people

who are above us speak”. Basanti’s knowledge of the role of DMSC was vague and undetailed.

5.2.2. Radha (int 32) – a sex worker rescued from exploitative madams

I was brought to interview Radha by two supervisors who were responsible for her welfare since she had recently escaped from two exploitative madams. Radha was renting a tiny room under the stairs, with a window onto the landing, a single bed, a fan and a shelf, for Rs.100 per day. Her new landlady, who was also secretary of the local committee, lived next door, and was supposed to be keeping an eye on her. She had given Radha clothes and her granddaughter had given her cosmetics. Radha had had one client the previous night, who had paid Rs.100, and she had borrowed a condom from the landlady. She had asked a peer educator to bring her a packet of condoms.

Radha grew up in Bangladesh, with an abusive step-mother. Because of this bad relation at home, her maternal uncle brought her to Kolkata, in her mid-teens, to work as a maid, and left her, without explaining to her how to return home if she wanted to. She made friends with a woman, who one day tricked her, bringing her to a madam to sell sex. The madam’s landlady did not allow minor girls in the house, so the madam kept Radha in a house outside of the red light area. Radha described how for one year the madam forced her to take clients, beat her when she asked about money, and only began paying her in the last two months. Radha says that she knew that she should be getting paid, and so she spoke about this problem to the madam’s other *adhias*, and to the *mashi* (maid), who suggested that maybe she should just leave this madam. When she mentioned the problem to a neighbour, the neighbour suggested that she should escape, and join the neighbour’s madam, which Radha eventually did. However, the new madam put Radha in a room within her old madam’s house, putting her at risk of attack by her old madam, who was furious with both Radha and the new madam. A peer educator heard of these events, and called a meeting, at which it was decided that Radha should be removed.

The supervisors had found Radha a room in a house belonging to a local committee secretary, and had arranged a meeting, with the madams, the people from their local committees, local supervisors, and Radha, to sort out the dispute. While they had placed

her for the time being in a room of her own, they discussed whether she should join a madam, since she was very inexperienced, young, and vulnerable, and could not be sure of earning enough money each day to pay the rent. During the interview, Radha told the supervisors that the previous day, another Project worker had approached her and tried to convince Radha to come to work for her as an *adhia*. The supervisors were furious, as were other Project workers when they heard, considering this to be a serious abuse of her position as a Project worker, and a failure to recognise that the decision on Radha's future would be taken collectively in a meeting.

The supervisors warned Radha to be very careful and not to expose herself to possible revenge or kidnapping by her old madam, because that madam would be furious now, and gave her advice about how to be safe. Radha was grateful for their help, and said that she would do whatever they told her to do. They told her not to stand outside the entrance to the house, and they asked the other sex workers in the house to look out for her, and if anyone tried to grab her, to call the local committee. In this case, DMSC is offering Radha significant support, empowering her to leave the madam and work alone, under the watchful eye of her neighbours, including the local committee secretary. Simply by taking advantage of DMSC's support, and following their advice, Radha is a more empowered sex worker, without needing to be able to voice the Project rationale of solidarity and organisation. Radha's case also illustrates the very divergent interests held among the various members of the red light area.

5.3. The cross-case analysis of problems-being-resolved

The remainder of this chapter presents the full cross-case analysis of the problems in sex workers' environments, and the tools which they have developed or learnt to use in order to act on those problems. The tools which they use mainly take the form of arguments, principles, or strategies which they report, and with which they offer each other advice. The Project enters into sex workers' relations to their environments, both through constituting new problems or goals and through providing resources which allow new actions upon existing problems. Each of these problems is constituted by the divergent interests of somebody with whom the sex worker has to interact: clients, other sex workers, madams, police, hoodlums, or the sex worker's family. The sex workers seek to mediate these other people's actions through the application of tools. We begin

with two problems posed by clients, in the domains of economic gain and of condom use.

5.4. Clients: Managing the economic relation

5.4.1. Acting – performing friendship and arousal for profit

The economic power of the customer to take his custom elsewhere, or to pay a sex worker extra comprise problems for which sex workers have developed mediational tools. The general mediational tool, which is a principle to guide their own behaviour, is that they must act in accordance with a customer's wishes if they want to retain his custom. Sex workers explain that their livelihood depends on pleasing the customer, and that therefore they must be good performers, to fulfil the role that he desires the woman to fulfil. If they identify a customer as a "good customer", one who will pay well and will not cause trouble, then they will try to act in the way he wishes in order to encourage him to return, and later, to maintain the relationship. Several women described acting as if they are friends or wives of the customer, mentioning practices like turning on the fan and the tape recorder when the client enters the room, offering him home-cooked vegetables, embracing him and calling him "husband", chatting and going with him on outings.

Supervisor: The behaviour with the customer depends totally upon the money he will pay, if he pays high I would behave differently otherwise I would not entertain him for long, only allow him to do it and go as soon as possible so that I can take another customer.

Interviewer: Do you sit naked in front of the customer?

Supervisor: It depends upon what the customer likes, some ask to sit naked, some wearing bra and panty and others wearing sari.

Interviewer: Does the customer touch your body before intercourse?

Supervisor: Yes, we start acting like husband and wife so that both of us get excited, we embrace and I show my love to him like a wife does though it is for a short period. Some customers ask me whether I am married or not since I don't wear vermilion [the sign of marriage] and I say, "yes and you are my husband,

you come daily from now onwards, then you would be my husband”. We have to do everything that is possible to do for business. (int 63)

Like many other informants, this supervisor emphasises that whatever acts of friendship or attraction she might perform with the client, it is solely for the purpose of earning extra money and ensuring his return – it is not genuine interest or friendship. While women enjoy their relationships with some customers, sometimes establishing long-term relationships with them, they actively established the boundaries between genuine friendly responses to men and those that are simply businesslike instrumental efforts to maximise income.

Sex worker: With customers we don't feel anything.

Interviewer: Whatever happens, it happens to the customer, not to you?

Sex worker: Yes.

Supervisor: But sometimes Customers even say that we are not responding, then we have to fake arousal. We say we are enjoying it and so on. We have to say. I want the customer to do it soon and leave. (Group 6)

The concept of “acting with clients” not only is a useful one for increasing profit, but also serves a self-presentational purpose, whereby the sex worker is positioned, not as somebody who enjoys her sexual relations with men, but as somebody who can cleverly manipulate men. Such self-presentation may have been elicited by situation of the group discussion, it may be present in discussions among sex workers, or used by a sex worker to justify her behaviour to herself. In any case, the resource of “acting with clients” is a way of preserving a respectable position of not enjoying the multiple sexual relations.

The quotes presented above are from supervisors, who are on average, older and more experienced than the ordinary sex workers, and probably for this reason, are more articulate about how to be “smart” and to act. By sending experienced sex workers (supervisors and peer educators) around to visit sex workers, the Project may contribute, informally, to the promotion of skills for pleasing clients and ways of making sense of their work in a way that preserves respectability, as well as health-focused skills. For example, in the case of Radha (described above), one of the supervisors advised her to behave well with her clients, because if they are happy with her, they will also bring

their friends to her. Another supervisor recounted how she advises sex workers to perform oral sex (widely reviled) if a customer requests it, on the principle that a sex worker has to act in ways she may not like, in order to earn from the customers.

Supervisor: I tell girls that it is the present trend of sex so, you have to encourage that to earn your living, since you have to make your customer happy. It is like offering different kinds of flowers to different Gods and Goddesses. Like Kali likes hibiscus so we offer her that. (int 63)

Although it is not part of the Project's official remit to help sex workers with their very immediate task of increasing their profit from clients, it is likely that, by putting sex workers in regular contact with more experienced women, the Project contributes to disseminating such practical strategies.

5.4.2. Eliciting tips or gifts

Gaining tips is another way for the women to profit from clients. One woman (int59) said that she was so confident in her ability to extract extra tips, that she would accept a low initial price for the sexual exchange, confident that she could convince the client to part with more than the balance. Acting, as described above, is one way of eliciting a tip. If a client does not appear to be offering a tip, the women may ask him for one directly, or, if a tip does not seem appropriate in the context of a relation of friendliness and familiarity, the woman can ask for help in paying her electricity bill or her rent.

A simple, and widely used means for increasing the takings from a client is to ask him if he wants drinks, or food, which he will pay for. A sex worker can tell him a higher price than she pays for the drinks, and keep the change – or in other words, take a commission. Some women also reported charging the client for the condom (which she might have got free or bought for Re.1), and making one or two rupees profit on it (about £0.02). Finally, many women benefit from gifts given by clients. A supervisor boasted that in 20 years of being in sex work she never paid for her own cinema ticket or alcohol. In the case of longer-term relationships, the client is often expected to provide gifts at Puja-time (the traditional time for giving gifts).

5.4.3. Taking control of the commercial transaction

A key strategy to ensure the transaction goes smoothly, is to take the money before sex takes place, to make sure that the client has the money and is willing to pay. Taking the money first also offers the negotiation advantage to the sex worker, in case the client requests a form of sex, such as oral sex, that the woman is not willing to do. The business norm that once money has changed hands, it is unreasonable for the buyer to change his mind and ask for the money back, gives sex workers an advantage if they ensure they take the money early. This strategy has also been taken up in relation to condom use, elaborated below.

To learn that time is money and to learn to manage her allocation of time per client are further key mediational tools to yield successful earning by sex workers. They explain that they do not want to waste time with a client, if he is not paying for it, as they are losing opportunities of meeting other clients. If he wants to sit and drink with the sex worker, she will charge him for that time, and will send him quickly out of the door after sex. Women mentioned their own individual principles of time management. One (int 50) does not accept drunk clients as they can take too long, and cause trouble. Another (int 57) explains that she does not take customers for the whole night at festival-time, because there is plenty of custom, so she can earn better by taking a series of “shot customers” rather than the discounted price for a full night. Flying sex workers, in their group discussion reported that, with timid clients, women could frighten them into leaving early, by saying that the police would come.

Not only can the women try to shift clients through as quickly as possible, they can also overlap the clients’ time periods. If a woman has one client (or sometimes, a *babu*) who wants to stay for some hours, and if another client comes looking for her, she may ask the longer-staying customer to sit and wait, and go off to another room with the other client, returning soon to the first one. This way she does not lose the custom of the second client, which she otherwise would have (int 60;29).

Sex workers speak with satisfaction and pride of their clever strategies for being “smart” and managing clients. Being “smart” not only brings material benefit, but it also comprises an admirable state to occupy. These principles and strategies help the women

to exert some control over the sexual exchange. Yet sex workers' powers over clients are limited by their undeniable economic dependence upon the clients. Indeed the issue of being "smart" becomes such an important topic of conversation against the background of having little power over the encounter with the client.

5.4.5. *Managing babus*

Economic concerns are also salient in sex workers' negotiation of longer-term relationships with *babus*. The potential that a man will exploit the sex worker for her income is a problematic possibility that is negotiated. It is widely asserted that a *babu* may pay the woman initially, but that as the relationship progresses, he will stop paying and begin to live off her earnings – turning from a *dhenewala* to a *khanewala babu* (from a "giver" to an "eater"). While some women accept this arrangement, glad at least of the regular company of someone who can be called "husband", others feel it is exploitation. The core topic of discussion and advice-giving in relation to *babus* is the issue of whether *babus'* offerings of long-term relationships or marriage are to be trusted. Many women greatly value, hope for, and report, at first and second hand, financially and emotionally sustaining relationships with *babus* (as did Basanti, described above). Such hopes are countered with stories of the untrustworthiness of *babus*. Sex workers tell stories of the dangers of going away with a *babu*, only to return to the red light area, rejected, impoverished and disgraced a year or two later.

Peer educator: No-one keeps us for more than six months or one year. They say, you are from Sonagachi, go back to Sonagachi. Thousands of such incidents happen. The girls go with a lorry full of things, with so many ornaments and come back in a torn sari. (int 11)

Interviewer: You said that you don't like it, but do acting in front of the customers. What do you think, do the customers also act?

Peer educator: Yes, they also pretend like that. We women are soft-hearted. If a customer shows love for 2 – 3 days, we give all our love to him, but men are very hard, hard as stone. They will act as if they love you. They will take all your love and then leave you. They will make you climb in a tree and push you suddenly.

Interviewer: Are all men like this?

Peer educator: Yes we act, but they are better actors. We don't love anybody.
(int 39)

It is not only the *babu's* duplicity that is responsible for women having to shamefully return to the red light area, but also the reaction of his family to the woman. Whereas he himself might accept her, if they marry, they will both usually go to live with his family, who might reject her if they find out about her work. Thus, one of the Project leaders said that she was refusing to marry her lover because she anticipated that his family would just reject her, as she had seen in so many other cases (int36). Another woman sought to ascertain that the man and his family would accept her by joining him in a visit to his home, before agreeing to marrying him.

Interviewer: Did your present husband marry before?

Sex worker: No, I am the only one. When my husband wanted to marry me and take me away from here, I told him that he should tell everything to his family, only then would I marry him. I have become wiser seeing other girls' marriages. He took me to his house at the time of Kalipuja. After that I put vermilion on my head [the sign of marriage]. (Group 4)

These again are strategies to manage the relationship with *babus* to avoid problems. The Project offers a further resource to avoid exploitation by *babus*. One of the ways in which it promotes the idea of saving money in its Bank, is as a means of having independent savings so that one does not have to rely upon unpredictable *babus*.

The strategy of acting to please a client, and the principle of not trusting *babus'* promises of commitment are means of managing contradictory demands. The first strategy relates to a divergence between the man's and the woman's aims. While they are coordinating to complete the sexual exchange smoothly, they have different individual interests within the exchange. Acting is a means of appearing to meet the client's goal, without compromising the sex worker's goals. Telling cautionary tales about *babus'* untrustworthiness is a means of counter-balancing sex workers' interests in leaving the red light area with a dependable man, with their interest in economic independence and avoiding shameful rejection.

5.5. Clients: Managing condom use

5.5.1. Condom use becoming an actionable problem

The Project has sought to constitute the protection of health as a problem, and particularly as an actionable problem for sex workers, by warning them of the dangers of STDs and HIV, by encouraging condom use and clinic attendance, and by providing resources for the promotion of condom use to clients. There is some evidence that the peer educators' messages about sexual health and condom use are becoming personally meaningful and translating into personal goals of condom use, particularly among those sex workers most exposed to the information and arguments (supervisors and peer educators). In the following exchange, Supervisor 2 had been for a test (probably HIV) at the clinic. That she can relax after receiving good news, and that she would slap her long-term customer if he dared to come with diseases suggest that protecting her sexual health is of personal significance.

Supervisor 2: I am relaxed as my clinical test is over. I got a positive [good] report.

Supervisor 1: Means you never worked without a condom?

Supervisor 2: No, but still we go for testing. Earlier I had this [STD]. It doesn't become clear after a single treatment. I have done it twice. Once more I have to take an injection. Then if my [long-term] customer has got diseases, I would give him a right slap. (int 32)

As well as the supervisors, most sex workers know that condoms “ought” to be used with clients to prevent disease. Nevertheless, the reports of whether condoms are used or not are highly variable, so that condom use appears to be the norm within some groups, but is completely abnormal within others. One pimp stated that he makes sure the client is refunded his money if a sex worker insists on condoms. In this instance, condom use is seen as an illegitimate request. Several women stated simply that they could not afford to insist on condom use if it meant losing a customer. But many women said that clients often brought condoms themselves and were willing to use them. Some women spoke of their personal commitment to ensuring that they stayed healthy by insisting on condoms, based on a fear of injections, or of painful STDs. Another woman

mentioned that she had been warned that even if a client is handsome and does not look like he has any disease, you cannot be sure, and should use a condom (int57). Some people, like Basanti, described above, reported pursuing the goal of protecting one's health in alternative, less effective ways, such as checking the client's penis for signs of disease, or taking a regular client for regular tests for STDs (int 54).

A survey conducted in Sonagachi in 1998 (3 years before my own fieldwork), found that 50.4% of sex workers reported using condoms "always", and a further 40.1% reported using condoms "often". Before the Project began, in 1992, 1.1% reported using condoms "always", and 1.6% "often". Looking at the patterns of people's responses in interviews, such as the one quoted above, casts some doubts on such findings. Sex workers could say that condoms should be used "always" with clients, but when questioned further, it emerged that "always using a condom with a client" does not mean the same for sex workers as for health-promoters. It may not be considered necessary to use a condom with a healthy-looking client, and a regular client is considered differently to a one-off client. Moreover, the hygienic value of condoms was widely appreciated, but was not always defined in the same way as the medically-defined value. For example, Project workers attributed the popularity of condoms in one area of the city to the particular scarcity of water there for washing after sex. In sum, the knowledge of the health-protective value of condoms does not translate in a simple way into condom use.

5.5.2. Arguments for negotiating condom use

As the Project promotes condom use as a goal for sex workers, while clients receive less health promotion attention, a divergence between sex worker and client in terms of their interest in condom use is likely to arise. Thus the sex worker needs some means of mediating the client's action. Sex workers reported using arguments provided by the peer educators. The arguments centre on protection from disease – protection of the sex worker, the client and his family. The most common argument is that either of them might have some disease without knowing it, and then the other would be infected, so it is better for both of them, if a condom is used. They seek to assert a principle of care for each other, or of care for the client's family, arguing that surely he does not want to risk infecting his wife and (future) children.

Sex worker: We have to make some understand, explain to them about diseases and value of life. We say that life is more important than money. (Group 2)

As this quote suggests, it is likely that the health-related arguments which sex workers use are ones provided by the Project's peer educators, since they largely mirror the information given in peer educators' training. One of the approaches taken by peer educators is to convince sex workers of the importance of thinking of their future, and the value of their health. This is echoed in the quote above, where sex workers report telling their customers that "life is more important than money", an argument that makes more sense when directed at sex workers than at clients.

The following supervisor described her more elaborate efforts to persuade clients of condom use.

Supervisor: I tell my customers, when they say they don't get full pleasure if they use a condom, that they visit many girls and I take many customers and none of us knows who among us has some kind of infectious disease. If we don't use a condom we might get infected. If we use a condom then we can be assured that the disease that any of us carry will remain within us only and would not infect each other, and the pleasure of intercourse would be more since I would take part wholeheartedly and would not have any worries. If you go home and find someday that you are infected then you would blame me. I don't want any such thing to happen so it is better to use a condom. (int 60)

Another supervisor extended the strength of the argument about protecting his wife, making it more compelling by invoking the embarrassing possible consequences of his infection:

Supervisor: I told him, if he gets any sexual disease like gonorrhoea, then his wife will also get it from him. He can tell the Doctor that he went to Sonagachi but what will his wife say to the Doctor, if she got the disease? Will she say that she slept with his friends? It will be so shameful for both of them if the doctor

examined his wife's private parts. Finally that person understood. But he never came to me again.

(Group 6)

That these more experienced supervisors have developed more complex condom promotion arguments points to the value of bringing together more and less experienced people to share the arguments which they have found useful. However, a problem with all of these arguments about protecting health is that they suggest that either the client or the sex worker is carrying a disease, which is a difficult possibility to admit. Sex workers in two group discussions said that, if visible signs of disease were evident, such as discharge from the penis, then there could be no argument, and the man would have to use a condom. However, they need to enforce condom use even in the absence of such visible signs.

A further problem with relying on these arguments is that, even if the sex worker is successful in the short term at convincing the client to use a condom, the risk is that he may not return, as reported in the quote above. The argument may work as a short term individual measure, but has to be employed anew with each client, and does nothing to change the basic power relation.

5.5.3. Strategies for enforcing condom use

Verbal arguments are not the only strategy available to women to mediate the negotiation of condoms. They are also skilled in managing the situation so that clients are more likely to assent to condom use. The most commonly mentioned strategy was the skilled timing of the first mention of condoms, after money has changed hands, when it is difficult for the client to undo the deal.

Sex worker: I send the customers away, who don't use condoms

Interviewer: Oh, really!

Sex worker: Yes, they come back on their own, as their money would be wasted. I take the money first. They come back and do with a condom

Interviewer: What when you don't take the money first?

Sex worker: It is best to take the money first. That is the tactics

Sex workers: Yes

(Group 7)

A further development on this strategy (mentioned in 4 cases) builds on the principle of delaying the mentioning of condoms and on an understanding of compulsive male sexuality. In this case, women described waiting to introduce condoms until the man is sexually aroused, at which point, he is powerless to refuse the woman's conditions.

Interviewer: You said that if a girl asks a customer to use a condom at the very beginning, he would go away, whose idea is this?

Peer educator: This is my own idea, I have tested it. I myself do this work. In the morning I do my duty as peer and at night I do this. I myself had this experience, when I asked a customer to use condom he went away. So I tried this method. Tested it first and then I told the girls to follow the same method. I first took the money, took off the clothes of the customer and my clothes. He became aroused and then I made him wear the condom. When a man's penis becomes erect, it requires a hole. So naturally he is bound to wear the condom to do his work, because I will not let him do so without a condom. Then I explain to him a little about the necessity of using a condom, as there is not much time. Later on he realizes and appreciates. Then he will again come to me he next time. But if I at the very beginning I force my customer to use condom, he will never come to me again. If I convince him gradually, make him aware of the diseases, then he will come to me again and again. Then I told the girls that they should convince the customers in this way (int 39)

Again, we see that resources and strategies are shared in an informal and natural way, among sex workers and Project workers, helped by the Project's procedures which set up regular meetings among sex workers, and thus opportunities to share such strategies.

5.5.4. Trust in "unity" regarding condom use

Even with these various resources, many sex workers continue to report that they still have to accept some clients without condoms, explaining that they need the money for rent, food, or for their children. The strategies described so far are tools to be applied

individually, in the immediate action context of the sex worker-client interaction. A key aim of the Project is to generate a collective response to the problem of client refusal of condoms, by constituting a united position and trust among sex workers, so that if everyone agrees to refuse sex without a condom, the “race to the bottom” effect of economic competition among sex workers would be eliminated. Such an agreement on a common code of practice would be a collective resource of solidarity which changes the balance of power in the individual sex worker-client interaction.

In the following group discussion, among sex workers who had recently arrived in the red light area, in response to the sex workers’ admission that they sometimes had to accept customers without condoms, both the supervisor and interviewer tried to promote, and discuss unity. While appreciating the logic, the women felt that the reality was that other women were accepting clients without condoms, and they could not afford to lose business to those women.

Supervisor: That means my association is fruitless. These two are taking customers without condoms, whereas these girls are using condoms

Sex worker: Can I say something? We use condoms so we get less number of customers, but those who do without a condom get more customers. Sometimes I feel bad that my customer is going away to her. We are not united.

Supervisor: That is why we are demanding a trade union

[....]

Interviewer: Can’t all girls say together that we shall not do without a condom?

Supervisor: All the girls won’t say. Everyone is not alike - then the work would have been very easy. Everybody is not the same.

Sex worker: Maybe we will take condom, but the girl in the next house will not use a condom and the girls there will get more customers than us (Group 7)

However, a different group of more experienced women said that they could confidently insist on condoms with clients, secure in the knowledge that no other woman would accept a client without a condom. The different experiences of these two groups of women may reflect differing social groupings, where certain groups of clients visit only a certain social/ economic category of sex workers.

Interviewer: But don't you think if you don't agree to take that customer without a condom, some other girl will take him? You said no other girl from that house will take him, but a girl from some other house can take him

Sex worker: No

Sex worker: They won't take

Interviewer: How do you know?

Sex worker: The *didis* ["sisters"/peer educators] have explained it to everybody. We know

Interviewer: Nobody will take him without a condom, are you very sure?

Sex worker: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: Do you speak about it?

Sex worker: Yes, amongst ourselves

Sex worker: We discuss with our friends, "do you do it without condoms?", they say "no, we don't do it without condom", we say, "we also don't do".

Sex worker: In every house, the *didis* explain to us, our health is very valuable to us, we don't do it without condoms, nobody does.

Interviewer: Why?

Sex worker: We will fall sick

(Group 2)

The trust in unity reported here is closely related to the work of the "*didis*", confirming the importance of the Project in constituting such trust, or at least constituting the problem of unity as an important issue for sex workers. Many other sex workers regretted that such unity did not exist for them. The crux of the problem, here, is that the collective activity of enforcing condom use, although good for the community as a whole, is in conflict with the individual goal of getting clients. Whereas many collective activities are organised around a concrete shared object (e.g. Leont'ev's collective hunt), refusing a client is an object which, in a sense, is not shared. Each rejection or acceptance of a man without condoms is a private act. It is easy for individuals to defect. The activity of enforcing universal condom use depends heavily upon trust, and the development of trust may be one of the consequences of the frequent social interactions constituted by the Project. With its community meetings, public demonstrations and network of peer educators, the Project may be helping to create a community in which the norm of "unity" is viable.

5.6. Managing relationships with other sex workers

The economic competition between sex workers may produce interpersonal problems. Few women are satisfied with the meagre and irregular numbers of clients which they receive, and in a context where many women take just one or two clients per day, each individual client is of very significant economic importance. Sometimes there are fights among women for clients. But given the economic situation, this is surprisingly rare. Certain practices and generally understood *rules* have been established to manage the competitive economic situation of large numbers of women soliciting on the street. So, for instance, it is not acceptable for a woman to approach a man if he is already speaking with another woman, or is outside somebody's room, or has already made an agreement with somebody (int 59). If a woman is negotiating with a client, and refuses the amount he offers, it would be seen as unacceptable if somebody else stepped in at that point to accept the price he offered to the first woman (int 50). The women who solicit on the streets usually stand at the entrance to their houses, waiting for clients to approach them. For the “flying” sex workers who do not live in the area, where to stand is a problem for them, as some local residents chase them away, seeing them as interlopers with no right to stand in front of their house. The flying sex workers (Group 8) explained that it is better for business to stand somewhere where there are fewer women, and that they had ongoing disputes with a madam from a particular house that they liked to stand in front of, because it was relatively quiet there. Thus the principle that sex workers may stand in front of their own houses to solicit for clients, which brings some order to the relations among local resident sex workers, constitutes a problem for flying sex workers who have no fixed house, but rent rooms when they need them. These rules are generally in the background, unspoken, and structure the organisation of the sale of sex, unlike the tools described in the previous sections, which are actively used by sex workers.

5.7. Managing their placement in the system of sex work

As described in Chapter 1, there are several systems through which the sale of sex is organised, from selling sex independently, to the madam system, to using pimps. These various systems create and solve different problems, and sex workers have means of deciding between these systems. For most of the participants in this research, the

decision is between the madam and independent systems. The pimp system is an option for the better-off women who can avoid standing on the street by using a pimp's services. The madam system limits the sex worker's control over her own sexual encounter and daily life. In this system, the sex worker has to pay half of her earnings to a madam, and may risk a beating if she does not obey the madam. Working independently, one can choose when and how much to work, the conditions of the sexual encounter, and keep all the money earned. However the madam system also solves some problems for sex workers, centring on economic and physical security.

The main reason that this hierarchical working relation of the madam system is maintained is the lack of sufficient economic capital, or regular income, among sex workers, to rent a room independently. To rent a room in Sonagachi requires either a very large initial payment (e.g. Rs.35,000 [£500]) to secure the room, followed by low daily rent (e.g. Rs.20 [£0.30]), or else high rents of about Rs.100 (£1.50) per day are charged. If a sex worker charges Rs.50 per client, as is quite common, and gets 3-4 clients per day, as is the average (Jana and Banerjee, 1999), her earnings after rent will be very little. In the madam system, one is not responsible for paying the rent each day.

The second reason why women opt to stay in the madam system is that the madam takes care of all their organisational needs, deals with troublesome local people, drunk clients, and police. The madam thus protects the sex worker, knowing how to navigate the rules and norms of the red light area. The women, when they first arrive in Sonagachi, are often naïve to the public world and the world of business. They usually have no idea of how the sex trade is organised, how to seek clients, how to protect oneself and one's earnings, how to interact with the various other residents, how to avoid conflicts with others and so on. Moreover, if a newcomer is from a poor rural area, she may be illiterate and innumerate, and have none of the knowledge of prices or bargaining skills necessary for economic transactions. Under these conditions, the madam system is an institution that solves the problems of sex workers' insufficient finances and experience. But of course it also leaves women vulnerable to exploitation by their madams, unable to leave them, and sometimes unaware even of their "rights", as defined by the red light area's norms, to be paid by madams 50% of what they earn daily.

After a supervisor told us that it was more profitable and convenient for women to work independently, we asked why then do so many sex workers stay under madams, and she explained:

Supervisor: *Adhias* don't stay independently because they are afraid. If they stay alone, there would be nobody to support them and customers might misbehave with them, [...] Some girls don't want to do independent business because they feel that the Income might not be sufficient to support herself. If she stays as *adhia*, she would pay Rs. 25 to 30 for the food and rest of the money is her own [apart from the 50% given to the madam]. There are other girls and the doorman to support her. But she might love anybody and keep him as *babu* and then he might betray her. If girls stay under landladies [used here to mean madam], they can get advice about good or bad since they are not mature. When a Girl is 18 – 20 years old, she is more emotional and does not want to understand about the motive behind the love a person is showing to her, but when a girl is of my age, 30 years and above, she can understand that if a boy is pretending to love her because of her money. She would not give in then, but if a girl is young, she would believe him and would be betrayed in future. If she stays under a landlady, she can make her understand about the facts of life. (int 20)

Given these advantages and disadvantages of the madam system, sex workers may have to decide between systems. To do so, they ask the question of whether the woman has sufficient resources to be able to manage the risks of being alone, or whether she needs the security of the madam system. In the following extract, a younger sex worker, working as an *adhia* had said that she intended to take her own room, to go independent. The older and more experienced women offered their advice.

Interviewer: If you take your own room, then the entire money would be your own and you need not have to give a share of it to your madam

Sex worker (older): Yes. Don't take a room now, because you don't have that much income. From where would you give the monthly rent? If you don't get much money, you can eat in the hotel and need not have to bother for the rent.

Sex worker 2 (older): How many Customers, do you get?

Sex worker (*adhia*): Not much and not even daily

Interviewer: In your opinion, is *adhia* more convenient than to take a room independently?

Sex worker: Yes, less botheration. But, one can't remain an *adhia* for the whole life

Sex worker (older): If any person takes a room and gives it to you [*babus* may do this], don't take the room, take the money and keep that in the Bank. It would be more convenient and useful. But if you take the room, you have to pay the monthly rent and that would be not possible for you to pay, if you don't get quite a number of Customers daily

(Group 4)

The principle of weighing up whether one has enough resources to manage the risks of being alone is a tool to mediate the decision of whether to join or stay in the madam system or not, but it is a tool with a very restricted application. This tool helps them in resolving the decision of whether to go with a madam or not, but it can do nothing to change the overall situation.

To some extent, the Sonagachi Project enters indirectly into this “risk environment” as a resource supporting sex workers. Although the Project is not supposed to instigate sex workers to leave madams (which would result in madams denying Project workers access to their *adhias*), by providing supports to sex workers, the Project materially alters the power relations within the community, making it easier for sex workers to manage their working lives independently. This was evident in the case of Radha presented above, who left a troublesome madam, and was working independently, with the support of the Project's supervisors.

5.8. Preventing abuse by police or *goondas*

5.8.1. Avoiding abuse

Arrest in a police raid, or exploitation by *goondas* (local criminals) are often mentioned as the most significant threats which sex workers face. The first means with which they mediate these problem is to seek to avoid these adversaries' attention. In the Sonagachi area, police generally accept that women may solicit within the locality, but draw the

line at their soliciting on the main road. Hence some women keep off the main road to avoid attracting police attention (int55). Another, who waits for customers at the entrance of her house, on the main road (int50) says that she just goes inside when a police raid is taking place, and thus avoids arrest. She explained that if the women bothered men on the main road, pulling at their hands, or saying something to them, then somebody might complain to the police, but that by avoiding such behaviour, they did not risk arrest.

The *goondas* are probably the group most feared by sex workers, who mention being beaten up, or raped, or having money or jewellery stolen or extorted from them, by the local boys. To avoid such problems, sex workers report locking their doors and staying inside their rooms if they hear the men going around (int46). They try not to do things which might elicit their anger. These men sometimes think of themselves as maintaining the respectability of a locality, and so punish sex workers for straying outside of the red light area or for wearing a sari in a revealing way, or even for simply wearing flowers in their hair (int 57). Adjusting their behaviour to these men's prescriptions is the first principle which the women use to prevent abuse.

5.8.2. The Project's support as a problem-solving resource

While sex workers may try to avoid problems with police or other adversaries, sometimes they get into trouble, and need means of getting out of it. The Project has succeeded in becoming known as an effective problem solver for sex workers. Part of the Project's logic, following the format of a trade union, is to offer individual support and advocacy to members, in return for a membership fee. Sex workers often report this aspect of the Project: that if they pay their Rs. 25 membership, they may call on their *didis*' for help in the event of a problem. Knowing that the Project is an available source of support may make sex workers more likely to consider their problems actionable.

The Project is often described as providing the kind of support that a family provides. This means supporting women in disputes, supporting them financially and with practical help in the event of an emergency such as threatened eviction, advising them on how to be safe and how not to be cheated, representing them at the police station, and so on. Informant 43, for example, described upsetting persistent conflicts with her

landlord and neighbours. At first her brother had come to support her in these disputes, but after he began working on night duty and could come to see her less frequently, she began to rely more on Project workers for support. They had not managed to eliminate her problems, but did offer her a significant source of comfort.

Interviewer: Why are you still with Durbar [DMSC], when I feel that they are of not much help for you?

Sex worker: Because of the problem that I am all alone, so I go to meetings to pass some time and to keep friendly relations with them. Since I don't belong to any [political] party, I can fall back on them for protection. I don't stand any torture on any helpless girl, I can seek Durbar's help in such times. I keep friendly relations with them since I have a lot of enemies who might murder me. (int 43)

Having access to expert representatives, and calling on them to solve problems is a minimal mode of participation: it is drawing on the Project's supports as a resource for individual action. These supports (such as problem-solving committees) have been constituted through Project workers' collective activity, but they are accessed as part of sex workers' individual actions of solving their immediate problems. Perhaps it should not be expected of such interventions that all community members will be empowered in an equal way, as many may be content simply to be able to call upon their colleagues' expertise in problem-solving, not expecting to solve their own problems individually (as Madan, 1987, has suggested). The availability of the Project's support is greatly appreciated by the sex workers who speak with affection and respect for the sex worker-leaders who they call upon.

5.8.3. Unity as a resource for preventing abuse

The principle that a person's friends should come out to support her if they hear or see her to be in trouble, is one that is widely shared in Sonagachi. The idea of "unity", as well as being used as a collective resource for achieving condom use, also comprises a useful measure against sex workers' adversaries, and seems to be more effective in this context. The Project tries to promote mutual support among sex workers, encouraging neighbours to come out to support each other when one of them faces a conflict.

Sex worker: Once a taxi driver came to hit me, all the girls stood beside me

Interviewer: Why?

Supervisor: No, she is trying to say, when the girls stand with their make-up on for the customers at the side of the road, the taxis that stand in a line, block their view. The customers are unable to spot the girls. So, she had asked a taxi to move away from the gate. The driver retaliated and came to hit her. When all the girls of the house came to her rescue, the driver got scared and ran away (Group 7)

The sex workers explained the logic of unity in terms of “safety in numbers”. According to their accounts, if, say, a sex worker is being harassed by local men, or threatened by a client, and people nearby can see or hear the dispute going on, then a big group of those people will come to support the sex worker, frightening off the troublemaker. Faced with a large group of women who are willing to argue for a long time, and possibly to give the troublemaker “a few slaps”, the sex worker’s adversary is discouraged from continuing the fight. Several accounts were given of cases in which the previously more powerful local people, such as police, landlords, or madams did not dare to cause trouble to a sex worker, knowing that they could face the organised response of the Project.

Supervisor: Now before harassing us, the police think “if we harass the girls the DMSC people will come after 15-20 minutes and we will lose our jobs”. They are afraid now. This was not so before. The police took away people regularly. (int 2)

Calling together 10, 20 or 50 women to come to one’s support is a slightly more informal version of a popular method of political and industrial protest in West Bengal, and all over India – the *gherao*. *Gherao* literally means “surround”, and in a *gherao*, people gather together to surround the individual, often in his police station or office. They shout slogans and will not let him pass until he has agreed to some of their demands. Some women described *gheraoing* a police station following the arrest of sex workers, and securing their release, another described gathering 300-400 women to *gherao* local troublemakers after they had beaten a woman and thrown her out of her

room. Faced with such commotion, the troublemakers have to enter into discussion and negotiation, they cannot just slip away or deny that they did anything. Some sex workers spoke of a sense of responsibility to come out and support the Project workers who stand up for them. Such a sense of mutual responsibility is a significant achievement for the Project, produced through creating good relationships between sex workers and Project workers, and through proving to sex workers that action can be taken to ameliorate or solve their problems. In this extract, the sex worker explain the importance of their supporting their local supervisor who supports them.

Interviewer: after you came what is the most problematic thing, is it the local boys?

Sex worker: Yes, they used to do, now they can't do

Interviewer: Why?

Sex worker: Because we have unity. If something happens to one of us, the rest of us would come forward to help her out

Sex worker: Suppose 'A' goes ahead and says "Son-of-a-whore, with whom are you fighting?" then the rest of us also come out. Or, suppose, if she comes forward then the rest of us would follow. How will 'A' go alone? She would get confidence or courage, if she gets backing from the rest of us. But if 'A' does not get that support, she would go alone once, twice but not thrice (Group 6)

Though "unity" is certainly widely understood and put into practice, the persistence of bitter conflicts between sex workers (evidenced in Chapter 7) shows that "unity" is far from being the assumed basis of sex workers' relations.

Supervisor: If they don't have a customer, they start to abuse other girls who get customers. I have so many types of problems to solve. I can solve all of them concerning Police, etc, but not these ones.

Sex worker: But now after [Supervisor's name] has made us understand. I have stopped calling bad names. I have changed a lot by her influence.

(Group 7)

The idea of unity is used by some sex workers to criticise the divisions among them. Two different groups of sex workers interviewed claimed that the Project did not

support them, since they were of a different social category to the Project people. Some of the Agrawalis (the better off sex workers from North India) of Sonagachi were in the process of starting up their own organisation, claiming that the Project supported only Bengalis, and arguing that Agrawalis needed unity among themselves. Flying sex workers claimed that the Project did not support them because they were not from the locality. They drew on the logic of unity to criticise the Project's perceived partiality.

Interviewer: Why are you all so scared of 'B'? She is not Police?

Sex worker 6: We are outside girls [not residents of the area].

Sex worker 2: Why are we scared? You see we are not local girls and so the local people will not take our side if we are brutally beaten. Not even these clinic people will do anything. Nobody will protest. Some houses pour water on us if they find us standing in front of their houses. Some beat us with sticks. Some throw stones and bricks at us. It happened with her.

[...]

Interviewer: Have you spoken to the *didis* [Project workers] about these local people, who give you so much trouble?

Sex worker 2: Yes, in meetings, when they have called us, we have pointed it out.

Sex worker 6: We are not local girls, no one will support us

Interviewer: Why do you need others, You people here are so many in numbers? You all can get together and complain or do something

Sex worker 5: If one or two protest, it will not help. If only I say something, nothing will happen, nobody will listen. We have to be united. (Group 10)

Unity is a collective resource, and here it seems to interface easily with individual interests in security, as it is argued that, if one expects to receive support in a time of need, then one should go out to support others when they need help.

5.9. Maintaining respect from family and community

The final problem to be considered is the challenge of maintaining a respectable identity in relation to one's family and home community, in the face of the stigma of selling sex. Denial of being in prostitution comprises the most common approach to this problem.

Sex workers typically tell their relatives that they are working as domestic servants or in factories in Kolkata. A greater challenge arises if someone from a sex worker's home village sees her in the red light area, and can then go back and tell people at home that she is a prostitute. This situation is feared by sex workers, and is reported to have happened by several women. The Project provides one concrete material resource to counter this problem: identity cards. False identity cards, which identify the woman as a health worker for the Project can be provided to sex workers, so that they can prove, at home, that they have a legitimate reason for being in Sonagachi.

Sex worker 3: I have told at my home that I am working for the office. Here I have the Identity-Card which I have shown. They think I work in this clinic. Two or three people came from my home to see, I brought them to the clinic. People here said that I work here.

Interviewer: Then there is no problem?

Sex worker 3: No, not at all. (Group 10)

A verbal argument with the same function is also promoted by Project workers who point out that, if a sex worker is spotted in Sonagachi, the question of legitimacy can also be asked of the person who spotted her there. So, a sex worker can match any challenge with a threat to tell the challenger's family that he was in Sonagachi to visit prostitutes.

Supervisor: One of my uncles came to Sonagachi for sex and told my family and villagers that I stay in Sonagachi as a sex worker. When I went home, my sister asked me not to come home, since villagers are harassing my parents after the person has told about me. I went to that person's home and told his wife that her husband visits sex workers regularly and he got a good beating from her and denied that he said that I am a sex worker. (int 59)

Preventing stigmatisation was not the anticipated function of the Project's identity cards, but this use emerged in relation to sex workers' major concern of identity protection, and the Project now promotes the use of its cards as means of solving this problem. However, this means of solving the individual problem of avoiding stigmatisation conflicts with one of the official collective motives of the Project, which

is to establish that sex work is work like any other, and is not something to be ashamed of. Provision of identity cards accepts and re-asserts that sex work is something to be denied. The Project has to meet the contradictory demands of helping sex workers to adapt to existing contingencies, and seeking to overturn the status quo.

False identity cards provides a partial solution to sex workers' problems of stigmatisation, but of greater value are jobs with the Project, which provide a small income as well as an improvement in status. Some sex workers were angry that after years of participation in the Project's activities, they had not yet been offered a job. They told the peer educators that they would no longer support the Project as they had received no rewards for their support so far. They expected a job as a *quid pro quo* for their participation. In such instances, the Project's aims of achieving impressive numbers of people at rallies may be met, but the people attending may be doing so as part of an action contradictory with the intended collective activity of the Project.

Interviewer: Do you go to meetings and rallies of DMSC?

Sex worker: Yes, I always go and like to meet people. I always go. I want to work like them, so I go to all the meetings.

Interviewer: Why do you want to work like them?

Sex worker: I am getting aged and I don't want that people should call me names and talk about my work, like I suck people and other such things. I am taking customers for Rs 20 to Rs 25 also, nowadays (Group 4)

Again, lofty aims of collectively forging a common motive to change the definition of sex work seem somewhat unrealistic in the context of sex workers seeking solutions to very immediate individual goals. Yet paradoxically, it may be precisely because the Project answers to some of these immediate, practical and individual goals, that it has gained the sex workers' interest, and thus, that it manages to constitute supportive social relations and collective activity amongst them.

5.10. Sex workers' view of the Project as a source of practical support

In the analysis reported above, the Project seems to have entered sex workers' lives mainly as an additional concrete support for the solution of their individual problems of

action. The “reflexivity principle” (described in section 4.10.2) of not idealising the Project in accordance with my own values, directed me to attend to this non-politicised relation to the Project held by sex workers. The existence of such a relation is supported by sex workers’ responses when asked directly what it is that the Project does. Most commonly mentioned were the Project’s role in promoting health, supporting sex workers, and offering the opportunity to save money in the bank.

Interviewer: Durbar comes to work here. What do you know about their work? What work do they do?

Sex worker: We have paid Rs.25 and have become a member and are given a photo [identity card]

Interviewer: What help has Durbar given you? Have you been benefited? Do you know these *didis*? What do they tell you?

Sex worker: They tell us that there are many diseases, for which we should take certain measures with the customers

Interviewer: Do they ask you to use condoms? Tell me frankly

Sex worker: Yes, they have told us about AIDS and asked us to use condoms. We shouldn’t let the customers do without condoms

Interviewer: Before they told you about these things, did you know about condoms and the diseases?

Sex worker: No. We didn’t know

Interviewer: What else do they say, about the bank?

Sex worker: Earlier *didis* used to tell us to save money but I didn’t bother but slowly after that I realized that it was good to save money for the future, otherwise I was spending all the money that I was earning. Also if I’m their member they’ll help me if I have a problem.

(Group 1)

That, is, sex workers do not speak so much about the *collective* reasons for the Project. While many of those people who are closely involved in the Project as peer educators and problem-solvers speak fluently and argumentatively about the political role of the Project in constructing a united response to sex workers’ problems (as we shall see in the following chapter), few of the ordinary sex workers take part in those discussions. In

the following discussion, the sex workers are asked about the collective motive of the Project, but respond by talking about the Project's practical contributions.

Interviewer: And do you know that there is a word going on about making this profession legal? Many people, the police etc., harass you because your work is illegal. Have you heard this?

Sex worker: Yes, we have heard. If there is any quarrel, we try to help each other out. The *didis* from the committee help us.

Supervisor: You went to Salt-Lake for a meeting where we spoke about making our work legal, tell them about that.

Sex worker: Yes, we all went. My daughter performed a dance in the program. We went, we heard. We heard that they are trying to help us

Interviewer: Do you go to any of the rallies or meetings?

Sex worker: Yes, we go. They explain it to us. Those who understand, stay, those who don't, leave. They are trying to help us, so we have to move along with them. They can't do anything alone. Some are saying they agree, some don't agree.

Sex worker: In all Banks, we can't withdraw money everyday, whenever we want but in this bank we can do that. It is for us line-girls, for our benefit. DMSC has given us many benefits.

(Group 1)

These women, like many others, support the Project because of the practical benefits which they stand to gain from the *didis*' support. In terms of the forms of participation discussed in Chapter 2, these women participate as service users, and as members paying fees in order to get support in return. They do not participate in decision-making, or in discussions of the conceptual rationale or official mission of the Project. From a Freirean perspective, they would not be said to have a critical consciousness of the role of the Project as a collective means of producing social change. This is not to say that they have not significantly gained in power through their limited form of participation. They have gained significant new possibilities through the presence of the Project's support, which they value highly. This interpretation supports the idea, presented in Chapter 2, that "empowerment" is not associated solely with full participation in

decision-making, but that specific and limited increases in powers also need to be recognised.

5.11. Conclusion

Sex workers have a range of ingenious strategies to resolve the problems which arise as they confront actors with different interests to their own. However, these tools are all limited in their domain of application. Sex workers have useful principles for deciding between the madam system or working independently, but often have to choose the madam system due to their significant economic and social disempowerment. Tricks to use with clients have to be employed repeatedly, one by one, and the sex worker has to risk displeasing a client, who may not return. The actions which sex workers can take have a tightly bounded domain of application.

It might be imagined that the Project could set itself up to provide the sorts of supports to sex workers that madams provide, without taking so much of their income, in the form of a sort of co-operative brothel. But the Project too is bounded in its possibilities of action, and setting up as competition to the madam system would be infeasible due to the resistance they would incur from the existing madams, who would refuse to cooperate with the Project. It would also be politically very difficult, because of the societal response to an HIV prevention project effectively pimping for sex workers. The domain of action of the Project is highly constrained.

The Project seeks to promote sex workers' commitment to collective interests, such as "unity", and the legitimacy of sex work as a profession, as a sustainable means of transforming the social order. However, sex workers' immediate interests in economic gain, or avoiding stigma are often in opposition to collective interests in universal condom use or redefining the nature of sex work (if these are presumed to be collective interests which most sex workers would endorse). When they use the Project's identity cards as proof that they are not sex workers, they solve an immediate individual problem, while contradicting the official collective motive of the Project, which is to establish that sex work is respectable work like any other. These contradictory demands of solving immediate problems by working within existing constraints, and challenging those constraints present a significant dilemma for community-based projects.

Examining sex workers' relation to the Project, to what extent is that relation participation in collective activity? To what extent is the Project, for sex workers, a "collective action project"? It has emerged mainly as an extra source of resources to manage sex workers' individual problems. With new health promotion arguments and people to call upon when a problem arises, significant new opportunities for action are constituted in sex workers' environments. By taking advantage of these support systems, sex workers gain significant new powers. However, by using the Project in these ways, sex workers are not taking part as collectivity members, but as individuals making use of problem-solving resources.

On the other hand, when sex workers pay their membership dues in order to ensure that they will receive support from the *didis*, they are contributing to the collective activity process. Although they may be still acting individually, anticipating solutions to their individual problems, by paying their dues, they are enabling the constitution of committees where problems can be solved and where people can work out the collective needs that must be addressed. More informally, by meeting the peer educators every day, talking to them, discussing problems, and by meeting their neighbours through Project activities, friendships and informal community bonds build up, which create supportive environments for the creation of new norms (such as a norm of condom use), or for offering each other support when conflicts arise. And progress towards the collective interest in solidarity has been made. The idea of "unity" is recognised as an ideal, and widely implemented in relation to supporting one's neighbour in the event of a dispute, if not so widely implemented in relation to condom use.

I have suggested, then, that sex workers generally relate to the Project as a source of useful resources for the resolution of their individual problems. In this mode of participation, significant new powers are gained, but participants do not act as collectivity members, co-ordinating their actions with those of others, in relation to a collective motive. In order to carry out the work of a collective action project, Project workers have to participate as collectivity members. The following chapter details Project workers' work as Project workers, in order to investigate the extent to which, and how they are incorporated into the Project as collectivity members.

Chapter six

Project workers' participation

Project workers are the core agents of the everyday changes being wrought in the red light area. They are the actors through which most of the collective activity of the Sonagachi Project takes place. In the interest of concretising participation in terms of the actions being taken, the Project workers are thus key figures. This chapter takes two perspectives on Project workers' activity. Firstly, it presents the actions which Project workers take in carrying out their roles of protecting sex workers' health and security, as part of the collective activity of the Project. In this section, the Project workers are considered as acting in the interests of the Project, as the agents of its work. Secondly, the chapter investigates the ways in which Project workers understand their relation to the Project. From this perspective, Project workers' personal interests in participating in the Project are explored, through discussing the personal gains which they report. Attention then turns to the relation which Project workers have to the Project's politicising ideology. The Project workers' conceptualisation of their role in the Project is then discussed in terms of the theoretical interest in conscientisation.

6.1. Analytic procedure

The chapter is based on the interviews conducted with Project workers, and on the group discussions, which brought together Project workers and sex workers. These discussions shed useful light on Project workers' work as Project workers, as they often became opportunities for Project workers to do some of their work, such as trying to persuade sex workers to use condoms or save money with the bank. Moreover, these group discussions also revealed the sex workers' active responses to Project workers' persuasive efforts.

The analysis for this chapter followed the same analytical procedures as were used for the analysis of sex workers actions. The coding frame used here was based on the actions being taken upon problems, with problems defining the code categories, and a

range of individual actions defining the individual codes. Again, in order to counter the fragmentation of people's experience into different codes, and the tendency to produce very generalising analyses, the first section (6.2) presents two case studies of individual Project workers. The coding frame used to analyse Project workers' actions is presented in Appendix 4. The main problems or tasks facing Project workers are "promoting sex workers' health"; "solving and preventing conflict" and "persuading sex workers to participate". These are the code categories which structure the presentation of data in the second section (6.3) below, along with their associated actions. As Project workers put their resources into action, to act on sex workers, and on their environment, the sex workers actively respond. Thus, where possible, the presentation of Project workers' use of their tools also incorporates sex workers' responses to these tools, as Project workers and sex workers co-constitute the problematic issues. The third section (6.4), presents the analysis based on the code category "personal gains from participation" under which several different personal gains were reported. Finally, the fourth section (6.5) discusses the role of a politicised awareness in Project workers' participation in the Project. This is investigated here empirically through the two code categories "meaning of workers' rights" and "consequences of workers' rights".

6.2. Illustrative cases

6.2.1. Gita - a sex worker leader

Gita's official post is that of supervisor, but effectively, she takes a leadership position in the organisation. She often participates in DMSC's weekly meetings, in the capacity of chairperson and problem-solver. In her local area, she is involved in the Usha bank collection, and in representing sex workers when they face problems with police or *goondas*. She helped me in organising, and participated in, two group discussions, and was keen to be interviewed herself, to tell her own life history. As one of the very articulate Project representatives, she has told her life story before, and said that her story was on the first page of many books, referring to Project publications, and to the productions of the journalists and researchers who are frequent visitors to the Project. Her story describes a move from violence and exploitation to confident politicisation and may be useful to commentators for meeting both their interest in stories of the

desperate exploitation of sex workers (Srivastava, 2004) and an interest in impressive examples of conscientisation. Here, I retell Gita's story again.

Gita's life history is a horrifying story of torture. She describes how she was sold at the age of 9, into the *chukri* (bonded labour) system, to a madam, who, along with her two *babus*, took delight in torturing her. She showed us her scars, from being cut with a knife and burnt on the stove, and told us that they used candles to expand her vagina so that she could take customers at a young age. She ascribes her commitment to working for DMSC to this personal history of extraordinary abuse and exploitation, saying that she does not want history to repeat itself. She speaks combatively and emotionally about the fight to protect the girls in her area, saying that she is willing to die for their sake.

Prior to her involvement with DMSC, Gita had been running a successful liquor shop in the red light area. But when three of her sex worker neighbours were raped, beaten and robbed, she resolved to do something to prevent such outrages. She gathered a group of women together to protest to local politicians and police about the torture. Appalled that the police dismissed their complaints with "how can a whore be raped?", she joined DMSC. At first, she says, police and local political activists ignored her or told her not to cause trouble. But after eight years of work, she is proud that now the police listen carefully to her, offering her a chair and a soft drink, when she goes to the police station. For Gita, being offered the respect due to "society" people, by the police, is highly valued.

Gita's Project work continues to centre on supporting sex workers in conflicts they face. In the group discussions which she organised, her relationship to the other women appeared informal, joking and egalitarian, although when she became serious, the women also treated her as an authority, in a position to give them advice or chastise them. She is by now a skilled advocate, and recognised by both sex workers and their various adversaries as an authority. She has had to develop these skills, she says, in response to sex workers' demands that she do something for them. When the *goondas* demanded money, or the policemen beat a sex worker, the sex workers would come to Gita, saying "you are DMSC's member, do something for us". She also praises the sex workers' courage to join her to stand up to the local *goondas*, saying that their support is

what gave her the confidence to take a stand. And she is proud of the degree of support that she and DMSC have in her area, boasting that they have to send two trucks to her area to convey her DMSC members, when a big rally is organised, more than any other red light area.

Gita is also reflective and articulate about the rationale for organisation. To explain the need for DMSC as an organisation to support sex workers, Gita contrasted their isolated situation with that of people like my interpreter and myself who have extended families who will support us, financially and practically. She told us that she explains to sex workers that they must save money with Usha bank because without family members to provide security, money is what takes care of sex workers. She also links the de-stigmatising messages promoted by the Project – that sex work is not “bad work” but work like any other, and that sex workers deserve rights – to her participation in the Project. She says that, as she learnt from the Project that sex work is not “bad” and that sex workers have rights to live in peace and get recognition for their work, she became determined to fight for their rights. Now she is proud of the achievements of DMSC and adamant that sex workers can stand on their own feet and gain their rights. She is critical of a rival NGO for being anti-prostitution, which she sees as implying that they think sex work is dirty and that sex workers should not get their rights. Referring to their “welfarist” (my term not hers) approach, she says “they think that if they don’t give us shelter we can’t survive, but we are saying that it is our life, we know what to do with it”.

Unusually, Gita uses the politicising messages of the Project to interpret her personal life. In a group discussion, she told other sex workers that they must fight for rights even from their husbands, that “each one has to fight her own battle”. When we met her again some weeks later, she had left her long-term *babu*, after a fight, and moved to a different room. She said that her *babu* wanted her to behave more like a quiet traditional wife, but that because of her Project work, she stays out late, and has to come and go at irregular hours, and asked “now when I don’t get any right, why should I live there? I have already started my revolution”.

6.2.2. Siuli - a peer educator

Siuli is a peer educator based at one of Sonagachi's clinics. She is reserved and quiet during the education sessions and clinic meetings, and does not stand out (unlike Gita). She joined the Project as a peer educator in its early days. Since the income from the work as a peer educator is insufficient for her needs, she also continues to sell sex, although she says that after her Project work she is often too tired to go to the gate to seek clients, and that if she had any choice, she would leave the line immediately.

Siuli grew up and got married in a village in Bangladesh. Two months after the birth of her daughter, she recalls, her husband began an affair with someone else, and left her. She moved to Dhaka to work in a garment factory to support herself and her daughter. In the factory, she met with two women who persuaded her that it would be better to leave her daughter with her older sister and to work in Kolkata, where she could earn more money, without telling her the work they had in mind. They brought her to Sonagachi, left her with a madam, and Siuli discovered that she had been sold into prostitution, and would have to work to reimburse the madam the procurers' fee. Siuli emphasises her powerlessness to refuse, under the circumstances of being completely alone, without money or friends to support her. She speaks of sex work as a miserable job, but, unlike some of her colleagues, she does not intend to find a man to look after her, as she says that men cannot be trusted, and "I have my body and I will earn on my own". She sends money home for her daughter, and intends to work as a sex worker and as a peer educator for as long as possible, to save money, and then to return home. She wishes to get her daughter married soon, and when asked what if her daughter gets a husband like her own, she says "that is her luck, but I must do my duty".

Soon after the Project began, Siuli encountered the peer educators, and asked if she could work like them. She says that she lost money by taking up the peer educator work, but that she wanted to meet with other people of "the society", and to educate girls in how to protect themselves. A major personal benefit for Siuli was the provision of an identity card, and correspondingly, an identity, as a health worker, so that she can visit her native place with a respectable story. She also values the social interaction that she gains through participating in the Project, saying that, before joining the Project, she

knew nothing but going to the gate, getting a customer, and going to her room, but that now she knows her fellow sex workers and has good friends.

Siuli is articulate and detailed in describing the resources she uses to meet her tasks as a peer educator. She describes her main job as convincing the girls to visit the clinic for checkups regularly, and also mentions providing condoms, and encouraging sex workers to join the organisation and Usha bank. On approaching a sex worker for the first time, she says, she has to first make friends, chatting about herself, her life, and only later, she begins explaining about condoms and diseases. Her arguments centre on the need to be healthy in order to be able to earn money. She points out that if a woman has to rest for a day, not only will she lose income that day, but maybe an old familiar customer will come, will not find her, and thus, will be lost as a regular customer. She suggests strategies to sex workers that they can use to convince clients of the value of condom use. She says that they can tell customers that AIDS is invisible, so you cannot tell if someone is carrying the disease, and therefore caution is necessary. Or they can emphasise the customer's responsibility to his wife, and how awkward it would be if he passed on a disease to her, but if condoms are used, there is no risk at all.

Siuli also has to convince madams that it is a good idea for sex workers to visit the clinic, and to always use condoms, which she does by emphasising the financial loss if someone becomes ill. Because some madams expect the sex workers to run away on pretence of visiting the clinic, Siuli has to promise to escort new girls to the clinic and back, until the madam trusts the sex workers to return on their own. For Siuli, it is clear that she cannot encourage sex workers to leave madams. She explains that, only if they see minor girls, or evidence of torture, or if sex workers make complaints to them, can Project workers raise objections with the madams, or help the sex workers to leave. Without any of this evidence, such "rescuing" will not be deemed acceptable, and the madams will unite to exclude DMSC's Project workers. In order to gain access to the sex workers, Siuli must be complicit with the madams.

Siuli appreciates the rationale and the impact of the "unity" brought about by DMSC, giving the example that they are now listened to at the police station. However, she is less convinced by the Project's politicising arguments that sex work is work like any other, and that they should strive for legal recognition. She spoke in a very negative way

about sex work, and when we used DMSC's arguments to suggest that sex work is not "bad work", she disagreed. She was familiar with these arguments, but expressed a more fatalistic response, saying that DMSC's struggle may achieve formal recognition, and then it will be difficult for police, madams and landladies to exploit them, but people will still call them "whores" behind their backs. Thus, the Project's official ideology is not fully convincing to everybody. Under such punitive circumstances, it is difficult to make the possibility of change sound realistic. Using DMSC's words, but with her own critical angle, she says "The one who is giving treatment is called doctor. The one who is pulling a rickshaw is a rickshaw-puller and in the same way, the one who is doing sex work is a sex worker. But the work which is not good, people will always mark it as bad".

6.3 Project workers' actions on behalf of the Project

Project workers carry out the Project's concrete tasks, of protecting sex workers' health and security. They are also responsible for mobilising sex workers' participation in the Project. This section describes the resources which Project workers have, to carry out these tasks.

6.3.1. Persuading sex workers to protect their health

Health-related arguments

Persuading sex workers to use condoms and visit the clinic regularly is a central task set for peer educators, in their job description. The tools which they have to meet this task are mainly factual information about the dangers and invisibility of STDs, as presented to the peer educators in their education sessions, and as represented in the "flipcharts" with which they are provided, as health promotion aids. The flipcharts contain coloured pictures used to illustrate the facts about HIV and STDs, and the importance of condoms and clinic attendance. Thus, when this supervisor was asked about the health promotion work that she does, she responded:

Supervisor: If the girl has not come to the clinic we explain the flip-chart to her. We tell her that a disease may not be detected outwardly. There are different types of STDs. You should come to the clinic for a check-up. You may have

problem with your period or a pain in your lower abdomen or it may hurt when you entertain a customer, this may happen if you have gonorrhoea so you come to the clinic. Here all the STDs will be treated. You cannot go somewhere outside and tell your problems frankly to the doctor but you can do that here. If we don't tell the doctor our problems openly then the doctor would not understand and we will suffer. So you come to the clinic and take the medicines which are given to you free of cost. This is our daily work.

(int 2)

This supervisor is echoing the information on symptoms of STDs, as presented in the education sessions. She also mentions the important point that STDs are often invisible, and even symptom-free, so that it is not easy to tell if oneself or one's partner has such a disease, and therefore condoms and clinic checkups are essential, even in the absence of symptoms. One peer educator described a metaphor which she has developed to explain this idea, saying "We tell them that a potato may look alright from the outside, but it may be absolutely rotten on the inside". The modes of transmission of HIV, and the fact that it is incurable are also emphasised, as part of the promotion of condom use. Thus the tools with which peer educators are provided to do their health promotion work mainly come in the form of important factual information to be transferred to sex workers. They are not provided with special educative tools, special communicative strategies or innovative means of persuasion. The argumentative and negotiation skills which they do develop come more from the informal exchanges among Project workers, facilitated by their regular meetings.

One of the only pieces of advice specifically targeted at peer educators' task of communicating with sex workers is the need to gradually make friends with sex workers, before getting on to the health promotion arguments. Peer educators describe first getting to know the person, and asking her about her background, and only later addressing the issue of sexual health. Peer educators often emphasised how long it took, and how extensive persuasion efforts were necessary, for sex workers to be ready to hear their messages, and to agree to visit the clinic.

Economic arguments

As we saw in the last chapter, the main obstacle which sex workers raise to peer educators' pro-condom arguments is that they cannot afford to turn away a client who refuses to use a condom.

Supervisor: We give them a one hour lecture, tell them to use a condom whenever they are sleeping with someone. We ask them to come to our clinic for blood test and check-up. In men diseases can be detected easily, but it is difficult with girls. But she says "I can't go to the clinic, I am waiting for a customer". I can't prove her wrong, for she is waiting for a customer, who is her only source of money and if she turns him down for not using a condom, then can she run her show? So, with this point, she shuts my mouth. (Group 7)

In response, peer educators seek to make an economic case for condom use, on the basis of the long-term importance of good health. They explain that if one falls sick with an STD, then one will have to rest for three or four days, and will have no income on those days. Furthermore, if "known" customers come looking for the sex worker on those days and do not find her, they may go to someone else and never return. And the *malkhin* may be angry if the sex worker has to rest, or loses a repeat customer. These arguments seek to encourage the sex worker to consider her long-term economic interest in good health over short-term economic gain, but they are not always very convincing. Looking at "where the action is" in condom promotion, argumentation between Project workers and sex workers is a core component of the Project's work. In this argumentative domain, short and long term goals compete, health and economic gains are weighed. Project workers need to become skilled in mobilising arguments, strategies and examples which counter sex workers' arguments.

6.3.2. Influencing others to protect sex workers' health

As well as persuading sex workers of the importance of condom use and clinic attendance, peer educators also seek to make it easier for sex workers to take these actions by changing the attitudes of the other important actors who influence the sexual encounter – the madams, pimps, and clients. The Project does limited peer education

with clients. There are regular night-time clinics, with male and female peer educators attached, who go out to raise awareness of STDs and HIV among men who are standing around the red light area, and try to convince them to visit the clinic. Again, the arguments are about protecting the client's own health and that of his family. Madams get most of the attention, being most accessible. Peer educators seek to convince madams of their economic self-interest in sex workers remaining healthy, in terms of the loss of income if a sex worker should fall sick and need treatment. The Project organises "madam meetings" and "pimp meetings" in order to outline the benefits of collaborating with the Project. These meetings are quite difficult to organise. Madams are unwilling to leave their houses for very long, as they continually oversee the sex workers working for them, so Project workers try to organise meetings of the madams within one building, so they do not have to go far. Pimps will not attend a meeting unless there is quite a significant outlay of gifts and snacks, which demonstrate appropriate respect for their importance. In such meetings, Project representatives emphasise that they do not wish to end the sex trade, but only to protect the sex workers' health, and make the economic arguments for madams' and pimps' co-operation in encouraging condom use. Such meetings probably also enable the madams and pimps to put their concerns or demands to the Project representatives, gaining some influence over the course of the Project, as it depends upon pimps' and madams' acceptance in order to be able to function in the red light area.

6.3.3. Solving and preventing conflicts

Generating unity

The Project pursues three means of solving sex workers' problems. The first of these is to promote "unity" among sex workers, so that the women can be confident that their neighbours will come out to help them. The main argument used to promote "unity" is based on personal interest, pointing out that if somebody comes out to support her neighbours in a problem, then she may also receive similar support later. As the following supervisor points out, the social divisions that exists between groups of sex workers, and the economic competition, limit the persuasiveness of arguments about "unity".

Supervisor: If anyone beats a girl, then all other girls will run to rescue her

Sex worker: But nobody will come to help in this house

Supervisor: I agree with you. You know why? It is because this house has 3 parties. Like for instance, when a customer asked you to suck his penis the other day, 2 girls would come out to help you, because you are friendly with them. But the rest of the people wouldn't pay any heed. So you all should keep friendly relations with one another, so that in times of crisis, one readily helps the other. [...]

Supervisor: If they don't have a customer, they start to abuse other girls who get customers I have so many types of problems to solve. I can solve all of them concerning Police etc, but not these ones

Sex worker: But now after [supervisor's name] has made us understand, I have stopped calling bad names. I have changed a lot by her influence. (Group 7).

As well as verbally persuading sex workers of the importance of unity, the very existence of the supportive Project, which changes the balance of power in the hierarchical sex trade, materially facilitates the development of such unity. Informants reported that, in the past, madams did not want to let their *adhias* become too “smart” by fraternising with other sex workers, and thereby finding out about the advantages of alternative arrangements. Landlords wanted to avoid sex workers stirring up trouble by supporting each other. Thus, they confined sex workers to their rooms, and constrained their interaction with others.

Interviewer: Do you go to each other's house, talk to each other?

Sex worker: Yes, there is no problem. Before, it wasn't like this.

Interviewer: How did it change?

Sex worker: We were restricted from going out before

Supervisor: They are free now. Before they were not allowed to go to each other's rooms, invite someone or drink together. The landlord said, don't interfere in others' problems or I will drive you out. (Group 2).

The existence of the Project, as an organised group of hundreds of local sex workers is itself an advance in “unity”. This organisation enables further opportunities for sex

workers to come together to develop supportive social relations, shielding them from resistance by madams or landlords.

Project workers as sex workers' advocates

If local mutual support does not work to alleviate a problem, Project workers may be called in by sex workers as experts. How do these appointed women manage to solve the problems that other women cannot solve by themselves? Firstly, in a formalisation of the logic of “unity”, simply by the Project workers turning up at the scene of the problem, a sex worker who is having a dispute is not alone, and this support may prevent her from being intimidated. The disputants know that they will have to deal with the organised response of the Project if they do not submit to the Project worker's decision on the allocation of blame and the rightful solution. In the following exchange, two young women who are the local committee members explain their problem-solving work.

Project worker 1: We have to solve all the problems. If there is a problem, people from the central committee don't come at first. First we have to go. We have to enquire about the problem and then we solve it.

Interviewer: Who comes with these problems?

Project worker 1: Everybody. If a customer beat up a girl or if somebody is robbed.

Project worker 2: First both of us go there then others come.

Interviewer: If a customer beat up a girl, how do you come to know it, what exactly happens?

Project worker 1: If a customer beats up a girl there is commotion, shouting . We live nearby so we come to know of it, we go there and ask what has happened. We talk to the customer and to the girl. If we see that it is the customer's fault then we give him a slap or two. After the situation is under control we inform the [central] committee.

(int 4)

Secondly, through their participation in the Project's work of solving problems, and through hearing of other problems being solved, many Project workers have become skilled advocates for sex workers, and are recognised locally as legitimate problem-

solvers. For example, this supervisor describes how she solved a problem with the police through applying her knowledge of the system.

Supervisor: One night a girl was hit by a policeman who was drunk. The girls came to my house in the night at 2.30 and told me, you are a DMSC member, do something for us. [...] I told my husband to call a taxi, took the girls who were beaten and went to the hospital. There we did everything, I knew I had to submit all the documents within 24 hours [to file a case with the police]. The next day we took all the girls to the Police Station and we all shouted, I told the girls to shout. I went and spoke to the Police. I told the O.C.[Officer-in-charge] “Why did the police beat up my members, now I’ll do something”. First I asked about the Officer who was on duty the previous night and said that I wanted to lodge a case against him. “How dare he hit my girls? Which law gives him the permission to do so?” When the O.C. saw that I was talking about law, then he said, “please don’t do it, forgive us”.

(Group 2)

If immediate negotiation between parties does not solve the problem, the second strategy available to the Project workers is to call a meeting of all the interested parties. In such meetings, the disputants, any other interested people, and people who can give evidence on each side are called together, along with the local committee, to collectively agree on a resolution. Such meetings are usually chaired by experienced supervisors or sex worker leaders. The kinds of problems for which support is sought by sex workers, and the procedures for solving them, are discussed in the following chapter.

6.3.4. Persuade sex workers to participate

Project workers’ third task is to convince sex workers to participate in the Project. The practical manifestation of such participation is opening a bank account to save money regularly, or paying the Rs. 25 membership fee. Occasionally, Project workers have to find people to stand for the local committee elections. The arguments which they use to do so centre on the sex workers’ individual interests.

To convince people to save money with the bank, Project workers emphasise the great importance of saving money for one's old age and the benefits of being able to borrow at reasonable rates. As detailed in the previous chapter, whether *babus* can be relied upon for financial security is an important consideration in sex workers' discussions, and Project workers try to convince sex workers that they would be better off having their own savings rather than relying on others. From the Project's point of view, having savings is an important insurance against having to accept a client without condoms, on the days that a sex worker has not had sufficient clients. The insurance more convincing to the sex workers is insurance against future needs for a lump sum (e.g. in case of sickness, or a downpayment on rent, or a family member's marriage or funeral), in the context where she has no other guarantee of support.

To persuade women to open an account and save money with the Project's bank, Project workers have to overcome people's reluctance and distrust of handing over their money to people claiming to keep it safe for them. There has been a history of people cheating sex workers, promising to keep their money safe for them, and then running off with it, so people are wary of such offers.

Peer educator: We want to gain the trust of the girls. The girls have lost a lot of money before, so they don't want to open an account.

Sex worker's grandmother: [Sex worker name] has been duped of Rs. 30,000.

Supervisor: I also lost a lot of money

Interviewer: You are collecting money for the last few years. So the girls have understood that you will not take their money?

Peer educator: Still not all are convinced

Interviewer: Are there many girls who do not have an account in your bank?
You have to convince them

Supervisor: Yes, there are many who do not have. We have to convince them.

Peer educator: those who keep money somewhere else can also have an account with us. Our motto is to free the girls from the systems like *chata* and *kisti* [moneylending systems]. In these systems they have to pay heavy interest. For 100 rupees, they have to pay 1 rupee as interest daily. The 100 rupees is not paid back. They keep on giving the interest. (int 4)

The Project issues bankbooks, and Project workers visit savers every day to collect their lodgements. For Project workers, the principle of being absolutely reliable and dependable is discussed as necessary to ensure sex workers' trust.

Project workers are also charged with increasing the numbers of official members of the organisation, for which the offer of the Project's problem-solving support is the main draw. Project workers explain to sex workers that they cannot depend upon the Project's support unless they are members. The logic of paying membership dues to an organisation in return for their support is familiar in Kolkata where local clubs often run community events or offer members support. The availability of the Project's support is a good reason to join the Project, for many sex workers. As presented in the previous chapter, some sex workers may attend meetings or rallies not because of their interest in them, because they were asked to, and wanted to ensure the Project workers' support. By constituting such relations, sex workers may attend the clinic as a favour to the Project worker who asks her to, who has earned the sex worker's support through supporting her in other contexts.

Beyond arguments for the material benefits of sex workers' participation, some Project workers also appeal to the political rights and wrongs of the discriminatory treatment and stigmatisation of sex workers in society, and their wider political responsibility to participate for the collective good.

Supervisor: The ordinary sex workers did not understand this in a day. We had to explain everything to them over and over again. We told them why we were forming the organisation, how it would benefit us. Initially they were not very interested. They said it was useless, unnecessary. It could not be of any help. We told them, "why don't we try? Maybe we will not reap the benefit but our children and grandchildren will live in peace". (int 2)

However, such appeals to the collective interest are of less importance to the ordinary sex workers than they are to the Project workers, whose relation to these politicising messages will be addressed in detail in sections 6.4 and 6.5, below.

6.3.5. Project workers' relation to sex workers

The goal of Project workers' activity, as defined by the Project, is to make sex workers' environments safer and more actionable. As experienced sex workers as well as knowledgeable Project representatives, Project workers have considerable experience and resources with which to help sex workers to consider and act upon their problems. For example, in the following exchange, the supervisor interprets the sex worker's problem with her *babu* as a general problem of having a local boy as one's *babu*.

Sex worker: My *babu* is not good. He mixes with other girls. He depends on me. Takes money from me. He beats me up and abuses me.

Interviewer: Then what is the use of keeping him?

Sex worker: What to do? He was the one who settled me and now I am forced to keep him. I really feel sorry for my wrong selection. I cry when I understand that he goes to other girls. I have driven him out of my house so many times, but he still comes back and tells me lies that he doesn't keep relation with other girls.

Supervisor: Let me explain this to you [to interviewer]. The main problem is that she has made a local boy her *babu*. This boy had helped her from escaping from her *malkhin*. The *malkhins* are scared of the local boys, so it was easy for him to free her. Now she can't forget his help and the guy is taking full advantage of her. (Group 7)

As other authors have noted, once people become "peer educators", they are no longer exactly "peers", in that they gain new skills, powers and opportunities. In the Sonagachi Project, the peer educators wear special green jackets as they go about their fieldwork. From the standpoint of an egalitarian participatory philosophy, such a uniform seems inappropriately hierarchical. A few sex workers expressed resentment of peer educators' privileged status as organisational representatives and people with important work to do. But many sex workers greatly appreciated the fact that Project workers were experts whose duty it was to look after them. The following exchange between supervisors and Radha, the young sex worker who had left an exploitative madam, illustrates the relationship between Project workers and vulnerable sex workers who look to them for support.

Supervisor 1: Always listen to *didi* [the local committee member] and obey her. If you don't then I would beat you, because you see that just for you I am facing a lot of problems. 'B' [Radha's madam] insulted me when I was standing in front of the telephone booth, ask her. She [Radha] came to me and told me about her problems, how 'B' is torturing her, she wanted to leave 'B', then she wanted to go to 'K'. I listened to her, I didn't say anything

Supervisor 2: Did you go to 'B's room, to collect money from her girls?

Supervisor 1: No I didn't, I sent 'S'. I am facing all the troubles and if you do something wrong, I would give you a right slap

Supervisor 3: We would just break her arms and legs

Supervisor 2: Why would we beat her?

Radha: If I do something wrong, then you beat me

Supervisor 2: See, we are scolding you for your own good. We will take care of you

Supervisor 1: You don't worry even if you don't have your own parents. We all will stand by your side. 'B' can't do anything to you

(int 32)

There is a significant divergence between sex workers (especially younger sex workers) and the Project workers, in experience and skill of managing life in the red light area. The relationship of Project workers to sex workers is one of giving friendly advice and support, based on their significant expertise. Although some Project workers say that their aim is for sex workers to "stand on their own feet", in practice, most of their work is to solve problems on behalf of sex workers.

Project workers' access to resources and experience also leads them to see more problems as actionable than do sex workers. In many cases, sex workers who are very isolated in the red light area do not know when and how and who to call upon if they face difficulties. In such cases, Project workers may be the people to identify a problem that needs intervention. For example, sex workers who are not treated fairly by their madams may not expect that Project workers can help them, and the Project workers have to pro-actively seek to bring the sex workers to the clinic, or enable them to leave the madam, and so on.

So far, I have considered Project workers' actions as they carry out the work of the Sonagachi Project. The various tools which Project workers use to protect sex workers' health and security have been presented. The analysis has shown that some of the objects (such as sex workers' conflicts) which Project workers address are priority problems for sex workers, whereas others (such as saving money in the bank), are actions that Project workers seek to constitute as new aims for sex workers. Complementing the previous chapter, this chapter has shown that Project workers often appeal to sex workers' immediate problems and needs as the rationale for their participating in the Project, rather than for collective interests.

6.4. Project workers' reported gains from participation

This section and the next examine Project workers' relation to the Project, as they talk about the Project, and their participation in it. Speaking of the social system in which they play a part is a form of knowledge characteristic of critical consciousness, and the final section will consider whether the data presented on Project workers' relation to the Project evidences their critical consciousness.

While Project workers act as members of a collectivity, in which protecting the health and security of sex workers is their shared motive, they also have personal interests in relation to the Project. The "reflexivity principles" of avoiding idealising the Project, and of recognising the personal meaning that participants give to their participation (section 4.10.2.), led to my examination of the personal gains which Project workers get from participating.

6.4.1. Material gains from participation

There are concrete material gains to be made by being employed by the Project, or by sitting on one of its committees. Sex workers' instrumental reasons for participating have been discussed in the previous chapter, and these also apply to the case of peer educators. The financial guarantee of a small daily payment is of interest to sex workers, particularly as they become older and anticipate a decline in customers. Working for the Project also provides a respectable job as a health worker instead of a sex worker. These concrete gains are highly valued by many Project workers. Furthermore, as I

accompanied a supervisor around the red light area on the day in which they were to elect new local committee members, she was trying to convince madams to stand for election. Her arguments were about the personal benefits, of possible payment, and the possibility of travelling, as a representative of the organisation, to Bangladesh or America.

Being an official of the Project, and having its backing, lends decision-making power to the Project workers, including to the madams or landladies who are often the people who constitute the Project's local problem-solving committees. Madams and landladies often dominate these committees, because they are relatively stable compared to sex workers, who may move from one red light area to another at short notice, and who are on call close to 24 hours a day for clients, limiting their ability to take up other responsibilities. The madams and landladies also have experience of the workings of the red light area as well as certain authority, which can be useful for the problem-solving work. However, the individual interests of madams and landladies are sometimes at variance with the individual and collective interests of sex workers. This is recognised by some of the peer educators, who voiced a concern that the landladies sitting on local committees were there to advance their own interests. Thus, the person who initiated the organisation for Agrawalis (a landlady) was suspected by one supervisor of having joined the Project just to get all their knowledge, and then to put it to use to serve her own community. Another supervisor argued that a different landlady was willing to do committee work only when it concerned the disputes that her son was involved in, and not otherwise. One madam who is also on the local committee is known to beat the flying sex workers with a stick to move them away from her house. Thus, participation in the Project can be a resource to be taken advantage of, by those who are already powerful. But the fact that supervisors recognise this and complain about it is a positive step towards guarding against such instrumental use of the Project for private ends.

6.4.2. Non-material gains of politicisation

The above are all rather cynical, instrumental, self-interested reasons for participation. Sex worker-participants in the Project speak enthusiastically of their non-material personal gains as they have become politicised members of the Project.

The methodological decision to take actions-being-taken-on-an-environment as the unit of analysis yielded an analysis emphasising instrumental aspects of sex workers' and Project workers' Project-related action. But to women involved in the Project, its significance to them and their commitment to it, seem to grow both from the practical problems solved and from a personal sense of development reported. To counter-balance the instrumentality produced in my analysis, I set up a code category of "personal gains". What I coded as personal gains were those times when sex workers spoke explicitly of the personal gains they had experienced through their participation in the Project. These benefits relate to the women's personal lives or personal sense of empowerment that are not strictly related to organisational aims and responsibilities. They do not include benefits which I may attribute to their participation in the Project, but only the ones which the participants attribute to their participation in the Project. That is, I take their statements of their personal development as evidence of how participants reconstruct their personal trajectory through the Project, from the point of view of the present, rather than taking these accounts as evidence of how participants *actually* changed psychologically, through their participation in the Project. It is important to acknowledge that demand characteristics of presenting themselves and their Project to outsiders, in the interview situation may have promoted a very positive evaluation of the Project and of their relation to it. In any case, learning to speak about the Project and their place in it, is an important part of people becoming incorporated into the activity of the Project.

Participation bringing respectability

Project workers value the respectable occupational identity of health worker which the Project can provide. A supervisor told of an exchange between a schoolteacher and her son, about the boy's parents' work. The fact that he could say that his mother worked for the STD/HIV intervention programme was a source of relief and pride for her. Siuli, described above, indicated this value associated with her participation in the Project when she said that having the identity of health worker enabled her to go to her home and visit her daughter, with an identity to be proud of. While part of their day's work may be to argue with sex workers that sex work is respectable work like any other and is not morally objectionable, many peer educators also greatly value their opportunity, as health workers, to deny or hide their other work as sex workers.

It is not just the title, or identity card, of a “health worker” which confers a new respectability. As representatives of the Project, their words carry weight. Project workers speak of their pride and satisfaction of being listened to by “members of society”, being treated as equals by other Project staff, and having their problems listened to, as citizens, by police.

Supervisor: People thought that since we are in the line we don't have any value. Now if we go to the Police Station they at least let us sit on the chair and listen to us. Before they used to tell us, “so what if somebody has touched you, so many people touch you everyday”. (int 20)

Through the Project's work to represent sex workers' interests at local and national government level, at local, national and international conferences, to the media, to academics and at social events such as book fairs, several of the Project leaders, supervisors, and other women have met with bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, academics, and other NGOs. At such events, the Project workers are called upon to speak on behalf of the Project. This responsibility brings Project workers into contact with “society members”, where they have to skilfully argue the Project position. They spoke of their pride at being taken seriously by these “society members”, and of their abilities to argue with them. The following supervisor described her experience of travelling to Jamaica alone for a conference on HIV prevention among sex workers, with great pride.

Supervisor: Next day we went for the conference, I was from 'India', one from Colombo and two from Jamaica. My turn came to give a speech and after that some people came running to me and kissed me. I was speaking in Bengali and Dr. Jana was interpreting it in English and one organizer garlanded me. I was astonished [...] I am experienced now and would be able to come back from any place abroad. (int 21)

While the sex workers have to contend with social stigmatisation due to their work, through their participation in the Project, they gain access to significant respect and experiences unavailable to many women working in more “respectable” jobs. They

become respected leaders who have important work to do, they argue with politicians, their photos or their words appear in newspapers, and they are treated with respect by international visitors from funding agencies, health promotion agencies, or universities. Project workers have gained significant powers to make their voices heard and to win esteem within these relations. Thus, the Project provides avenues for the development of power and respect in areas that are often not available to other poor women. We cannot say whether they are *more* empowered than those women or not, but we can be specific about which powers they have and have not.

Participation constituting a confident courageous self

Project workers, and other sex workers who take part in the Project described their confidence and courage as having been increased by their knowing that a large group of women were united and ready to support each other. Thus, as well as facilitating concrete achievements, “unity” was valued for its contribution to enabling personal friendships, and its enhancement of confidence. In the following group discussion among sex workers from a smaller red light area, who are enthusiastic about attending Project rallies, the women explain the reasons for their participation.

Interviewer: In Sonagachi people say that they don’t have time, they are busy. Then why do you go?

Sex worker: We go.

Interviewer: Is there any use standing under the sun the whole day and shouting?

Sex worker: Yes

Sex worker: Yes, very much.

Interviewer: Do you like it?

Sex worker: Our courage gets boosted up.

Sex worker: We meet so many people.

Supervisor: They are saying that, before we didn’t go out, nowadays we are coming out in public, we have confidence, this is what we like.

Sex worker: Yes, we like it.

Supervisor: These people don’t walk usually. They take a taxi or a rickshaw. I asked them, “don’t you feel tired walking in the processions, carrying the flag”.

They say, “no, we like it, we enjoy ourselves”.

Sex worker: Yes that’s true, we are encouraged.

Sex worker: We see so many other girls, we like it.

Sex worker: We shout the slogans and walk with the flag.

Supervisor: Girls fight to carry the flags

Sex worker: We like going there. The men move apart and make way for us, we like it.

Sex worker: There are guards on both sides

Sex worker: Before the police used to arrest us, now they cooperate with us. So won't we like it? (Group 2)

In this extract, the sex workers contribute significant content to the discussion of why they like the rallies, but the supervisor appears to be much more expert in explaining the value of participating in rallies, comparing their present confidence to go out in public to their previous reticence. It could be argued that the supervisor is leading the discussion, that the sex workers do not *actually* hold the position that the rallies have built their courage and confidence, but that they are speaking as they know the supervisor expects them to speak. However, to understand how people are constructing the role of the Project in their lives, we do not need to establish the source of sex workers' reported increases in courage – whether they genuinely stem from the sex workers' own opinions or not. It is enough to note that participation has provided them with a new self-understanding, which can be mobilised, at least when talking to outsiders, like me.

Project workers are also proud of their fighting spirit and combative attitude. The Project Director has made it a rule that in their Project meetings, people have to introduce themselves as sex workers, in an effort to normalise their profession. The following supervisor told her story of how the Project had brought about significant turning points in her life. One of these turning points was the time when she stood up in front of an audience, the first person to proclaim her identity as a sex worker.

Supervisor: We had a 3 day workshop for sex workers. They paid us 200 rupees each. Everyone was asked to introduce themselves. They spoke a lot but no one gave her actual identity [as a sex worker]. At that time I went up on stage and took permission from the respected audience. I told them I was a whore, a sex

worker, and I told them about my life. From that time onwards my name started appearing on the television, newspapers everywhere. (int 41)

Stories of their fighting spirit and confidence that they can solve their problems are encouraged and rehearsed in Project meetings. This supervisor speaks of confidence in the Project's efficacy and the changes it has made.

Supervisor: Now to tell you the truth, we are not afraid that somebody will beat us or shoot us. We have heard that the British also tortured us. Our girls could not open their mouths before. Now, after DMSC is formed [...] before harassing us, the police think "if we harass the girls, the DMSC people will come after 15-20 minutes and we will lose our jobs". They are also afraid now. This was not so before. The police took away people regularly – customers, pimps, girls, whoever they got. Then the girls had to give money in order to be released. The girls tolerated all this quietly. But not now, not anymore. [...] Now that we have started, we will carry on, whether we live or die, we will move on. (Int 2)

There is probably truth in the statement that the police now think twice before heavily-handedly carrying out a raid, although such raids still occur. What is more certain, here, is that the story of increasing confidence and fighting spirit among sex workers is a way that people involved in the Project learn to recount the significance of the Project. Having examples of past successes, and telling of changes that have come about in the police's behaviour are convincing arguments for the importance of their collective project.

Participation producing "awareness"

Within the Project's meetings and discussions, a conceptualisation of sex workers' problems as resulting from a lack of due rights and recognition is promoted. Learning to think of their problems in this way, is described by participants as a personal gain in "awareness". Some Project workers spoke of learning from other Project workers that the work which they do is not shameful. They contrasted a previous state of mind in which the ideas that they might be equal to other women and deserve respect were

simply not entertained, or even considered, to a present awareness that they too deserve self-respect.

Supervisor: 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. Most of the girls in this line are illiterate, so they don't understand it. (int 20)

Gita also described this change in her attitude to sex work.

Gita: When I was not aware and hadn't come in contact with the Project, I also used to think that I am dirty. Still today there are girls who think so, I won't hide that. This Project has made us respect our work and ourselves too, they have taught us that we also have a right to live and get recognition for our work which is not bad. When I thought it was bad, it was bad, now I think it is good and fight for our rights. (Group 5)

Along with learning that their work is not shameful, Project workers also describe becoming aware that they deserve rights as workers, and thus that they can protest against abuses of their rights.

Supervisor: 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. 'DMSC' and this Project have made us aware of it, we have learnt from the Project that we have to struggle and fight for our rights. (int 21)

Such increases in "awareness" were spoken of as a personal sense of progress, in which an earlier ignorance, sense of inferiority or shame contrasts with a new awareness, confidence and sense of respectability. This personal trajectory was sometimes spoken of in terms of coming from darkness to light.

Peer educator: We were inside a well before. Now we have come up, we are seeing the light outside. Let's see how far we can proceed from here. The child doesn't learn everything the day it is born.

(int 11)

6.4.3. Participation: Self-serving or selfless?

This discussion of Project workers' reported gains from participation has shown that concrete material, personal and social gains are important incentives for participation. The rationale claimed for participatory projects often emphasises the collective benefits and lofty ideals of participating for the greater good. Asking poor people with heavy demands to participate solely for the common good may be unrealistic. However, there is no fundamental incompatibility between people achieving personal as well as collective gains through participating in a project. Activity always comprises many different actions. As Jahoda (1982) argues, for all of us, if we are lucky, employment is a means of making personal gains, including the sense of contributing to the success of something meaningful and collective, widening one's social relations and one's grounds of social status. While benefiting economically, we may simultaneously contribute to a collective project. Thus, sex workers may make personal gains through participating and simultaneously take part in a collective action movement to further their collective interests. The problem to be avoided is conflicts of interest, where the individual interest is in contradiction to the collective interest.

6.5. Project workers' relation to the conscientising Project ideology

The Project has a very recognisable explicit official ideology, which centres around a demand for sex workers to be granted "workers' rights". Three core inter-related issues are covered in this ideology: the argument that sex work is a legitimate form of work and not something to be ashamed of; the argument that sex workers can solve their problems by uniting and working together; and the argument that once "workers' rights" are officially granted to sex workers, they will no longer face societal discrimination. These issues are crystallised in the Project slogan "Sex work is work! We demand workers' rights!" Essentially, "workers' rights" refers to a future situation in which the government recognises their work as legitimate work, and bans all forms of discrimination against sex workers.

This rationale is evident in the Projects' leaflets and magazines, in press statements made by Project leaders, and in interviews with Project workers. The high-profile presence and discussion of this political position, within the everyday activities of the Project, is a very distinctive feature of the Sonagachi Project. This rationale is the "mission statement" that places the Project's everyday work in the context of a wider struggle. It has the features of a conscientising message, which puts sex workers' problems in their societal context, and proposes collective solutions to those problems. This section examines Project workers' use of this body of knowledge about "workers' rights", as a means of examining the process of conscientisation. It will address Project workers' reflective knowledge of "workers' rights", how "workers' rights" constructs their environment as actionable, and whether their use of the concept evidences their "critical consciousness".

6.5.1 Two expectations from "workers' rights"

Institutional and legal recognition for the organisation

The first 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". The function of this board would be to identify cases of trafficking of women into sex work, or of minor girls being in sex work, in order to "rescue" such women and seek punishment for the perpetrators. The Project's proposal was that 60% of the board members would be sex workers. According to the Project director, 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. This institutional interest in "workers' rights" refers to the formal recognition of sex workers as legitimate workers, who may establish and register the sorts of formal organisations that other occupational groups establish, such as workers' co-operatives or professional

boards. The slogan “Sex work is work. We demand workers’ rights” clearly represents this interest in achieving formal recognition.

“Workers’ rights” as solving local problems

The aim of institutional recognition is of interest to those people involved in running the Project as a formal organisation intersecting with state services and infrastructures. But this is not the interest for most Project workers, who look to the granting of “workers’ rights” as removing the grounds for many of the everyday concrete problems faced by sex workers. Project workers explain that sex workers face all kinds of discrimination from “society”. With dubious legal standing, sex workers 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.

As well as the material deprivations brought about by societal discrimination, the deprivation of social recognition is a hardship sorely felt by sex workers, and one to which “workers’ rights” is again posed as a response. The lack of social recognition manifests in stigmatisation of women who have been in sex work, 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. The stigma of selling sex causes them problems in accessing health services, and causes problems for their children at school. If they change jobs, and are found out to have been sex workers, they may be harassed and sexually exploited. If the nature of their work is discovered by people from their home village or suburb, they may be evicted, or rejected by relatives, or blackmailed. 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. Incorporated in the notion that sex workers are eligible for “workers’ rights” is the idea that, as workers, they should not be considered as doing “bad work”.

Interviewer: You often refer to this work as “bad work”. You say “bad locality”. If you think that this is not bad, then why do you say this?

Peer educator: You know why we say this! 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 Sonagachhi, they hate them. [...] Just like a family's [i.e. non-sex-worker's] children are educated, we want our children to be educated. [...] If our profession is legalised, we will not be harassed by the *goondas*, 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.

Peer educator: Then they will be afraid to say that

Interviewer: They will say "sex-worker's son"?

Peer educator: Not even that. They will not have that courage if our profession is legalised. (int 11)

It is argued that if the government grants sex workers "workers' rights", such discrimination will be outlawed, and sex workers will no longer have to face these various forms of oppression. This argument locates the sources of sex workers' problems in "society's" wrongful attitude toward sex workers, and it identifies a legal change as the appropriate solution. To bring about this change, it is argued, sex workers must unite together and fight for their "workers' rights".

6.5.2. Constructing an actionable environment with "workers' rights"

Does knowing the ideology about "workers' rights" make sex workers' environments more actionable? Being able to consider that an alternative state could exist problematises the present. Rather than seeing difficulties simply as given hazards of the job, which must be adjusted to, if an alternative situation is imaginable, then those problems may be seen as distortions, open to challenge. By having "workers' rights" as an imaginable alternative to the present condition, the present becomes open to change, and thus actionable. "Workers' rights" itself is imaginable because it is a position that has already been achieved, from a state of oppression, by workers. Project workers sometimes compared their situation with that of manual labourers or "untouchables", who have gained certain legal guarantees through organisation and lobbying. One of the often-repeated arguments about workers' rights equates sex work with other forms of

work, stating that since cobblers, drivers and doctors have unions, so too can sex workers be organised to fight for their rights. If sex work is equivalent to these other forms of work, then a change in sex workers' situation is conceivable. Believing that change is possible is mentioned by Project workers as a motivation for participation.

Supervisor: Now many girls are listening to what we say and become members also, but previously they used to close their door in our face and abuse us. Some of them, even at present, refuse to believe that DMSC is of any help. They feel that a prostitute can never get recognition in the society, so it is of no use bothering and going to the meetings. (int 20)

This supervisor mentions two reasons for participating: believing that the Project may be of help, and believing that it is possible that sex workers may one day get social recognition. From my analysis of the interviews with sex workers, I would say that the first reason is more likely to be the important one to sex workers. Nonetheless, the fact that this Project worker identifies the belief in the possibility of change (the belief that DMSC can be of help, the belief that gaining recognition is possible) suggests that this is one way of locally making sense of people's participation in the Project.

Arguing that, in principle, sex work could have a different status is one way of problematising the status quo, to suggest that the environment is actionable. Another way is to create material resources that alter the environment so that new actions are possible. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that, to deal with the problem of local men's groups harassing sex workers and demanding money, the first response was to adjust to this situation and to try to avoid incurring the men's anger. But with the advent of the Project and local committees of women responsible for defending the local sex workers, the problem of local men became one which could be actively challenged through collective protest. If Project workers convince sex workers of the appropriateness of "unity", and create opportunities for a norm of unity to be developed, so that sex workers do agree to enforce condom use, or to support each other if there is a conflict, there is a shift in the balance of power in sex workers' relations, and the dominance of men is problematised by the fact that it can be resisted.

The counterpart to defining the problems as actionable is defining sex workers as the agents who can take action to remedy their problems. Arguing that they are workers who can be organised to take a unified stance, is a means of trying to produce a positive, active identity for sex workers. So is the argument that sex workers are not “*kharap*”. Being in prostitution is often spoken of in a fatalistic way, as something over which one has no control, and which one can never leave. Words such as “*kharap*” (meaning bad or broken), or “*noshto*” (meaning spoiled) used to describe sex workers suggest the fatalism with which many people apprehend their situation. The Project’s arguments that sex workers are not “*kharap*” or “*noshto*”, but are respectable workers who can organise to demand changes, seek to overcome that fatalism, to promote a more active identity.

However, having a conceptualisation of the social origin of their problems does not necessarily translate into seeing their environment as actionable. In the group discussion with flying sex workers, the women explained how they got into sex work through being sexually exploited in their previous work on a construction site. They accounted for their vulnerability in terms of the structural conditions of gender and poverty, explaining that as poor women, they had few options. Thus, they had a conceptual understanding of the role of social structural arrangements in constituting their problems, but without a sense that those problems were actionable. Within the red light area, they are further disadvantaged by their outsider status, and thus, being hassled by some local residents who do not see them as having any right to sell sex locally, or who see them as competition. The flying sex workers tended to accept, and to adapt to, the power relations which disadvantage them. For example, in the context of a dispute between a local madam and flying sex workers who would stand outside her house, the flying sex workers themselves were willing to attribute the fault to the sex workers, for “bad behaviour” such as pulling men’s sleeves, or robbing them, or standing outside the madam’s house when they knew they should not. Thus, these women’s conceptual understanding of the social origins of their problems did not translate into critical analyses of their relations with madams or into plans to change their situation.

6.6. Critical consciousness?

In Project workers' talk about the Project and their relation to it, there are several strands bearing on the issue of "critical consciousness". Project workers report an increase in personal awareness, and they speak about their exploitation as wrongful abuses of their rights, to which organisation is an appropriate response. This section critically discusses the status of Project workers' knowledge of workers' rights and of their personal advances, as a way of discussing the concept of conscientisation. Do Project workers' relations to the Project evidence the achievement of "critical consciousness"?

6.6.1. Unrealistic or freed from arbitrary present constraints?

As an outsider, it was difficult for me to understand the conviction with which Project workers asserted that legal recognition would bring an end to their concrete problems, and an end to social stigma. Even the example given by the Project director, of untouchability having been outlawed by the Indian government, only seemed to me to undermine the belief in effectiveness of formal laws in changing materially and symbolically the social position of marginalised groups. Progressive government policies seeking to raise the social status of people from "untouchable" and "scheduled caste" backgrounds have come nowhere near ruling out social stratification based on caste. The assertion that social acceptance would follow from legal recognition seems completely unrealistic. This led me to query why so much emphasis was given to the idealistic, unrealistic commitment to achieving "rights", when the Project workers were achieving significant concrete improvements in sex workers lives, through their clinics, health promotion, and problem-solving committees within the red light areas. I wondered why they did not place more emphasis on the concrete workings of the Project, and less on the idealistic vision of "workers' rights". If the expectation of "workers' rights" is so unrealistic, why were people so adamant about it, and should we call it critical consciousness?

As a concrete goal, "workers' rights" and all the benefits attributed to it, may not be realistic, but as a means of legitimising sex workers' identity, and of allowing alternative states to be imagined, the concept of "workers' rights" is very effective.

Claiming that sex work is work is to ask for evaluation on the dimension of work rather than sexual morality. 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, who therefore may be unionised, and should be respected. 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 and productive.

To describe something as unrealistic is a conservative position to take. This was the problem of positivism, according to Martin-Baro (1994, p.21), who argued that, "the most serious problem of positivism is rooted precisely in its essence; that is, in its blindness toward the negative. Recognizing nothing beyond the given, it necessarily ignores everything prohibited by the existing reality [and] winds up consecrating the existing order as natural". Maybe from my social scientist's point of view, the achievement of recognition through "workers' rights" is unlikely, but without counterfactual imagination, would anything change? Does this make it uncritical, or rather, critical?

6.6.2. Repeating the standardised Project ideology or a new politicised awareness?

The development and promotion of the critical ideas which I have presented in this chapter has depended upon the intervention of activists and academics, who brought outsider perspectives to the insiders of the red light area, and who were expert in formulating politicised arguments to counter prevailing societal ideologies. In order to promote these new conceptualisations of their situation, they are periodically rehearsed, and there seems to be a standardised "origin myth" of the Project's emergence and its history. Certain aspects of the Project's history, including the dates of establishment of its various facets, and certain arguments about the nature of sex work, are rehearsed in education sessions, they appear in Project documentation and are told to visitors to the Project. Aspects of these narratives were told to me in very similar ways by different people. They have also been told to others in similar ways, as various reports on the Project contain quotes that are very recognisable. For instance, a recent article quoted a

Project worker whom I did not interview, as saying proudly that previously, the police used to abuse the sex workers, but now they offer her a chair (Thekaekara, 2004), just like Gita, as described above.

The basic story mentions the desperate conditions that existed prior to the Project, the initiation of the STD/HIV intervention programme, the realisation that sex workers' conflicts with *goondas* had to be addressed, and the formation of DMSC, as a sex workers' organisation in 1995, so that sex workers could unitedly resist their oppressors. Soon after, they decided to address the financial exploitation of sex workers by moneylenders and set up Usha Co-operative Bank. Since the foundation of their organisation, and their unity together, many of their problems have lessened, but they still have a long struggle before them to get the workers' rights which they deserve. "Society" may think that sex workers are bad people, and stigmatise them, but society itself is the origin of the problem – men from society are the clients of sex workers, and exploitation by members of society led the women to take up sex work. The following is a typical account:

Supervisor: In Rambagan, there were some *goondas*. There was one called Lattu who was very dangerous. He used to carry weapons with him. He harassed the girls continuously. He was such a terror that girls could not stand in the gate in the evenings. All the girls were afraid of him. [...] they broke into a girl's house and raped her, we could do nothing. We have come here because of poverty. If we cannot earn, then how will we live.

Interviewer: Did the local *goondas* harass you mostly?

Supervisor: Yes mostly. Then my duty was in Rambagan. There were problems already. They poured hot water. Sometimes they threw bombs. The *goondas* harassed the local girls. They did not let the girls stand on the road. How would the girls earn then! Then we thought that we must do something. Then on 12th of July, 1995 (confirms the date with the coordinator) we started DMSC. We thought that we need to protest. If all of us protest, then we can resist these *goondas*. So we told all the girls that we have formed an organisation called Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee. You join us, then we can fight against the exploitation. We explained this to all the girls. We said "don't be afraid, we

are always at your side. If anything happens to you, you protest”, this is how we built this organisation. (int 2)

During her telling of the story, this supervisor checked the date on which DMSC was founded. And afterwards, she asked to listen to the recording of what she had said. After listening to the tape, she told us that she had forgotten something which she wanted to add, and added a description of another aspect of the Project’s work, its vocational training for older sex workers. As well as having a somewhat standardised official or semi-official story of the Project, many Project workers also have a concept of their “life story” which they expect to tell outsiders such as journalists or academics. Many of them can spend half an hour or an hour telling this story almost without probing or encouragement. The story begins with the difficult conditions at home leading to their entry into sex work, their early years of exploitation before becoming involved in the Project, their increase in skills, confidence and awareness as they took part in the Project, their personal and the Project’s general achievements.

The content of these stories is “critical”, in the sense of being reflective on the conditions of the person’s life and means of solving problems, but hearing the same elements repeatedly makes the stories sound uncritical, in the sense of being standardised and inflexible. Politicised knowledge is not necessarily open to questioning or dialogical. In carrying out interviews, it was at times frustrating to hear the interview repeating the same narrative that had appeared often before. However, some people, (such as Siuli, described above), were willing to express their doubts about the Project ideology. And in some interviews, we avoided the topic of the changes that the Project had brought about. Through this kind of attention, I gained a complex understanding of the Project, one which did not reiterate wholly the very positive position which is put forward by supervisors, and which frequently reappears in reports on the Project (e.g. Jana & Banerjee, 1999; Nath, 2000; Thekaekara, 2004).

To point out such repetition is not to argue that these statements are meaningless, only that they are cultivated in Project discussions. Even if such stories are standardised, they may provide very useful resources for the unusual task of retelling one’s life story, and for the difficult task of generating a new, politicised conceptualisation of oneself, one’s problems, and the collective means of their solution. The stories comprise new

resources for interpreting their situation and their contribution to collective action in an affirming and politicised way. The statement about the police offering them a chair makes visible and tangible their newfound power. Learning such advantages, improvements, and ways of interpreting their situation surely contributes to Project workers' interest in participating and to their having a shared conceptualisation of their problems and how to address them. Moreover, many of the more experienced Project workers were able to use these elements to have extensive arguments with us about the problems facing sex workers, and their likely future, arguments which were far from mere repetition of learned slogans.

In the standardised story of the Project, the Project appears as a complete break from the past, and the source of the idea that sex workers' stigma is not to be taken for granted, but can be blamed on "society" rather than on the sex workers themselves. However, there is historical continuity in the Project's arguments. Binodini Dasi, actress and prostitute, working in Kolkata, wrote the following in her autobiography, in the late nineteenth century:

Is the life of a prostitute disgraceful and despicable? But then, how did she become disgraced and despised? Surely, she did not become a despicable creature the moment she came out from her mother's womb! [...] many are lured by men, and by believing in their false promises end up by carrying on their heads the load of calumny and suffer hellish agony. Who are these men? Are not some of them members of the same male community who are admired and respected in society? (cited in Banerjee, 1998, p.120)

Compare Binodini Dasi's argument to the following statement by a peer educator:

Peer educator: However much we say that what we do is not bad, society doesn't accept that. They accept all other professions, the rickshaw-pullers, the driver. But they think we whores are so bad that we find no place. But who have made prostitutes? This society. And the society itself is not accepting them. You are a police officer, I work in your house as a maid-servant. I am 11 years old. My parents are very poor. You rape me one night. Your wife thinks that it is my fault. She drives me out of the house. I get a bad name. Other people come to

know this. My father and brothers don't let me enter my home. Where do I go then? I finally land up at Sonagachi? Who then brings me to Sonagachi? Society.

Interviewer: of course. Very true

Peer educator: but people hate me today. They say “Sonagachi whore”. But was I born in Sonagachi? Did my parents give birth to me here? Society made me a prostitute. (int 11)

As well as such continuity in the understandings available to sex workers, there are also historical instances of sex workers resisting and trying to constitute organised responses to their problems, suggesting that the Sonagachi Project has not constituted a complete break from the past, but has drawn on some pre-existing politicising resources.

6.6.3. A general advance in consciousness or learning specific new discourses?

Sex workers' reports of increasing social and personal awareness accord with Freire's description of a transition from naïve to critical consciousness. People who have had a substantial involvement in the Project tell of a turning point, where they shifted from being unaware to being aware. Does this indicate the emergence of “critical consciousness”? These accounts represent the self-understanding of participants, but may not be the conceptualisation which we should adopt as social scientists.

As I have suggested in the chapter on participation (Chapter 2), in relation to the concept of “raising critical consciousness”, people's awareness of *specific topics*, (such as potential routes to political action), may certainly be increased through intervention, but that this awareness of specific topics does not necessarily constitute a qualitative advance in their thinking. I would suggest that sex workers' awareness and verbal eloquence pertaining to issues of rights, recognition, and the value of organisation, may well have increased through their participation in the Project, but that this was not a qualitative advance in their consciousnesses, but was more simply, learning new ways of talking about particular topics.

One way to sustain this argument is by identifying aspects of their environment which sex workers do *not* problematise, even while problematising others. These

unproblematised issues show that the “critical consciousness” which they demonstrate in relation to part of their work is not a qualitative shift to a different way of thinking. For instance, there remains, among sex workers, a conservatism around several topics. For instance, I never heard anyone protest about the *adhia* system, in which 50% of a sex worker’s earnings go to the madam, not even those people most able in making political arguments about the problems of sex workers and their rights. Furthermore, many continue to judge “proper behaviour” of sex workers as behaviour that does not irritate the client or the madam. One peer educator, for example, spoke eloquently in an interview about gender relations, the wrongs done to sex workers by society, and made arguments that sex work was a respectable job like any other. Later, in a problem-solving meeting, her response surprised me. The problem brought to a meeting was that a girl had been raped, and this peer educator’s response was that she was not a pure good woman anyway. That is, she reiterated the familiar ideological position that a loose woman can expect no better than rape.

6.6.4. Discussion: “Critical consciousness”?

I have suggested that certain unrealistic expectations, and fixed and standardised stories are core features of Project workers’ discussions about their Project’s rationale. Though these discussions do name and capture structural dimensions of their problems and propose collective routes of action on those problems, the fixity and lack of realism do not support the “criticality” of the conceptualisation, and sound more like the “naïve transitivity” characterised by Freire (1973, p.18). From an outsider, social scientific perspective, Project workers’ analysis of their situation, when they anticipate the end of their problems with the advent of “workers’ rights”, seems unrealistic, and thus uncritical. And hearing similar arguments repeatedly makes them sound uncritical and dogmatic. However, is it appropriate to judge the Project workers’ knowledge on the criteria I would apply to social scientific knowledge? Implementing my reflexivity principle of avoiding the imposition of western feminist expectations on other groups of women (as outlined in Chapter 4 on Method), leads me to recognise the valuable critical role of the concept of “workers’ rights”. The sex workers speak proudly of their increase in awareness, their determination to achieve workers’ rights, if not for this generation for the next, and their achievements in mobilising local sex workers to stand

up for their rights. From the point of view of my “reflexivity principle”, we should respect this pride.

The final section of this chapter has illustrated in detail the knowledge that Project workers have of their collective action process. Constructing the environment as actionable with a narrative of change towards a better future, imagined through the idea of “workers’ rights”, makes sense of a person’s actions within a collective activity. I have tried to argue that learning this politicising discourse is quite a concrete achievement.

6.7. Conclusion

This chapter has presented both Project workers’ actions as health promoters, and their discursive knowledge of the Project. The analysis of Project workers’ actions confirmed the suggestion in the previous chapter that sex workers’ relation to the Project is one of accessing supports in the event of concrete problems. Project workers often appealed to sex workers’ individual interests in persuading them to participate. Project workers themselves, however, are incorporated into the collective activity of the Project, both by taking actions which fulfil the Project’s collective motive, and by taking part in the politicising discourses of the Project. They report significant personal changes as they became aware of the more political aspects of their situation. This politicised knowledge centres around the future goal of “workers’ rights”. This imagined future allows the present to be problematised, and provides a shared motive facilitating Project workers’ coordination together.

Project workers’ interviews and discussions have been interpreted in this chapter in two different ways, at “factual” and “meaning” levels (Kvale, 1996). Firstly, they have been taken, at the “factual” level, as accurate reports on the actions which Project workers take, and secondly they have been taken at the “meaning” level, to examine the construction of Project workers’ understandings of their Project and their relation to it. These two ways of treating the data are contradictory, but are pragmatist responses to the constraints of the research situation. In response to the constraints of the research question of how Project workers contributed to making sex workers’ environments more actionable, and the practical constraint of limited accessibility of Project workers’

work, Project workers were treated as key informants reporting upon their actions. In response to the research question of how Project workers verbally construct their relation to the Project, interviews and group discussions were treated as providing data on the ways in which Project workers talk about their work, data which was argumentatively engaged with in discussing whether it evidenced “critical consciousness” or not (in section 6.6). The “factual” and “meaning” levels are contradictory ways of treating the data, but both are useful in relation to different research constraints.

The work of the Project has been considered in this chapter through the interviews and group discussions held with Project workers. This provides a perspective on the reportable knowledge which Project workers hold of their work. The next chapter turns to an observer’s perspective on Project workers’ participatory fora, to investigate the social resources facilitating Project workers’ collaboration, and the practices which comprise their participation.

Chapter seven

The daily activities of participation

What is that Project workers do when they participate in the activities of the Project? What goals are their activities expected to fulfil? What are the procedures and rules that are in place to facilitate their collaboration together? And to what extent do Project workers have control over the conditions of their collaboration together? This chapter brings us to “where the action is” regarding Project workers’ participation. An analysis of the observational data on the daily routine work of participating in the Project as a Project worker is presented. The two central activities of the Project – health promotion and community problem-solving – will be presented here in two sections. The first section details the daily work of peer educators, and the second section, the conduct of the weekly community meetings.

7.1. Analytic Procedure

The analysis of the peer educators’ work is based on observations of 9 of their morning meetings, 5 of their education sessions and one teacher training, and my daily informal observations of their interactions with sex workers whenever I accompanied them in the red light area. Observation of 19 community meetings provide the data for my description of the meetings. Whereas the actors’ perspectives on their lives and work in the red light area, and their relation to the Project were accessed through interviews and group discussions, as presented in the previous two chapters, the observational data presents an external observer’s view on participants’ activities. The major divergence between the two datasets is on the topic of “rules”. The procedures which enable Project workers to co-ordinate their collective action barely appeared in the interview data. Such tacit skills were best revealed by an external observer.

A “summarising content analysis” (Flick, 1998) was used to organise the extensive field notes. In this data reduction procedure, field notes were paraphrased into short descriptions of events, and organised in a table. The rows of the table were defined by

the activity being undertaken (with a new row for each Project meeting, education session, etc). The columns were initially defined by the activity-theory categories of “actors”; “object”; “tools”; “rules”; “goals”; “division of labour”. The “objects” are the objects of participants’ action or discussion, which provide the content which participants are collaborating around. Participants’ engagement with these objects is implicitly or explicitly oriented to meeting certain “goals”. “Tools” are resources put to use as individuals take action. “Rules” are social resources which enable co-ordination of people’s joint action, tacitly followed by participants, and include the procedures through which Project activities take place. The “division of labour” defines the roles of the various participants, and their relation to each other. Each event observed was condensed and represented as short sentences bearing upon the various analytical categories. After the first round of analysis, it became evident that there was important heterogeneity in the category of “object”. In particular, the Project’s *procedures* can also become *objects* for participants, when they reflectively discuss or act upon them. Thus, the second round of analysis differentiated “concrete tasks as object” and “Project rules as object”. The category of “actor” is not presented here, since the various actors (sex workers and Project workers), and their interests have been presented in detail in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, the “actors” are considered as Project workers, carrying out the work of the Project.

This chapter presents what Project workers do when they participate, as Project workers, and it begins by detailing peer educators’ daily routine. It follows the structure of the three different activities of their daily work, as they go from their morning clinic meetings to their health promotion in the field, to their education sessions. The descriptions of these events are presented in terms of the analytical categories (“objects”; “tools”; etc). Not every event provided substantial observations on each analytical category, so there is not necessarily a section for each category within each activity. The second section then details what participants do when they participate in the Project’s problem-solving meetings. The procedures of the meetings, the tools for problem-solving which are used, and the various kinds of objects of the meetings are all presented. Finally, I will interpret the category of “Project rules as object” as the opportunity for Project workers to exert control over the conditions of their collaboration together.

7.2. The environment of peer education

7.2.1. The physical setting

Abinash clinic is a small, purpose-built one-storey building situated near to Central Avenue, Kolkata's main North-South road, and in a relatively well-to-do part of the red light area. Just outside the clinic, a tea vendor and a snacks vendor set up their stalls each day. The clinic faces on to a wide street, which joins onto the main road, and is quite busy with people and sometimes taxis coming and going from the red light area. The building comprises one room, with an adjoining toilet. It is simply constructed and finished, with unpainted walls and small, barred openings as windows. It gives the impression that the minimum resources necessary have been spent to produce a building which adequately fulfils its function, and to this extent, it contrasts with some other NGOs I visited which had created surroundings comfortable and aesthetically-pleasing to middle-class staff and visitors. The single room functions both as a medical clinic, and as the meeting room for the peer educators. The clinic part is located at one end, with a desk for the clerk, who registers each patient, a desk for the doctor, nurse(s) and coordinator, an examination table, with a curtain for privacy, and cupboards for clinic records and medical equipment. The rest of the room is furnished with fans and narrow benches to sit on, for the peer educators to gather, have meetings, and education sessions.

7.2.2. The division of labour

The peer educator job exists in a traditional hierarchical division of labour. About 30 peer educators are based at this clinic, each responsible for a defined set of houses, and four supervisors oversee about eight peer educators each. One or two co-ordinators (who are non-sex-workers) oversee all of the supervisors' and peer educators' work, and have the ultimate authority over the peer education part of the clinic's work. The doctor has authority over the medical side of the clinic work. Minor tensions and disagreements notwithstanding, expressions of loyalty among employees, to the colleagues at their clinic, are important. So, for example, when a supervisor from Abinash was insulted by one from a different clinic, at a meeting, her two supervisor colleagues from Abinash walked out of the meeting with her. On a different occasion,

peer educators fiercely scolded their colleagues for arriving late to a function involving people from several different areas. They accused the late arrivals of letting down their co-ordinator, making her appear inefficient, due to their lateness. When they are on duty, peer educators have a green jacket to wear, with an identity card pinned to it. They are also allotted bags, umbrellas and ‘flipcharts’ which are books with coloured pictures designed to support their communication with sex workers about protecting their health.

Project workers’ role vis-à-vis the co-ordinator could be described as *professional employees*. They are expected to be able to manage most of their work independently, and to be capable of carrying out their individual responsibilities, and are respected for this. Their suggestions and requests are taken seriously by the other staff. However, the co-ordinator has authority over the Project workers. It is accepted that the co-ordinator has the authority to punish Project workers if their behaviour is not up to scratch, and to issue instructions as to the work to be done by each Project worker. Project workers relate to both the co-ordinator and the doctor in ways that recognise their superiority. When the doctor enters the clinic, during their morning meeting, they usually stand up to chorus “Good morning sir”. During revision of the flipchart, if someone does not appear to be paying attention, the co-ordinator may test her on what has been said, and order her to leave her seat and stand at one side, as punishment. Project workers have to produce monthly reports on their achievements, and a supervisor warned that late submission of a report could be punished by withholding the person’s salary.

This hierarchical structure extends to the relation between clinic and the administrative and decision-making centre of the office, with co-ordinators reporting to the office, and bringing important problems to the office for decisions to be made there. We will see in this chapter that, within the clinic, participants have a certain degree of control over their work, but the overall structure of the work is set by the Project director, whose decisions are taken as authoritative and final. The hierarchical relation extends further to the relation with funding bodies, who also set parameters on the form of the Project’s work. This will be detailed in the following chapter.

Peer educators are paid per half-day’s work. Their starting wage is Rs. 25 (approx £0.32) per half-day, increasing by Rs 5 each year. For supervisors, the increase is Rs. 10 each year. For most peer educators and supervisors, the payment for their clinic work is

not a sufficient income, and most either have supportive regular customers or husbands, or else continue to work as sex workers in the afternoons and evenings. peer educators' duty hours are 10:30 am to 2:00 pm, and their day's work has three separate components: a morning meeting, fieldwork and education session.

7.3. Peer educators' morning meetings

7.3.1. Rules

“Rules” refer to the procedures which enable participants' actions to fit together in a co-ordinated activity. They include established organisational procedures, and informal understandings of how to carry out one's work.

Peer educators and staff start arriving at the clinic from about 10:20 each morning. A roll call takes place at 10:25 or 10:30. Punitive procedures involving loss of salary exist to ensure peer educators' punctual attendance. Following the roll call, the morning meeting takes place until 11 o'clock.

The general purpose of these meetings is to co-ordinate the work of the individual fieldworkers. Peer educators learn of policy or practical changes being planned, they tell each other of their particular successes, or seek help with their particular difficulties. The meetings are generally informal. A supervisor (or sometimes the co-ordinator) often takes the lead to introduce a particular topic, and others join in with their contributions, or issues they want addressed. The co-ordinator usually leaves the peer educators and supervisors to conduct the meeting while she works at her desk. If noise levels get loud due to arguing, the co-ordinator may step in to call for quiet, so that people outside do not hear them arguing. Project workers also chastise each other for chatting during the meeting. If there are no pressing matters to discuss, and participants lapse into informal conversation, the coordinator will usually tell them to revise the flipchart, nominating one of the peer educators to lead the group in going through its content, page by page. Certain professional standards are enforced, or encouraged. During duty hours, Project workers are not allowed to have their hair down, or to smoke in the clinic. They are expected to pay attention, to keep quiet when someone is talking, and to keep the place tidy.

7.3.2. Objects of the meeting (i): Concrete tasks as object

The meetings fulfil several functions within the overall goal of co-ordinating the work of the Project. The first of these, an official and core function, is to generate solutions to immediate problems or challenges that peer educators are facing in carrying out their daily work. A peer educator, or a group of peer educators may bring their problem to the meeting, where colleagues may suggest solutions, or it will be decided that the problem needs to be taken to some other expert or authority. For example, on one occasion, a peer educator brought up the problem of madams who would not let their *adhias* visit the clinic. It was a problem recognised by several others, and participants agreed that it was important to address it. A supervisor compared this problem to the difficulty they had getting pimps on their side, saying that since the Project started having meetings with the pimps, they have become quite supportive. She thus suggested gathering a group of senior Project workers together to go and visit the madams to convince them of the benefits and remove any doubts that the madams or sex workers had. Other examples of problems brought up in the fieldworkers' meetings are the problem of flying sex workers being harassed by local boys, and the question of what to do with a young sex worker who had just been rescued from exploitative madams.

Secondly, by bringing together the co-ordinator and the fieldworkers, the morning meetings offer opportunities for communication between office and field. This communication goes both ways. Notices from the office are read out occasionally. For example, they might announce a forthcoming event, such as a meeting with local youth clubs, to which peer educators are invited, or announce the names of the winners of a drawing competition for the children of sex workers, so that the peer educators who know those children can bring them to the office for their prize. Going the other way, if fieldworkers want to query or negotiate the rules of their job, they can ask the coordinator to bring their request to the Director. On one occasion, for example, supervisors complained about the rule that they have to sign in at 3 o'clock (they work longer hours than peer educators), arguing that they may miss this signing-in time not because they are not working, but because they are in the middle of some work that might not come to an end promptly by 3 o'clock. The co-ordinator said that she would bring this up at a meeting of the Director and co-ordinators. The day before a monthly meeting, the coordinator often asks the morning meeting for any suggestions for the

agenda of the monthly meeting. Finally, meetings are also opportunities for learning or reiterating the Project's policies and procedures. For example, on the day that local committee elections were to be carried out, a supervisor explained the purpose and responsibilities of local committees, and the procedure for elections.

7.3.3. Objects of the meeting (ii): Project rules as object

The third function that the morning meetings fulfil is to assert the ground rules that are the basis of Project workers' collaboration together. This can take the form of making complaints about people who are not adequately fulfilling their role in the Project, or of re-establishing and re-negotiating the ground rules and expectations guiding their collaboration. For example, concerns about the management of the bank collections were raised on two occasions. In one instance, peer educators complained that the staff member responsible for issuing bankbooks was failing to provide books to sex workers who had joined and lodged money. Peer educators felt strongly that failure to quickly provide sex workers with books risked losing their trust, which had been very hard to gain in the first place. Participants agreed, and decided that, if the books were not provided within a week, the staff member would be reported to the (former) Project Director. During my fieldwork, another dimension of debate concerned the various responsibilities of teachers and students in the peer educators' education sessions. Some peer educators complained that they were not getting their proper education classes, as the allocations of people to the different classes was not clear. It was debated whether it was the responsibility of teacher or student to ensure that everyone had a class to attend, and the co-ordinator ordered that teachers and students should jointly work out a definite class allocation within one week.

Establishing the ground rules and roles of their work together does not only take the form of making complaints about others' behaviour. Debates and discussions take place to define the rules of their work. For example, on one occasion, most of the morning meeting was dedicated to negotiating exactly at what time peer educators were expected to be at the clinic. A peer educator who had arrived at 10:25 was told by another that she was late – and this stimulated a heated and prolonged debate over what exactly counted as late. The agreed-on rule was that peer educators will be marked "late" if they arrive after 10:30, and "absent" if they arrive after 10:40. Three days of being marked

“late” amounts to being marked “absent” for one day, and when one is marked “absent”, one is not paid for that day.

Furthermore, in the context of a complex organisation, and one with a drive to empower people to solve their problems locally, the issue of which forum is most appropriate for which kind of problem is quite often raised in response to a report of a particular concrete problem. So, when the problem of the flying sex workers being harassed was brought up, other peer educators challenged the speaker as to why this was being brought up in the morning meeting, when the local committee was supposed to deal with these kinds of problems. In the case of the madams who would not let their *adhias* join, a bank staff member suggested that they should take the problem to the office, but he was rebuffed by a supervisor who was adamant that the peer educators themselves should try their hardest to solve the problem before bringing it to the office, arguing that they should be strong enough to manage this matter. In these debates about which forum is the appropriate one for solving this or that problem, participants are both establishing their knowledge of organisation’s division of labour and are also constituting each other as empowered problem-solvers, who do not need to go to higher levels to solve their problems.

In sum, the meetings function both to solve concrete problems faced in the field, and as sites in which the organisation of fieldwork is itself debated and established. Meta-commentary on how participants ought to participate emerges within meetings. Within the activity system of the morning meetings, attention can be given to a range of different kinds of objects. Attention moves around from one object to another, and something that is the object of attention at one moment (e.g. debating the appropriate forum, or what is “late”), later may become a taken-for-granted rule, guiding peer educators’ participation, guiding where and how they bring up other problems for discussion. If a problem arises with that assumption, then participants may again bring it into debate, in order to change it.

The morning meeting ends with the clinic co-ordinator reading out the names of those sex workers who are due for follow-up in the clinic. Peer educators listen for names of people for whom they are responsible, for their next job will be to go and collect those women.

7.3.4. *The voice of authority as a source of reflection*

The sense of what the Project *should* be, of how Project workers *should* behave, and what rules *should* be followed stems largely from the definitions of the situation promoted by the founder of the Project, Dr Jana, and the leaders of the Project. Dr Jana, called “Sir” by Project workers, commands enormous respect and loyalty. His authority is widely taken for granted among Project workers, although he and the leaders emphasise that he can be argued with. While he is no longer the active director, he is still involved, in a consultative capacity, with the Project. His voice of authority can be heard as the one which asserts the Project rules and rationales, and what is expected of the peer educators, for instance, through his insistence that they recruit more new patients to the clinic, or find new people to promote condom use to, or come up with solutions to their problems locally. In one clinic meeting, the doctor asked the peer educators to learn their flipchart well, because Dr Jana would be coming the next day and might wish to test them on it. In an education session, when a peer educator said that her *babu* did not use condoms, the voice of Dr Jana was invoked as the judge of the wrongfulness of this admission.

Peer educator: They [*babus*] don't use condoms

Teacher: If you as peers say this, then how will you convince ordinary sex workers

Peer educator: Don't say this in front of Sir.

Teacher: He will beat you. Aren't you ashamed?

Peer educator: You must convince your *babu*

(Education session)

The position of outside activists as powerful experts is still present, even in this participatory programme. Interestingly, when the activist's view is that the participants should be taking over control of their Project, the presence of the activist's voice can be a resource to encourage the participants' efforts to control their Project and their community life. So, the principle that problems should be solved locally as far as possible is one that activists have encouraged, and which now is part of the constitution of the Project workers as active, effective, competent problem-solvers. This reflective

position, in which a rule enters into reflective discourse, can arise by invoking the authoritative voice of a leader, whose principles are widely known.

7.4. Peer educators' health-promoting fieldwork

From 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., the peer educators and supervisors do their “fieldwork” – that is, they go out in pairs to their allotted houses to meet with sex workers, and to promote clinic attendance, condom use, and participation in the Project.

7.4.1. Core goals

Peer educators have three core tasks to do during their fieldwork – to bring sex workers to the clinic for check-ups and follow-ups; to convince sex workers to become members of DMSC or to open a bank account; and to educate sex workers about HIV, STDs and condom use. Two fieldworkers are specifically responsible for condom distribution – they sell government condoms to sex workers and madams, and sometimes try to convince household servants that they can make a bit of profit by buying a box of condoms, to sell them on individually. One day a week, all of the peer educators distribute free condoms.

Bringing sex workers to the clinic is seen as peer educators' primary goal. A peer educator, before setting out on her fieldwork said “God bless me so that I can bring in many patients today”. In response to the complaint about their education lessons, a coordinator stated that bringing patients to the clinic was their priority. Gaining new members and savers in the bank is the next priority. A supervisor spoke with pride of “my members”, mentioning a particularly “good member” who saved Rs. 300 per day. Persuading the women of the risks of unprotected sex and the benefits of condom use are also spoken of as important parts of their job, but I would suggest that the concreteness of the feedback on the success of their work – in terms of the recorded number of patients brought by a person, the numbers of members and bank-account holders – encourages greater emphasis on these aspects of their job, in which their work is visibly recorded.

As well as seeking to convince sex workers to take up particular actions, peer educators also seek to convince people of the political messages of the Project, that sex work is work, and that sex workers should unite to support each other. Sometimes, (it seemed for my benefit), supervisors “corrected” the language of sex workers who were speaking to me, telling them not to call their work “bad”. Occasionally, they have extensive arguments about whether sex work is good or bad work – the kinds of arguments detailed in the section on “workers’ rights” in the previous chapter. These messages make sense of prostitution in a way that is more affirming to sex workers, and this is certainly one source of supervisors’ and peer educators’ interest in discussing them. Many Project workers are also aware that this kind of talk is what is expected of them by their “superiors”. Thus, a supervisor informally coached new peer educators in the political messages the day before a monthly meeting, in case the former director, who would be present, asked them about these issues. While the Project is set up in order to constitute new domains of actionability within sex workers’ environments, it also comprises a new environment itself, which sex workers must learn to master.

7.4.2. Additional goals: Advocacy, bank collections & condom distribution

As friends and as Project representatives, peer educators and supervisors also take on a role of giving advice to sex workers and advocating on their behalf, as has been elaborated in the previous chapter. They also act as sex workers’ representatives in interaction with the organisation. So, they accompany sex workers to the clinic and to the meeting with the doctor, and sometimes pay the Rs. 5 clinic charge, for those who cannot afford it. They also sometimes bring individual sex workers’ problems to the coordinator or to weekly meetings for solution.

Two further activities that take place during the fieldwork are the bank collections and condom distribution – with Project workers specialising in each of these jobs. For the bank collections, sex workers are given bank books, and are expected to make daily deposits of a fixed sum, depending on how much they can afford. The peer educators responsible for the bank collections go, in pairs, to the houses they are allotted, collecting money, marking it in the books, and later depositing the money at the office. They say that people deposit between Rs. 5 and Rs. 200 daily. The “bank” functions like a credit union: after saving a certain amount of money, people may borrow a related

amount at a low interest rate, and make regular repayments. The bank collectors explained that it was difficult for sex workers to save their money without a daily collection (and sex workers confirmed this).

Condom distribution is also done by specialists (the Basanti Sena), who, like the peer educators, are responsible for certain houses. They sell condoms at the token price of Rs.1.50 for a box of 5 condoms. They wear orange jackets, so that they are easily identified by potential condom customers. They visit rooms where they know people who buy condoms, and others call out to them, to buy condoms, as they pass by. Madams may buy condoms for their *adhias*, servants sometimes buy a large box, to sell them on for a minimal commission. The ‘Basanti Sena’ sometimes complain about their job. They say that they do not like to carry the heavy boxes of condoms around, and they want to work as peer educators. When others say that they must do the job, they asked that at least, when they take part in some public event, they should be allowed to wear the green jackets like the other peer educators. They do not want to stand out as condom vendors. This may relate to the negative view of condoms that exists.

7.4.3. Tools

In order to meet their various goals, Project workers have various tools available to them. They use information and arguments to convince sex workers to visit the clinic, use condoms, or join the organisation. These arguments have been outlined in the previous chapter. For the most part, the information needed for each of these is provided through their education classes (described below). But the social and argumentative skills are much more informally developed, and the practical details of introducing themselves to sex workers or madams, introducing the topic of safe sex or of the bank, and arguments depend on Project workers’ informal social skills.

The supports offered by the structures of the organisation also offer a resource for Project workers’ fieldwork. If they encounter difficult questions or problems, they have the office to turn to for decisions or advice. So, for example, on one occasion, a woman wanted to know how much a certain medical treatment would cost, and peer educators referred her to the office. On another, an ongoing argument between two *babus*, one of whom was the *babu* of a local committee member, was brought to the office for

resolution. If Project workers encounter a difficulty in carrying out their educational work, such as madams creating obstacles, they can bring them to the clinic, to seek suggestions from their supervisors or coordinator. As I argued in Chapter 4, having access to these valued resources, without necessarily individually being able to solve the problem, is an important source of the empowerment which peer educators can bring to community members.

7.4.4. Rules

In order to gain the opportunities to put those tools into action, peer educators need to proceed in a way that is easily accepted by sex workers, and that engages them. Maintaining good, informally supportive, personal relationships with the sex workers seemed to be very important. Though most peer educators are well-known in their area, sometimes a fieldworker is assigned to a new area, for organisational reasons, usually to replace somebody else who might have taken on a new responsibility such as training. Then it takes time for the new person to get to know the sex workers in that area. In one of the weekly meetings, sex workers complained that a favourite peer educator had been transferred to a different area, but they wanted her back. Personal relationships between peer educators and their local sex workers are valued by the sex workers, and were important for gaining sex workers' assent to being interviewed. They are probably equally important in gaining sex workers' interest in and commitment to Project goals.

Each time I witnessed one of the fieldworkers visiting a sex worker's room to speak with her, they would begin with informal chat, they would often sit down together, and sometimes would be offered tea. On one occasion, as a supervisor was bringing us to the field to look for a potential research participant, she did some health promotion on the way – as my intermediaries often did some of their work while facilitating mine. Upon spotting one of the patients she was responsible for, she went to remind her to take her medicine every day for 15 days. She approached another who she knew, suggesting to her to visit the clinic, and trying to convince her with the medical rationale and the benefits. But the woman flatly refused. Later, the supervisor told us that the woman was annoyed with her because she had invited her to her room, but that because supervisors are always offered food when they visit, she had not gone because she did not want to eat. Accurate or inaccurate in this particular case, this supervisor's

interpretation points to the importance of informal personal relationships in fieldworkers' experience of their health promoting work.

As well as maintaining good personal relationships, effort goes in to ensuring a positive general appraisal of the Project itself – to create a receptive environment for the uptake of the particular activities or ideas promoted by the Project. As I mentioned above, maintaining sex workers' trust in the bank is seen as essential. On one occasion, after a sex worker's problem of conflict with her neighbour had been settled in a weekly meeting in a way that left her dissatisfied, the coordinator visited her to share a snack together and confirm their good relationship. This woman was not a powerful or important figure, yet the coordinator unusually left the clinic to visit her at home. The coordinator sometimes goes out, to talk with pimps or others – by her presence showing that they are taking this individual seriously – if someone needs special attention in order to be brought on board.

7.5. Peer educators' education sessions

At one o'clock, the fieldworkers return to the clinic for their daily education session, which lasts an hour, completing their day's commitment to Project work. They gather on the benches, facing the teacher, who leads the lesson. The teacher is a young woman from the red light area, a non-sex worker, who has received some training from DMSC in the information to be imparted, principles of teaching adults and teaching methods. Their education sessions cover three basic areas: health-promotion information; knowledge about their organisation; and, from the school curriculum, literacy, numeracy and other standard subjects.

7.5.1. Goals

Observation of a teacher training workshop, and interviews with the coordinator of the education programme, suggest that the official aims of the education programme are to produce peer educators knowledgeable about STDs and their prevention, and to produce potential future public representatives of the Project, teachers, nursing sisters, or leaders.

7.5.2. Objects of the education sessions

The contents of the peer educators' flipchart demonstrates the kind of content of their lessons, as it functions more or less as a textbook for many of their education sessions, though it is intended to be a visual resource to back up their communication with sex workers about protecting their health. It consists of several pages of colour illustrations, with captions, and for each picture, the peer educators learn a certain point that they are supposed to make. The flipchart begins by introducing the clinic, showing that the people there are friendly and welcoming, and explaining which kinds of illnesses are and are not treated there. Then there is detailed explanation of the different symptoms and outcomes of the various STDs and HIV/AIDS, and an emphasis that STDs are treatable and should be treated early, and that they are transmitted sexually, and are preventable through condom use. The importance of taking the full course of a treatment is mentioned, as is the importance of treating one's partner also. The value of remaining healthy by using condoms is argued in terms of sex workers' loss of earning time, if they fall sick. That STDs are not always outwardly visible is mentioned, followed by the suggestion that sex workers should go for a blood test every 3 months, even if they do not experience any symptoms. An anticipated interpretation of skin rashes as evidence of poisoning by an enemy is countered with an explanation as a curable STD, and it is emphasised that the clinic cannot work magic – when a disease is cured once, that does not mean one cannot suffer from it again.

Usually, the health-related information is presented in a factual and abstract way, without stressing why sex workers or peer educators need to know these things, or how peer educators might go about conveying these things to sex workers. When they are learning about their organisation, the content of the class is somewhat more closely related to the job skills that peer educators need. They learn about the benefits of organisation, the advantages of Usha bank, the various branches of DMSC. In learning the advantages of Usha, for example, what they are learning is also what they need to tell sex workers, to convince them to join. In these lessons, they also learn of the political position of DMSC, with regard to issues such as legalisation and workers' rights, and the story of the founding of DMSC, including the reasons that they need organisation. The third element of their education is traditional literacy, numeracy, and the school curriculum of West Bengal. Students are divided into classes of different

skill levels, and this division is made on the basis of their literacy level – a criterion which reveals that schooling is the underlying model of the education classes, and which leads to class groups very mixed on other criteria, such as knowledge of the organisation of DMSC, or leadership in organisational activities.

7.5.3. Rules

The dominant mode of interaction in the education sessions is a teacher-led question-answer format, on the information that the peer educators are expected to know. Sometimes the teacher answers her own questions, and when nobody else can answer, or for topics that they have not covered before, the teacher will present a short lecture-style talk on the topic. The content of the lessons focuses on information rather than argumentation, skills or strategies. In this system, the learners are positioned like school children.

In the classes working with the flipchart, the emphasis is on accurate grasping of the information contained in the flipchart. The teacher asks questions such as “Why will we go to the clinic?”; “Pain in the lower abdomen is a symptom of what?”; “Are gonorrhoea and syphilis dangerous diseases?” And peer educators answer. Factual information is foregrounded. There is no discussion of arguments or strategies to convince sex workers or madams of the benefits of clinic attendance, or suggestions of arguments that sex workers might use with their clients. The contents of the class are not attuned to the precise needs of peer educators, which are to influence sex workers and others, not simply to acquire precise medical knowledge.

The inappropriateness of a didactic method for communicating about STDs and clinic attendance is implicitly expressed by peer educators, few of whom seem to actually use their flipchart to educate sex workers. In fact, supervisors discouraged peer educators from using the flipcharts the way they learn to use them in lessons. During one morning meeting while they were revising the flipchart, a supervisor interrupted the peer educators to tell them to think of what they would say as an introduction before using the flipchart. Another joined in, telling them not to be so mechanical, not to read from the book, picture by picture, but to chat more informally, to summarise the information in one’s own words, and gave a demonstration of how to do it informally. Some peer

educators agreed that the book was bad, some of its contents were confusing, and the pictures of STDs made them feel dirty, so, they said, they usually put the book away, and explain in their own way. Thus the education sessions do not seem to be providing the specific tools which peer educators need in order to carry out their health-promoting work. Instead, information is provided, for peer educators to put to use in their own ways. Peer educators learn communication skills from each other, but informally, and not within the education session itself. From an activity theory perspective, knowledge, in order to be useful, needs to be a tool adapted to a particular action in a particular context. More than facts, peer educators need practical knowledge that helps sex workers to avoid HIV and that helps the peer educators to constitute HIV prevention as an interest for sex workers. I have shown in the previous chapters that the usefulness of the Project arises from its provision of concrete resources. The knowledge being presented in the education sessions is not formulated in such a useable way.

7.5.4. Further pursuing the rules

Given the strong focus on factual knowledge, the education sessions are not used as opportunities for the direct discussion of issues of gender, sexuality, self-empowerment, or other conceptual issues that a conscientisation approach might expect to be important. During one education session, while covering the issue of treating one's partner for STDs as well as oneself, a peer educator brought up the problem of convincing one's *babu* to use condoms or to visit the clinic. Other peer educators agreed that this was difficult, one asserting that few peer educators' *babus* consented to visit the clinic for checkups. From my perspective, this presented an opportunity to discuss issues about how peer educators can exercise power in their private lives, or to share strategies for convincing one's *babu* to take up healthier behaviours. However, this opportunity was not taken up. Instead, the teacher scolded the peer educators for making baseless claims and proceeded with the content of the flipchart. In the education classes, the formal and official DMSC position on issues of health, sexuality, prostitution, the benefits of organisation, and the structures of DMSC are learned. The official position is that *babus* of peer educators must of course attend the clinic, and the alternative position, which seemed to need discussing, was not tolerated. While there may not be opportunities within the education sessions to discuss the complexities of such personal

or Project-related issues, these topics are addressed in other fora, such as the formal meetings, and informal conversation.

Compared to my ideals of participatory and problem-focused intervention, the factual focus of the education sessions was puzzling. In an interview with the coordinator of the education programme, I asked why they focussed so much on factual knowledge about STDs, and on the school curriculum, rather than the job-specific skills of interacting with madams and sex workers. She responded that the peer educators knew better than teachers or coordinators how to interact with sex workers and madams, so therefore the outsiders could teach them nothing in this respect. She explained further that the peer educators were the first diagnosers, and would become total health workers, perhaps later becoming teachers or nursing sisters, so they need to know all of the medical details. As for their literacy and general knowledge classes, peer educators have to fill in report forms regarding the work they have achieved, and some of them will progress within the organisation to gain greater responsibility and public exposure, so they will need those general skills. Moreover, the education sessions are intended to promote peer educators' general empowerment, to which literacy and school-knowledge contribute. The coordinator's respect of sex workers' expertise in interacting within the red light area justified why persuasion of sex workers or madams was not a part of the education classes. This betrays an understanding of the classes as for the purpose of transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the students, rather than for collective discussion of problems and collective elaboration of means of solving the problems.

7.6. Project meetings

Weekly "Central Committee" meetings are held, on Friday afternoons, at the DMSC office. The office is located on the border of Sonagachi red light area. All of the administrative work is done here, and it also includes a large flat roof area which is used for the meetings. Usually about 45 to 60 people attend the meetings. The bulk of participants are made up of peer educators and supervisors from the nearby intervention fields of Sonagachi. Project workers from other intervention sites in Kolkata are officially supposed to attend, but, in practice, they attend only when an issue concerning their field will be brought up in the meeting. Local committee members and ordinary sex workers attend when they wish to raise a particular issue of concern to them. The

meetings are chaired by experienced sex worker leaders. In general, non-sex worker staff do not attend – Project workers and office staff are proud that sex workers have become empowered to produce effective solutions to their problems without the need for non-sex workers' input. Monthly meetings are also held, to deal with issues confronting the organisation as a whole, which are usually chaired by the Project Director, and attended by co-ordinators as well as by sex workers. Participants sit on the ground, facing the front of the meeting where the chairpersons and sex worker leaders sit, in chairs. Meetings usually begin at about 3 o'clock and continue for about 2 hours. As 5 o'clock approaches, people begin to stand up, to stretch, to chat, or they leave to go to the bathroom. The meeting is usually brought to an end soon after this change of atmosphere. Cups of tea, and occasionally snacks or sweets are distributed, which help to sustain energy levels.

I will begin by describing the general procedures or rules through which the meetings are carried out. I will then turn to discussing the objects of the meetings. There are several different kinds of objects to be discussed. The concrete tasks to be fulfilled by the meetings are to solve problems brought to the meeting by sex workers, or other residents of the red light area and to communicate between administrative staff and field staff on policy decisions. The Project work becomes the object of the meetings when Project workers bring specific problems they are having in carrying out their work to the meeting for solution. Project work also becomes an object of the meeting in an informal way, as opportunities to debate the ground rules of their collaboration emerge in the course of discussion of other topics. Finally, politicised narratives about the Project, its past and future sometimes become the object of meetings, in an explicit educative effort.

Within each of the categories of "objects", a very disparate range of objects are brought to the meetings. The uniqueness and diversity of the problems does not permit an overall summary of them. Instead, I present a few examples of each kind of problem in this chapter. The problems and their solutions are very useful as illustrative both of life in the red light area, and of the Project's approach to solving problems. A full list of problems and solutions is presented in Appendix 5.

7.6.1. Goals

The official primary goals of the meetings are to solve local disputes among sex workers or between sex workers and others, to solve any problems that local sex workers have, and to solve any difficulties that Project workers are having in their work. People come to the meetings with the goal of having their problems solved. The sex worker leaders who chair the meetings have the goals of defending and supporting sex workers and coming to a fair decision so that DMSC is respected.

7.6.2. Division of labour

The conduct of the meetings is organised by a set of well-defined roles. At each meeting, a chairperson is nominated, who must introduce herself, open, and formally close the meeting. Anybody who wants to leave the meeting early has to obtain her permission. The person nominated is usually someone who has little experience of public speaking, and she is coached through her responsibilities by one of the sex worker leaders, who tell her to stand up, speak loudly, and say “*Namaskar*, my name is I am a sex worker from”. The discussions are then effectively chaired by one of the experienced leaders, who call for the problems to be explained, cross-question relevant people, summarise arguments and make the decisions on solutions. At the large meetings, a microphone is needed. People are generally reluctant to use it, and part of the training that new local committee members get is to speak into the microphone. The meeting procedures are designed to give people experience and confidence in public speaking, as well as to solve the particular problems that arise. At one of the monthly meetings, chaired by the Project Director, at which coordinators were doing most of the talking, the director asked for peer educators to explain the problems rather than coordinators, in an effort to promote their confidence and assertiveness. Peer educators spoke up at this point, but later in the discussion, when solving the problem, it was again mainly the coordinators who verbally participated.

The first business of the meeting is to formulate the agenda. Participants who have come with a problem to be addressed are asked to state their issue at the start, a list of the problems is made, and the problems are then dealt with in turn. The problems which are brought to the meeting are explained either by the person with the complaint, or by a

Project worker who is representing that person. If a sex worker is shy about public speaking, her representative might speak on her behalf. Alternatively, she may be encouraged, told that everyone is like a family here, and that they want to hear her problem. The speaker generally gives a long narrative of her problem, and may be interrupted with questions from other participants or by the leader who is chairing the meeting, to find out important points of her complaint and the situation. If necessary, the meeting will also hear from the other side of the problem (if there is an adversary). It is understood that one person should speak at a time, that each person should have their chance to speak, and that chatting to one's neighbour is inappropriate. If these background rules are transgressed, as happens in heated arguments, other participants are likely to assert them.

Generally, participants expect the leader chairing the meeting to produce a solution, and the discussion is directed through this leader. It is usually the more experienced meeting participants who join in to offer suggestions or to ask questions. Sometimes these are minimal, and the meeting takes the form of a discussion between the leader and the person bringing the problem. At other times, the majority of the meeting participants get involved in an issue. Critical challenges to the leader are usually an acceptable part of the debate, and good suggestions from meeting participants other than the chairperson may be taken up. In one case, a meeting participant criticised the leader for not attending the local meeting held about the problem. This problem caused a long heated debate, which a co-ordinator interrupted to say that they were getting nowhere, and to ask the local secretary to suggest a solution. While dissent from the leaders is possible, they are also treated with respect, and on one occasion, a challenge to the Project Director, about why Project workers were not receiving their salaries, made by a supervisor, was met with a rebuke from a co-ordinator who said that the supervisor should show more respect to the Director.

7.6.3. Problems brought to meetings by sex workers & their solutions

For community members not directly involved in the Project, the meetings function as fora in which problems such as inter-personal conflicts or disputes can be solved. Sex workers, madams, and sometimes landladies bring their problems to the meeting, hoping that DMSC might resolve their dispute fairly (or in favour of the person bringing

the problem), or so that somebody from the Project might advocate on her behalf, or might have some expertise in how to solve such a problem. During the nineteen meetings which I observed, nine separate problems or complaints which sex workers had were brought to the meetings. In four of these cases, the sex worker herself attended the meeting to present her problem, otherwise, the problem was presented by a peer educator representing the person with a problem. What is notable about this set of problems is that it is difficult to make any meaningful set out of them: the problems brought to the meeting are highly variable and unique. I will present here just a few examples of the problems brought and solutions reached.

What these problems do have in common is that they typically concern conflictual relationships between different red light area residents. In one instance, a sex worker's sister had eloped with a local man, the woman was concerned for her sister's safety and sought DMSC's help. It was decided that the woman's photo would be circulated to peer educators, and a group would accompany the sex worker, to talk to that man's family, in the role of the sex worker's advocates. Another case concerned the financial affairs of the three children of a peer educator who had died. The dispute was over what to do with the peer educator's possessions, how much money the landlady owed the children, and what to do with that money. They decided to sell the possessions, and keep the money in the children's name in the Project's bank. A major problem brought to one of the meetings was that two sex workers had been arrested in a police raid. It was decided to call a big meeting of all the relevant DMSC members in that local area, which was likely to lead to a group of experienced women to go and negotiate with the police.

7.6.4. Problems of other community members, and their solutions

During the observation period, there were five instances of problems of non-sex worker community members brought to the meetings. Again, these typically concern local difficulties or conflicts, with the hope that DMSC, with its expertise, will know how to solve the problem, or will mediate between the disputants, to reach a solution. The willingness of other community members to bring their problems to the meetings for solution evidences the respect with which the Project is regarded locally, and the legitimacy accorded to their decisions. For instance, a madam brought problems she

was having with her *adhias* for the consideration of the meeting, on two successive occasions. Two sex worker sisters had borrowed money from the madam and had then run away. The meeting agreed that the money should be repaid, either by the sex workers' new madam, or by the sex workers themselves. Local peer educators would visit the new madam to explain this.

On occasion, people who are not directly involved in the sex trade also seek the Project's support. One local family of non-sex workers asked for DMSC's help to retrieve the dowry paid for a daughter's marriage to a man they subsequently discovered to be impotent. The meeting agreed to send somebody to represent them at the police station. A further problem, which might become one so common that a policy is needed on it, concerns the newly established programme of providing anti-retroviral drugs at a reduced price, by the Project's counselling centre. The problem was that an HIV positive person could not afford the drugs, and peer educators representing him asked if he could be treated for free. It was decided that the matter should be referred to the committee of the centre for a decision. Here, the understanding of a division of roles between different sectors of the Project was put to good use, to send the problem to the relevant committee. A similar understanding is evident when the decision is made to call a local meeting in response to a problem, and let that local meeting solve the problem.

7.6.5. Rules for effective and fair problem-solving

Despite the heterogeneity and specificity of the problems brought to the meetings, there are certain routes to producing a solution, and principles for solving problems that are widely known and applied to the disparate problems that arise. The three main routes to solving a problem are: a sex worker leader, or a group of local Project workers may advocate on behalf of a sex worker; a local meeting of all concerned parties and DMSC representatives may be called; or a conflict can be solved in the meeting, by a procedure of getting evidence and coming to a fair solution. Additionally, if the problem is deemed to be of a kind that can be solved by the local peer educators or committee members, they may be assigned the task of solving the problem locally.

For the solution of problems within the meetings, three principles used to produce acceptable solutions to conflicts can be picked out: the use of “evidence”, the importance of “fairness”, and the principle that personal circumstances may be taken into account in deciding on a solution to a problem, but it is not appropriate that personal interests of Project workers enter into the decision-making process.

“Evidence” is the important concept constraining the production of fair solutions to conflicts within meetings. Conflicts can be dismissed from the meeting if there is no evidence as to which side is in the right. Witnesses are an important form of evidence, and people bringing problems are encouraged to have witnesses. Evidence consists of facts about what happened when, rather than general accusations. The leaders who chair the meeting are skilled in cross-questioning, to find out the key details of the issue, from both points of view, and/or potential motives. A problem of interpersonal conflict between two sex workers, for example, was dismissed from the meeting, because taunting, in the absence of a physical fight or other exploitation, was not felt to be serious enough, and because there was no evidence to support either side.

A principle of fairness also operates. People make complaints if they suspect “partiality” to be going on, particularly if they suspect that a Project worker is being favoured over an ordinary sex worker. A sex worker who had a conflict with the president of the local committee complained to a meeting that this president was partisan and unfair. She also mistakenly suspected that DMSC could get the police to drop a case which had been filed against that person. In the problem of the peer educator who had recently died, one of the issues was what to do with her furniture. The suggestion that her things should be given away to people who were her friends was rejected on the grounds of unfairness. It was decided that they should be sold, by people offering prices for the things they wanted. Fairness often means in accordance with existing norms in the red light area, and thus, fairness may lead to decisions that do not necessarily favour sex workers. For instance, when sex workers had left a madam while owing her money, it was assumed that they should pay that money back to the madam. Or in the case of Radha, who had fled from two exploitative madams in turn, and where the first madam had demanded compensation from the second, the decision was to try to get the first madam to repay the money to the second, but if that failed, decision-makers agreed that Radha would have to pay it. Such “fairness” is thus one of the ways that the

Project ensures its acceptability and legitimacy among the more powerful actors within the red light area.

In formulating the appropriate, fair, solution to a problem, personal circumstances may be taken into account, such as the extent to which a person can actually afford to pay up, given her own financial responsibilities, for example. When the problem of how much money the landlady of the peer educator who had died owed to the woman's children was being discussed, the issue of how much the landlady had earned from the room in the meantime was debated at considerable length. Although it was not related to the accounts between the landlady and the peer educator's children, this issue was given so much attention in order to establish whether the landlady had sufficient earnings to make a large payment to the children or not. While personal circumstance may be taken into account in deciding how to resolve a matter, purely personal problems are not considered suitable for the Project to solve. When a sex worker asked for the Project's help to prevent her boyfriend from leaving her, the chairperson said that this was a matter of the heart, and not one that DMSC could intervene in. Likewise, Project workers' personal interests rarely feature in the meeting's discussions. It was an instance, notable for its rarity, when a supervisor argued on the basis of her personal financial circumstance (rather than on the financial needs of sex workers in general) that a particular proposal about salaries was not acceptable that brought to my attention the norm that obviously self-serving issues or arguments were largely excluded from the public meetings.

Finally, the meetings are also seen as an opportunity for Project workers to learn how to solve problems locally, by witnessing the solution of problems. Some of the leaders of the meetings remind participants that they can apply these problem-solving tools in their own work. When a madam complained that sex workers had taken a loan from her, and then left without repaying it, the sex worker leader chairing the meeting gave advice to madams not to give loans to sex workers, because it could cause this kind of trouble. At one meeting, the sex workers chairing the meeting had decided not to discuss a particularly difficult problem due to absence of any Central Committee member, but one of the supervisors suggested that it should be discussed even if they would not solve it there and then, because then people may become aware of this kind of problem. So it was discussed, as a learning opportunity. This suggests that some participants are well

aware of the function of their meetings as opportunities for learning and sharing experience and strategies. As well as producing solutions to individual problems, the meetings function to provide other problem-solvers (peer educators, local committee members) with tools, resources, principles or examples for their own problem-solving work. On occasion, the discussion of a problem incorporated warnings to other peer educators to avoid such problems, or anticipated problems that might occur so that peer educators might be prepared for them.

While the problems brought to meetings are very unique and disparate, the Project has generated a set of widely applicable problem-solving resources. Sending experienced sex workers as advocates, or calling local meetings, or implementing principles of “fairness” and “evidence” are problem-solving skills that can generalise to produce effective and accepted solutions to new problems, when they arise.

7.6.6. Organisational policy as the object of the meetings

As well as functioning to solve community problems, the meetings are also used to convey organisational policy, or to bring difficult organisational decisions to the Project workers for discussion. In these cases, the functioning of the organisation, is explicitly the object of the meeting. The meetings are sites for communication between the administrative and leadership side of the organisation and the grassroots workers, and this communication may take an educative form, or the form of a debate. The educative function is served when organisational policies or procedures are rehearsed. For example, before elections to the central committee were to take place, an explanation and discussion of the procedure of the ballot was given in a weekly meeting. When important decisions are to be communicated to Project workers, this is usually done in the monthly meetings. In one such meeting, the yearly accounts were read out, with congratulations to peer educators for recruiting so many members. In another, a decision to form an Executive Committee was announced, which would take important decisions and convey them to Project workers. The Project workers agreed on the importance of the committee, adding that they will complain if they do not know what is happening, and that it is absolutely necessary to have a representative from each field on the committee. In this case, Project workers had some input into how the idea of an Executive Committee would be implemented. Project workers were also consulted,

when, due to a change in funding structure, less money was made available for salaries. The Project was negotiating with the funding agency, trying to get the same amount as previously, refusing to take the funds until the money available for salaries was increased. The Director brought the issue to a monthly meeting, to ask whether people could wait longer for their salaries, or whether they would accept the demands of the funding agency, and let 6 people lose their jobs. This decision seemed to be open to some negotiation, although the Director made clear his opinion that they should not give in to the funders' demands yet. In these examples, the work of the Project, in terms of an organisational policy or procedure was brought to the meeting explicitly, to communicate a decision, or to debate an issue.

7.6.7. Project workers' problems in carrying out their work as object

Another route through which the Project's work becomes the object of the meetings is when Project workers bring problems they are having in carrying out their work to the meetings, looking for solutions. They seek suggestions or support in solving their work-related problems, or use the meeting to draw attention to colleagues' responsibilities or organisational structures that need modification or improvement. Twelve of such problems concerning the functioning of the daily work of the Project took place within the 19 meetings observed. On one occasion, Project workers reported that few people were saving with the bank, and they were given advice to carefully build trust, be always helpful, and reliably available for lodgements or withdrawals. Other times, complaints were made that certain Project staff (teachers and bank staff) were not turning up for their duties. After the meeting where the complaint was made about the teachers, the sex worker leader chairing the meeting went with the people complaining to speak to the co-ordinator of the education programme. On occasion, Project workers use the meeting to make demands on the organisation. At one meeting, peer educators complained that they had not received the bags and umbrellas which they were due, and the chair asked them to be patient as there were not sufficient funds available at the time. At another, local committee members asked if they could use money from the membership fees gathered locally to purchase the tea and biscuits necessary when a local committee meeting had to be called, explaining that otherwise, the secretary and president always end up paying for the snacks out of their own pocket. It was decided that a limited amount of local membership dues could be used to pay for refreshments.

As mentioned above, on another occasion, a supervisor challenged the Director about the delay in receiving their salaries.

In these varying ways, the meetings provide a forum for Project workers to establish the procedures of their work together, that is, to exert control over the conditions of their collaboration together. Some of these procedures (such as efforts to build trust), are more open to their control than others (such as their salaries).

7.6.8. Emergence of Project work as object in the course of problem-solving

Not only are work-related problems explicitly brought to meetings for solution, but, sometimes, during the discussion of a concrete problem, an opportunity arises to discuss the procedures of the organisation, even though those procedures were not explicitly on the agenda for the meeting. As noted above, sometimes in the course of solving a problem, the sex worker leader chairing the meeting might use the problem to make a more general point about Project policy or the kinds of problems and solutions that Project workers should be generating. So, when a problem concerning Project workers' efforts to rescue a minor girl arose, one of the sex worker leaders took up the opportunity to explain the organisation's policy on minors.

But the most common way in which the Project work emerges as the object of discussion is when the presentation of a particular problem stimulates one of the other participants to raise the issue of which forum is most appropriate for which kind of problem. Thus, a common reflective line of discussion concerns the appropriateness of bringing a problem to one's superiors for solution versus solving it oneself. A response to someone's reported problem often includes a suggestion that the person should be empowered enough to solve that problem herself by now. Or, if people seek the support of the non-sex-worker office staff, their peers may assert that the Project workers should be able to solve the problem.

For instance, in one meeting, a leader began describing the procedures for an upcoming local election. Project workers discussed how the procedure would be managed so that there could be no cheating. In response to the question of who would keep the key to the ballot box, one person suggested that someone from the office (i.e. non-sex-worker

staff) could keep the key, another person immediately queried why they would have to rely on the office staff, couldn't they manage it themselves? In other cases, Project workers queried the urgency of problems brought to the meeting, suggesting that they should be sorted out at the level of the local committee. A peer educator asked the local president how her local committee was, and she said she was not on speaking terms with all of the members. She was told that she had to overcome personal differences in order to carry out her role properly. Further, it was suggested that the new local secretaries and presidents should have a meeting to learn from each other how to solve problems, so that more problems could be solved locally instead of centrally. Similar discussions are held in the context of the clinic meetings, and again, both establish the organisation's division of labour, and remind participants that they are expected to try to solve problems themselves.

7.6.9. The political rationale of the Project as object

The goals of the organisation (whether health-focused goals, goals for the meeting, or longer-term, organisational mission views) generally remain implicit during the meetings. But occasionally, the problems discussed are interpreted by a sex worker leader present, in a politicised way. For instance, as well as producing a concrete solution to a sex worker's problem of being threatened by her neighbours, on their discovery of her work, one of the leaders also said to the meeting that the problem was due to criminalisation of prostitution, and that if this was removed, then these problems would not arise. She said that today it was this particular woman who was facing the problem, tomorrow it could be any of the sex workers.

When there were few or no problems to discuss, the chair or other leader might take the opportunity to rehearse the story of the founding of DMSC, to remind participants of its purpose, rationale, goals and procedure, or might retell the arguments for the political goals of workers' rights and recognition, or the arguments that sex work is work, or the argument for organisation and how it supports sex workers' condom use. The meetings, then, provide an opportunity for learning the new politicising discourse that has been discussed at length in the previous chapter.

7.7. Conclusion

In describing the concrete activities through which the Project takes place, this chapter has identified a set of resources, in the form of rules and a division of labour, which enable the coordination of Project workers' joint activity. In order to have access to the problem-solving resources of the meetings, and in order to co-ordinate their activities at the clinic, Project workers also need to be familiar with the rules of the Project. At the simplest level, they have to be punctual, but they also have to know how problems are expected to be presented, what counts as evidence, and how to narrate the details of a problem to facilitate its solution. A hierarchical division of labour provides clear definitions of the various participants' roles, their relation to each other, and which issues they do and do not have authority over.

By following these rules and the division of labour, the Project workers are incorporated into the Project, so that their action fits in with that of other Project workers. The Project rule that problems should be solved as locally as possible is a way of constituting Project workers as empowered Project workers. This rule embodies the Project's ideology that sex workers should be empowered to solve their own problems. The rule brings the ideology, frequently elaborated at a discursive level, into practice, demanding of participants that they should be acting in a certain way, namely solving problems locally.

And to what extent do Project workers have control over the conditions of their collaboration together? When do participants discuss the conditions of their joint action? They do so in a straightforward way, usually, by bringing to a meeting the problems which they are having in carrying out their work, and seeking solutions to those problems. When they seek advice on a problem they are involved in, or make a complaint that someone is not doing their work properly, or disagree over the official time at which work starts, they are extending their control over the conditions of their joint action. In solving problems that come up with carrying out their concrete work, they may re-construct, or re-assert the rules governing their joint action. The founder of the Project, and the official mission statement of the Project are important sources for the reflection upon the rules and the rationales of Project workers' collaboration together. Knowledge of how Project workers *should* be behaving and talking, as defined

by the founder of the Project, is used to reflectively enforce those rules on each other. Essential to learning and re-constructing the rules is the opportunity provided by the clinic meetings and the weekly meetings, as places to bring up any problems that Project workers are having with their work. The social resource of meetings is what enables Project workers to learn, assert and renegotiate the conditions of their collaboration.

Chapter eight

Participation in context

The focus of the previous chapters has been on the point at which actors, sex workers and Project workers, take an action upon a problem. In taking these actions as my focus, I have given little attention to the structuring of those actions by their location within a community and societal context. I have emphasised the success of the Sonagachi Project, and have referred so far to factors internal to the Project as processes enabling such success. But, when so many other projects, with similar philosophies and activities, in similar circumstances have failed (e.g. Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; Campbell, 2003), why has this project been so successful? Are there factors peculiar to the Kolkata context which have enabled the Project's work? And how have local and national conditions constrained the Project's work?

This chapter situates the work of the Sonagachi Project within the wider context of the societal activity systems within which it functions. If we take the Project as the actor, its core goal is to use a set of resources to protect the health and security of sex workers. It does this through providing tools to support the daily work of peer educators and problem-solvers. Thus it constitutes a local activity system which joins Project workers to sex workers in a supportive relation. However, the Project is situated within the complex constraints of a red light area with its own social organisation. The Project's health promotion activities have to take account of, and engage with, the interests of other actors: those who are powerful in the political organisation of the red light area, those who related to sex workers through the hierarchical economic relation organising the sale of sex, and the funding agencies which make possible the Project's work. I have argued in Chapter 3 that, to the extent that the Project has to engage with these other groups, we can consider them as taking part in activity systems together, as collaborator-adversaries with divergent interests but a partially shared object. These activity systems reflect not only local conditions, but also their position within existing societal conditions.

Three sets of questions guide this chapter. Firstly, it asks: What is the nature of the relation between the Project and its collaborator-adversaries? And how does the Project adjust its activity to avoid conflict with its collaborator-adversaries? Secondly, it asks: How does the Project's situation in wider societal contexts structure the form of its activity? And thirdly, it asks: Is the Project gaining any control over the conditions in which it is embedded? These questions will be addressed through considering the Project's participation in three fractured activity systems.

- (i) The activity system which emerges around the political organisation of the red light area, and the interest in an ordered neighbourhood.
- (ii) The activity system which emerges around the economic transaction of the sale of sex, and the interest in the successful exchange of sex for money.
- (iii) The activity system which emerges around the funding agencies' and Project's interest in an effective Project for sex workers.

8.1. Analytic Procedure

The analysis for this chapter draws freely from all of the datasets, in an attempt to build up a multifaceted picture of the complex context of the Project's activity. Key informant interviews with leaders and founders of the Project and with representatives of funding bodies provided important information on the context of the Project's foundation. Background information was also gleaned from Project documentation. And the full dataset of interviews, group discussions and ethnographic notes were analysed according to the following codes referring to contextual constraints: "background to the Project"; "funding context"; "locals' response to the Project"; "business norms"; "the Project changes local context". For the most part, the discussion presented here is ethnographic. It takes the form of observations on community life, not systematic presentation of individuals' or groups of people's perspectives (as was done in Chapters 5 and 6). The unit of analysis is the whole community, and all sources of data were used to build up a comprehensive picture of the workings of the Project in its activity systems with its collaborator-adversaries.

8.2. The political activity system of the red light area

Through the Project's actions of solving sex worker's conflicts with their neighbours, or representing sex workers in disputes with more powerful people, the Project enters into the domain of informal policing or civic organisation of the red light area. Prior to the Project's foundation, and continuing throughout its operation, there have been other powerful local organisations which also see their role as that of maintaining an ordered neighbourhood. These are the political parties, and associated "youth clubs". Local men, mostly sons and *babus* of sex workers, are the members of these clubs, who define their role as providing the civic organisation of the neighbourhood, carrying out activities on behalf of the whole community. Thus, in preparation for the major yearly festivals (Kalipuja, Durgapuja, Diwali), club members collect subscriptions from sex workers and all local residents, to pay for the clay statues and decorations which communities all over Kolkata put up at this time of year. They may also organise other events, such as drawing competitions for children, or blood donation camps. Near to the Project's office, the local club has put up a fish tank, for decorative purposes. The clubs are also linked with political parties. The political parties are interested in the clubs because they have a lot of influence on sex workers' votes. Being a paid-up member of a political party entitles a local resident to the support of that party. Within one red light area, there may be two or more different clubs with different party allegiances. Party officers can help people in simple matters like obtaining a ration card, which sex workers need in order to access the government-subsidised basic foodstuffs, and which also can be used as identity papers, useful to immigrant sex workers. The political party is also called upon as a support in disputes, such as disputes between tenants and landladies. In these ways, the clubs and parties contribute to having an organised and orderly neighbourhood. But their power is not necessarily used to the benefit of sex workers. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, local men from the clubs and political parties in some areas are feared on the basis that they use their power to exploit sex workers, or on the basis that they punish sex workers in their self-appointed role as guardians of the orderliness of an area.

The activity of the local club members, as club members, is directed toward the object of controlling the orderliness of the red light area, and maintaining their position of power in the red light area. This may be done through getting their party candidates

elected, through forcefully or violently asserting their power, or through gaining recognition as effective problem solvers with whom people wish to align themselves. In the previous chapters, I have claimed that the Sonagachi Project has become a significant resource for solving local problems and conflicts in the red light area, recognised by both sex workers and their adversaries as an organisation that must be taken seriously. As such, the Project has entered into the activity system of the political or civic organisation of the red light area, with an interest in maintaining orderliness, and avoiding or solving problems. The Project's interest in orderliness for the protection of sex workers can come into conflict with the clubs' definition of an orderly neighbourhood. While in the previous chapter, I outlined the internal workings of the Sonagachi Project which have enabled it to become a force for solving community problems, I did not account for how it is that such a powerful new organisation gained local legitimacy, in a context of already existing powerful organisations. Thus, I aim here to situate the Project's problem-solving within the context of the existing community organisational structures of the red light area.

To define the activity system in this instance, we have the Project, the local clubs and political parties making up a fractured community, which is brought together by virtue of an interest in maintaining the order of the red light area, each member recognising the contribution of the other members to maintaining that order and each acknowledging that they need to take account of the other's powers, in order to maintain their own. Similar problems are brought to the Project and to the clubs and parties, who have some similar resources with which to solve the problems. However, the actors usually act separately to solve the problems (the Project does not consult the club members usually, nor vice versa). But since they are involved in similar activities of problem-solving, they have to have a relationship with each other. This relationship is institutionalised, so that conflicts are avoided, by having a recognised division of labour, and co-ordinating themselves by a set of rules. The division of labour defines which kinds of problems and issues are the territory of the clubs, and which the territory of the Project. The rules by which they understand the appropriate form of their activity are shared by virtue of being a part of the local culture of how neighbourhoods are organised, and by negotiation between the Project and the leaders of the local clubs and parties.

8.2.1. Defining a division of labour unthreatening to the local clubs and parties

We have seen that the Project is now up and running as a successful and powerful organisation, solving sex workers' problems, which local clubs and parties need to take account of. But how did it manage to attain such power and legitimacy? How has it managed to get a foothold within this existing powerful organisational structure? How has the Project been allowed to become a significant organisation, if the local clubs and parties already had control over much of the red light area?

The Project was initiated as a response to a biomedical and behavioural survey of sex workers. The Project's initial focus was on health issues, which made it relatively unthreatening to the local power brokers. By specifically defining its remit as protecting the health of the sex workers, and by asserting that the Project did not seek to upset the structure of the sex trade or the organisation of the area, the Project was able to start up without resistance from the local power brokers. The founders of the Project emphasised to club members that if sex workers died of AIDS, then the clubs would lose their influence. One of the local youth clubs, Palatak, provided the premises for the initial sexual health clinic, which turned into a long-term arrangement. With this particular club, the relationship has been supportive and productive. It was the definition of a division of labour, in which the Project's role was defined as being confined to the area of health, and thus, not challenging to the clubs' political interests in the red light area, that enabled this relationship in which the club and Project collaborate around their interest in community service. At first, the Project had to carefully define that its interests were not opposed to those of the clubs. With other clubs, however, more difficult relationships have ensued, particularly where it is the behaviour of club members which constitutes the problems that sex workers bring to the Project for solution. In these instances, the rules which give legitimacy to a community organisation facilitate the Project to assert its interests.

8.2.2. Facilitated by widely accepted rules of community organisation

The careful efforts to define the Project's community role as restricted to looking after sex workers' health partially accounts for their acceptability to the clubs. But still to be explained is the Project's success in constituting a complex organisation which has

gained sex workers' loyalty, their confidence and their understanding of the sort of role the Project will fulfil. I will suggest that the ability of the Project to constitute such a structure has been greatly facilitated by the national and local cultures of political organisation, in which community-based movements and organisations are a widely-understood form of activity, having both local legitimacy and institutional recognition.

The first thing to note is that, the Project's problem-solving aspects bear many similarities to the role fulfilled by the local clubs and political parties. Thus, it is easy for local residents to make sense of what it is that the Project does, and how they should interact with the Project. Several people referred to the Project as working in a similar way to a club. One older sex worker explained that if the Project sisters could not solve the conflict she was having with her neighbours, then she would go to the Party office, the club, councillor or police station – seeing all of these as fora for the solution of problems. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 5, the way in which most sex workers engage with the Project is through a relationship of paying a membership fee in return for the provision of concrete support. This is the widely understood form of relationship between local residents and the clubs or parties. It is not a particularly participatory or mutual relationship, but it is one in which significant support can be accessed for the solution of problems. Taking such a form also makes the Project recognisable to the other organisations and groups in the red light area, who are familiar with the idea of a community organisation representing the interests of its members. And so the Project has an entry point to being taken seriously.

Not only is the practical form of the Project's problem-solving a recognisable organisational form, but the conceptual logic of movements of oppressed groups organising to demand their rights is one that is familiar in Kolkata, a city that has been governed by Left Front parties since 1977, and has a strong culture of trade unionism. The logic of collective bargaining, for workers in the informal sector, such as tailors, cobblers or rickshaw drivers, as well as for workers in formal employment, is widely recognised and institutionalised 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 Durbar now, but we started with a few, to protect sex-workers from the exploitation of *malkhins*,

babus, dalals. 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. (Group 5)

In this context, holding strikes and rallies are recognised as legitimate means of protest, and it is easy for the Project to get permission to organise a large demonstration of sex workers to parade through the streets.

Some of the Project workers had worked for a local party (usually CPI(M), a Communist party, and the largest party in West Bengal) prior to getting involved with the Sonagachi Project, and reported receiving their first training in politicisation, public speaking and learning the reasons for organisation through their involvement with the local party. When asked about how she had become interested in the cause of social and legal recognition for sex workers, the following supervisor mentioned her earlier involvement in party politics.

Supervisor: My political awareness [gained from involvement in party politics] has taught me to protest against exploitation, I have applied that here also. Before we used to bow our heads since we were helpless, now we don't. I have learnt that if I pursue a thing for years I will get success one day, though it may take time. (int 20)

The national political culture also has some aspects which facilitate people's belief in such a collective action movement. In the following quote, the Project Director describes his early politicisation 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. 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".

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 and in *Ananda Bazar* [widely-read Kolkata newspaper] there was a full page about me. (int 40)

Within the context of the local and national political culture, local level organisations of people who share an occupation or a disadvantaged status are a recognisable form of effective organisation. It is a form of organisation taken seriously both by the members of such organisations, and by the institutions with which they engage to represent the interests of their members. This is an aspect of the wider societal context that has greatly facilitated the establishment of the Sonagachi Project as a serious actor on behalf of sex workers, in the red light area.

8.2.3. To what extent does the Project gain control over the rules of local political organisation?

As well as trying to keep on the right side of the local clubs, the Project also tries to exert influence over them to be more supportive of sex workers' interests. As club members are also clients of sex workers, meetings are held with them with the dual aim of educating them about the risks of STDs and HIV, and encouraging them to support sex workers' security. Similar meetings are also held with the local police. The format for meetings which is deemed acceptable by the clubs and the police is one which respects their status and has a formal atmosphere. In these meetings, the important

speakers sit at the front, and give lectures to a silent audience. The meetings have formal openings, introductions of the speakers, votes of thanks and closings. Participants have to be presented with folders, pens and paper, and with tea and snacks. Some of the sex worker representatives of the Project have gained the skills to participate in such formal meetings, giving speeches. At the meeting between the Project and a local club which I attended, the Project was invited to come and teach the club's younger members about STDs. But overall, the format of the meetings does not produce much interaction between sex workers or the Project and the club members, or opportunities to develop collaborative commitments. Nor is the Project empowered to suggest an alternative format for the meetings which might produce more engagement between the participants. Nor is it empowered to engage with club members as equals.

On the other hand, however, with a shared interest in the orderliness and proper running of the red light area, the Project can sometimes align the club members' interests with its own, and use the club members' support to further Project interests. So, the founders of the Project convinced the clubs that it was better for them if sex workers were healthy, since they are the basis of their power, as a voting bloc. When community conflicts arise, say between the Project and pimps, or between sex workers and madams, the Project can sometimes convince the clubs to take their side. In doing so, they try to align clubs' definitions of their role as guardians of the civic order with the Project's interest, and with the Project's view of who is in the right and who in the wrong.

8.3. The sale of sex activity system

The daily lives and work of sex workers are the object at which the Project's interest in protecting sex workers' health and security, and madams' and pimps' economic interest come into relation. These interests are often in conflict, and the Project has to carefully manage the relation with madams and pimps, in order to prevent the contradictions between their interests leading to the Project being refused access to sex workers. The Project does not try to overturn the hierarchical system of the sex trade. To some extent, the Project collaborates with madams and pimps to enable the sexual transactions between sex worker and client to take place without problems, though the definition of problems may be divergent. The Project also has to collaborate with madams in the

solution of their problems, in order to gain acceptance. Within this collaborative-adversarial relation, the Project enters sometimes as a resource which helps these groups to avoid trouble from the police, or as one which provides sexual health services to sex workers, to keep them healthy and able to earn continuously. It can also enter as one which enforces the fair treatment of sex workers.

8.3.1. Following the rules of the red light area to ensure access

To ensure its access to sex workers, the Project has to avoid appearing to pose a challenge to the madams. If it does so, the madams can close their doors to the Project workers. During my fieldwork, the Project was at the early stages of a new programme to rescue minor girls or trafficked women. In response to Project workers rescuing a badly tortured sex worker from a madam, the other local madams refused the Project workers access to their sex workers. This issue was brought up as a problem in the weekly meetings, but no solution was reached. Project workers had considered that it would be considered legitimate, to be following the rules, for them to remove a sex worker if she is being badly mistreated. However, in this case, the madams were not sympathetic to Project workers' rationale that they could rescue mistreated women. If a woman is not being badly tortured, then Project workers consider that they cannot instigate the woman to run away from a madam. They can only respond if the sex worker herself makes a complaint to the Project and expresses a wish to run away. The following exchange between Radha, who had left an exploitative madam, and the supervisors who were supporting her, demonstrates the position that Project workers are not supposed to influence sex workers to leave their madams.

Interviewer: Did you know that B [the madam] is this kind of a lady prior to this incident, that has happened with her [Radha]?

Supervisor 1: Yes, before her, two other girls left B for the same reason and for this, B suspected G and another male peer educator named S.

Radha: Yes, B said that you people bring the girls out of the house. She blames you people.

Interviewer: What do you mean by suspecting S?

Supervisor 1: She blamed S, saying that he has taken out her girl. But it is not true at all.

Radha: The girls are leaving because they wish to, but B is blaming you, saying that G and you people are influencing the girls and taking them out of her house. (int 32)

Thus, in order to be allowed access to sex workers, whose problems are often caused by madams, the Project has to follow the rules accepted by the madams, and must not challenge the madam system. In solving problems, Project workers adhere to the definition of sex workers' appropriate behaviour which is accepted by madams, including that they should not run away from madams, and should repay money which the madam has lent them, or has paid to a procurer. In these ways, they collaborate to protect madams' interests, contradictorily, in order to be able to further the Project's interest in sex workers' security.

8.3.2. Protective rules of the sex trade support the Project's work

The sale of sex in the red light area is governed by highly structured rules and procedures, some of which support the Project's interest in sex workers' security. While sex workers are at the bottom of the red light area's hierarchy, there exist defined procedures and norms governing what is and is not fair treatment of sex workers. The Project cannot challenge the structure of the sex trade, but it can legitimately seek to enforce the rules that exist. For example, the allocation of the sex worker's earnings between pimp, madam, domestic worker, and sex worker is strictly prescribed by local rules, and any deviation from that norm is considered cheating. If a madam takes more than 50% of a sex worker's earnings, everybody, including madams, pimps and other sex workers, considers that to be wrong. On the other hand, if a sex worker pretends that she was paid less by a client than she was, in order to give less to the madam, then that is also considered wrong, by sex workers, as well as by others. The existence of such norms gives leverage to the Project to defend sex workers' interests, within the confines of the norms.

Still the Project has to avoid causing too much trouble. Even though it is recognised that the madam should pay her *adhias* 50% of what they earn, and pay them daily, the Project cannot risk causing too much annoyance to the madams. But it also has some indirect ways to address such problems. In explaining the importance of the daily

collection for the bank, in a teacher training session, one of the sex worker leaders explained that collecting lodgements from the sex workers daily helped to ensure that the madams paid their sex workers daily. (Otherwise it is easy to “forget” exactly how much a sex worker is owed). She noted that they do not explain this to the madams, for there are some things that you should not say, but should do!

Norms also exist concerning sexual relationships between sex workers and the men around them, which protect sex workers from potential sexual exploitation. There is a community rule that the men of a house, such as domestic workers, or male brothel managers, as well as the man who pimps for a sex worker, do not go to women in their house for sexual services. If they want sex, they must go to women in other houses, just as any other client would. These norms prevent the men from mixing sexual relationships with business relationships, and thus, from exerting an extra source of power within the sexual encounter, as explained by this man:

Babu: And the pimp takes an oath that he would never misbehave with a girl, if anybody does, and the girl lodges a complaint, then he would not get even 5 paisa *dalali* [pimp’s fee] for 15 days. A pimp should not get drunk and misbehave with a girl. (int 42)

I would not suggest that these norms protecting sex workers have been or are typically followed. The norms may often have been broken, and that is why they need to be asserted, but they are recognised as norms, and everyone accepts that a madam is in the wrong if she does not pay a sex worker 50% of what she earns, and that a pimp should not seek sex from a woman whose agent he is. Thus, if the rules are broken, it is accepted that protest, and a demand to right the wrongs, are legitimate responses. The existence of such norms is a hugely supportive starting point for the Project’s work to support sex workers.

8.3.3. Has the Project gained any control over its relation to the sale of sex activity system?

By virtue of having become a significant site of power in the red light area, with the capacity to solve problems and to make its decisions stick, the Project has become a

valuable resource with which madams align themselves, in order to benefit from its support. Madams are often the targets of hostile acts by local men, or pimps or police, so the Project's support is valuable to them.

Interviewer: Why do *malkhins* [madams] work with you, what interest do they have?

Director: To get security from the scheme. *Malkhins* are also being tortured by *goondas* many a time. So they would get protection from us, if they work with us. We are also able to bring them under control, as they are working with us and we can put before them some conditions, which they have to obey for the well being of the girls. Our work becomes easy.

Interviewer: *Malkhins* are with you due to insecurity?

Director: Yes, and that is a favourable point for us. The police also sometimes torture and exploit *malkhins* and we give them protection from that too. *Dalals* [pimps] also harass *malkhins*. (int 40)

If the madams look to the Project for support, the Project can stipulate that only madams who follow the Project's rules are eligible to be members and to receive their support. So, madams who want support must allow their *adhias* to visit the clinic, must pay them fairly, and must not keep minor girls. Thus, through becoming powerful, the Project is able to drive a harder bargain with the madams, since their support is valued by the madams.

In relation to the pimps, the Project may have contributed to making sex workers' health an interest of theirs. For some pimps, insistence upon condom use is seen as an unusual and unjustified demand to make of a client. One woman who used the pimp system reported that she could refuse a client on the basis of condom use, but only because the pimp could easily find another woman who would accept the client's demands. However, a counter-norm to this was reported by the affluent head pimp in conversation with a clinic co-ordinator. She asked him about pimps' interest in condom use, and he replied that he only deals with clients who use condoms. He said that, if clients are paying Rs. 1000 (£15, a high price), you do not want them to fall ill. Emphasising that he provided a professional service to high-class clients, he said that it is part of his service to keep his clients healthy, which in turn entails keeping sex workers healthy. If

clients asked for sex without condoms, he said that he scornfully tells them to go and ask a cheap “hawker”, that is, a flying sex worker. This attitude on the part of a pimp may not be a common one in Sonagachi, but it does reveal a potential avenue for the Project to pursue, so that pimps might define their business norms in ways more in alignment with the Project’s interest in sex workers’ health.

8.4. The funding activity system

The Project depends for its existence on the provision of funds by outside bodies. While subscriptions to DMSC provide the income for running the problem-solving wing of the Project, the health promotion wing – the salaries and consumables needed at the clinics – and the administration of the office depend upon external funding.

The Project was initiated and funded by the World Health Organisation in 1992, following the advent of HIV, and concern that sex workers could be important “vectors” of a potential HIV epidemic. It was thus set up with the specific remit of HIV prevention, as well as having a participatory philosophy that aimed to involve sex workers fully in the Project’s functioning. This engagement with sex workers led, later, to the Project expanding its focus to the more general problems of sex workers’ physical and financial security. The WHO provided funding from February to December 1992. NORAD, the Norwegian development agency, then funded the Project until September 1994, when the UK Department for International Development (DfID, then ODA) took over the funding of the Project. Around the year 2000, DfID decided to take a “hands-off, upstream” approach, to move out of managing individual projects, or deciding the allocation of funds to individual NGOs. Since then, DfID funds for HIV prevention have been channelled centrally through the National AIDS Control Organisation, to which the State AIDS Control Societies have to make detailed applications for their funding. The West Bengal State AIDS Control Society (WBSACS) then takes the decisions on how to allocate the funding it receives, between the various NGOs and projects seeking funding. The projects which were previously in receipt of funding from DfID automatically became eligible for funding through WBSACS, and this was the case for the Sonagachi Project. While the Project receives its core funding through the WBSACS, it also continues to receive smaller amounts of funding for specific projects from other donors, including NORAD, who fund the education programme. DfID, in

the meantime, has some input into deciding how funds should be allocated across the different Indian states, and the proportions that should be allocated to different HIV prevention activities. DfID is also working to improve government systems, to increase transparency and to reduce corruption.

In this context, the Project must take part in an activity system in which international and national funding bodies set priorities, goals and budgets for the prevention of HIV, with varying degrees of input from community organisations. The interests of the funding bodies and the Project meet around the shared object of having a sustainable, effective Project. In this interest, funding agencies offer financial and logistical support to projects. The State AIDS Control Society is involved in capacity-building of NGOs. The Sonagachi Project is used as a model of best practice in India, and the Society arranges exposure visits and on-the-job training for people from other NGOs. It also arranges training for NGO workers, project co-ordinators, peer educators, and doctors. The Society is supportive of the Project, lending it institutional recognition. For example, for sex workers to go abroad on Project business, they need a passport, for which they need a letter of recommendation to confirm that they are of “good moral character”, and thus eligible for a passport. Such official letters have been provided to the women by the State AIDS Control Society.

However, the interests of the Project and the funders are not always in harmony. The definition of the appropriate activities of that Project, is a site of divergence between these two actors. The divergence concerns the relative weight being put on HIV prevention specifically, and on community development more generally. An external evaluation of the Project, while commending the Project’s attention to wider issues of social justice and quality of life, also suggested that “care should be taken not to lose sight of the original primary objectives of HIV prevention” (O’Reilly *et al*, 1996, p.2). The division of labour in this relation between Project and funding agencies is one in which the agencies choose which Project to fund on the basis of its matching their priorities, and monitor the Project’s activity to assess its suitability for continued funding, while the Project’s role is to design the details of the intervention and implement it.

8.4.1. The Project's adjustment to the rules set up by funding agencies

How is the Project's work structured by its position within this funding activity system? Firstly, funding agencies set up official rules and procedures which projects must follow in order to be granted funding. Secondly, the situation of being dependent upon insecure sources of funding leads to projects orienting to funding agencies' interests, sometimes in competition with each other.

The change in funding arrangement from DfID to WBSACS as the source of funding has had some impact on the Project's practices. For funding sexual health intervention projects, NACO has a set of guidelines, covering the kinds of activities that may be funded, the numbers of staff that may be funded for the different kinds of activities, the sum of money that projects will receive per peer educator, or per clinic counsellor, etc. When the funding for the Sonagachi Project started coming via WBSACS, there was less available per peer educator and the State AIDS Control Society wanted them to cut back on some of their administrative salary expenses. According to representatives of the State AIDS Control Society, DfID were more generous in their allocation of funds, but also required more stringent accounting, documentation and evaluation. These representatives also claimed that NACO's guidelines were somewhat inflexible and out of date, giving the example that if NGOs are doing STD treatment, then they need an STD counsellor, but there is no provision for funding such a counsellor within NACO's framework. They also claimed that NACO demands quantitative monitoring of interventions, in terms of measures like numbers of condoms distributed, numbers of classes held, whereas they were concerned that this kind of measurement could lead to the quality of services being sacrificed in order to increase quantities. To get their funding from the Society, NGOs submit a one-year plan, and funds are released twice yearly. Every 6 months there is a review, the NGO submits a report, and someone from the Society visits the projects, makes suggestions, and then the funds are released. Reports on all the activities carried out must be made quarterly, again, staff from the Society visit and write up a monitoring report.

There is a significant power differential between the Project and the funding agencies, in their collaboration to produce an effective Project. As an expanding Project, there is always more to spend money on than there are funds available. For instance, in the

expansion of the Project to the districts of West Bengal, it has received funding to work in nine red light areas, but has spread this funding across eleven red light areas. In a competitive and insecure funding environment, the Project actively orients to funders and potential sources of funding. The concept of “publicity” is used to shape Project decisions and actions, gaining good “publicity” being directed both at improving funding prospects, and more generally at the representation of the Project in the media.

Certain Project actions are specifically directed at improving “publicity”. On September 13th, 2001, the Project held a rally to the American Center in Kolkata, to express condolences. A press release informed the media of the demonstration, and claimed that 1000 bottles of blood would be donated. I wondered about the motive behind the rally. At a meeting the next day, one of the supervisors said that the Americans give the Project so much funding that they should demonstrate sympathy with them. Although another responded that they should show sympathy in any case, funding or no funding, the idea that such actions were undertaken to impress funding bodies was a plausible one. A similar interest in publicity was mentioned in relation to the Project’s work to rescue minor girls. Sex worker leaders mentioned that photographs should be taken of the girls who are rescued, in order that the Project may claim acknowledgement of its good work, and may receive funding for the work of rescuing. My own work was facilitated by this orientation to funding. I had to pay the organisation a fee for the time given to me by the peer educators who helped me. The Director explained to the other office staff that I was a customer and should be fully satisfied with the service I receive from the Project, because then I may be a source of further paying visitors, through generating good publicity. Since I was able to pay the service charge asked for by the Project, and since they need all the funding they can get, my own research was facilitated by them in every way. Finally, the training of Project workers to tell their life histories eloquently, and in a way that places the Project as a significant turning point in their lives is surely also directed at impressing funding agencies, as well as journalists and researchers, as part of creating positive “publicity”.

The Project also has to carry out certain actions to demonstrate to funding agencies its accountability and effectiveness, including keeping meticulous financial accounts, and accounts of numbers of people treated at the clinic, numbers of condoms distributed, and so on. The clinic supplies, such as condoms, medical gloves, medicines, have to be

counted and re-counted at various stages of distribution, from arriving in the office, to the clinic, to their use or distribution. The Project also documents its activities visually, producing reports illustrated with photographs, and accompanied by videos, to prove to the funding agencies that various important and innovative activities had been carried out. At the teacher training workshop that I attended, a significant effort went in to photographing and videoing the more interesting sections of the workshop such as the games.

Demonstrating and asserting success in Project outcomes is another very important part of the orientation to funding agencies. At one of the meetings, the former Project Director exhorted the Project workers to increase the levels of condom use, warning that otherwise their funding may be cut. At every opportunity, such as meetings with other NGOs, with media, or conferences, the Project emphasises its successes. Seabrook (2001) suggests that, considering the pervasive poverty and desperate situations of a major proportion of eastern India's population, claims of near-universal condom use, or significant increases in sex workers' power, made by the Sonagachi Project and others are surely massively over-stated. He suggests that in the context of the dependence of such projects on easily-discontinued foreign funds, the projects do all they can to impress the funding bodies, and to convince them to continue providing funds. Such a pressure to demonstrate success may contribute to unrealistic assessments of the problems, but the orientation to demonstrating success, to achieving positive publicity, and to documenting their innovative activities is likely to have made their interactions with funding agencies easier.

8.4.2. The context of the societal values in which the Project operates

The Project's work exists in a controversial position locally, in the context of debates over the appropriate form of response to prostitution. In these debates, a key argument revolves around whether working to make sex work safer legitimises the commodification of women, where an important value dimension concerns the kind of society deemed ideal. But in relation to the international community of HIV prevention organisations, which generally embrace liberal values as well as a focus on health as the core value, the Project is seen as a highly successful and innovative project.

The particular form which the Project takes, and its overall rationale of improving the conditions of sex work, were probably made possible by the fact that funding came through international rather than local bodies, as well as by the intellectual and political commitment of the Project's founders. Provision of funding by organisations such as the WHO and DfID allowed the Project to take up an approach which is deemed by many local organisations to inappropriately legitimise the sale of sex, instead of seeking to eliminate prostitution. Paradoxically, the funding agencies' focus on HIV rather than on wider social concerns, which has in some ways constrained the Project, is also what enabled the Project to exist in the first place. International organisations' focus on sex work as a health issue may avoid issues of morality or decisions on what kind of society is desirable, and swiftly provide funding for HIV prevention activities. Locally, however, the political polarisation around such issues leads to complex disputes which persistently raise challenges to the Project.

The WHO originally commissioned an epidemiologist, Dr Jana, working in occupational health at the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health to undertake an initial biomedical and behavioural survey, and then to start a Project. Dr Jana's previous work had been on the occupational health hazards of agricultural workers and small-scale industry workers, and he described learning from this experience that health issues were fundamentally inter-twined with the social and economic conditions which set up the qualities of the working environment, and not reducible to a single disease agent. He recalled how hearing the WHO consultants speaking of the prostitutes with the international discourse of "sex workers" interested him in the possibility of approaching the problem as an issue of occupational health, where vulnerability was a consequence of environmental hazards. With this interest, the initial STD/HIV intervention programme, which began with quite standard methodologies, evolved to try to address the wider determinants of the sex workers' vulnerability, such as their relations with madams and pimps and local hooligans, their economic insecurity, and so on.

As well as the extension of the focus to the wider determinants of health, what is notable about the Project is its efforts to organise sex workers. This approach seems to go along with a view of sex workers as oppressed but potentially organised workers, which is facilitated by the local familiarity with trade unionist ideas, but does not

accompany the view of prostitutes as victims to be rescued and rehabilitated. The activists who have been advisors to the Project draw on leftist discourses which refuse to consider sex work as a moral issue, asserting that it is work like any other, and that sex workers' problems stem from their lack of social and institutional recognition. The appropriate response to these threats, under this logic, is that sex workers should organise to defend each other and fight for their rights. Thus, these advisors also express a strong commitment to involving the community members as experts in designing, implementing, and decision-making in the Project. They argue that, to work with sex workers, one must respect them, and that one cannot truly respect them without respecting the work that they do. This approach forms the overall Project ideology. It should be noted, however, that, while the ideology of the Project is that sex workers are the agents and leaders of the Project, the activists who have been involved have strongly influenced the form of the Project, have promoted the specific rationale consonant with their position, and still contribute significantly to important decisions and new policies.

A certain flexibility on the part of the funding agencies, to let the Project develop organically, to learn by trial-and-error, implementing innovative activities in a context where there were few effective precedents, is noted by Dr Jana as facilitating the Project's successful development. This approach enabled consultation with community members to influence the form which the Project could take. In 1999, DMSC (the sex workers' organisation) took over responsibility for running the sexual health wing of the Project, to the pride of the senior members, who note that they do not need NGOs to bring them funds, but that they deal directly with the funders now. The Project Director and sex worker leaders are proud that they can solve most of the problems, and run the organisation, without needing direction from outsiders. Again, the liberal participatory values of the funding agencies enable the Project to take this particular form.

Moving to the wider societal response to HIV, the extent and urgency of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been a sensitive issue in Indian national politics, with the national government trying to avoid a picture of India having a particular HIV problem. Inadequate governmental commitment to prevention undermines the effectiveness of the National AIDS Control Organisation whose responsibility it is to co-ordinate the national response (UNAIDS, 2002; Sethi, 2002). This ambivalence on the part of the government hit the news in October-November 2002, when Bill Gates was in India to

make a donation of \$100 million to HIV prevention. Gates used a report by the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, which projected that 20-25 million Indians would be HIV positive by the year 2010, to contextualise his interest in HIV prevention in India.. (Present UNAIDS estimates for HIV infection in 2004 are around 5 million. Figures endorsed by the Indian government are estimates of 3.8 million in 2000 [NACO, 2004]). To some members of the Indian government, this amounted to “spreading panic”, through overly negative comments about the scale of the problem. The Human Resources Development minister responded that “The efforts to fight the menace should be commensurate with the threat. I think Gates has overdone it” (Ahmed, 2002). The minister asserted that India’s approach was to reduce the price of AIDS treatment, and that the issue of patents on life-saving drugs was a more crucial one. While the money was eventually accepted and put to use on HIV prevention, the event illustrates the lack of a strong governmental commitment to HIV prevention. Chatterjee and Sahgal (2002) argue that due to such political indifference, the National AIDS Control Organisation has failed to actively pursue its own potentially progressive policies, and rather than functioning as a supportive site producing a national synthetic and organised response to the HIV/AIDS challenge, has effectively left HIV prevention to the innovative efforts of individual NGOs. Chatterjee and Sahgal praise the work of such NGOs, but emphasise that they are working with little national support in terms of resources such as useful research evidence, skills in making funding applications, or co-ordination among different HIV projects.

8.4.3. To what extent does the Project have any control over its funding situation?

The success of the Project, and it being recognised as a model project has given it status and some bargaining power, in relation to its funding bodies. The state government seems to be developing a more positive attitude to HIV prevention, possibly influenced by the Project proving to be something which is seen very positively internationally, rather than something that brings stigma to West Bengal. An official from DfID explained to me that in 1995, DfID tried to turn the running of their sexual health programme over to the government, but that the government refused to get involved with controversial and stigmatised issues to do with commercial sex, or men having sex with men. But, by 2001, the government was willing to take on the projects.

I mentioned in the previous chapter the incident discussed in meetings where the Project was refusing to comply with the reduction in funding ordered by the State AIDS Control Society. An official from the Society complained that the Project was complacent, and did not send in its reports on time, and presumed that it would automatically receive funding, and that it could enforce its demands on the Society, by virtue of its fame, and status as a model project. Indeed, the Project did succeed in getting almost all of its demands, in this negotiation. Thus, the Project has some bargaining power with the funding agency. As in the case of the madams, once the Project has gained a certain amount of influence, its control over those resources (the problem-solving resources in the case of the madams, and the symbolic power of being a well-known model Project in the case of the funders), then it can use those resources to make its demands.

8.5. Conclusion: How is the Project's work structured by its situation at a cross-section of wider activity systems?

This chapter sheds a new perspective on my assumption that this is a “sex-worker-led” Project. The Project is “led” by much more than sex workers, it is led by the prevailing understandings of community organisation, by the priorities of funding bodies, and by the constraints of the power hierarchies of the economic organisation of the sale of sex. The Project is constrained to focus its attention on health issues both by funding systems and by local clubs' protection of their role as the providers of civic organisation. The particular form which the Project may take depends greatly both on the model of the club which solves problems in return for a membership fee, and on the international HIV prevention model of participatory health promotion. Pre-existing norms of what is legitimate and illegitimate treatment of a sex worker provide a starting point for the Project to defend sex workers' interests. In all of these ways, the Project's work is deeply structured by its location in activity systems, which are themselves structured by prevailing economic and social relations.

Although the Project's interests diverge from the interests of the three groups of collaborator-adversaries mentioned here, in order to carry out its work, it has to adjust its activity to the interests of these groups, in doing so, collaborating with them. Careful definition of a division of labour is one way of avoiding conflict with the collaborator-

adversaries, used to avoid conflicts with the pre-existing political organisation of the red light area. Following established rules, such as rules of the madam system, or rules of producing accounts and reports to funding agencies, allow the Project to continue its work, within existing constraints. However, as the Project has gained in social power, by virtue of having large numbers of members, being able to solve concrete problems, and being recognised as a model project, it has gained bargaining power with the groups with whom it engages, and thus, has gained some control over the conditions of its joint activity with those groups.

Chapter nine

Conclusions

This thesis has contributed to the conceptualisation of participatory development, through an investigation of the functioning of the Sonagachi Project. The four empirical chapters have extensively mapped out the concrete consequences of the Sonagachi Project, on the ground, in terms of its significance in people's daily lives, and in terms of the actions being taken by participants which comprise the participatory process. This chapter now turns to examining the consequences of this investigation for our knowledge about participation. What are the implications of this detailed case examination for the theory and practice of participatory development?

I began this thesis with questions about the functioning of the Sonagachi Project, with more general questions about how participatory projects can overcome the internal and external obstacles to their effective functioning, and a theoretical perspective on participation as collective action, supported by resources, threatened by divergences, and aiming to achieve control over its environment. After investigating the concrete, context-specific, contingent detail of the Sonagachi Project, this chapter seeks to develop the generality of the knowledge produced, returning to the questions raised in the first three chapters in turn. The first section returns to Chapter 1, considering the Project as an empirical case of a successful participatory project, to establish how the Sonagachi Project has been so successful. The second section considers the Project as a theoretical case of participation, to return to the questions raised about the potential and functioning of participation in Chapter 2. The third section returns to Chapter 3, considering the Project as a theoretical case of collective action to examine the contributions of the thesis to activity theory. In discussing the findings of this thesis in relation to other literature, I am extending the generality of those studies, confirming the usefulness of the knowledge which they produce. Having established all this, the chapter then opens out to future action, considering possibilities for future research, and concrete recommendations for future interventions.

9.1. How has the Sonagachi Project achieved its successes?

As the starting point to developing our understanding of the social psychological processes through which collective action projects function, I began with the concrete empirical question of how the Sonagachi Project has achieved its successes. Each of the four empirical chapters provides a part of the answer to this question. The analysis of the sex workers' actions (Chapter 5) produced answers to the questions of why the Project enjoys sex workers' support and interest, and how it is improving their health. It suggested that, by comprising a workable resource, which effectively solves some of sex workers' concrete individual problems (such as disputes with neighbours or clients, or problems with madams or police), the Project wins sex workers' interest. By thus winning the sex workers' confidence, the Project's health promotion work is facilitated, as the women are willing to visit the clinic, anticipating support in return. The Project also seeks to constitute both individual and collective resources for the enforcement of condom use, in the form of arguments and strategies to use with clients, and in the form of trust among sex workers that condom use will be enforced as a standard by their neighbours.

The analysis of the Project workers' participation (Chapter 6) produced answers to the question of how the Project successfully enlists participants who are willing to work as committed members of a collectivity. To investigate this, the chapter asked why Project workers participate, and investigated the role of their critical consciousness of the possibility of "workers' rights" as an alternative state for sex workers. As well as material gains which Project workers can gain through their affiliation with the Project (income, decision-making power), Project workers place great personal value on their sense of development of confidence, awareness and pride through their participation in the Project. The shared rationale of struggling for "workers' rights" makes sense of participants' joint action. Problematising the present situation by posing an imaginable future, it suggests that collective action is worthwhile, and presenting a common goal, it binds participants together as members of a collectivity.

The analysis of the daily activities of participation (Chapter 7) further pursued the question of how the Project manages to achieve an organised, collective unit, through investigating the infrastructures and procedures that enable Project workers to

coordinate their activity together. A clear hierarchical division of labour provides clear definitions of the various participants' roles, so that they may take appropriate action that fits smoothly with that of their colleagues. This form of organisation also produces experts or authorities (including sex worker leaders and non-sex worker employees) who have the power to take decisions, and subordinates who must follow the decisions taken by the authorities. Having shared understandings of Project rules concerning how problems are to be raised and solved further enables coordination, and frequent meetings allow for discussion and resolution of problems or disagreements over participants' collaboration together. By addressing the concrete work done in the Project's problem-solving meetings, this chapter also established some of the reasons for the Project enjoying community support, in that it solves concrete community disputes in ways that achieve community legitimacy, through procedures establishing "fairness" and "evidence".

Finally, the analysis of the context of participation (Chapter 8) addressed the question of how the contextual location of the Sonagachi Project within local economic and political structures, and national and international ideological and funding structures, has contributed to its success, as well as exercising constraints on its operation. It suggested that pre-existing norms supported the Project's work, including business norms protective of sex workers, the local familiarity with the idea of calling on the support of an organisation of which one is a member, and the liberal values of international funding agencies, which accepted the importance of a participatory project answering to sex workers' felt needs. As well as these supportive norms, however, the Project also had to contend with an environment in which actors such as madams and local political party members, who controlled access to sex workers, had interests at odds with those of sex workers. We saw that the Project had to carefully adjust its definition of its remit and its actions so as to minimise its disruption of these powerful groups. We also saw that the Project astutely and energetically orients to its funding bodies, through its interest in "publicity". But the Project has also managed to gain some control over its situation within these contradictory demands. As the Project gained in its capacity to solve concrete problems, it also gained a position as a significant political actor in the red light area, so that it could strike bargains with madams, to offer them support only on condition that they treated their *adhias* fairly.

These are the explanations for the Project's success offered in the empirical chapters of the thesis. By providing concrete resources to sex workers to manage their lives in the red light area, it has constructed their working environment as more actionable, and has mobilised their interest in the Project. By providing concrete resources for Project workers to protect sex workers' health and security, it has constructed the environment of the red light area as actionable for Project workers. By providing conceptual rationales and an organisational structure for their collaboration, it has made the environment of the Project itself actionable for Project workers. And by adjusting tactically to the contextual constraints set by its relation to other groups, it has been able to act within that environment, without incurring those groups' hostility. However, the interest of the thesis is not only in the particular details of this unique project, and the next section seeks to unpack the implications of the study for the theory of participation.

9.2. Contributions to conceptualising participation

The core aim of this thesis has been to contribute to the conceptualisation of participatory development. The means of doing this has been to implement a pragmatist and activity-theoretical analysis of the single case of the Sonagachi Project. The pragmatist approach, I have argued, offers a method of clarifying our ideas about participation by specifying participation concretely in terms of the concrete actions or consequences which they entail. And the case study, as Flyvbjerg (2001) argues, is ideally suited to complexifying our understanding of a particular topic, because the events of complex social life usually exceed our general theoretical statements. Thus this thesis both simplifies and complexifies our understanding of "participation". It simplifies "participation" by specifying it clearly, and it complexifies it by drawing attention to the contradictions and dilemmas in which participation is embedded. These contributions will be elaborated here, by returning to the three main challenges to participation posed in Chapter 2: (i) the fundamental question of whether participation has a meaningful role to play in societally marginalised and disadvantaged contexts, (ii) the problem of the "external" power relations in which participating communities are embedded, and (iii) the problem of capacity for participation "internal" to the participating community.

9.2.1 What is the role of grassroots collective action in health promotion?

Significant circumscribed local changes

The thesis seeks to advance a nuanced view of participation, in which participation is seen as playing an important role in making local changes, although that role is tightly limited by contextual constraints. Thus I argue that the role of participation is to produce *significant circumscribed local changes*. For example, the Sonagachi Project has, according to biomedical studies, controlled HIV and reduced STDs. According to sex workers, the Project offers useful supports for solving problems. And the Project's sustainability is proved by the fact that an expanding project has been maintained for over a decade. On the other hand, the Project has been constrained by its location within particular economic and political structures which it cannot challenge.

Critiques levelled at the whole project of participation (e.g. Cooke & Kothari, 2001), which state that participation is an inappropriate response to macrosocial inequalities which must be targeted at the macrosocial level by governments, or that participatory programmes exert insidious forms of control over participants have validity, and have received some support in this thesis. However, such critiques do not do justice to the very real and locally valued changes which communities can make. Sex workers highly value the opportunity to have their conflicts with madams or police solved. Project workers are proud of their achievements and speak with satisfaction of their sense of increasing awareness. They may be being incorporated into outsider-initiated Project discourses, but they celebrate their abilities to argue with journalists or politicians about the nature of prostitution and the desirability of workers' rights for sex workers. The Project has made the environment of sex workers actionable in numerous new, but domain specific, ways. While governmental support and supportive social policies are essential to effective and sustainable HIV prevention, in the absence of such support, or while the slow-moving wheels of societal change are set in motion, community-level projects can make significant local achievements, in the medium term (Chatterjee & Sahgal, 2002; Williams & Campbell, 1998).

Given the impressive results of this Project, it may be tempting to idealise it as instantiating the best international progressive policies (e.g. Nath, 2000). But we should be cautious about such interpretations (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1996). The Project is also highly constrained in the issues which it can target. It cannot overturn the madam system or guarantee financial stability in the form of long-term funding. It can have little effect on the international and national economic and social policies which disadvantage many poor unskilled women. Thus, the potential of participatory projects should not be over-stated either. Despite the Project's commitment and rationale of empowering all sex workers, and promoting new, politicising understandings and possibilities in their worlds, many ordinary sex workers see the Project simply as a source of support to call upon in solving immediate problems. A relatively small group of Project workers are gaining this new activist awareness and powers to make effective changes.

From this point of view, the role of participatory development can be described as achieving significant, circumscribed, local changes. This view avoids either overly optimistic or pessimistic expectations of participation. The question, "Can participation achieve significant change or not?" need not be answered with a singular response. Instead, we can clarify that the changes may be highly significant in the lives of participants, but have little impact at the societal level. The pragmatist attitude is what enabled me to develop this perspective (James, 1995 [1907]), which oriented me to understanding "participation" concretely and specifically. Hence, rather than evaluating participation absolutely, I sought to *specify* its role, by asking: What it is that participation enables people to achieve, and what does it not enable them to achieve? Developing and implementing this epistemological approach to understanding social phenomena is the thesis's most general and generative conceptual contribution for conceptualising participation. It is also the approach that I have taken to understanding the concept of empowerment.

How is it that "powerless women...lead successful movements"?

Conceptualising empowerment concretely, in terms of "the power to take a specific action" enabled me to explain how the problematic statement identified in Chapter 2, that "powerless women can and do lead successful movements" (Kar *et al.*, 1999,

p.1432) can come about. It is through the women having specific powers in certain domains but not in others. Sex workers are highly disempowered by social stigma and by poverty, which produce limiting constraints on the actions open to them, in arenas such as finding alternative employment, being respected by their families, or having secure housing tenure. But in the Sonagachi Project, sex workers are implementing and leading a collective movement. Some participants have learnt effective tools for solving problems and for leading meetings. Within the community of sex workers, and in some of their interactions with other groups (such as police), these sex worker leaders have powers to take decisions which people will follow, and to mobilise people to attend a meeting. These new actions are significant changes. However, their domain of application is tightly bounded.

As I described in the analysis of sex workers' actions (Chapter 5), the sex workers have available to them certain strategies and arguments, which give them circumscribed powers in their interactions with clients. A sex worker may have a tool for encouraging condom use, but she can do very little about the legal status of sex work, for example. Again, the powers which they have are highly circumscribed. Depending upon the action that we are focusing on, the sex workers can be described as either powerless or powerful.

However, some resources are applicable in a range of domains. While strategies for convincing a client to use a condom apply within a very specific domain, resources for community organisation have a much broader domain of application. The division of labour whereby somebody is responsible for the problems of a certain group of women, and the procedures of meetings which enable conflicts to be solved in a way that is seen as legitimate to both sides, are resources which can respond to a wide range of problems, including unpredictable ones (as presented in Chapter 7). Still, however, the domains in which the decisions of the meetings may be applied are circumscribed by the activity systems in which the Project is embedded. The meetings do not have the power to spend their HIV prevention funding on pensions for former sex workers. Nor do they have the power to remove sex workers from the madam system. Again, the powers are bounded.

From this discussion, there emerge two useful concepts which we should use to specify what we mean by “empowerment” of community members: firstly, we should ask, what are the boundaries of application of a certain power, and secondly, is the power applicable to one very specific situation, or can it be used in several different situations? An “empowering” project should be very clear about which powers it seeks to constitute for community members, since there is such a range of different powers that can be gained. If people are expected to participate as decision-makers or as problem-solvers, then they will need specific opportunities and skills to do so. If people are attending handiwork classes, they will not be “empowered” in the same way as are women who are learning to argue with politicians.

This section has argued that participation can, indeed, achieve significant circumscribed local changes. But how can grassroots communities make such achievements, from a position of systematic disadvantage? The thesis has addressed in detail the processes which enable a collective action process to function, pinpointing collaborative relationships with activists and local power interests (processes external to the participating group), and resources for collective action (processes internal to the participating group), as the means to achieve successful participatory development. The *how* of participation is what I now turn to.

9.2.2. How can a participatory project survive the power inequalities of its relations to other groups?

Given that there is an existing power structure in the community, one in which sex workers are taken advantage of, how can an intervention project gain the permission of the groups who exploit sex workers to carry out its work, while avoiding being hijacked by those groups?

The contradictory position of participation

Looking across the four empirical chapters, as the analysis moves from the interests of the sex workers to the interests of powerful community members and funding regimes in which the Project is embedded, the contradictory position of the Project is evident. On the one hand, it must answer to the interests of sex workers’ individual everyday problems of action, as described in the analysis of sex workers’ actions (Chapter 5). On

the other hand the Project must answer to the demands of powerful interest groups and funding bodies, described in the analysis of the context of participation (Chapter 8). Sandwiched between these demands, in Chapters 6 and 7, are the Project workers and their activity constituting the Project.

Located in a community which is already highly organised and structured, the Project, although it is set up to serve the needs of sex workers, has to adjust to the pre-existing hierarchies which disadvantage sex workers, often seeming to collude with them (e.g. by allowing madams to be committee members). Moreover, the Project relies on significant input from outsider-activists, even while declaring itself to be led by sex workers. These contradictions play out in the Project's activity, which constantly has to balance conflicting demands. The activity theory perspective would expect such profound contradictions in the activity systems in which the Project is embedded to be likely candidates to stimulate a breakdown (van Vlaenderen, 2001). Since there is very little opportunity to re-negotiate others' definitions of their goals, which is a useful means of avoiding breakdown (van Vlaenderen, 2001), the Project often has to adjust to existing structures rather than challenge them.

In so doing, the contradictions are made salient. It has to enable people to further their individual action goals, which contradict the Project's activity, in order for it to continue to function. So, when sex workers use the Project identity cards to prove that they are not sex workers, they solve an individual problem, but further perpetuate the idea that sex work is something shameful – one of the ideas which the Project specifically aims to refute. When the Project invites madams to stand for election on its local committees, it offers them opportunities to advance their personal interests which are often in conflict with the interests of sex workers. These women are invited because their voices already have some legitimacy, so are more likely to be taken seriously, and because they need to maintain the madams' support, in order to be permitted to access their *adhias*.

The challenges and contradictions of constituting a participatory project among disadvantaged sex workers, when other powerful groups already have significant control over community life and are not willing to give it up have been noted in several instances (Busza & Schunter, 2001; Campbell & Mzaidume, 2001). Trying to instigate change through intervening with the most disadvantaged members of a community,

when their employers or adversaries are disinterested or antagonistic to such change seems to be a unlikely place from which to achieve significant change. Yet the Sonagachi Project continues to function even under such conditions. Having become a significant actor in the red light area – good at negotiating with police or *goondas* – it has earned madams' interest in the Project as a source of support. This gives the Project an opportunity to enforce certain conditions (proper treatment of their *adhias*) on the madams, in return for allowing them to call on the Project for support. In this way, the Project is gaining some limited control over the madam system. Part of the contradiction is that this control has been cultivated through the Project acting as a resource for the madams, and thus furthering the interests of the madams.

A fundamental dilemma for such projects is whether they can seek to change the system in which sex work takes place, or whether they have to adjust to the existing system, and thereby collude in it. In the tough realities of red light areas, however idealistic and politicised a project may be, it is unlikely to be able to implement radical change from the start.

Control over resources, participation and authority

To form an organised project within a highly disrupted and disadvantaged community is to make a significant intervention into the balances of power, and the social organisation of that community's life, as new resources enter into circulation. Such resources include cash, jobs, access to problem-solving support, access to status-enhancing positions in the organisations, access to the media, skills in negotiating with police, and so on. These valuable resources can become significant generators of controversy, dispute and distrust, as people compete for them (Campbell, 2003). Intervening through the provision of desirable resources can easily become more divisive than constructive. But the Sonagachi Project has been running for 12 years, and has managed to mediate between the various interests of community members. Most impressive is that it has managed, largely, to avoid being colonised by madams, even though it has to collaborate with them. How has this been possible? Why are people not trying harder to use the Project for their own interests?

I suggest that the issue of control over resources is of crucial importance here. The resources provided by the Sonagachi Project are competitively sought. People hope for jobs from the Project, some madams use the Project to further their own ends, peer educators demand the bags and umbrellas which they are due. On one visit to a clinic, after the World AIDS day parade, where marchers had been given cheap baseball caps to wear, the local sex workers were complaining that their representative was not doing her job very well, as she had not even managed to get caps for all their children. There is competition even for these meagre resources. When the Director did not want me to pay informants, he was seeking to forestall the possible competition and ill-feeling that might ensue if people felt that opportunities to be paid for an interview were being distributed unfairly, and the expectations that people could expect individual economic benefit from their participation. The competitiveness around the Project is curtailed because the resources available are still relatively minor. Getting paid Rs. 25 (£0.35) for half a day's work (the peer educators' starting salary) is worthwhile for some people, but it is not a dramatic salary. The stakes being relatively low may lead the Project to be less likely to be seen as a source of resources to be competitively sought after. Among those people who are already powerful in the red light area, this meagre salary is of no interest.

Resources like cash or jobs, are one-off, zero-sum resources. But many of the most significant resources which the Sonagachi Project constitutes are not of this kind, but are social resources and tools to which everyone can have access without depriving anyone else of access. The resources which facilitate people to enforce condom use, or to solve local conflicts, or to hold a problem-solving meetings are not zero-sum resources of the kind likely to generate conflict. Focusing on constituting such resources may help to avoid some of the destructive competition.

But such social resources can also be used to advance people's individual personal interests, to the detriment of collective interests. How has the Sonagachi Project managed to avoid colonisation of its work by the more powerful community members? It has allowed madams to be committee members, but how has it prevented these women from taking over meetings and taking decisions in their own interests? In fact, the hierarchical organisation of the Project retains control over many of its resources. There is a strong sense of authority within the Project, and of an authoritative

hierarchical decision-making structure. The administrative office remains the centre of power, with important decisions or difficult problems continually being referred to the Project director for a decision, and his decisions carry authority. The original founder of the Project carefully managed all aspects of the Project for seven years, when a new director, Mr Dutta, took over, to whom decisions of all kinds are referred. Both are taken very seriously. This authority relation runs throughout the Project, and alongside its participatory commitment. Peer educators are respectful employees reporting to their co-ordinator, who in turn reports to the Project office. There is a strong sense of what is permitted and what is not. And thus there is a sense that madams would not dare to overstep the mark in this hierarchical relation (although on occasion this does happen).

By retaining control over the problem-solving resources, through a hierarchical organisation, the Project has prevented colonisation of those resources by the more powerful community members. It is through controlling these resources that it has been able to have that bargaining power in relation to the madams which I discussed in Chapter 8. By being able to offer people conflict-solving support or to withdraw that support, the Project is able to stipulate that, to be eligible for its support, madams have to adhere to certain standards of treatment for their *adhias*.

A second important institutional mechanism which prevents personal interests from taking over, is that the problem-solving meetings, which are a source of significant power, are public. The presence of thirty or fifty Project workers must be a strong influence preventing the people chairing the meeting from serving their own interests or the interests of their friends. Although I have mentioned that few of the people attending in such meetings actually contribute verbally to the meeting, they serve the important function of enforcing transparency and accountability, just by their presence. Being seen to be fair is an important contributor to the Project's legitimacy, and holding its meetings in public is a safeguard of that fairness. Indeed, in one meeting, in response to the leader who was chairing the meeting calling for quiet because a crucial problem had to be addressed, another participant responded "why is it crucial? Because it concerns your house?" By holding these problem-solving meetings in the presence of a wide range of sex workers from different red light areas, the institutional power of the leaders and decision-makers is kept in check. While the leaders have power through their

position in the hierarchy, they are monitored in their use of this power by the presence of their peers.

But is this hierarchical relation not contradictory to the stated participatory philosophy of the Project? Have I not claimed that sex workers are running the Project and that they have control over the conditions of their work together? To apply my own standard of being specific about what people do and do not have power over, a re-examination of what it is in the Project that sex workers do and do not control shows that within the Project, sex workers' powers are tightly bounded. The structural decisions on how many clinics there are, how many peer educators are to be hired, who is to be hired, what the salaries are to be, when a demonstration will be held, what the priorities of the clinic work are, and so on, are decisions taken centrally, and it is widely accepted that such decisions are taken centrally and must be respected. The authority of Dr Jana and of Mr Dutta is mainly taken for granted, with a certain degree of fear of displeasing them. Considering the location of the Project in a highly unequal and competitive context, it is quite imaginable that, had the Project opened up all of its decisions to community control, it would have become at best a site of significant conflict, and at worst it would have been taken over by the already powerful people, to advance their own interests. The pre-existing state of community relations is not a level playing field: if the power had been offered to local people, it is likely that it would have been the madams or pimps or *goondas* who capitalised on it, rather than the sex workers. By establishing that certain things are not up for discussion (particularly the allocation of zero-sum resources like who is hired), the Project has limited the likelihood of people competing for those resources, or seeking to monopolise them. This is not to argue that poor people cannot manage financial resources, but to recognise that the community is not a level playing field, nor a homogenous unit. Although it seems counter to the Project's stated participatory philosophy, not allowing certain core elements of the Project to come up for debate prevents domination of the Project by madams, and thereby permits it to continue serving the interests of sex workers.

In significant ways, then, the Sonagachi Project is not participatory. The powers that the Project provides are not only bounded by societal constraints, but are also necessarily bounded by the Project itself in order to ensure its own survival. Project workers have limited powers over the micro-organisation of their work together, monitoring each

others' performance at their job, and bringing problems to the office for attention and solution. Few Project workers are involved in significant decision-making. However, the Project is open to the interests of the sex workers in important ways. Firstly, it provides the fora for them to communicate with the Project and make demands on it, through meetings in which problems can be solved and complaints about the Project can be made. And secondly, the Project allows its resources to be used to answer to sex workers' immediate everyday problems: their arguments with clients, their problems with police, and so on. In terms of Arnstein's ladder of "gradations of citizen participation" (Figure 2.1), does this amount to genuine participation or not? Participants have control over some domains of their Project but not others, and they can demand that the Project meets their needs. My argument is that each of the domains of power is important and qualitatively different. Considering the quasi-quantitative "degree" of power which is given over to participants, as Arnstein suggests, is an important check on professionals' monopolisation of the process. On the other hand, considering the qualitatively different domains of power is important in order to specify the division of labour among co-actors, and to specify which skills and supports need to be offered in order to gain a particular power.

Leadership, institutional support and sustainability

The role of activists, founders, and health professionals in participatory projects is a complex issue (Lykes *et al.*, 2003). While it may be ideal and desirable that the community takes over the running of a participatory project, such work depends upon significant skills and capacity, which cannot be assumed to exist in systematically deprived and marginalised communities (Pradeep, 2002). Indeed, participatory projects often report the withdrawal or loss of institutional or professional support as factors leading to the breakdown of the project (Asthana & Oostvogels, 1996; Walden *et al.*, 1990; Laukamm-Josten, Mwizarubi, Outwater *et al.*, 2000). The Sonagachi Project continues to rely heavily on the leadership of the present and past directors, as decision-making authorities. It also depends upon the availability of funding for its activities. Participatory projects among marginalised communities depend upon significant financial, logistical, and professional support. The issue of "sustainability" is one that is important to funding agencies, governments, and community projects. Funding agencies and governments tend to look at the problem of sustainability in terms of: Can this

project sustain itself once external support is withdrawn? From the point of view of the projects, however, the sustainability issue is quite different. It is: How can we ensure that we have sufficient reliable external supports to sustain ourselves? While participatory intervention is sometimes advocated as a cost-efficient way of using local resources to run a project, in fact, in the context of the high degrees of marginalisation and disadvantage which characterise the communities most vulnerable to HIV in developing countries, participatory interventions require significant input, not only for carrying out the health-focused work, but also to constitute the organisation and collaboration which constitutes a participatory project.

Within such historically and contemporarily deprived social contexts, leadership becomes an invaluable resource for the conduct of effective projects. Chatterjee and Sahgal (2002) report, from a survey of 19 NGO-run HIV prevention projects in India, that leadership was cited by their informants as one of the most important factors in the effectiveness of NGO work. The survey findings may reflect a popular representation of hierarchy and authority as factors that make a project work (Madan, 1987), rather than the factors that a social scientist might find. Even so, this underscores the importance of leadership as a model that participants expect and value. In the Sonagachi Project, the leadership roles of the past and present directors is very evident in all parts of the Project's work. They are relied upon to take decisions on every aspect of the Project, are expected to produce good solutions, and are highly respected on this basis. I would suggest that one reason that leadership emerges as so important in such contexts is the absence of significant external and internal supports for the running of a project. In such challenging and threatening environments, projects rely heavily on committed, determined, imaginative leaders (Campbell, 2003). Perhaps if such projects were more stable in their foundation, for example, if they were guaranteed funding, and had access to other institutional supports, such as the support of hospitals, police, or effective advice on making funding applications and the availability of services that they could use, then leaders might not be so important, and a range of community members could take on management and decision-making roles.

9.2.3. Building commitment and capacity internal to the Project

As well as managing its relation with outsider groups, a participatory project also faces significant challenges in its internal running. It must mobilise the support of community members and it must constitute procedures to enable participants' collaboration together to run smoothly.

Gaining community support: Answering to sex workers' interests

The initiation of development projects, and the acquisition of funding is usually driven, at least partially, by non-local decisions about development priorities. This can set up another contradiction for participatory projects where there are divergences between the official priorities of the Project and those of local people. In the light of my argument that for many sex workers, their interest in the Project derives from their hope that the Project will come to their support in the event of them facing a problem, the importance of a project meeting the felt needs of the local community becomes clear. This is further supported by the fact that Project workers relied heavily in persuading sex workers to participate, on arguments based on their individual interest in their security or economic gain, rather than on general arguments about the collective interest. It is also supported by the importance to Project workers of their personal gains reported to derive from their participation. HIV prevention projects sometimes have to contend with disinterest, or a loss of support (Campbell, 2003; Walden *et al.*, 1999). The Sonagachi case suggests that by answering to existing felt needs of the community, a project can comprise a meaningful object around which community members' interest and commitment can be sustained.

The ability of the Project to attend to and solve concrete immediate problems, which might not be directly linked to HIV, makes it very interesting both to the sex workers and to the Project workers. The sex worker leaders and many of the committee members work hard to solve and prevent sex workers' problems, and are on call at any time of the day or night. They spoke of their satisfaction at being able to do something worthwhile for their local sex workers. That satisfaction and enthusiasm depend on the gratitude and prestige which they receive through being able to address the felt needs and priorities of sex workers. Asthana and Oostvogels (1996) suggest that Project workers on a project in Chennai lost interest and motivation due to their not being able to make

any significant, visible changes in the community. If the Sonagachi Project had focused solely on HIV from the start, it is difficult to imagine it mobilising so much interest from sex workers, who get involved in the Project's HIV-related activities probably due to their interest in its problem-solving support.

Building trust among sex workers and between sex workers and the Project has been another important consequence of the Sonagachi Project's problem-solving abilities. The lack of solidarity or trust among sex workers, due to their conflictual and economically competitive environment, has been identified as a core obstacle both to their health promotion and to their co-operation in a project together (Abdool Karim, *et al.*, 1995; Walden *et al.*, 1999; Campbell, 2003). The Sonagachi Project's frequent meetings offer opportunities to develop informal as well as formal relationships and trust among participants. The meetings also offers opportunities to solve problems or conflicts between Project workers concerning their work. As well as having frequent, meetings, peer educators visit sex workers in their houses every day, forming significant social relationships with them, and forming the community bonds which may form the basis for mutual trust and for new norms, such as norms of condom use, to develop. I have suggested that one of the important reasons for sex workers' participation in the Project, their agreeing to attend the clinic or meetings or rallies, is because they feel a responsibility to their "*didis*" who help them, and because the informal daily contact has constituted important social relationships with mutual responsibilities. In these ways, the Project comprises an object and a site around which a network of relationships can develop, the relationships which may be the basis for community solidarity to make condom use universal, and to encourage people to support each other if they face conflicts.

The implication of this for community development projects is that being responsive to local needs is a way for projects to comprise a meaningful activity and a meaningful set of relationships for local community members. Furthermore, establishing frequent social contact with Project workers, and fora for social contact among community members is a core constituent of the community bonds which are often lacking in disrupted communities, and which are the basis for any growth of solidarity, trust or sharing of health-enabling norms. For example, considerable trust is necessary if a norm of condom use (which occurs in private) is to be institutionalised, as in Sonagachi.

Thus, counter to any demands to focus directly upon the health topic of concern to development agencies or governments, this discussion has argued that in order to gain support, and create a normatively regulated community, it is essential that a project works indirectly, on meeting the felt needs of the community. This indirect work also builds essential social capital and capacity which support the development of health-enhancing norms, as well as the community's ability to respond to new challenges (Campbell, Williams & Gilgen, 2002; Campbell, 2003).

Constituting collectivity members

As well as meeting individual needs, however, for a Project to function, there needs to be an internal organisation which allows for people to fulfil particular roles as part of a bigger collective project. To this extent, Project workers need to act co-operatively with their colleagues, so that their work intersects smoothly. For this, Project workers need both opportunities to discuss and elaborate the nature of their interdependent action, and familiarity with skills, procedures and discourses which facilitate active participation. These are resources for collective action. Two forms of resources for constituting people as members of a collectivity will be discussed here: firstly the procedures which enable participants to coordinate their activity, and secondly, the role of conscientisation in constituting the collectivity.

Firstly, the existence of established and authoritative procedures regarding punctuality, a division of labour which allocates certain roles to certain individuals, definitions of the appropriate procedures through which problems may be solved, and so on, allow for the different participants' actions to interface smoothly, as they carry out their individual actions as part of the collective activity (sections 7.3.1.; 7.6.2.; 7.6.5). These rules and procedures have to be learnt, adapted to new contingencies, discussed and agreed upon. Contrary to funding agencies' emphasis on focused disease-specific intervention, community interventions often need to give much energy to constituting the community capacities which enable members' effective participation, before the health issue is even addressed (Hawe, King, Noort, *et al.*, 1998). I have suggested that the frequent meetings within the Sonagachi Project facilitate the constitution of Project workers as collectivity members through their being incorporated into the collective mechanisms of the Project, gaining the skills and knowledge which enable them to take

part effectively. Moreover, these meetings contain opportunities for Project workers to monitor each others' performance of their work. Since their tasks are interdependent, Project workers have an interest in making sure that others do not carry out their work in a way that will create difficulties for their own work – again serving to integrate the actions of the different participants. Thus, for instance, when the bank collectors reported that intake was down due to madams not allowing them access to sex workers, the problems created by other Project workers being seen to rescue *adhias* from madams had to be addressed. A further resource which contributes to people acting as collectivity members is the principle of fairness and impartiality. It is widely understood that impartiality is a Project principle which must be upheld, and participants complain if they suspect that somebody is acting in an impartial way, to further their personal interests or those of their friends, for instance. Similarly, as I have argued above, holding the meetings in public is a means of forcing people to meet collective rather than individual interests through their participation.

The second general way in which people are constituted as members of the politicised, activist project, is through problematising of the status quo, to develop a “critical consciousness” of their problems. What is the role of critical consciousness in the formation of a collective project? In sections 6.4 and 6.5, I have discussed the politicising rationale of struggling for workers' rights in terms of critical consciousness. The form which this knowledge takes introduced some questions about the nature of “critical consciousness”. I queried whether sex workers' reports of turning points and increases of awareness should be taken at face value. I also pointed to what seems to me an unrealistic hope in the possibility of workers' rights, and an uncritical repetition of the official Project story, asking whether these factors detracted from the “criticality” of the knowledge. However, I also pointed to the value of this discourse as bringing people together in terms of a collective interest in a shared goal, and to the role of the concept of “workers' rights” in problematising the present, so that it can be seen as actionable, rather than inevitable. Conceptualising the problem as a major structural one also allows for failures to be attributed to the present wrongful situation, which may be changed, rather than to intrinsic problems with the Project or its activities.

The research also allowed for observations about *how* the problematisation of the status quo comes about. While it is often asserted that a critical awareness of the sources of

one's problems is an important prerequisite for transformative action, there is little explication of how such problematisation is achieved. Firstly, as I have mentioned, the presence of an imaginable future alternative allows the present situation to be problematised. This position of having workers rights is explained by Project workers by reference to other social groups (informal labourers, "untouchables") who have gained their rights in recent history. Thus, as Montero (2002) suggests, one way of problematising the status quo is to compare the present situation to that of other social groups in order to show that an alternative is indeed possible. This research has also shown that it is not sufficient that people only gain an understanding of the structural roots of their problem. The flying sex workers' sophisticated explanation of the economic and gendered basis of their vulnerability did not lead to an activist but to a fatalist response, because they could not see any concrete opportunities which would enable them to act upon that situation or to avoid it. Some parts of one's environment are more under one's control than others, with differential success of reflection leading to action. I showed in Chapter 7 (sections 7.3.3.; 7.6.7. and 7.6.8.) that participants bring the procedures of their Project work under reflection and gain control over them. But reflecting on their economic circumstance, over which they have little control, does little to make that economic situation actionable.

Thus, a second way of problematising the status quo, is by providing practical action alternatives. Provision of a new resource (e.g. access to support which will enable a sex worker to leave a madam and rent a room alone) materially changes the power relations in the community. Being able to leave a madam is a new path of action: the madam system is, *de facto*, problematised, in that it no longer has to be taken for granted. The sex worker who draws on the Project's support to leave a madam may not see her problem in politicised terms, or see her action as a political action, but the power of madams is in effect problematised, since the sex worker was able to consider an alternative. Many sex workers interviewed knew that the Project's role was to offer them support, but said that they had not had a problem which they needed to bring to the Project, nor could they give an example of a problem that had been solved. Publicising the concrete problems that have been acted upon and solved would be a way of generating understandings of people's problems as actionable problems.

In this section I have elaborated the consequences of the empirical work of this thesis for our understandings of participation. I now turn to discussing its contributions to activity theory.

9.3. Contributions to activity theory

Activity theory is not a ready-made system to be applied to any social phenomenon, but rather, offers a general theoretical and methodological approach which has to be concretised in a relevant way in order to analyse the particular object of study (Engeström, 1996). Through confronting activity-theoretical ideas with the complexities of various empirical settings, the applicability of the theory is advanced, as the concepts are specified in new ways, applicable to the new domains. When discussing methodology in Chapter 4, I argued that the generality of a theory is proved in its application to a new context. Has the present research yielded any generality or development for activity theory? I have implemented activity theory to analyse a case of participatory community development, which is a social formation that has not often received an activity-theoretical interpretation. In order to analyse grassroots collective action, I developed a specific activity-theoretical conceptual toolkit, comprised of the concepts of (i) resources for collective action; (ii) contradictions between individual and collective interests, and between the interests of opposing groups; (iii) reflection on the conditions of activity. The use of these concepts to investigate the collective action process of the Sonagachi Project enabled the construction of a picture of why and how the Sonagachi Project functions. On this basis, the first contribution of the thesis to activity theory is to demonstrate the usefulness of this conceptual toolkit to the analysis of the social phenomenon of grassroots collective action.

While the three conceptual resources relied on in this thesis are familiar in activity theory, their application in a new context has revealed new facets and applicability. I will address each of these conceptual resources in turn.

9.3.1. Resources for collective action

Using the activity system model (Figure 3.1), I suggested that we could consider the components of the activity system as resources for action and activity. While a tool is a

resource to enable individual action, rules, a division of labour, a community, and a shared motive can be resources for activity. In order to enable collective activity, these resources need to be agreed upon by participants, so that participants share a definition of their division of labour, their rules and their motive. Without such agreement, people's individual actions will not fit together in the achievement of a collective interest, but will conflict and contradict each other, hindering collaboration. I suggested that Project meetings are important fora for the development of a shared understanding of participants' division of labour, their rules and their shared motive. In the analysis of the activity of participation (Chapter 7), it emerged that the division of labour, and the rules of the Project enter into discussion in these meetings, as participants monitor each other and enforce the rules of their Project, confirming the importance of these resources to the organisation of collective action. The implication is that these concepts may be thought of as the resources upon which a collective action process rests: that is, these categories do not only describe an activity system, but may serve as guidelines as to what has to be established in order to constitute an effective collective action project.

9.3.2. Divergences of interests

The particular empirical setting of this research, of a community fractured by different interests, where the whole of community life is potentially the Project's object, presents a setting of greater divergences than have mostly been addressed in activity-theoretical studies. The concentration of these studies within organisations, such as schools or hospitals, that are more tightly defined as to their boundaries and their focal tasks contrasts with the very open and fractured set of activities which comprise the Sonagachi Project. In addressing collective activity, Leont'ev's description of the "primaeval hunt" presented a harmonious activity in which each member's action was subordinated to the collective goal (see section 3.3.2). However, as much as shared collective interests and collaboration are necessary to the existence of activity, divergences and conflict are equally fundamental to social life. To conceptualise the divergences among different actors is an important contemporary challenge facing activity theory (Engeström, Engeström & Vähäaho, 1999; van Vlaenderen, 2001). I suggested that the concept of collective action, understood to encompass at once the coordination of acting in a collectivity, and the individuality of carrying out an action,

maintains attention to the simultaneous convergences and divergences of acting together (section 3.5).

I have pointed to two conceptual means of meeting the challenge of dealing with divergences between actors. The first is the distinction between action and activity, and the second is to consider divergent groups as collaborator-adversaries within a single activity system. In the analyses of the sex workers' and the Project workers' relation to the Project (chapters 5 and 6), the difference for the Project between people acting on the basis of individual interests (which I call action), and on the basis of collective interests (which I call activity) was an important one. The data suggested that sex workers mainly draw on the Project as a resource to solve their individual problems of action, such as disputes with clients or madams, or the need to prove to their families that they are not sex workers. This mode of utilising the Project contributes significant new powers to sex workers. However, sometimes individual interests are at odds with collective interests, as in the case when sex workers seek to use identity cards which state that they are health workers to deny their profession, when the collective interest of the Project is to assert that sex work is not shameful. Sex workers' mode of participation contrasts with that of Project workers, who are incorporated into the Project as members of a collectivity, through sharing rules, and a motive, and agreeing on a division of labour. These same Project workers can, however, also make use of the Project to serve their individual interests, gaining a salary, or the power to take decisions which serve their personal interests.

The distinction between individual and collective interests has been a useful one, to clarify some of the divergences in operation within the activity system of the Project. However, the empirical investigation also suggested a problem with this distinction, as it emerged that, when sex workers are taking "individual" action (such as seeking an income or respect-bestowing identity cards), those actions are just as social as the actions subordinated to Project interests. Such actions are part of activity systems in which sex workers relate to their family members, in which respect and material support are earned and granted. Thus, the divergence is more a result of a person's participation in two contradictory activity systems, rather than being a divergence between the individual and the collective. Nonetheless, I suggest, that, if we take one particular activity system (such as the Project) as our frame of reference, we can say that *with*

respect to this particular activity system, a particular action (such as calling on the *didis* for assistance) is an individual one. The distinction then, between an individual action and a collective activity is an analytical distinction, with respect to a particular activity system, not an ontological distinction about the nature of the action itself.

This problem of people's participation in multiple activity systems creates difficulties when the activity system model is applied in a community context. Even a simple action seems to exist at a crossroads of multiple activity systems. In describing the act of condom use, for example, the interests of sex worker, client, madam and landlord may all enter into the negotiation over the condom. Are all of these actors to be considered part of the activity system constituted around the action of condom use, or are they to be considered as taking part in their own activity systems with their own interests, which clash at certain points of action? Distinguishing the different activity systems, and taking the object around which people meet as defining their participation in an activity system together may help to organise a conceptualisation of the complex social relations in a community

The second means which I proposed to deal with divergences is to consider divergent actors as part of a single activity system, an activity system constituted around the point where the actors meet around an object which is, at least minimally, shared. Even an argument has rules and a shared object. I used this conceptualisation to propose the concept of collaborator-adversaries, in order to acknowledge the simultaneous existence of conflict and collaboration. Analysing the Project's complex relation with local clubs and political parties, with madams, and with funding agencies through this lens revealed the processes through which the Project sought to minimise the disruption to its work by defining a division of labour, rules, or goals which those groups would agree to, and which would facilitate the Project's work.

Are there any disadvantages to considering the divergent actors as members of a single activity system? It is important not to lose sight of the fact that each actor also takes part in other activity systems, which constrain possible actions and activities. For instance funding agencies take part in activities with their respective governments, which set priorities and policies; the representatives of funding agencies take part in activity systems in which their job performance is evaluated, and so on. In this thesis, it has only

been possible to focus on the activity system constituted directly around the work of the Sonagachi Project. Researching also the other important activity systems in which the divergent actors take part, would provide a comprehensive background to understanding the phenomenon of collaborator-adversaries' coordination together in a single, but fractured, activity system.

Collective action is a system of divergent actions and interlocking activities. This thesis has proposed the concepts of action/activity and collaborator-adversaries as means of articulating this tension within collective action.

9.3.3. Reflection on the conditions of activity

The third conceptual tool used in this thesis was the notion of reflection on the conditions of activity as the means of gaining control over the activity. I suggested that by bringing aspects of one's environment into discourse, this environment can be operated with, alternatives can be envisioned, and action taken to establish a new formulation of the environment. As Engeström (1993) has argued, the presence of contradictions is an integral part of such reflective development. In this thesis, the process of reflecting on the conditions of activity has been addressed in two different ways. In the first, Project workers reflect upon the environment in which sex work and the Project are located (described in section 6.5) and in the second, Project workers reflect upon the workings of their Project itself (sections 7.3.3.; 7.6.8.). Such reflections came about through different contradictions in each case. In the first case, I investigated the learning of a new discourse, that of struggling for workers' rights, suggesting that this new discourse creates the perception of a contradiction between the rightful situation of sex workers, and the wrongful existing situation. This contradiction problematises the present situation, by presenting an alternative situation which is imaginable but which does not exist. This contradiction did not arise from a contradiction within local activity in the red light area, but was introduced by activists presenting an alternative discourse.

The second domain in which participants reflect on the conditions of their activity concerns the work of meetings. In the domain of acting on the conditions of their own collaboration, participants have gained some control. To examine this, I focused on the

times when the Project work itself became the object of the meetings. I suggested that when participants simply bring problems that they are having with their work to the meeting for solution, or monitor each others' performance of their duties, they are reflecting on the conditions of their activity. The source of the reflection, the contradiction, is in the different responses of different actors, as they monitor and comment on each other's action. I also noted that the authoritative voice of the Project's founder, and the knowledge of the Project's "*shoulds*" comprise a perspective for reflection on their activity. Reflecting on their action from the point of view of the Project's ideals, Project members bring their actions into alignment with the official structure of the collective activity, that is, they become incorporated into the activity, as collectivity members. This form of reflection, like the learning of the Project rationale of struggling for workers' rights, takes place through learning a contentful definition of the ideal situation, which can be compared with the actually existing situation. Across these two domains, I have sought to concretise reflection. I have done so by conceptualising it as a process either of somebody commenting on another's action, or as reflecting on the existing situation from knowledge of the ideal situation.

In sum, the thesis has contributed to activity theory's capacity to analyse grassroots collective action, through the refinement of conceptual resources to understand what makes a collective action process hang together, the simultaneous collaboration and conflict inherent to such collective action processes, and the nature of reflection upon the conditions of activity.

So far in this chapter, I have suggested conclusions to the research questions with which I began. I have sought to facilitate the generality of the knowledge produced through the case study of the Sonagachi Project through bringing the empirical details into dialogue with other cases and with shared theoretical interests. The validity of the knowledge, however, is to be assessed by its future effectiveness. Where do we go from here? The next phase of the research is to open out to new actions: future research and future interventions.

9.4. Future research

I envisage four immediate developments on the research presented here. The case study reported in this thesis is part of a wider research effort to conceptualise participatory development in an actionable way. Within this thesis, I have brought the case into a one-way dialogue with my interpretation of other case studies presented in the literature. Systematically comparing this case study with others is a way of producing further generality for the cases. This can be attempted by a single author, but is better done by collaborating with other researchers of participatory development, to write papers, to hold symposia and workshops, in which convergences and divergences among the cases can emerge. Such collaboration is the next destination for the research presented in this thesis.

The research presented here was conducted on a project that was already up and running successfully, having been established 9 years previously. The rules and goals, the division of labour, the relationships with collaborator-adversaries, had already become widely shared and well established. In order to observe how these shared understandings become established, how a group of initially isolated people with divergent interests actually establish the basis of a collaboration together, it would be very fruitful to observe a project from its start up phase. The meetings held from the initiation of a community project would provide data on how those shared understandings are negotiated, where obstacles arise, how individual interests are dealt with, and so on.

The concept of collaborator-adversaries, who come with divergent interests but meet around a shared object, is one that I developed in the course of the analysis of the empirical material. I did not start out with it, or design the research with the concept in mind. To thoroughly investigate the simultaneous collaborative and adversarial relations in a divergent activity system, it would be ideal to research the various other activity systems of the collaborator-adversaries as a supplement to understanding their collaboration in the focal activity system. In the case of the Sonagachi Project, it would be useful to develop a full understanding of the demands on representatives of funding agencies, the interests of landladies, madams, and local political parties, to understand the actions which they take, when they interact with the Project.

Finally, this thesis has evaluated the form and content of knowledge which may be described as characterising “critical consciousness”. A productive way of further assessing the functioning of such content would be to compare the conceptualisations of their problems held by sex workers working for the Sonagachi Project with those working within the auspices of other projects in Kolkata with an alternative ideology, such as the conceptualisation of sex workers as victims of commercial sexual exploitation. It would be useful to ask: Do the sex workers working within the different projects have different “critical consciousnesses” about the structural nature of their problems, and the role of their organisations in solving them?

9.5 Implications for health promotion

9.5.1. Participatory development policy

I draw three implications here for the practices of groups such as government bodies or funding agencies involved in initiating and assessing development policy and participatory projects. These implications refer to the planning of a project, its format, and its sustainability.

The first lesson of this thesis is the assessment of the role of participation, which I have stated as achieving *significant circumscribed local change*. This means that participation should both be valued for the changes which it can bring about, and seen as only one part of a wider project of health-enabling societal change. Thus, there is not one right answer to the problem of development, but simultaneous attention should be given to the level of community development and to the level of societal change. Thus, for example, the need for a project to adapt itself to an unequal environment (such as maintaining good relationships with madams) may be a medium-term necessity, but should simultaneously be the target of long-term change. The limited scope of a participatory project should be clearly specified, without losing sight of the wider environment and longer-term changes which are required.

Secondly, I have suggested that, in order to mobilise people’s interest in a project, it needs to respond to felt local needs, otherwise it is unlikely to present a meaningful

object around which people have an interest in collaborating. If a project focuses solely on a topic defined as a priority from the public health perspective but not from a local perspective, it will have to offer incentives for people's participation which risks further entangling individual interests and competition for resources in the work of the project. Project design needs to allow for much work, which may be only indirectly related to the official Project objectives: work on solving local problems, building supportive relationships and developing skills for participation. Constituting such a supportive environment, with participatory and problem-solving skills, will comprise a set of resources that the community can use to tackle public health and other problems.

Thirdly, I have emphasised the importance of long-term institutional support of participatory projects among marginalised groups. For historically disempowered groups, the issue of project sustainability is not whether the project can function without external support, but whether the project can depend upon the long-term existence of the external supports which it needs. Supports such as availability of good quality health and social services, good relationships with political representatives and police, advice on legal and bureaucratic procedures necessary to run an NGO, and advice on making funding applications are all areas in which community projects rely on the expertise of other social groups. Such supports must be made available and easily accessible to project workers. In contexts such as Sonagachi, where external supports are few and far between, a huge responsibility falls on the shoulders of individual leaders, who are expected to produce effective solutions to all manner of problems and dilemmas. While it may often be the policy of progressive liberal development thinking to turn over the running of a project to the community, in a very marginalised and unequal context, this may be unrealistic or even counter-productive. I have suggested that turning the project over to full community control, in the absence of anything resembling a level playing field, would amount to offering madams or pimps or relatively powerful sex workers opportunities to advance their individual interests. The design of participatory projects, therefore, needs to allow for long-term external support, and leadership, accompanied by efforts to build community capacity to take over the project.

9.5.2. *Participatory development practice*

This thesis has shown that the practice of participatory development is a very complex and challenging process, involving the management of relations with powerful outside groups, balancing these with the needs of the community, constituting among community members the capacity to participate effectively, and avoiding being hijacked for the pursuit of personal interests. A project both seeks to make participants' environments beyond the project actionable, and it also comprises a new environment, which becomes actionable to participants. The project needs to develop participants' skills to act in this environment, while avoiding becoming a resource for furthering personal interests to the detriment of collective interests.

Firstly, how can a project promote conceptualisations of people's problems as actionable? For people to seek solutions to their problems, they need to know that those problems are actionable, that alternatives and supportive resources are available (Kelly & van Vlaenderen, 1995). "Problematisation" of the status quo is part of the process in which people gain new understandings of their environment as actionable. One way of doing this is to promote an imaginable alternative status for the community, a status which recognisably exists for another social group, and is thus imaginable. However, I have also tried to emphasise the importance of *material problematisation*. By this I mean that providing problem-solving resources, and letting people know the concrete problems that have been solved in the past is a demonstration that alternatives exist, a material problematisation. Rather than arguing at a general level that a project exists to provide support, or that in principle community members could enjoy an alternative situation, material problematisation would take the form of solving problems and publicising to the community the concrete successes in solving problems. Giving examples of problems that have been solved is a concrete way of demonstrating that problems are indeed actionable.

Secondly, how can a project design its activities to maximally increase the actionability of participants' environments? Considering the idea that powers are specific and bounded, if a project claims to "empower" people, it should specify exactly what action it empowers them to take, and what supports, skills and opportunities are necessary in order to take that action. People need a very different set of powers if they are to act as

health educators, or decision-makers, or political lobbyists. Some powers are applicable in more domains than others, and these more generalisable powers are valuable to project flexibility and sustainability. The social resources of meetings with effective problem-solving principles and procedures are ones that can flexibly adapt to any new and unpredicted problem that may arise. The resources of condom promotion arguments have a more circumscribed domain of applicability. But if such arguments are needed by the community, effectively organised meetings will be an ideal way to generate and share such arguments. Sustainability of the project, in terms of maintaining community support, is also gained by the project being able to solve the immediate and concrete problems which arise.

Thirdly, how can a project develop its members' skills to be effective participants? As I have argued, to constitute a smoothly functioning project from a disparate and isolated group of people with little experience of formalised organisational action, participants need to develop skills in participatory procedures and familiarity with the conventions, principles and rules of the individual project. Bearing this need in mind, participatory fora can be designed to be environments for "learning by doing" as well as for achieving the action goals set for them. Such fora could include both novices and experts, to facilitate learning. Less experienced participants may be asked to chair meetings, or explain problems, or suggest solutions (as is done in the Sonagachi Project). This is done with the interest, not of solving the problem as quickly and efficiently as possible (which would be done by getting an expert to solve it), but with the interest of constituting a community of skilled participants.

The above three recommendations refer to efforts to increase the powers of participants to act on their environments. Three further recommendations concern the need for a project to avoid being co-opted to serve individual interests. The first, general recommendation is that the designers of a project should consider what kind of environment that project comprises, for the various community actors. Is it one that offers opportunities or resources to pursue personal interests at the expense of collective interests? If it does offer such resources that can be used to advance personal interests, are there mechanisms to prevent abuse of such resources? Which domains of the project's activity are to be under community members' control and which are not? As I have argued above, where a project has to collaborate with community members with

divergent interests and inequalities of power (such as madams and sex workers), the project may need to retain control over the desirable material resources which can be used to benefit individual interests. It may need to assert a strict hierarchy in order to have control over the more powerful community members. Otherwise, the project risks creating divisions and further perpetuating the inequalities that it seeks to overcome.

Secondly, I have argued that, in the context of pre-existing power relations in which powerful groups have an interest in the subordination of the target community, a community project is likely to have to collude with those powerful interests, to some extent, in order to be allowed to function. Thus, projects need to be politically astute, in dealing with these other groups. Ideally, they will be able to mollify the more powerful groups while gaining power to challenge those power interests (as the Sonagachi project does, in relation to madams' power over sex workers). This complex political relation must be planned for and monitored. How the project is going to deal with conflicts of interests and collusions should be spelled out in the project proposal, and actively managed, rather than denied, as the project proceeds.

Thirdly, what infrastructures can a project set up to prevent it being used to promote the individual interests of participants, and to convince the community that it is acting fairly? I have argued that the resource of frequent public meetings is an important means of monitoring whether people are carrying out their roles in the project fairly and effectively. Such transparency is backed up by principles of "fairness" and "impartiality" which facilitate and legitimise participants' monitoring and voicing of abuses of power. Such fora for making complaints about people's conduct, or voicing concerns about unfairness are important means both of protecting the project from being hijacked for individual interests, and for demonstrating its fairness to the community. It may not be practical to bring every decision to a large public meeting, but smaller decision-making or problem-solving committees could be transparent by having rotating independent community members attending such decision-making. This would facilitate impartiality, the community's confidence in the impartiality, and the development of community members' knowledge and skills for participation.

9.6. Conclusion

In its widest perspective, my research has aimed to contribute to psychology's power to produce actionable understandings of contemporary social transformation. While my empirical research has analysed the Sonagachi Project's construction of resources to make sex workers' environments actionable, at the same time, I have been seeking to construct conceptual resources to make the phenomenon of participation actionable for researchers and interventionists. At this level, the research seeks to contribute to the research agenda identified by Chaiklin (1996, p.384) as the study of "societally significant practices". This is a research tradition which investigates real-world social phenomena in the settings in which they normally occur, attends to the institutional and societal nature of individual and joint activity, seeks to develop productive theoretical apparatus for the analysis of social practices, and to study practices that are significant to the lives of participants, in the interest of contributing to improvements in the possibilities for participants' actions.

The thesis has contributed a pragmatist approach to understanding the societally significant practice of participatory development. Specifically, the approach which I have developed replaces a way of thinking about social phenomena through a logic of quantity (e.g. more or less participation) or binary categories (e.g. does participation produce significant change or not?), with a logic of domain-specificity (e.g. in which domains are participants empowered to act?). By specifying domains in this way, we can see that participation can lead to change that is both significant and circumscribed, that people can be simultaneously empowered in one domain but disempowered in another, that our relations with others are simultaneously collaborative and adversarial, and that we may be highly reflective on some domains of our life but not on others. Carrying through this approach has enabled me to offer suggestions and heuristics to be used in the design of participatory programmes.

As Chaiklin (1996) argues, this research agenda to study societally significant practices is a collective endeavour. My action of writing the thesis is part of a knowledge-production activity system whose motive is the provision of transformative knowledge. A division of labour within this system allows individual researchers to produce partial contributions, which together with the contributions of other theoreticians and empirical

researchers, yield actionable recommendations which are tested in their implementation by practitioners. These individual actions, adjusted to the collective motive, are not incompatible with other individual interests in personal development, furthering a career or getting a PhD. I have sought to align my action with the actions of my community, through providing sufficient methodological and empirical detail, theoretical discussion and suggestive recommendations to enable this research to be taken up by others. However, the achievement of generality or applicability of a case study cannot be guaranteed within the procedures of the study itself, but can only be proved in the future application of the knowledge in another context. The real and very challenging test of its generality is whether the readers will find this research useful.

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Appendix 1: Topic guide for interviews

1. Contextual information

Can you tell us about your life?

(where you are from, family environment, how you came to the red light area, expectations for future)

Living and working conditions:

Which system of sex work do you work in?

(how do you meet clients; do you have a good relation with your madam/pimp/neighbours/clients; which system is better?)

What are the biggest problems of living in the red light area?

How do you cope with those problems?

Who would help you if you had a problem (with client/ debt, etc)?

Do you have a good relationship with your family?

Is better to be a housewife than a sex worker?

Do you have a babu?

2. Health and condom use

Do you prefer to use condoms with clients?

What is the opinion of madams/pimps?

How do you negotiate condom use?

What happens if a client does not agree?

Do other women enforce condom use?

3. Relation to the Project

Do you know what work these *didis* [Project workers] do?

Have they done anything useful round here?

Do you visit the clinic?

Have you been to any meetings or rallies? What happened?

Some people are saying that sex work is not *kharap kaj* [bad work], but that it is good work, what do you think?

For people working in the Project:

What are your duties for the Project?

How do you carry out the work?

Appendix 2: Details of interviews

Interview number	Duration (minutes)	N	Work	Details	Approx. Age
1	60	1	Sex worker	Indep. Cat. B.	40
2	75	1	Supervisor	Former sex worker	35
3	105	1	Supervisor	Occasional sex worker	45
4	60	2	Sex workers	Cat. A.	22
5	Partly recorded	1	Landlady	Agrawali	45
6	120	2	Project workers	Peer educator; Supervisor	40-45
7	45	1	Co-ordinator		40
9	Not recorded				
10	30	1	Sex worker	Cat A, pimp system	30
11	60	1	Peer educator	Former sex worker	45
12	120	1	Sex worker	Cat B, indep.	28
13	30	1	Sex worker	Cat B, adhia	30
14	60	1	Teacher		22
15	Not recorded				
16	90	1	Co-ordinator		50
17	60	1	Madam		50
18	Not recorded				
19	60	3	Supervisors	Occasional sex workers	30-40
20	120	1	Supervisor	Former sex worker	50-55
21	60	2	Supervisor & <i>babu</i>	Sex worker	35
22	30	1	Madam		45
23	120	2	Sex workers	Cat. B. adhia	
26	135	2	Sex worker Peer educator	Indep.	27-35
27	90	1	Supervisor	Former sex worker	45
29	60	3	Former sex worker; 2 supervisors		45-55
30	45	1	Teacher		24
31	60	1	Peer educator	Former sex worker	40
32	60	3	Sex worker 2 supervisors	Cat B	18-40
33	90	1	Landlady		50
34	180	2	Supervisor & client	Sex worker, indep.	27-40
35	90	1	Peer educator	Former sex worker	35
38	60	1	Co-ordinator		24
39	120	1	Peer educator	Cat. B.	40
40	90	1	Director		
41	60	1	Supervisor	Madam	45
42	270	1	Babu		35
43	120	1	Occasional sex worker	Local committee	55
44	180	3	Clients	Taxi driver, babu, 'servant'	30-40
45	135	1	Peer educator	Former sex worker	40
47	60	1	Supervisor	Leader	40
48	45	3	Male peer educators		35-45
49	105	1	Client		26
50	60	1	Sex worker	Local committee	28
51	15	2	Project workers	Condom distribution	35
52	60	1	NGO worker	Other NGO	
53	60	7	Male peer educators		20-45
56	60	3	Male peer educators		25-45
58	60	1	Political party activist		50
59	60	1	Supervisor	Occasional sex worker	45
60	90	3	Supervisors	Occasional sex workers	40-45
61	40	1	Director		
62	20	1	Sex worker	Committee member	26
63	75	1	Supervisor	Occasional sex worker	45

Missing numbers (i.e., 8, 24, 25, 28 etc.) refer to group discussions which are described in Table 4.5

Appendix 3: Coding frame for Chapter five

Coding frame for sex workers' problems

Code category (Problem)	Code (Particular action)
Clients: economic gain	Dealing with clients Dealing with babus
Clients: condom use	Personal significance of HIV prevention Condom promotion arguments Confidence in unity Condom enforcement strategies Check customer for signs of health Use of clinic
Police & Goondas: Avoiding abuse	Call on didis' support Use of meetings Unity as a resource Avoid conflicts
Relationship with other sex workers	Avoiding conflicts with colleagues
Relationship with madam	Deciding on which system
Family: Maintaining respect	Avoiding identification as a sex worker Arguments for sex workers' legitimacy
Verbalised knowledge of the Project	
Sex workers describe the Project	

Appendix 4: Coding frame for Chapter six

Coding frame for the analysis of Project workers' actions, as project workers

Code category (Problem)	Code (Particular action)
Promoting health to sex workers	Health arguments Economic arguments Influence madams/ clients
Solving/preventing conflict	Generating unity Expert problem-solvers Advocate on sex workers' behalf to others
Persuade sex workers to participate	Arguments for material benefits Arguments on politicised basis
Making personal gains	Material gains Gaining respect Gaining in courage Becoming politicised
Role of political awareness	
Meaning of "workers' rights"	Institutional/legal recognition Solution to concrete/social problems
Consequences of "workers' rights"	Personal consequences Organisational consequences

Appendix 5: Problems brought to DMSC meetings

The complete set of problems and objects brought to the DMSC meetings.

Box 1: Problems brought to DMSC meetings by sex workers, and their solutions

1. Having been identified in the red light area by people from her neighbourhood, a sex worker faces eviction. It was agreed to provide her with an identity card as a health worker
2. A sex worker asked for DMSC's help to prevent her boyfriend from leaving her. The chair said that this is a personal issue, not one for DMSC.
3. A sex worker's sister eloped with a local man, she was concerned for her safety. Her photo would be circulated to peer educators, and a group would accompany the sex worker, to talk to that man's family.
4. Neighbouring sex workers and their families were having ongoing disputes and conflicts (the local president was one of the adversaries). Each side brought their case to the meeting on successive meetings. The conclusion was that it was a petty personal problem, but that a local meeting would be held to resolve it.
5. A physical fight over personal issues between a sw and a peer educator had taken place. No conclusion was reached although there were suggestions that the peer educator should lose her job.
6. A peer educator had died, leaving three children, and the meeting considered what to do with her possessions, how much money the landlady owed the children, and what to do with that money. They decided to sell the possessions, and keep the money in the children's name in the project's bank.
7. A woman new to the sex trade (possibly tricked/sold) had been drugged by a madam and raped, the madam had subsequently been beaten up by DMSC workers. the sex worker was to be taken care of by DMSC, and returned to her home place if she wanted.
8. Two sex workers had been arrested in a police raid. A big meeting of all relevant DMSC members was to be called in that local area, [likely to lead to a group of experienced sws to go and negotiate with the police].
9. A minor had been arrested in a police raid. It was asserted that there was little that DMSC could do for the young woman, it is now in the hands of the court.

Box 2: Problems brought to DMSC meetings by non-sex workers, and their solutions.

1. A madam brought problems with her adhias for the consideration of the meeting, on two successive occasions. Two sex worker sisters had borrowed money from the madam and then run away. The meeting agreed that the money should be repaid, either by the sex workers' new madam, or by the sex workers themselves – local peer educators would visit the new madam to explain this.
2. A local family of non-sex workers asked for DMSC's help to retrieve their dowry paid for a daughter's marriage to a man they subsequently discovered to be impotent. The meeting agreed to send somebody to represent them at the police station.
3. A landlord deemed innocent had been arrested in a police raid. Local peer educators wanted to support him. DMSC would contact its legal consultant about the issue.
4. A madam (and a minor) had been arrested in a police raid. DMSC would not help the madam as DMSC policy prohibits members from keeping minor girls as adhias.
5. An HIV positive person could not afford the anti-retroviral drugs being distributed at a reduced price by the Project's counselling centre, and representatives asked whether the medicine could be provided to him free. The matter was to be referred to the committee of the centre.

Box 3: Communication between organisation and grassroots workers

1. Before elections to the central committee were to take place, an explanation and discussion of the procedure of the ballot was given in a weekly meeting.
2. When, due to a change in funding structure, less money was made available for salaries while negotiations were going on with the funders, the director brought the issue to a monthly meeting, to ask whether people could wait longer for their salaries, or whether they would accept the demands of the funders, and let 6 people lose their jobs. This decision did seem to be open to negotiation, although the director, who chaired the meeting, felt that they should not give in to the funders' demands yet.
3. A monthly meeting was used to communicate a decision on salaries: that a cap would be put on the maximum which a project worker could earn. This decision had already been taken and was not open to debate.
4. Introduction of DMSC's new secretary, president, treasurer.
5. Conveying new procedures. An Executive Committee will be formed, which takes important decisions and conveys them to Project workers. The meeting is used to appoint committee members, nominated by the peer educators from each field. The peer educators agree on the importance of the committee, saying that they will complain if they do not know what is happening, and that it is necessary that there is a representative from each field on the committee.
6. A forthcoming festival to be run by DMSC and other organisations was announced, and suggestions sought for its content.
7. Accounts for the year were read out, with congratulations to peer educators for bringing so many patients, and a request for efforts to get more life members to join (who pay a relatively large lump sum).

Box 4: Project workers' difficulties carrying out their work as object

1. Project workers had attempted to rescue a minor girl, but the local club members and then police got involved, because they had drawn too much attention. The police would send her to a home which is notorious among sex workers for abuse of residents. Leaders would try to negotiate with police, if unsuccessful would try to get her parents to take her home.
2. People were not saving money with Usha bank. Advice given was to carefully build trust, be helpful, and reliably available for lodgements or withdrawals.
3. Peer educators made a complaint that they had not yet got the bags and umbrellas that they were due. The sex workers leader chairing the meeting asked them to wait, as there was insufficient money at that time.
4. A complaint was made that a teacher in one area was not teaching sex workers, but only teaching children. The complainants were to take the problem to the education co-ordinator, with a sex worker leader, after the meeting.
5. After Project workers had rescued a sex worker who had been beaten and tortured by her madam, the peer educators' work in that area was being hampered by local madams who suspect that peer educators will try to rescue other sex workers. They were not being allowed entry to brothels, and savings with the bank were down. (No solutions were generated, it was more of a report of a problem than seeking solution).
6. A report was presented to the meeting on progress on a case of a rescued minor girl, regarding efforts to have the traffickers and madams brought to justice, and the girl returned home. The sex worker leader reporting advised the other peer educators working in that field to anticipate resistance from the local people due to DMSC's involvement in rescuing.
7. Funds were requested for tea and biscuits at local committee meetings. The people bringing the issue said that it was not fair on the committee members to have to pay for these, and asked if they could use money from the DMSC subscriptions. A sex worker leader decided that a certain limited amount could be used for refreshments.
8. The person responsible for Usha bank in one field had been absent for some time, the director emphasised the importance of maintaining the sex workers' trust and volunteered to be their guarantor, allowing them to withdraw money without their bankbooks.
9. Request for more funding for the cultural wing, for new instruments. Complaint that people do not turn up for rehearsals, including one of the leaders, she responds that she is very busy.
10. Peer educators asked for a supervisor they are fond of, who has become a leader (CC member) to spend more time in her intervention field, with them. But she is very busy at the office.
11. A supervisor challenged the former Project Director (most respected person in the organisation) as to why they were not being paid properly and on time, emphasising that many people were having real difficulties with bills and debts.
12. Sex workers complained that a favourite peer educator had been assigned to a different intervention site, they wanted her back. [I did not catch if there was a solution to this, but it is unlikely that she would have been transferred back].

Box 5: During problem-solving, emergence of project work as object

1. During discussion of the procedure for the ballot to elect the next central committee members, a Project worker queried who would keep the keys to the ballot box. When somebody suggested that a member of the office staff could do so, another person asked, why not one of us?
2. During discussion of one community problem, the issue of the locus of responsibility was raised. The leaders asked why the local committee could not solve the problem, and on hearing that nobody turned up to the local committee meeting, rebuked the local secretary for not fulfilling her duties. She responded that the office involved themselves in this problem at an early stage, and therefore had to see it through.
3. When an inter-personal problem was brought to a meeting, for which there was no evidence, a landlady and local secretary tried to define that kind of problem as beyond the remit of DMSC. She stated that she had problems with her tenants but that she would not bring the problem to DMSC as the tenants would only insult the respected office workers, using her example to show that not all problems should be brought to DMSC for solution. In this case, the accused person was related to a friend of hers, and this may have been a protection for that person. Nonetheless, the issue of appropriate forum is under discussion.
4. Again, Project workers queried the urgency of an inter-personal problem brought to the meeting, suggesting that it should be sorted out at the level of the local committee. A peer educator asked the local president how her local committee was, and she said she was not on speaking terms with all of the members. She was told that she had to overcome personal differences in order to carry out her role properly. Further, it was suggested that the new local secretaries and presidents should have a meeting to learn from each other how to solve problems.
5. Again a madam is told to bring her problem to her local committee (of whose existence she was ignorant) first.
6. When a problem concerning Project workers' efforts to rescue a minor girl arose, one of the SW leaders took up the opportunity to explain the organisation's policy on minors.