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**From brothel to boardroom: Prospects for community leadership of Indian HIV interventions in the context of global funding practices**

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**From brothel to boardroom: Prospects for community leadership of Indian HIV interventions in the context of global funding practices**

**Abstract**

The empowerment of marginalised communities to lead local responses to HIV/AIDS is a key strategy of funding agencies' globalised HIV/AIDS policies, given evidence that disempowerment is a root source of vulnerability to HIV. We report on two multilevel ethnographies at the interface between HIV prevention projects for sex

workers in India and their funding environment, examining the extent to which the funding environment itself promotes or undermines sex worker empowerment. We show how the 'new managerialism' characteristic of the funding system undermines sex worker leadership of HIV interventions. By requiring local projects to conform to global management standards, funding agencies risk undermining the very localism and empowerment that their intervention policies espouse.

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS; empowerment; community; new managerialism; funding agencies; global

Given evidence that disempowerment is a root source of vulnerability to HIV (e.g. Blankenship, West, Kershaw, & Biradavolu, 2008), empowerment of marginalised groups is widely advocated in funding agencies' HIV policies. Empowerment, in this context, is understood not only in the narrow sense of people gaining greater control over their health-related behaviours, but also in a broad sense, of gaining greater control in their everyday lives (Dworkin & Ehrhardt, 2007). But to what extent does the funding system itself promote or undermine community empowerment? This paper offers an answer to this question by examining the relation between two local HIV/AIDS intervention projects for sex workers in India and their funding environment. To sustain their activities, projects must succeed, not only in their health promoting work in the brothels, but also in their proposal-writing and reporting work oriented to funding agencies' boardrooms. We shall argue that the complex administrative practices required by funding agencies effectively disempower sex workers, undermining funders' stated aim of grassroots leadership and empowerment.

Critical development literature articulates the intricate relation between global funding regimes and local implementation practices (e.g. Hillhorst, 2003; Mosse, 2005). This work shows that it is not possible to properly understand intervention practices without placing them in the context of the demands emanating from the aid system (Kelly & Birdsall, 2010). The aid system is not a neutral facilitator of interventions, but

deeply implicated in the forms that projects take. In the HIV/AIDS literature which is motivated by an interest in improving health outcomes (rather than theorising development), however, the influence of funding regimes has been a blind spot. Efforts to explain the success or failure of intervention practices focus on the behaviour of 'target groups', frontline health promotion workers, or at most, the local context, neglecting the role of powerful systems and actors (Campbell & Cornish, in press; Stephens, 2010). It is rarely acknowledged that funding agencies themselves comprise an important environment for projects, with concrete implications for their health promotion practices (for an exception, see Aveling, 2011; this issue).

By questioning how funding regimes implicitly constitute the activities of HIV/AIDS projects, and how projects creatively adapt to these regimes, we seek to make visible how the demands of the funding system may bring about unanticipated and undesired consequences. We do so through multi-level ethnographic studies of two HIV prevention projects for sex workers in India, focusing on a contradiction between funders' policies of empowerment and the disempowering nature of their procedures for obtaining and administering funding.

### **HIV policy: Favouring a local response?**

Around the globe, it has become widely accepted that HIV/AIDS interventions are most appropriately delivered by local, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), using peer education to encourage behaviour change (de Waal, 2003; Seckinelgin, 2008). In India, following the policies of the major national and international funders, a plethora of local non-governmental organisations and community-based organisations (CBOs), are charged with delivering 'targeted interventions' to the 'high risk groups' of female sex workers, men who have sex with men, and injecting drug users (Avahan, 2008; NACO, 2006). 'CBOs' have a particular definition in this context: their membership is limited to 'community members', i.e., people who can be classified as falling into one of the 'high risk groups' (Avahan, 2008; NACO, 2006). The rationale is that local organisations are best positioned to be responsive to local needs, allowing for diversity and empowerment in the HIV/AIDS response.

Recognising that social marginalization and disempowerment are at the root of these groups' vulnerability to HIV, policies explicitly advocate their participation and empowerment in the intervention process. For instance, the government-sponsored programme aims for 50% of HIV prevention interventions to be led by CBOs by 2011 (NACO, 2006). The major philanthropic donor, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also seeks to 'hand over' interventions to CBOs (Avahan, 2008). This means that organisations comprising and led by female sex workers, men who have sex with men, or injecting drug users, are to be actively involved in delivering, managing, and leading HIV prevention projects, and ultimately to directly receive HIV prevention funds into their bank accounts. In one sense, then, the 'global' force (as represented by funding policies) is 'localising', giving priority to the local.

Simultaneously, however, the value attributed to local diversity and ownership is undermined by the homogenous and prescriptive nature of funders' policies (Kelly & Birdsall, 2010). Characterised by practices of 'new managerialism' (Dar & Cooke, 2008), the funding consensus extends, in prescriptive detail, to the activities, staffing, and monitoring of HIV interventions, so that personnel and achievements become interchangeable and comparable on universal indicators. Incorporating NGOs and CBOs into the funders' bureaucratic service provision model risks erasing the very local responsiveness deemed to be their special strength (Mawdsley, Porter & Townsend, 2005).

### **Theory: Projects adapting to fit their environments**

It is tempting, given the vast asymmetries of material and symbolic power between global funding agencies and local community projects, to map this relationship onto longstanding binaries, such as global-local, powerful-powerless, structure-agency, or centre-periphery. However, careful scrutiny of how projects play out in practice refutes the validity of such binaries. As Massey (2004) argues, what we term the 'global' is just as concrete and embodied as the 'local'. 'Global' processes, such as international agreements on funding mechanisms, are peopled by specific actors and created through concrete practices. This is not to suggest that global processes are flat, even, and accessible to all. On the contrary, globalisation is 'uneven', connecting

particular people together but not others (Massey, 2006). This 'uneven' globalisation is powerful, but not deterministic, since, in formulating local projects, local actors are always inventive, creative, sometimes complicit, sometimes resistant (Mosse & Lewis, 2006).

The form that an intervention project takes, then, is neither wholly the result of creative local agency, nor the simple imprint of a powerful global donor's conception. Rather, projects are adaptations, serviceable forms that can sustain credibility among their different audiences (Mosse, 2005). The ostensible environment of an HIV prevention project comprises the local settings in which risk behaviours are practiced and shaped, such as brothels and local political or policing practices (Nhamo, Campbell & Gregson, 2010). However, a second environment is equally crucial, namely the funding environment, in particular, the representations among global funders of what a successful project should be (Aveling, 2010; Swidler & Watkins, 2009).

The funding environment may not be at a different 'scale' to the local intervention environment (Marston, Jones & Woodward, 2005), but it remains a distinctive environment, with its own economy of targets and grants, a language (often English) of logframes, mission statements, aims, objectives, outputs and outcomes, and social conventions such as working groups, minuted meetings, documentation of activities, emailing and applying for funding. This environment is evidently not equally accessible or navigable to all, but calls for specific cultural capital and skills. Successful, fundable projects become possible through the work of intermediaries, or 'brokers', who mediate between the contrasting environments of red light area and funding scheme, brothel and boardroom, translating the priorities of each into the language and activities of the other (Aveling, 2011; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Mosse, 2005). Such 'boundary crossers' (Kilpatrick, Cheers, Gilles & Taylor, 2009), who move between boardrooms and brothels, have rich concrete experience from both domains and are thus uniquely placed to coordinate and integrate the possibilities and constraints of both sides (Gillespie & Richardson, 2011).

Following this theoretical perspective, we take as our data the adaptations made by our case study projects in response to their funding environment, using this data to shed light on our question of the extent to which the global funding environment constitutes local sex workers as empowered or not.

## **The studies**

We report on ethnographic studies at the interface between two HIV prevention projects for sex workers in India and their funders. In this context, sex workers are overwhelmingly poor women with little formal education, selling sex to provide for their own survival and their families' needs. As is standard in India's targeted interventions, both projects use peer education (i.e. train sex workers to be health workers), to promote condom use and attendance at health clinics. Their duration is less standard, both being long-standing, established in the mid-1990s, and thereby having continually adapted to changing funding environments. Their guiding philosophies also distinguish them: both prioritise sex workers' empowerment and aim for sex workers to take increasing ownership and leadership. One is in western India, one in eastern India, one is urban, one rural. One is primarily governmentsponsored, the other primarily funded by a philanthropic donor. To preserve anonymity, we have removed identifying details of the projects and persons we refer to.

We report on 6 months of observational fieldwork in each site (recorded in daily diaries), during which fieldworkers attended regular project activities, including meetings in red light areas or project offices, and undertook informal (unrecorded) interviews. We also draw on interviews with project staff, both sex workers (30) and non-sex-workers (15). Sex worker participants worked as peer educators and 'outreach workers' for the projects. Non-sex-worker NGO workers were based primarily in NGO offices rather than the field, with responsibilities including managing peer educators, training, monitoring & evaluation, and report-writing. Published documents, particularly funders' policies, provided data on the context.

Our analytic method is genealogical (Gillespie, 2006), in that, beginning with the concrete form that projects take, we seek to read off the context which produced that particular form (in this case, the funding context). Practically, our analysis first extracted all material in which we could discern adaptation to funding agencies. Analysing this material, four themes resulted, presented in the following four sections. The first illustrates the relatively familiar point that, in implementing funding agencies' prescriptions for intervention designs, projects adapt those designs to fit local contexts. The subsequent two sections each show how puzzling characteristics of the HIV response in India – namely the organisational form of 'NGO-CBO pairs', and the continuing major role of project founders – can be explained as adaptations to funding regimes. The fourth section examines prospects for sex worker leadership of HIV interventions.

### **Adapting intervention design to reflect local realities**

While funding policies are prescriptive regarding official project structures, activities, and reporting, paperwork is their medium of operation. Turning official project definitions into practices allows for leeway in adapting funders' definitions to suit local constraints. The definition of a 'sex worker', a 'meeting', and 'appropriate remuneration' all came up for local debate during our fieldwork. One project's funders expected a certain number of community meetings to be held per month, to inform people about HIV and mobilise their support. NGO-CBO representatives felt that the quota was unrealistically high. Having worked in the community for many years, they feared they would only annoy local people by re-recruiting participants who had already heard their messages. Exactly what constitutes 'a meeting' or 'a sex worker', however, is a matter of interpretation. While the official purpose of organising an HIV awareness meeting for sex workers might be to convey HIV prevention messages to 'new contacts', peer educators are also sex workers and arguably legitimate participants in a meeting, as are sex workers who are already familiar with the project – though they have heard the messages before. Similarly, when one meeting begins and another ends is potentially a grey area, allowing for interpretation.



Discrepancies between funding bodies regarding the level of salaries which they authorise for similar posts had led to local adaptations in the other project. To cope with such discrepancies, they had decided not to accept the full level of salaries on offer, in one instance. We noted in fieldnotes an NGO worker's reasons:

From [funding agency], he said, for a Project Co-ordinator, the level of salary available is Rs. 20,000. But in [this NGO/CBO], they take Rs.12,000 for this post. His reason is that 'we are an NGO, we cannot afford high salaries. When this funding ends, and if people get used to having a vehicle, a better lifestyle, then they won't be able to accept a lower salary. Also, if people have the same post, but through another funding body, they might be remunerated at a different level and this would not be fair.' So they do not take the extra. They don't think it is sustainable.

Similarly, when we, as researchers, offered remuneration to sex workers in return for their participation in interviews, both CBOs declined the offer, explaining that they did not want to set a precedent that participation in NGO-CBO activities was to be rewarded by material gain. Sariola (2009) notes in her study of southern Indian NGOs, that it was a general assumption that material rewards such as meals or *saris* were required to incentivise sex worker's participation. Our case study CBOs sought to resist such a commodification of participation, and maintain an identity as activist community organisations rather than the role of service provider with quotas to fill, into which they are often cast by HIV prevention funders.

Adaptations of the intervention design come about when project actors face a contradiction between what is locally appropriate and what their funder expects. In these instances, the projects prioritised the local, revealing their scope for ignoring or interpreting their funders' project designs. They did not always have so much leeway, as the following section shows.

### **HIV project organisation: NGO-CBO pairs**

The mode of delivering HIV/AIDS interventions in India has developed a peculiar organisational form, which could be called 'NGO-CBO pairs'. In individual red light areas, not one organisation, but two, are typically jointly involved in HIV prevention activities: one NGO and one CBO. NGOs are generally staffed by 'technical staff', people who are not 'from the community', who have professional qualifications and skills (such as social work, counselling, accountancy, or project management) deemed useful to running an intervention. CBOs, in this context, are sex workers' organisations, whose membership is restricted to sex workers. Both of our case study projects took the form of an NGO-CBO pair. HIV interventions, until the mid2000s, had traditionally been led by NGOs, but since the advent of policies with targets for CBO involvement, there has been a 'mushrooming' of CBOs across India.

What is the reason for this duplication of organisations? Simply put, we argue that it results from contradictory demands from funding agencies, which call for projects to be both community-led on the one hand and bureaucratically sophisticated on the other. On one hand, as outlined above, 'CBOs' are considered, in Indian HIV policies, appropriate 'owners' and 'leaders' of HIV interventions.

On the other hand, the forms of management and reporting required of organisations to evidence proper use of public funds practically exclude 'community members' from fully owning and leading the management of interventions. For instance, the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) produces 'Operational Guidelines' for the selection process through which NGOs/CBOs may be appointed to deliver HIV prevention (NACO, 2007). The guidelines list 7 areas for appraisal (governance, staffing and organisation, experience, financial management systems, procurement systems, planning, monitoring and reporting systems, external relationship), with 3-8 specific questions under each area (NACO, 2007, p. 12-13). Organisations are required to produce an organogram, mission statements, minutes of meetings and annual reports. They should have accounting and procurement systems in place, and written recruitment, gender, staff welfare and staff appraisal policies (NACO, 2007, p.10-14). In sum, to effectively navigate the funding environment, NGOs and CBOs must be highly 'professional' organisations, where professionalism means being able to implement the managerial requirements of the funding bodies.

The demanding managerial requirements were evident not only in written policies but also in the field. During our fieldwork, we heard complaints from representatives of both government and philanthropic funders about the informal nature of the projects' processes. We noted in our fieldnotes after a meeting with an MBA-qualified funder's representative:

Without us asking for it, [funder's representative] started to speak about the 'gaps' in [CBO's] work, [...]: a 'stakeholder analysis' and 'gap analysis' that apparently they haven't done, and then a whole lot of management process (including a human resources policy, a gender policy, process documentation, sexual harassment policy, sustainability plan).

We were surprised to hear him lament the lack of a stakeholder analysis, as our own observations had noted particularly impressive work with stakeholders. Moreover, for an organisation rooted in grassroots activism among members with low levels of literacy, written gender or sexual harassment policies seemed a poor means of addressing such concerns, and unlikely to secure the 'community ownership' that the funder ostensibly advocated.

At the other site, a funders' representative expressed his puzzlement to us regarding the CBO's lack of formal membership and leadership processes:

He said that [CBO]'s decision-making processes are very vague, and the lack of a membership register is a problem[...] - that if a funder has a pot of money and [CBO] say that they are working for 5500 women [i.e., apply for funds to cover this number of beneficiaries], well, it is not all that convincing. He intimated that 'not so many opportunities would be available' if they lacked these management processes.

The funders needed the membership register to enable them to decide on funding allocations, and decision-making and leadership processes to demonstrate appropriate governance mechanisms. An NGO worker explained to us the CBO's

point of view, namely that any sex worker who is in contact with them is a member, and any sex worker is eligible for their help, without need for a registration number. He added that decision-making is accountable, being done collectively, in meetings, and that although they do not have elections, annual meetings are held with opportunities for new people to come forward. In this instance, there was a clash between the locally preferred form of a CBO and the form of CBO judged to meet global governance standards.

Although the funding agencies' written policies advocate CBO leadership, the managerial practices required by them necessitate ranks of professionally qualified staff. NGO-CBO pairs is an organisational form that emerges as a response to these contradictory demands. While the dual commitments to both community empowerment and managerial practices are characteristic of global HIV policy, the particularly restrictive definition of CBOs, in Indian HIV policy, as comprising 'community members', makes the contradiction between these dual commitments particularly salient, as it becomes embodied in dual organisations (CBO and NGO).

### **Continuing reliance on project founders**

In both projects, the original highly-educated, upper middle class project founders remained an important presence. In the early days, the founders took responsibility for all aspects of the projects, gradually handing over leadership responsibilities to sex workers and other NGO workers. The single activity that remained largely the founders' preserve, however, was the work of interfacing with the funders. We identified three ways in which founders mediated between the distant world of funding boardrooms and the local projects.

Firstly, the project founders were sometimes in a position of *representing the authority* of the global funders, assessing whether the work of the project was meeting the criteria that their funders required. For instance, in one case, on the day before a visit to one of the clinics by the founder, we observed a serious atmosphere of preparation as the peer educators busily practised their technical HIV-related knowledge (the knowledge expected of them by their funders), in case they would be

tested on it. Similarly in the other, the founder maintained high expectations of the quality of the HIV prevention work, as an NGO worker reported:

She demands hard and fast results. She expects quick results. That is justified. As a commander or a team leader it is only right that she expects that.

In both cases, the founders command enormous respect on the part of project workers, who are anxious to meet their high expectations for project performance according to funders' criteria.

Secondly, the founders *interpret* funding agency requirements for the projects, translating them into locally-relevant actionable strategies and language. Both founders, in their role as representatives of successful HIV prevention projects, are regularly invited into the boardroom, as consultants, speakers, or working group members at policy-making or policy-informing events convened by national and international agencies (e.g. NACO, UNAIDS). This experience equips them to interpret global HIV policies for local action. In one study site, for example, the day after a delegation of sex workers and non-sex-workers returned from an international or national event (such as a sexual health conference or a meeting with funders), it was standard practice for the founder to hold a meeting to interpret the messages of the event, for those who had been present there, as much as for those who had not. Similarly, when unfamiliar people approached the CBO with a request, they were asked to wait for a response, while the issue was brought to a meeting, where the founder would help interpret that request. A funder's suggestion to route funding directly to the CBO, a journalist's proposal for a news story, or a researcher's request for research access were strange requests from different worlds, and lacked obvious meaning to the sex worker representatives. The founders, with their experience of these different worlds, were in a position to interpret them.

In the other site, during a 'retreat' for project employees, the founder, recently returned from consulting on national HIV policy, gave a talk outlining new policies and their implications for HIV interventions, including changes to the 'target groups'

eligible for funding, increasing importance of evaluations, and new opportunities to serve as training organisations. She was able to provide concrete answers to questions about the priorities of the funder, and how to meet their criteria for recognition as a legitimate service provider.

Thirdly, the founders sought to *cultivate the NGO-CBOs' awareness of their public image* and how to manage it. In the retreat mentioned above, the founder emphasised that the organisation's public reputation was key to their chances of selection as a service provider for the new HIV/AIDS programme. Our fieldnotes quoted her saying:

'You need to publicize what you have done. In today's society, what I do sitting back at home does not matter, how I can market my product, sell it in the market – all depends on that'.

To know which image of the NGO-CBOs to present depends on a rich understanding of the audience. The gulf between the worlds of red light area and funder makes such an understanding difficult. In both cases, CBO and NGO representatives often presented an idealised image of their activities, to us as researchers, to potential funders, and to the media. For instance, sweeping statements that there were no longer any trafficked women or exploitative madams were intended to reflect the projects' significant achievements, but sounded naïve and unrealistic to experienced funding agency representatives or journalists. We heard funders' representatives express frustration at a perceived gap between projects' self-presentations and the realities on the ground. This observation is not news to one of the founders, who sought to help the CBO representatives better align their self-presentations with the sophisticated understandings held by their funders, as we noted in fieldnotes recording her contributions to a project meeting:

'You keep on saying that [CBO] is good, all is fine. There are no problems at all. By saying so you are giving wrong impressions. Why is [CBO] so insecure? [...] This is the reason that [funder representative] and other people ask us these questions. Because you are not giving them a correct picture.'

You always try to portray that all is very good, nothing is wrong, so our behaviour is suspected. [...]Be realistic.'

Through such activities, project founders, as intermediaries, serve as buffers between the changing requirements of the funding environment, and the practical activities of the NGOs-CBOs. For the NGO-CBOs, the stakes are high – their survival depends upon continued funding – but the environment is distant and impenetrable. The founders seek to make that distant world interpretable and actionable. Their continuing presence, we suggest, is not because they have clung on to power, but is another adaptation to the complex and changing funding environment which calls for significant policy-mindedness. Funding agencies have helped the founders to gain this policy-mindedness by inviting them into the boardrooms, constituting them as lynch-pin 'boundary-crossers'. Given funding policies' ostensible commitment to 'community leadership' of HIV interventions, our final section questions the prospects for sex workers to take on the leadership role of mediator between boardroom and brothel.

## **Prospects for sex workers' project leadership**

Both projects had achieved significant progress towards their aims of sex worker leadership and empowerment. In this section, we follow the development, over time, of sex workers' leadership capacities.

To empower one of the most excluded and marginalised groups in Indian society was a challenging goal. When the projects began, local sex workers' experience was predominantly of the world of the red light areas. Many described having no confidence even within their occupation, for example, to negotiate with madams or clients. Few had experience of working for, let alone running, intervention projects. Our fieldnotes recorded one project's founder describing the sex workers' initial disempowerment in relation to the middle-class professionals instigating the project:

[Founder] told a story of when she began, and was to recruit sex workers to be peer educators, her boss drew up a 2 page list of selection criteria and they interviewed the women. They asked the first question: 'What is your name?' and the women covered their faces with their *saris* and mumbled so they could not be heard. [Founder] suggested: 'how about 1 selection criterion: those who can speak without covering their faces?'

Local institutions such as hospitals were also inhospitable places for sex worker empowerment. A long-standing peer educator described her project's complaints in the early days, regarding the inaccessibility of the hospital:

[Our position towards the hospital was:] You ask us to take the patient to the hospital. But after taking them there, you would say, 'go to Number 1 and get the case paper, get it stamped at Number 2, pay money at Number 3, and at Number 4 and 5, show the doctor'. Even after doing all this, you go to Number 4, you lose time. The doctor gets up and leaves. Even when you meet them, they won't touch your hands and do a checkup [due to stigmatization]. After doing all that, we decided in the big meeting 'how will the patient survive?'

At the outset, then, institutional environments, including HIV intervention projects, were daunting, uninviting, and disempowering to sex workers. Over time, however, both projects have made strides in enabling sex worker leadership. At the red-lightarea level, sex workers have become highly skilled and highly regarded as leaders and problem-solvers. They are skilled in navigating the complex political and interpersonal issues that regularly arise, such as a violent dispute between a sex worker and her regular partner, conflicts between neighbouring sex workers, or abuse by local hoodlums. For such problems, both CBOs have procedures for sending a representative on a 'fact-finding' mission, holding local meetings, interviewing both sides in a dispute, and coming to a decision on appropriate action.

Sex workers' empowerment in relation to local institutions has also grown. Both projects have systematically involved sex workers in the full range of project work, including in negotiations with their external stakeholders. In both places, sex worker



leaders have gained expertise in negotiating with police, becoming familiar with the laws and procedures of policing. One project has negotiated with the local hospital to provide office space for an advocate for sex worker patients. In both, sex workers spoke proudly of their newfound skills in public speaking, representing their peers, and problem-solving. Overall, the CBOs' sex workers were typically capable of resolving local issues without the involvement of NGO workers.

It was when a problem involved acting in relation to people or institutions beyond the familiar red light area that the limits on sex workers' leadership became evident. Sex worker leaders typically sought the guidance of the projects' original founders when they faced decisions regarding the projects' funders. One CBO requested help, for instance, to interpret the significance of their funder's suggestion to route funds directly to the CBO rather than via the NGO. An NGO worker told us:

Our women don't understand the language of development with funders, government and other groups. But when we talk about development with these women, we use the language they can understand. We [NGO-CBO] are not able to put ourselves forward in a correct way. This is what we lack. So if we want to upgrade ourselves at NGO level, then we should learn the process and technicalities.

Sex workers' and NGO workers' 'lack', here, is relational. It is a lack in relation to an environment that disempowers them. While the NGO worker describes his NGO-CBO colleagues as 'lacking' the language of development, funding agencies are rarely described as lacking the language of the brothels. In our other study site, the NGO's training officers were unhappy with the funder-provided training. Our fieldnotes recorded their complaints that:

the resource persons are more consultancy types and bookish - using laptops and projectors. They gave the example that the person who gave the training on advocacy even spoke throughout in English! [...] The morning after the training, they have to explain to the women what it was all about, because nobody has understood.

That funding agencies habitually use English is just the most concrete example of the disempowering discrepancy between the cultures of sex worker and funder, of brothel and boardroom.

While sex workers have become significantly empowered in relation to their local red light areas, and their local institutions of hospitals and police stations, they remain disempowered in relation to the funding environment. 'Global' funding systems are not sufficiently global to include sex workers from the red light areas of India. Indeed, from the sex workers' point of view, these systems are abstruse, arcane, exotic even – qualities more usually associated with 'the local'.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined how funding agencies comprise an important environment to which HIV intervention projects adapt. The projects that we have studied had to adapt to two quite different environments, namely, they had to organise health promotion activities suited to impoverished sex workers, while also fulfilling funding agencies' requirements in relation to global conventions of management, monitoring, and accountability. Moreover, they have had to adapt to a contradiction between what funding agencies want to fund (namely grassroots community-based organisations) and how they want to administer funding (namely, using procedures alien to marginalised communities). Adapting to these different and even contradictory environments, projects have engaged in creative, locally intelligent interpretation of funder's guidelines, split into NGO-CBO pairs, and capitalised on the peculiar skills of their boundary-crossing founders.

These local adaptations are intelligent responses to their funding environment, enabling the projects to continue to source funds for their health promoting and empowering activities. In this sense, they are positive achievements. However, from the point of view of funding agencies' stated commitment to sex worker leadership and empowerment, the need for such adaptations is more problematic. Funding agencies' policies and administrative procedures are impenetrable to sex workers,

undermining their leadership of their NGO-CBOs. The environment constituted by funding agencies does not further their stated objective of sex worker empowerment.

In relation to conceptions of the global and the local, our analysis substantiates Massey's (2006) argument that the process of globalisation is 'uneven'. Through the processes of providing international funding for local HIV projects, the distance between Washington or Delhi and a brothel in rural India becomes short for some (e.g. project founders with experience of the policy environment), but immensely far for others (e.g. sex workers without such experience). Through the globalisation of 'new managerialism', institutional logics of bureaucracy and performance management, have gained a 'global' familiarity for a limited audience – for policymakers and managers from Bangkok to Seattle or Lilongwe – but remain obscure and inaccessible to grassroots workers in these same cities (Townsend, Porter & Mawdsley, 2002; Swidler & Watkins, 2009).

Returning to policy commitments to sex worker empowerment and leadership, our findings have several implications. Firstly, funding agencies could consider the extent to which their own procedures and practices further their ostensible aims. It is not only within their work in the brothels that empowerment is an issue for sex workers, but also within their work in the NGOs. Given that the NGO sector, funded through globalised aid systems, is such a major employer of poor people in developing countries, the empowerment or disempowerment of these people in their workplaces ought to be of concern. Funding agency constraints are one force structuring the possibility of such empowerment.

Secondly, for projects to live up to their potential, envisaged by funding agencies, to be responsive and appropriate to local needs, they need to be able to adapt funders' prescriptions to suit the local setting (Kilby, 2004) – as our case study projects did so skilfully. Such processes of interpretation and mediation may be best accomplished through long-term, responsive relationships between funding agency representatives and NGO representatives, as Eyben (2006) has argued. Turning written policies into concrete practices is always a matter of interpretation, and funding agencies need to tolerate, even facilitate, such interpretation.

Thirdly, what are the prospects for sex workers to take on the leadership role of interfacing with their funding agencies? We have argued (following Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2009; Gillespie & Richardson, 2011) that the intermediary role of the project founders was not due to individual characteristics of these particular founders, but that they acquired this skill through gaining rich experience both of brothels and of boardrooms. If our suggestion about the value of boundary-crossing is correct, funding agencies could create opportunities for repeated boundary-crossing for sex workers, that is, inviting sex workers to participate meaningfully in the world of disbursing funds and making policies (e.g. offering them real decision-making power and accountable responsibility in the allocation of funds). Such an initiative could yield two positive outcomes. Sex workers' experience from the brothels could inform boardroom discussions so that funding procedures become more responsive to local realities. In turn, sex workers' experience in the boardrooms would equip them with understanding of the funding environment to bring back to their projects.

International funding agencies face a difficult, perhaps impossible, task. They want projects to be led by CBOs because they are local, innovative, responsive to local needs, and have the identification and support of the community – all things that externally-led, government or charitable schemes often lack. However, to make decisions on where to allocate their funding, to evaluate their impact, and to maintain standards of intervention design, funding agencies create complicated schemes for project design and assessment (see Piot, 2010). In incorporating community organisations into their bureaucratic regimes, funding agencies risk turning community organisations into professional service providers, governed by the same limiting practices as large government or charity programmes – thus losing the very localism that made them attractive in the first place.

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