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A Timeline of the Relationship Between WAVAW and Sex Working Communities

Introduction

In 2018, WAVAW released a public apology for a series of actions that caused harm to sex working communities. To take accountability for these actions, an in-depth examination of WAVAW's relationship with sex workers is being conducted. This process includes tracing WAVAW's history with sex working communities prior to, and following the apology as well as providing a glimpse into the current supports sex workers are able to access at WAVAW. With a comprehensive timeline of WAVAW's relationship with sex working communities, WAVAW aims to learn from the past in order to better serve sex workers presently.

Early History (2000-2008)[1]

To contextualize the early relationship between WAVAW and sex working communities[2], it is imperative to examine both WAVAW's external relations with sex worker-led organizations and the internal dialogue that was happening among WAVAW staff and board members on the topic of sex work and how it fit into both the organization's mission and scope of work.

In the early 2000s, WAVAW maintained strong relationships with two noteable sex worker-lead organizations in Vancouver: PACE Society and WISH Drop-In Centre Society. WAVAW staff worked alongside Pace in 2002 to support the creation of a police sensitivity training program, which aimed to improve police treatment of sex workers. Shortly after, WAVAW partnered with WISH in 2004 to provide sex workers with better access to WAVAW's hospital accompaniment services. Through these connections, WAVAW was actively updating service delivery based on the feedback received from service users and provideres in hopes of better serving sex working survivors of violence.

However, despite these efforts, WAVAW's ability to provide sex working survivors with the quality of support they deserved was hindered by internal disagreements regarding WAVAW's organizional stance on sex work. Discrepancies between WAVAW's service delivery and internal conversations about sex work first began to appear when some of the staff began expressing abolitionist sentiments. This sparked widespread internal debate about the normative implications of sex work, which revealed the necessity of engaging with the topic in a more

[1] The account of WAVAW's early history was informed by an interview with Dalya Israel, Executive Director at WAVAW.

[2] Early history encompasses the early 2000s due to the lack of available data from 1982-2000. This report will be updated in the instance that this data becomes available.

nuanced way. As such, WAVAW agreed to participate in a series of dialogue cafes on sex work which were hosted by practicum student from Langara College. These dialogue cafes took place in the spring of 2007, and involved in-depth discussions between WAVAW staff, board members, volunteers, and practicum students on how sex work should best be understood.[3] However, the overall outcomes of the dialogue cafes further illustrated the diverging perspectives on sex work held by WAVAW staff, making it increasingly difficult to come to a consensus in relation to WAVAW's organizaional stance. Staff members subsequently decided that an explicit stance on sex work was unnecessary for WAVAW, especially if staff chose to focus solely on the harm done to individual sex working survivors rather than the context of this harm. In this sense, while sex workers who experience sexualized violence were able to access WAVAW's services, the available supports did not entirely align with their lived experiences of violence. This approach was evidently harmful to sex workers.

The ambiguity inherent in WAVAW's initial perspective on sex work prompted calls from the community for a clearer stance. Accompanying these calls for clarity were elevated levels of concern within radical feminist circles about the about the influx of vistors to the city for the 2010 olympics. Such concern stemmed from the assumption that the olympics would heighten the risk of violence against sex workers (particularly Indigenous women sex workers). During this tumultuous time, abolitionist-leaning staff at WAVAW turned to Vancouver Rape Relief (an abolitionist and transmisogynistic anti-violence organization) in an attempt to reconcile a previously broken relationship and resist fracture within the local women's movement. This short-lived alliance with VRR paired with concerns surrounding the olympics created the context for the 2008 publication of "Stepping Out of the Binary".

Publication of "Stepping Out of the Binary" (September 2008)

In September of 2008, WAVAW published "Stepping Out of the Binary" during a visiting scholar program with the UBC Centre for Women and Gender Studies.[4] This paper was largely a product of the disproportionate focus on abolitionist views within the 2007 dialogue cafes, which subsequently came to inform the paper's stance on sex work. Through questionable claims to morality, it argued that sex work was an inherently violent form of labour that was worthy of condemnation.

As WAVAW eventually acknowledges in their 2018 apology to sex workers, this perspective wrongfully conflates sex work and sex trafficking while simultaneously undermining the agency

[3] Note: These dialogue cafes and the subsequent "Stepping Out of the Binary" paper referred to sex work as 'prostituion'. However, the term 'sex work' is employed in this report in acknowledgement of the harms associated with the term 'prostituion' and to reaffirm our stance in support of sex work as a legitimate occupation.

[4] As of 2012, the UBC Centre for Women and Gender Studies is now known as the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice.

of sex workers. The paper has since been removed from WAVAW's website. It was available online up until WAVAW's formal apology to sex workers in 2018 as an accountabilty mechanism. However, should community members wish to access the paper, it can be made available.

This harmful publication is now considered to be a point of reference for WAVAW staff as it represents the need to pivot and do better when it comes to supporting sex working communities.

Nevertheless, during the years between 2008 to 2017, WAVAW continued to struggle with its overarching position on sex work. Internal disagreements over how sex work should be conceptualized within a "choice, coercion, and circumstance" framework were commonplace, with conversations disproportionately focusing on "coercion" and "circumstance" at the expense of "choice". WAVAW has since come to understand the problems associated with these reductive terms and is committed to reframing the conversation on sex work to one of agency, with a focus on the importance of bodily autonomy.

Key Findings of the Inclusion Project (2017-2018)

Following the publication of "Stepping Out of the Binary", many current and ex-sex workers raised concerns over WAVAW's position on sex work, asserting that it was exclusionary and inconsistent with their lived experiences. During the same time, WAVAW was beginning to work on an emerging advocacy initiative called the Inclusion Project, which further illuminated the gaps in their organizational stance on sex work. The Inclusion Project involved community consultations with folks of marginalized genders to determine how to best provide support to self-identified trans, Two-Spirit, and non-binary survivors. These community consultations revealed that there was a significant sense of solidarity between trans communities and sex working communities. Given the interconnectedness of the two communities, WAVAW soon came to the realization that in order to support the rights of trans folks, WAVAW needed to support sex worker rights and vise versa. For this support to materialize, it was necessary for WAVAW to repair their relationship with sex workers. WAVAW had to take a step back to reflect, grieve, and acknowledge the harm they caused to sex working communities in order to be accountable and make amends. Based on the feedback received from trans sex workers, the next step in this process of trust-building was updating WAVAW's position on sex work while taking resposibility for the harms associated with WAVAW's previous stance.

Apology to Sex Workers (July 18, 2018)

In July of 2018, WAVAW released a public apology to sex workers. The apology briefly traced WAVAW's history with the "Stepping Out of the Binary" paper and their previous organizational stance on sex work before pivoting to to an acknowledgement of the harm caused to sex working

communities. To rectify such harms, a plan to conduct an audit of WAVAW's services and create more accessible sex worker supports was also established. In doing so, WAVAW aimed to embody the values of accountability they strive to attain as a survivor-centric anti-violence organization.

The apology was generally well-received by sex working communities and allies, many of whom kindly shared their thoughts with WAVAW on Twitter:

> "This apology is a positive first step. We look forward to working with @wavawrcc to rebuild trust with the sex worker community" (Pace Society @PaceSociety).
>
> "I had the privilege of meeting some of staff from the @wavawrcc at @UoGSexConf. As feminists we need to accountable and reflect own our history of excluding sex workers and trans people" (Lyndsey Butcher @LyndseyButcher).
>
> "I was a sex worker so yea I've done my research and I've never heard another sex worker ask for anything but decriminalization" (Michelle Keep @jmkeep).
>
> "We fully support @wavawrcc's apology to sex workers, and we listen to sex-worker lead organizations who tell us that crimialization puts their lives and livlihoods inn danger. It's pretty short sighted to think that abolition will end violence against women or poverty" (Discorder Magazine @DiscorderMag).
>
> "We should not be targeting sex work as inherently harmful. It is often quite the opposite. What we all want is to stop trafficking (and not just in the adult industry, but in all industries). We cannot do this effectively while some forms of sex work are criminalized" (Mistress Tissa @MistressTissa).

Sex Work Community Feedback Survey (July 27, 2018)

Shortly after the apology to sex workers was published, WAVAW released the Sex Work Community Feedback Survey. This survey allowed sex workers to share their lived experiences and provide WAVAW with direct feedback on how to improve their sexual violence support services. The key findings of this survey have informed WAVAW's current stance on sex work and can be summarized as follows:

- Sex work is work.
- Sex work is not inherently violent. Sex work is distinct from sex trafficking and needs to be treated as such.
- Sex workers have the lived experience, agency, and expertise to be spokespersons for their own professions. Paternalistic assumptions about what sex workers need and how to meet these needs are to be avoided.

- Decriminalization will help ensure sex worker safety and lower the risk of exploitation.

- Solidarity with sex works can be expressed through organizational support for decriminalization. This stance needs to be embedded within all aspects of WAVAW's operations, including but not limited to volunteer and staff training, equitable service delivery, and updates to WAVAW's constitution.

WAVAW Updates Stance on Sex Work (October 31, 2018)

After synthesizing and reflecting on the feedback provided by sex workers, WAVAW formally updated their organizational stance on sex work. Consistent with the key findings of the survey, WAVAW's new stance explicitly condemned the nordic model while reaffirming support for decriminalization. This was a critical and necessary step in working towards the goal of making WAVAW's "sexual assault services relevant, suitable, and inclusive for the sex work community" ("Sex Work Community Feedback Survey").

Rebuilding of Trust Within Sex Working Communities (2018-present)

Trust-building has been a key priority for WAVAW following the ammendments to their position on sex work. To strenghten their relationship with sex working communities, WAVAW has engaged in a wide range of advocacy-based initiatives in support of sex working survivors. On one hand, WAVAW began strengthening their pre-existing partnerships with sex worker-lead organizations. This eventually lead to WAVAW's participation in a series of events, conferences, and reports on the topic of sex work. For instance, in 2019, WAVAW participated in a conference hosted by Living in Community (LIC), which was entitled "A Safer Province for Everyone: Responding to Violence Against Sex Workers". WAVAW has since joined LIC's steering committee (2020) and has participated on a panel for the BC Sex Work Support Service Network as recently as May 2022. Similarly, WAVAW co-authored a 2021 report with Peers Victoria Research Society entitled "We Belong: Addressing Service Inequity for Trans, Non-Binary, and Two-Spirit Sex Workers". This collaborative report was informed by six months of community consultations with trans sex workers, who provided valuable recommendations for improving sex worker support services.

Meanwhile, in terms of internal reform processes, WAVAW is currently working to update their strategic priorities to include the provision of specialized supports to sex workers. This is a critical aspect of WAVAW's rebranding plan and involves embedding their commitments to sex working communities within their organizational constitution. It also entails improved training and workshops for staff and volunteers on the topic of sex work. Additionally, WAVAW is conducting research and advocacy work through a novel Meaningful Inclusion Project (2020-2025), which will create a blueprint for promising practices to offer affirming sexual

violence services for all trans, gender diverse, and Two-Spirit survivors, many of whom are sex workers.

Current Supports for Sex Working Communities

Sex workers are able to access WAVAW's sexual violence support services, which include counselling, victim services, and support groups. WAVAW has also partnered with WISH to offer 1 on 1 counselling services as well as a sex worker-accessible victim services clinic for current and past sex workers at WISH. For sex worker survivors interested in learning more about these services and how they relate to WAVAW's new stance on sex work, a series of frequently asked questions is available on WAVAW's website.[5] Furthermore, WAVAW's Meaningful Inclusion Project is currently working to develop resources to inform service delivery for trans sex worker survivors.

Next Steps: Specialized Service Delivery for Sex Working Survivors

WAVAW is presently exploring options to move beyond solely sex worker-inclusive services to create specialized support services by and for sex workers. Although WAVAW has yet to determine what this program may look like in practice, it will be a nuanced, sex worker-informed program that affirms the lived experiences of sex working survivors of violence. A questionnaire will be distributed to sex working communities and key informant interviews will be conducted to ensure that sex workers themselves play a key role in the creation of this program. Feedback will then be compiled and analyzed to create a series of recommendations detailing how WAVAW can best support the needs of sex workers moving forward.

[5] https://www.wavaw.ca/wavaws-stance-on-sex-work/

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