

For Whose Own Good?

A Conversation with Melanie Muñoz from the Association Lysistrada by Diana Padilla

While walking to my meeting with Melanie on a Monday evening I can tell right away that the streets are pulsating with life. I am meeting her in the iconic Rothaus Hotel, right in the heart of “Kreis 4”, one of Zurich’s busiest areas, filled with bars, cabarets, erotic cinemas, and windows illuminated by red lights. The sex work legality of the city is evident, but here there’s more than meets the eye.

Diana Padilla: Please tell me a bit about your line of work: Why did you choose social work and how did you end up in a place like Lysistrada?

Melanie Muñoz: My first formation was journalism—I chose my main topic to be prostitution in Switzerland because it was a very interesting and complex subject, and of specific interest for journalism with regard to the one-sided way the topic was portrayed in the media. I met somebody working in Zurich for an institution that does counselling for sex workers. She asked me if I would agree to start teaching a German class for sex workers in “Kreis 4” of Zurich, where a big part of sex work took place at that time. I taught that class for about three years, in “Business German” so they could learn how to negotiate and everything else of necessity. Following this, I was offered a job as social worker in Winterthur and I accepted under the condition of me being able to study social work properly. I was convinced to address to the issue of adult migrants because of its importance in Switzerland.

DP: Migration in Switzerland is at a very high rate—around a third of the inhabitants are migrants. Are you informed about the percentage of sex workers among them?

MM: We don’t have exact numbers because, of course, we don’t reach every single sex worker. The well-settled, professional sex workers with permission are not reached by us because they work

privately in their apartments. But the people we meet, mainly in the streets, are practically all migrants.

DP: As far as I understand in the Canton of Zurich, sex work laws are stricter than in others. In the Canton of Solothurn, these strict laws haven’t reached them yet. Is this the reason why Lysistrada is located in Solothurn?

MM: We are about fifty people involved throughout all of Switzerland, providing a lot of volunteering work. As you mention, there are a lot of strict laws and Solothurn will get one next year. But regulations can be important at some point. The association is formed by a committee of five women, and they are working as volunteers. Me and my colleague are the only ones earning a regular salary, because we do the basic work, and I am the Project Manager. The volunteers do the strategic work for our association, and that’s important because since they are volunteers, the government is not allowed to dictate to them what to say or not to say. I guess there’s the same problem everywhere; we have a saying in German for that: “You never bite the hand that feeds you”. So the government cannot tell us to keep our opinions silent, because the committee is working independently. We’re a bunch of women working together, and we’re having a great time.

DP: Can you give an example of the laws that are restricting sex work? What is the main obstacle?

MM: The biggest problem is that the Swiss government confuses prostitution with human trafficking, but the one doesn’t have anything to do with the other. Furthermore, politicians always claim to provide those laws to protect women, but in the end it doesn’t have anything to do with protection because those are migrant laws. Actually, it is a legal way to restrict the number of women allowed to

work here. Because women from poorer countries outside the European Union don't even get here legally, unless they get married. I'm talking about the percentage of rather poor women who have to work to support a family, etc., and the officials say: "Because they are from a poor country they are dependent. That's why they have to have a regular working contract – and a boss". This is kind of ridiculous.

DP: But pimping is prohibited, isn't it? Or is it tolerated in a grey area?

MM: Pimping is not forbidden anymore; what is forbidden is to push somebody into prostitution, but one can be a manager of a prostitute if she chooses to have one. The difficulty among the whole issue is the administration: the affected are mostly women who don't speak the language (German, or Swiss German in this case). In the Canton of Solothurn they can work independently in street prostitution, otherwise they would need a work contract, and that's the point: under federal law a contract between a sex worker and a client is immoral, but a lot of regional governments ask for contracts between a sex worker and a business owner. In every Canton, such contracts are running but we know it's a farce because there is no job description. Every woman has to be working of her own free will, and decide for herself what she's willing to do or not. That's one of the main problems, that most women cannot manage these complicated administration issues, so they have to pay somebody who usually asks for a lot of money to do it. And it's also the same with the tax forms. Here is when the pimps come into action: men with a lot of imagination in making a business out of it.

DP: I would like to focus now on Lysistrada: What kind of support do you provide by taking into consideration the mentioned problems?

MM: Lysistrada is a street work organisation, which means that we can only visit places where women are at work: clubs, bars, wellness centres, private apartments, the streets. They cannot show up at our office even if it would be more helpful for them to come to us with all their paperwork; but right now we are only doing street work. We call this "door opener". We talk to these women about health and prevention, that's easy to understand. We deliver condoms and working material in many languages. But we also tell them little tricks that we have learned from other women and make sure they know that we

don't have a moral problem with sex work as many other people working in the field have. Religious groups are telling them that god doesn't approve of what they are doing, that it is wrong, etc... We always have to convince them first that we are not religious, nor from the government or the police, and that we do not hold any control function. Then when we have their trust, they open their doors to us. At the working place itself—surrounded by their bosses and other girls—they cannot speak to us directly, so they reach us later by a call or an e-mail. On site, we work with so-called mediators. We didn't invent this wording but adopted it from the National AIDS Federation, a Swiss association. The mediator women are like cultural mediators and speak the language of the sex workers. All in all our work is very much based on personal relationships.

DP: Do you help them in any way with providing health and/or legal counselling? What can a sex worker do in the event she needs assistance?

MM: For example, health is a very easy subject. In Zurich, there is a wonderful institution where they can have medical studies done or abortions for very little money. What we can offer them is a pretty good contact list with doctors all over the Canton of Solothurn. We explain to the doctors what the sex workers do and need so they're ready to welcome them with any further administration problems. They can go there anonymously if they want to and also, if they don't have a permit or insurance, so if somebody is there illegally or doesn't have insurance she can go there, no problem and no questions asked. Another possibility we offer is *triage*, which means that if we cannot help immediately because we are doing street work, we try to send the person to the place/organisation where they can help. All the organisations in Switzerland that have to do with sex work are all working together; we have unions all over the country, we know each other, we know the institutions, we know who speaks which language, where can we send somebody regarding which problem, etc.

This top organisation is called Prokore—it is a Swiss association and a network, so all organisations in Switzerland that deal with sex work are members. I have been part of the committee for many years—there I do my volunteer work, and we organize a lot of work in groups with different subjects, we do political stuff, we get in touch with the Swiss counselors if there's something that they're trying to do. We are militant.

DP: Switzerland is a privileged country. It is one of the very few countries legalizing prostitution. Have you ever worked with countries where sex work is illegal?

MM: Yes, I had a close exchange with Sweden because it was said that Sweden had some good solutions concerning prostitution, and by experience I can say that this is not true at all! In Sweden, prostitution is immoral and the women in prostitution are treated as victims and not as an active subject that can decide. Since every sex worker in Sweden is called a victim, and since they do not want to punish victims they would not forbid prostitution, but they punish the clients, which is ridiculous. Switzerland recently did consider following the Sweden model, but fortunately we did a great job so it didn't have to come to that, and we reached the goal. Now it has been decided that Switzerland will not go for this Sweden model, but they are reinforcing regulations, which wouldn't be a bad thing actually if there wasn't such a strict regulation for migrants. This issue is not about prostitution but about migration, because they don't want to encourage people to come to Switzerland.

On the one hand, there are the women from Latin America, Russia, Asia, and Africa who are allowed to work legally in cabarets as dancers. There, the women possess a contract to dance, but they have to do it naked. They also have to drink a lot with the guests to make more money. That drives us to another absurd fact: because animating somebody to drink alcohol is illegal, but everybody knows that cabaret dancers also make additional money by animating clients to consume champagne. To understand my point: the work in the cabaret was the only sex work that was regulated with contracts and specific laws. But as the government knew that there is animation to alcohol and there is prostitution in cabarets, even WITH laws they decided they could not protect those dancers regardless of the regulations. They decided that migrant women from outside Europe are not allowed anymore as cabaret dancers in this country. But at the same time, they are doing a lot of regulation in sex work, which is a big contradiction, right? We had a regulated part, and it didn't work. Now we are trying to tell them again and again to not regulate so much because it's going to provoke the opposite of what they want.

On the other hand, there are sex workers from the European Union allowed to work independently. In Solothurn, the streets are the only place where the police do not ask for a working contract, but just with the flexible movement of residents of the Euro-

pean Union that allows them to work only ninety days a year. This regulation is part of the bilateral contracts between Switzerland and the EU, with the effect that most of those women who work here for ninety days don't live here permanently. They have their families in their countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Germany. They move back and forth and leave their children behind and come here only to make money.

DP: Is there an utopian idea of how sex work could become an accepted profession within this society? What would be the "perfect world" for an either migrant or Swiss sex worker?

MM: I guess the perfect world would be one without prostitution. But then the world itself is far from perfect. At this point, I usually like to ask people to define prostitution. Where does it begin? Where does it end? We do have this pictures in our minds that the prostitution act is the sexual act and that the person gets money for that, but I think there are probably marriages where women do a lot to keep the peace at home. I think it would be worth rethinking who is a prostitute and why.

DP: The name *Lysistrada* comes from a comedy by Aristophanes and talks about how women were in control of men by restricting or allowing, being completely in control of sex, and this way they would negotiate things to keep the peace while being empowered. Is that the organisation's motto?

MM: Exactly. The utopia would be that every person who decided, under any circumstances, to become a sex worker in Switzerland for whatever reason—and most of the reasons are economic—has the possibility to work in safe, good, and independent conditions. That society respects and recognizes that decision. Most of them have children, family, hopes, and dreams, and the utopia would be that anyone who decides to do sex work should have good conditions without any pressure. This way each one could decide on the service she's offering, reject clients, and negotiate the price of the service. For our organisation, these are the three essential things for free and independent working of the "free will" nature. Sex work is a social reality and actually fits perfectly into capitalism; it has always existed and it will keep on existing. I just wish they could work in conditions where they can stay healthy, physically and psychologically, and to achieve this, they need social recognition.

DP: Right, they should always be protected...

MM: Right, but the acceptance of society is the most important. As long as the society doesn't accept sex work for moral reasons, a sex worker will never be able to have the same access to the world as other members of our society have.

DP: Do you think Switzerland is far from this utopia or do you see it in the near future?

MM: Switzerland was closer to that some years ago, but then it became more of a migration politic instead of sex work politic. Sadly, Switzerland is drifting away from that utopian concept. Although sex work is legal and will stay legal, probably relevant organisations will receive less funding money, unfortunately, even if we are the ones who have access to those women. This trend does not only apply only to Switzerland, it's all over Europe that we—society—are getting very “moral” again.

DP: In the face of the recent Swiss Council elections, the right wing occupies the majority of the seats in the parliament. Why this turning point?

MM: This trend has been going on for years—the right-wing parties take advantage of the people's fears. Since Switzerland is a rich country, it seems that its citizens have something to lose. Especially in this recent election, we could see that the right-wing politicians didn't have to struggle too much because the war in Syria and the arrival of the refugees helped them to ensure that people were even more scared, so it was easy this time for those parties to win. That's my opinion.

DP: What are your future plans or projects?

MM: What I see after all these years is that it is very important to make our association work. What I learned is that if you want to do a good job for sex workers, you need to deal with politics. At the beginning I didn't know this, and all I wanted was to do social work and help empowering those women. But this is not enough: you need to battle in politics, because what we want to change is not the sex work but to make society accept it. That is political work and engagement—and it has to be done for free in order to not be politically punished. To provide good work in issues like migration or sex work, you have to act politically and show volunteering engagement.

DP: Would you like to become a politician?

MM: No, I would never become a politician because I like to be on the other side—on the side of the human beings who have to deal with the consequences of others' political decisions. There, I think, I can do something that can change this world a little bit. Beside this, I don't like to do an office job; I feel more comfortable sharing my working time with sex workers than with decision makers.

DP: Probably with the new media generation, which is growing with fast, unlimited, and individual access to information, such issues may change for the better. The digital era may help enable more tolerance around homosexuality, sex work, and women's rights, or against racism.

MM: We have to believe in the fact that such a future is reachable. I'm scared that it's going the other way globally because the world is changing right now; we are living in a very impetuous moment. It is a good thing that all those people are coming because they decided to no longer accept the suffering in their countries; it's a good thing that they are moving. But on the other hand, there is a settled society and that may clash. So usually these migration waves provoke a strict politic on migration in the well-settled countries as a consequence, because they want to conserve what they are used to having and they don't see that we are all part of the same planet. If we are living in a very rich country, it has a lot to do with the things happening out there, in other countries. I'm not too optimistic, but that doesn't matter, we keep on going and working hard!

DP: And that makes this mission even more admirable.

Captions

1 “Women's fight now!” Graffiti in the neighbourhood of Zurich's Langstrasse, April 2016. Photograph by: Diana Padilla.

2 “We must fight stigmatization and criminalization of sex workers”. Graffiti at a construction site on Zurich's Langstrasse, April 2016. Photograph by: Diana Padilla.

3 Nightclub on Zurich's Sihlhallenstrasse, in the neighbourhood of the Langstrasse, April 2016. Photograph by: Diana Padilla.

Lysistrada (Solothurn/CH) is a non-profit organisation whose professional approach is the empowerment of sex workers. The staff regularly visits sex workers all over the Canton of Solothurn to talk about health, prevention, and legal counselling. They offer access to anonymous medical counselling and prevention materials, and triage them to other organisations in case the problem can't be solved immediately. The committee works voluntarily, and the motivation for this work and the organisation's self-conception is that sex work is a social reality. Lysistrada seeks to ensure that the professional conditions of sex workers are as humane and equitable as those of all working people.

Melanie Muñoz (b. 1975) is a social worker who has been living in Zurich for twenty years, and for the same period of time she has been highly interested in the very complex subject of female sex work that connects sociology, politics, economy, society, gender, and sexuality.

Diana Padilla (b. 1990 Mexico City/MX) holds a Bachelor in Fine Arts from the Santa Fe University of Art and Design. She was part of the organisation One Billion Rising New Mexico, which focuses on the abolition of violence towards women and children. Her practice revolves around art education and socio-political art. She currently lives in Zurich and studies at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK.



