

Reporting from the Red Light

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On my 25th birthday there were a lot of things I'd never done.

It was two months ago, and I'd flown into Bangkok with my friends Sarah and Alex to embark on The Common Language Project, a media collective we'd formed to cover positive and underreported international news for independent media sources.

All of us were new to this business of running a nonprofit. There were a lot of things none of us had ever done.

I had never spent time in a third world slum. I had never walked through a minefield. I had never talked to a prostitute.

There were mundane things too: I'd never run a website, or ridden a motorbike, or produced a radio piece. Or not complained about having to wake up early for work every morning.

But by last week I thought I had taken all these new experiences pretty well in stride. I've kept an open mind, and allowed my initial impressions and prejudices to shift as we cover each story. We all have. Our mantra on the project has become "let the story write itself, don't force it to fit your expectations."

But feminism was one thing I thought I'd had all figured out. I've called myself a feminist for as long as I can remember. In college I took women's studies classes; read – and at least claimed to understand – Andrea Dworkin, debated the merits of 3rd wave feminism, and could give you a perfectly good academic explanation of power structures that create a market for trafficked women.

So when Sarah and Alex and I got ready to cover a story about Calcutta's red light district I figured we had it written before we'd even arrived. I knew what we were going to find: women as victims of a sexist system, desperately struggling to escape the bonds of prostitution, making just enough money to live without any hope of escape. And the amazing NGO that has sprung up in their midst to save them. Yes, prostitution was bad, I thought, and New Light, the NGO we'd be talking to, was good. End of story. We'd be in and out of there in an afternoon.

On day one, I'm walking down an alley in Kalighat, near one of the holiest Hindu temples in all of India. I have read about this alley in the newspaper. The New York Times article that inspired us to come here in the first place described it as fetid, a slum, one of the worst places on earth. And yes, as I'm walking I am being careful to avoid the open sewers, averting my eyes because I can see into people's bedrooms, see people bathing at the water pump on the street. I glimpse a brown river of garbage and mud at the end of the lane. I keep thinking I see a curtain being drawn across a room by a prostitute with a new client. I'm taking all of this in.

But after an afternoon of serious horseplay with prostitutes' children, who spend their evenings at New Light while their mothers are working, when the three of us sit down over beers, what we're talking about is not desperation or poverty but the incredible community we saw and sense of autonomy we felt from the women of Kalighat.

It was during conversations like that one that my feminist conscience started getting nervous. This was going against every instinct in me but maybe...was it possible? Could it be that prostitution isn't all that bad? Could it, given a little more recognition and improved conditions, be a valid and valuable profession?

Blasphemy! Prostitution is oppressive to women. It's damaging, and it's indicative of all the larger systems of sexism in society. What kind of feminist am I?

All those people we saw are pimps and prostitutes, I reminded myself, desperately trying to fit what I'd seen back into my comfortable stereotype. Desperately trying to deny the sinking realization that there was no way this was going to be a one-day story.

The problem was that I had been expecting ravaged faces with the dark circles of drug addiction and hopelessness, women slumped in their hovels in misery, pimps controlling the big money and forcing girls to work for next to nothing. I was expecting to be scared and horrified. I was expecting to feel pity.

The problem was that I was not expecting my biggest challenge to be getting over my own hang ups about sex in order to ask these women frank questions about their work.

When I met Sunita the next day I finally threw out my expectations and started to let the blasphemy in.

She's about 40, a little chubby, with a grin that takes up her whole face and feet that swing a good three inches above the floor when she sits in a chair. She looks a lot like a middle aged housewife. But she's worked as a prostitute in Calcutta for the past 20 years, and still earns as much as younger women, seeing about 5 clients a day and earning the going rate of 50 rupees, or about a dollar, per client.

She laughs as she recounts the story of being kidnapped on her way to work when she was 16. She woke up in a brothel in New Delhi, but when she saw all the girls lined up in their red saris and pretty gold jewelry she thought it was a wedding party.

She escaped that brothel only to be forced into another one. This time she got away by jumping out of a second story window while the madam was sleeping. She had no idea where she was, and strangers helped treat her bleeding and swollen knees and get her back to Calcutta.

Sunita: I found work as a housemaid, but the head of the house immediately made sexual advances towards me. Wherever I went I was asked to sleep around. Eventually I

decided to become a sex worker. If everyone is trying to sleep with me anyway, I might as well earn some money.

As we talked to Sunita my fears about asking questions about how much she made or what her job was like started to seem silly. She wasn't ashamed to talk about her life, so why was I feeling ashamed for her?

She told us about running into the man who had sold her to the brothel in Delhi:

Sunita: One day, while I was working in the city, I saw one of the guys who sold me talking to another girl. I followed them and he took the girl into a restaurant. I told the manager, 'I know this guy, he sold me as a slave, he is trying to do the same to this girl.' The manager called the police and they arrested him. I went to the police headquarters, and they questioned me about what had happened. He threatened me, saying he was going to come and slash my cheeks with a razor. But he went to jail.

We asked her if she'd seen conditions for women in the neighborhood improve over the past ten years.

Sunita: Now, my coworkers are more aggressive. We take care of each other if anything happens. It's much safer now.

She talks about her entry into the profession as a choice at times, but adds that she didn't have many options.

Sunita: I'm illiterate – if I had known education would make things better for me I would have made different choices. But now it's too late, I'm 40 years old and there's no point.

The daughters of women like Sunita will have more options than she did. At New Light's Shoma Memorial Girls Home, 15 girls from Kalighat, on the verge of entering the trade themselves, take traditional dance and computer lessons, prepare for a trip to Darjeeling, and attend school regularly. If they do choose to follow in their mothers' footsteps, as New Light staff and mothers are quick to mention, it will be by choice, and they will do so on their own terms.

Another group a few miles north is organizing to make sure that happens. At midnight on May 1st sex workers in Sonagachi, another infamous red light district, organized a rally to demand recognition for their work as a viable profession, fair wages, and protection from exploitation, trafficking and slavery. Heading to the protest, I am buoyant with my newfound analysis of the sex trade, ready to be floored by the most progressive feminist ideology I've ever heard. And then I walk by a doorway lined with 11 year old girls in bright lipstick and platform shoes.

I start to feel sick as I picture a member of the religious right watching this scene over my shoulder. "These women are burning George W. Bush in effigy so that they can keep selling little girls into sex slavery?" I stammer something back about the oldest

profession, the possibility that some women are here by choice, that empowering sex workers means they'll use condoms. But I feel ashamed. Ashamed that I so easily turned on my own beliefs; ashamed (that a group I'd so proudly heralded as the New Feminists) (that these women) are marching through these same streets, seeing these same children in the same doorways. I am remembering that things are always much more complicated than you want them to be.

But these women aren't all wrong. As they march through the streets demanding their rights, insisting that their honest day's work is just as honest as mine, I have to agree.

I have to stop insisting that it's even possible to have any given issue completely figured out. I just have to let this one write itself.

This piece was produced by The Common Language Project, with narration by Jessica Partnow, production by Alex Stonehill and music by Milemarker and Chezroc. For more of our work, please visit www.commonlanguageproject.net.