

The Paulo Longo Research Initiative: new directions in sex work research and policy

We are pleased to announce the creation of the Paulo Longo Research Initiative, a new consortium for studying the political economies of sex work. The following paragraphs explain who we are, what we hope to achieve and some of our plans. We introduce our blog which contains photos, slideshows, bibliographies, links and other resources that PLRI members have either produced or found interesting. It is early days for the PLRI so those sections will grow in the coming months and a website will be developed. If you are interested in working with us to shape **new directions in sex work research and policy**, or have a comment, we look forward to hearing from you.

Core Partners

- The Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK
www.ids.ac.uk
- The Department of Epidemiology and Preventative Medicine of Monash University Medical School, Australia
<http://www.med.monash.edu.au/epidemiology/>
- Centre for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalisation (CASAM), India
<http://www.sangram.org/advocacy.htm>
- The Global Network of Sex Work Projects.
www.nswp.org

The Paulo Longo Research Initiative is a collaboration of scholars, policy analysts and sex workers that aims to develop and consolidate ethical, interdisciplinary scholarship on sex work to encourage policy that helps improve the lives of men, women and transgenders who sell or buy sex.

Established in 2008 the PLRI brings together institutions and people that are committed to human rights and social justice and who have made significant contributions to the study of public health, gender, sexuality, development economics, migration, ethics and human rights in the context of sex work. Although the founding partners are mainly concerned with developing countries the PLRI will have a global focus that also recognises important issues and debates around sex work in North America and Europe.

The groups will expand to include partners from relevant academic institutions, NGOs, community based groups to participate in events and collaborate on research, policy analysis and communications projects. Because a key aim is to provide opportunities for sex workers and advocates in developing countries to strengthen their participation in developing knowledge sex workers groups and institutions in the Global South are particularly encouraged to contact us to explore possibilities for collaboration.

Sex work policy and research - room for improvement

The idea for the PLRI arose among activists, policy advocates and academics who were frustrated by the quality of information on sex work available. Although there are many excellent books, essays and studies about sex work - including several by sex workers - a great deal of scholarship on sex work is misguided and stigmatizing. Sex workers frequently complain that much of what is written about them reflects prejudices and myths rather than the reality of their lives. Advocates of rights based policy and programs also complain frequently about the lack of quality research to provide evidence to guide their work.

The study of sex work has a complex history that reflects shifting understandings of links between prostitution and public health, law, gender, economics and human rights. Research on sex work is made difficult by a lack of agreed standards and methodologies. Indeed generally accepted definitions of prostitution, sex work and sex workers do not exist. Ethical aspects of collecting information and producing knowledge about sex work have also been problematic with many claiming that the accepted ethical framework does not protect sex workers as individual research subjects or as an occupational or social group.

The body of work dealing with commercial sex is perhaps best described as uneven. For example, the role of female sex workers in HIV epidemics has been studied extensively while male and transgender sex workers haven't despite serious sub-epidemics in these communities. The economics of sex work, income redistribution and labor issues have received comparatively little attention despite the important roles they play in the lives of sex workers, their clients, families and the broader community. Most recently discussion about sex work has been reframed as a dialogue about human trafficking and sexual exploitation. As a result consideration of sex work has become linked to concerns over 'criminal' immigration, terrorism, drugs, HIV, poverty and gender inequality - whilst other areas key to the dynamics of commercial sex continue to be broadly overlooked.

The links between research and policy is a persistent concern. Sex workers rights advocates say that while poor and stigmatizing research is frequently successfully promoted, higher quality research frequently remains scattered across academic journals and internet sites where it is not easily accessed by policy makers, advocates and programme implementers. Opportunities to advance human rights and dignity through sound policy and law making are lost where ill-informed ideas replace rigorous research,

How the Paulo Longo Research Initiative works.

The Paulo Longo Research Initiative aims to address these issues by gathering together institutions and people to review existing research and policy on sex work, conduct rigorous multi-disciplinary research and strategically communicate findings. Sex worker involvement will be central with all work grounded in their perspectives of the issues they face at global and local levels.

PLRI activities will be arranged around five themes - human rights and law; health; gender and sexuality; mobility and migration and economics and development. These frameworks will provide the lenses through which we view sex work and increase the effectiveness of community-based research.

A sixth stream of our work will be the development of research methodologies and new systems of ethics for studying of sex workers and sex work. We aim to both incorporate and improve upon traditional qualitative and quantitative research methodologies moving toward innovative, interdisciplinary and participatory frameworks that reflect sex workers priorities and perspectives.

The PLRI will strive to develop and embed ways of involving sex workers in the production of knowledge that are ethical and which have greater socio-cultural relevance to sex workers. We plan to make spaces and opportunities for transformative capacity building, collective thinking, research, strategic knowledge translation and thoughtful advocacy by

- developing innovative and ethical ways of researching sex work.
- Conducting research that is ethical, methodologically sound and theory-driven.
- Publishing and innovatively communicating research findings and analysis of sex work issues.
- Supporting training to increase capacity for high priority, community-based research and its uptake.
- Hosting seminars, conferences and web-based discussion spaces for productive dialogue between scholars, sex workers, policy analysts /makers and advocates.

The Themes

The PLRI will further develop theoretical, cultural and empirical understandings of citizenship, gender and human rights and review the historical role of religious and philosophical streams of thought as they apply to, and shape, constructions of commercial and transactional sex.

Law and Human Rights

Human rights standards and norms have traditionally constructed sex work as an affront to human dignity. As a result it has proven difficult for the international human rights regime to endow sex workers with the range of rights normally accorded to others unimpeded by occupational or moral status.

We will examine the strengths and weaknesses of international human rights and domestic legal frameworks as they apply to sex work and evaluate the impact of various international and domestic laws and policies on female, male and transgender sex workers.

Economics and development policy

Although it is well accepted that sex work and poverty, stigma and inequality are linked, too often simplistic assumptions about these factors lead to ineffective, and even harmful, programmes and policies. The PLRI will work to establish broader understandings of the economics of the sex sector, the drivers of demand for, and supply of, commercial sex; the factors that determine prices and behaviours within sex industries, the economic re-distributional effects of commercial sex and the impact of broader economic trends on people that buy, sell or trade sexual services. To achieve this we will analyse sex work economies as they relate to the processes of development, human rights, social protection, livelihoods strengthening and equitable development policy and programming.

Mobility, migration and human trafficking

One of the defining characteristics of modern times is the movement of large numbers of people, including workers, both internally and across international borders. Migration and mobility, both managed and unmanaged, occurs for many purposes, including for domestic, military, industrial and agricultural labor. Family reunion, conflict, environmental and geo-political changes, marriage and economic aspiration are among the many factors that drive mobility and provide the legal, illegal and quasi legal frameworks that determine many of the outcomes of mobility and migration.

The movement of women for commercial sex has increasingly come to the fore over the last decade and discussions around it are increasingly framed around the trafficking of unwilling women and young people for forced work

in the sex industry. Feeding into wider debates about sex, immigration, labor rights and gender relations, female sex work itself is increasingly conflated with human trafficking while mobility of men as buyers or sellers of sex is largely excluded from the analysis.

PLRI research projects will seek to further understand and articulate the dynamics of economic migration, slavery, people smuggling, debt bondage, unregulated work in informal economies and other factors linked to mobility. We will conduct research into the roles of informal travel agents and people smugglers in processes outside formal contracts, visas and work permits that enable people to migrate, and live and work legally. By increasing accurate rather than emotive understandings of the various advantages, opportunities, risks and vulnerabilities of sex work related mobility the PLRI will elaborate and promote effective, rights-based approaches to reducing the abuses and violence associated with both human trafficking and poorly designed or executed attempts to stop it.

Health

Although HIV has been the focus of most work on sex workers health issues for the last quarter of a century it is important to recognise that transgender, female and male sex workers and their families are frequently affected by illnesses and conditions caused by social exclusion, poverty and gender based violence as well as sexual and reproductive health issues STIs and unwanted pregnancies.

Although the potential for commercial sex to play important roles in expanding or slowing HIV epidemics is well recognised, HIV and AIDS-related prevention, treatment and care for sex workers remains inadequate. Indeed the specific dynamics of commercial sex in HIV epidemics remains controversial, as do the efficacy and ethics of disease control measures for as they apply to sex workers. In recent years controversies have been created by the United States HIV policy which has encouraged the criminalization of sex work in developing countries through conditions of its funding allocations and by the UN which encourages prevention of sex work via poverty reduction.

PLRI research projects will examine the impact of these and other features of the architecture of international and national public health interventions and policy. We will map and critique the evolution of established evidence and 'best practice' in respect of the health of sex workers and their clients. We will also address contemporary issues in health policy and programming that affect sex workers, such as new HIV prevention technologies, circumcision, integration of sexual and reproductive health and HIV services, provider initiated HIV testing, economic empowerment strategies and harm reduction strategies for drug users

Gender and Sexuality

Contemporary gender and sexuality studies have much to offer the study of sex work. Recent work on the production of sexual subjectivities under neo-liberalism highlights the potential of a political economy approach to sex work - one that goes beyond debates about coercion and choice to understand better the structures of constraint and scenarios of agency within which sex is bought, sold and traded. The PLRI will conduct new ethnographic studies that permit a more nuanced understanding of sex workers' negotiation of norms on gender and sexuality within their relationships. We will contribute to - as well as draw on - broader debates within the fields of gender and sexuality, whether on questions of masculinity and male sexualities, or on resistance and resilience, to offer new insights into the material conditions of sex work.

Our work in this area will aim to move beyond understanding of the sex worker as a distinct type of sexual or economic subject toward exploration of commercial sex and transactional dimensions of sex as enmeshed in power relationships and economies of desire that are inherent within all sexualities.



Paulo Henrique Longo was a Brazilian psychologist, gay rights activist and sex worker. In 1990 Paulo established Programa Pegacao to provide services to male sex workers in Rio de Janeiro and advocate on issues that affect them. In 1992 he co-founded the International Network of Sex Work Projects which he later led for three years. Paulo was passionate about research and he was

well known in international forums for his eloquent critiques of sex work research and policy. He was an editor of *Research for Sex Work and Horizons*' Principal Investigator for a community based research project on community development among sex workers in Rio. Paulo died in 2004.

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You can visit our blog at <http://plri.wordpress.com/>