



"NO BAD WOMEN, JUST BAD LAWS"

Sex worker's rights are women's rights

Sex workers' rights are central to the fight for women's rights and for achieving gender equality. Yet, there continues to be disagreement about how best to ensure that women in the sex industry are free from violence and discrimination.

"We keep reproducing inequality because we are afraid to lose what little ground we have gained. But we can't have women's rights if sex workers don't have rights, because sex workers are women, too." (Sex worker-led organisation, Brazil).

MYTHS

Feminists can't support sex worker's rights.

FACTS

Feminist collectives and organisations around the world support the rights of sex workers and the call for the decriminalisation of sex work.



Some of these are:

FEMNET (Kenya); Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (Thailand); International Community of Women Living with HIV (Global); International Women's Health Coalition (US); International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (Malaysia); Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (Philippines).

No one chooses to do sex work.



Choice is always limited, relative, and contextual. Most people worldwide work for money to survive. If you're poor, a person of colour, a woman, trans and/or gender non-conforming, you likely have a smaller range of choices. Regardless of whether you choose to do domestic work, sex work, farm work, office work, factory work, or anything else, your choice should be valued and your rights should be respected, protected, promoted and fulfilled.

Sex workers sell themselves.



Sex workers are not selling themselves, they are selling a service that is limited in duration and scope.

Sex work is inherently violent.



Sex work between two consenting adults is not inherently violent. However, its criminalisation, as well as discrimination and stigma against sex workers, generate violence and other human rights violations.

All sex workers have been abused.



1 in 3 women experience violence

All industries have women who have experienced abuse because global gender-based violence statistics are deplorable. The WHO estimates that 1 in 3 women will experience violence in her lifetime. Sex workers have the right to be treated with dignity, and have recourse to justice, just as women in other occupations.

Criminalising buyers and managers is the appropriate feminist response to sex work.



The "End Demand" model is being promoted as a solution to end the exploitation of women. However, evidence shows that sex workers working in this context are less safe. Criminalisation of any aspect of sex work drives the industry underground and beyond the reach of health, social, and justice services.

Decriminalisation of sex work will lead to more abuse, trafficking and the exploitation of women and children.



There is no robust evidence to support this contention. Rather, decriminalisation empowers sex workers and clients to report cases of exploitation and trafficking as they are best placed to do so. Laws against human trafficking already exist in most countries and must be enforced in a rights-affirming manner, regardless of the sector in which it occurs. Sex work and human trafficking are thus separate issues and it is dangerous to sex workers' health and lives to conflate the two.

Feminist reasons to support the rights of sex workers



Advocate for intersectional feminism. As feminists, it is important to support communities that are advocating for their own rights and advance intersectional feminism.

"Sex workers strike against interference in our bodily autonomy in mutual solidarity with all other women; disabled, transgender, lesbian, mothers (including single mothers), queer, women of color, women incarcerated, pregnant women, young and old who fight similar battles as we do in order to claim their own bodily autonomy. We strike in solidarity with women of color, women incarcerated, migrant women, begging women, women who use drugs, transgender women, asylum seekers, Muslim women, and all women who like sex workers are stigmatised, discriminated against and persecuted by the law and law enforcement." (Empower Foundation and English Collective of Prostitutes)



Support for bodily autonomy.

A key feminist belief is that women should have control over their own bodies and sexual behavior. This means when an adult woman chooses to engage in sex work, her decision must be respected and her human rights protected and promoted.



Make visible the widespread nature of women's poverty.

Women are more likely to be poor, employed in precarious, low-paid labor, and less likely to have access to land, loans and education. When feminists recognise sex work as work, they recognise sex work, like farm or domestic work, as precarious labor with women in those industries needing access to labor rights.

Challenge misogyny.

Sex workers occupy public and nocturnal spaces and often defy patriarchal stereotypes about 'what women should look/act/dress like'. Sex workers also demand fair compensation for something that is traditionally imposed on women as both emotional and physical labor.

"When feminists oppose sex work, they deny the emancipation of sex workers as women's emancipation. Modern society is still a patriarchy – women's labor in the domestic sphere is unrecognised and unpaid, many women are financially dependent upon their husbands, and some still need to ask men for permission in order to move and act freely" (Sex worker, Italy)

Reduce gender-based violence, labor exploitation and trafficking.

Sex workers who are empowered and able to access their rights free from fear of arrest, stigma and discrimination are better able to report cases of violence, abuse and exploitation.



Listen to women.

"We want the feminist movement to stop punishing us for our strengths, stop rewarding us for our pain, stop gaining privilege on the back of our needs, and to listen when we speak. We will continue to speak out about our rights and you need to hear us. If you deny our experience, you deny our existence." (The Scarlet Alliance)

What can Women's Movements Do?

- **Listen to and recognise** sex workers as experts in their own lives. Involve them as integral partners in the fight for gender equality and encourage visibility by collaborating with sex worker-led movements.
- Use an **inclusive and intersectional** understanding of gender equality that recognises diversity in needs and experiences of women and fight for feminism that is sex worker-inclusive and transgender-inclusive.
- **Share knowledge and resources** with sex worker-led organisations, facilitate their access to key advocacy spaces, provide platforms for diverse sex worker voices, and foster the exchange of information and skills.
- **Accept sex workers' evidence and campaign for full decriminalisation.** Given growing evidence about the ways in which criminalisation and structural inequalities shape conditions within the sex industry, it is time support the full decriminalisation of sex work as the best way to ensure the safety and self-determination of sex workers.



Levy, J (2014) "Criminalising the Purchase of Sex – Lessons from Sweden"; Prostitution Law Reform Committee (2008) "Report of the Prostitution Law Reform Committee on the operation of the Prostitution Reform Act of 2003"