

Good Work (If You Can Get It)

Job Discrimination against Sex Workers

by Savannah Sly

It can be frustrating to be a sex worker in this world. On the one hand, you have society telling you to stop whoring around and get a real job. On the other, you have employers discriminating against you before you even get a foot in the door.

For many people, sex work is a temporary means of making a living. Regardless of duration, engaging in sex work brands people with a scarlet letter. Discrimination is a major barrier to accessing employment for people with sex trade histories. Even when employment is secured, former sex workers aren't safe from being outed and fired, regardless of how well they perform their jobs. Sex work stigma affects the job stability every type of erotic laborer, from [strippers](#) and [escorts](#) to [adult content creators](#), [porn performers](#) and [BDSM professionals](#).

Employment discrimination is an increasingly concerning practice due to the sheer volume of people who participate in online sex work. During the COVID pandemic, tens of thousands of people sought to make money from home via adult content platforms. For example, in May of 2020 an [average of 7,000-8,000 new content creators joined the OnlyFans platform everyday](#). All of these people are now at risk of being denied other forms of employment due to stigma.

Laborers in the sex trade are overwhelmingly women and LGBTQ people. Thus, employment discrimination against sex workers exacerbates gender disparities in mainstream workplaces. The stigma of the scarlet letter enable abusers to blackmail, stalk, and harass at current and former sex workers at will. Take for example the testimony of a school teacher who refused the advances of her co-worker:

“I thought I could be a discreet “under the radar” sex worker and a teacher with the public school system simultaneously. Unfortunately, when I rejected the advances of a male co-worker, he hired a private investigator, discovered my sex work website, and wrote an anonymous email from a “concerned parent” to school administrators. As a result, I had to withdraw from my main career that I have put multiple degrees and years of work into. I felt punished for having boundaries with a retaliatory co-worker, and helpless to defend myself, simply because I was a sex worker.”

Applying for jobs as a former sex worker can be an anxiety-ridden process. Applicants must delicately balance hiding their past with championing their worthy experience. Resume

gaps are a common issue, especially if they have supported themselves exclusively off sex work for multiple years. Under these circumstances, it's easy for strong job candidates to under-represent their transferable skill sets.

Society is missing out on the value-add that sex workers represent to mainstream work environments. Take for example the public health and medical sectors...sex workers commonly become experts in identifying, neutralizing, and avoiding transferable pathogens, making them fine candidates for prevention education, research, and best practices development/deployment. Because sex workers must maintain a high degree of privacy to protect themselves, they frequently develop advanced discretionary tactics applicable to cyber security, intelligence, and finance. The situational awareness and character assessment required to stay safe as a sex worker can lay the foundation for numerous jobs such as event management, emergency services, security, trail guiding, bar tending, and ironically even law enforcement. Broadly speaking, sex workers possess finely attuned social intelligence skills that can lend them to thrive as care workers for children and youth, the elderly, and people needing healing or therapeutic attention.

In short, sex workers have a lot to offer the job market.

Sex workers have always operated covertly in the mainstream, but the tides are turning. Sex workers are more visibly stepping into power. Women with sex work histories are openly [running for office](#), [advancing civil rights](#), [directing film and television series](#), and [dominating the charts](#). For those of us who have traded sexual services for a living, the sight of our colleagues making strides in their careers, and shaping the world is thrilling.

Much work remains to eradicate unnecessary barriers to employment and basic resources for sex workers. If we wish to comprehensively address sex and gender discrimination at work, we must expand discrimination protections to include people who have traded sex. Discrimination protections must be extended beyond employment to include housing, education, social services, healthcare, immigration, and child custody.

Chiefly, decriminalizing prostitution will enable current and former sex workers to move forward with their lives. A prostitution record can haunt a person for decades, blocking access to employment, apartment rentals, banking and financial tools, and other necessities. [Sometimes prostitution related charges can lead to being listed on sex offender registries](#), with mandates extreme limitations around where a person can live and who they can interact with. In the instance of the women below, simply being implicated in a prostitution arrest has been enough to prevent her from finding other work:

“I worked as a principal consultant who implemented enterprise programs for industrial maintenance organizations, and I was highly valued by an impressive list of clients who I served. But due to my arrest record for prostitution in 2014, I am now unable to get past an employment background check. The charge for prostitution was dismissed the same day I was charged. So

much for Due Process; I was never told I was being charged, never arraigned, never plead or made a deal with prosecutors. Yet there's a permanent mark on my record. The new Scarlet Letter is just as effective as the old one.”

Until we can decriminalize sex work, significant harm will continue to be done to women and LGBTQ people in the form of discrimination and traumatizing state intervention. While no single policy will undo the centuries of stigma associated with sex work, removing unnecessary barriers and criminal penalties will start to even the playing field.



About the Author

Savannah Sly strives to advance the status and welfare of sex workers in society through advocacy, art, public education and field development. Sly is the founding director of [New Moon Fund](#), and presently serves as an advisor to the Woodhull Freedom Foundation and the Global Lab for Research in Action at UCLA Luskin. Learn more at savannahsly.com