

Decriminalization and Destigmatization of Sex Work

A 101 introduction for Civilians

Imagine you're at your place of employment. Lets say you're a therapist perhaps or maybe you're an accountant. Whatever it is you do as a living you've chosen it as your preferred form of labor that best suits you as we all are forced to labor in some way shape or form to survive. It's another unvarying day for you at your job and then all at once while you're working something horrible happens. You're violently assaulted by your client. They rape you and they rob you and then flee the scene. You're badly shaken up, need immediate medical attention and want your assailant brought to justice not only for your own peace of mind but also to ensure that they don't repeat this crime unto anyone else. You go to call 911 but then you're suddenly struck with the reality that you can't because your profession is illegal, you're considered a criminal and can be prosecuted under the law. This isn't some dystopian nightmare. This is unfortunately the very grim reality that many who work in the sex trade industry will face on a daily basis because of archaic laws that regulate our labor, and are derived from anachronistic puritanism. They serve no purpose other than to perpetuate stigma, violence and death against sex workers.

Sex work is a broad umbrella definition encompassing several different forms of labor such as but not limited to ; escorting, stripping, content creator, webcam model, prodominatrix, outdoor workers, and sugaring. A sex worker is someone who receives money or goods (i.e. shelter, clothing, cars, drugs, designer products, food) in exchange for sexual services, performances or goods, an example of some products or services that one might sell are: soiled socks and panties, lap dances, online strip teases, naked photos, flogging or whipping,

psychological play and of course, good old fashion sex, sex not being limited to a penis penetrating a vagina but also anal and oral penetration involving folks of every gender identity.

The variety of jobs in sex work is vast but they all have the common foundation of consent between consumer and producer. The consumer purchases goods and services on their own free will just as the producer sells them out of their own free will, or at least as free as you can be under the economic forces that govern our existence.

The legality of these jobs varies greatly not only from country to country but by state, as well as city and county. We also know from looking at the history of sex work that regulations on it aren't just relative to the geographical region but subjective to the moralistic standards of the culture's time period as our ethics are ever evolving. Sexual identities and practices such as homosexuality that were once frowned upon as an abhorrent taboo and criminalized are now commonly accepted as a social norm. Sex work often referred to as, "the world's oldest profession" yet is still remains unacknowledged as a job and is long overdue for social acceptance and individual respect.

Most people, sex workers and civilians alike (civilian: a term used to refer to a nonsexworker) will agree the most stigmatized of jobs in the sex work industry is that of the full service sex worker (FSSW). This term specifically refers to those who provide in person sexual services. FSSW can be your cliché luxury courtesan that Hollywood loves to portray in movies accompanying a politician or a celebrity on a vacation overseas. They can also be an elite escort catering to upper middle class doctors and lawyers on their lunch break in a private condo, or a confidante who sees clients of every gender identity from generation Z to boomers in a collective incall shared with other workers. We are also outdoor workers sometimes working from the street or a parking lot. We can be a classic companion working out of a hotel, a

survivalist sex worker, or a sugar baby with their sugar daddy working from their home. There's no right or wrong way to do sex work. No hierarchy of whores. Every form deserves respect and dignity. There are, however, right and wrong ways to speak about and refer to sex workers. To help destigmatize FSSW people can adopt a neutralized language free from dehumanizing slurs such as lot lizard, street walkers, hookers, whore, and the all familiar prostitute. These demeaning words are rooted in the systemic violence of criminalization, physical violence of individuals and only serve to perpetuate stigma. Speech that the average person may find humor in do so at the expense of sex workers bringing us humiliation and shame. These jokes only reinforce stigma thus making the world a more violent place to work and live for sex workers. If a sex worker refers to themselves using any of the formerly mentioned terms it is not degrading as there is a power dynamic at play here and we're reclaiming the word.

There are different legal approaches to regulating FSSW, they are: criminalization, legalization, the Nordic model (also known as partial decriminalization/abolitionist) and decriminalization. Criminalization legally penalizes both sex workers and their clients for engaging in consensual adult acts. In today's sexually liberated climate when folks are free to have as many sexual partners in their life as they please it is utterly ludicrous that the government still has a say on whether or not adults can consensually sell or buy sex. After all the criminalization of commercial sex is birthed from an arbitrary veneration of religious puritanical beliefs. Criminalization is innately incompatible with personal privacy, and autonomy which is a human right. It creates environments that foster stigma, violence and a lower quality of life for the individual while generating unforeseen adverse effects on society as a whole. Criminalization by its very nature is intrinsically violent as arrest is an inherently traumatic act. A criminal record of prostitution can be devastating for an individual attempting to secure housing, a job, vote, attend school, obtain healthcare and even interfere in personal friendships and relationships because of the stigma attached to prostitution. This often results in them

being trapped in a cycle of poverty that leaves them at risk of being exploited. No one wants to hire, rent to, or sometimes even befriend the local hooker. Handcuffs, jail cells and criminal records are not the answer for sex workers or human trafficking victims.

Human trafficking exists in various industries across the labor spectrum from agriculture to beauty salons, construction, and factory work. In no other industry do we attempt to eliminate it by criminalizing the labor and incarcerating the workers. Abolishing the sex industry because trafficking exists within it makes about as much sense as abolishing farms because some farmers have trafficked workers. Criminalization increases the dangers of sex work by pushing it further underground into secluded locations increasing the vulnerability of heinous attacks from people who realize the improbability of sex workers acquiring help and disgustingly view them as easy targets. Generating laws like SESTA/FOSTA that censor free speech it drives sex work into the dark web where predatory clients as well as people who seek to exploit sex workers have the advantage as they're stripped of their ability to advertise, screen clients, use discretion over who they see as clients and where they work which literally forces us onto the streets subjecting us to hazardous working conditions with unscreened clients and police abuse of power. Mentally criminalization isolates sex workers since it fuels stigmatization which hinders social bonds and negatively impacts our mental health. The criminalization of sex work disproportionately affects BIPOC, the LGBTQ community, low income folks, as well as migrant people as biases against these individuals and communities are prevalent in society and police are not exempt from internalizing them. It is common knowledge amongst sex workers that police use coercion tactics through threat of arrest, extortion, as well as physical and sexual violence. The vast majority of FSSW living under criminalization are in agreement that police hurt more than they help. Criminalization offers no solutions, conversely it breeds a plethora of problems.

With all of the failures of criminalization one might think that the best approach to regulating sex work is to legalize it and unless you know better this does sound ideal. It would seemingly improve the quality of sex workers lives by providing police protection, and promoting destigmatization and perhaps even generate some tax revenue. However legalization only sounds good on a surface level, upon further scrutiny we can see it tends to mirror the same problems as criminalization onto the most marginalized members of the community. Legalization entails the strict government regulation of the sex work industry as well as the workers. It would dictate when, where and how it can take place and include mandatory licenses, and registrations, and STI testing which leaves sex workers entangled in a big web of burdensome bureaucratic regulations and deems us criminals if we can't or won't act in accordance with these invasive, exclusionary rules. These legal mandates are obviously highly problematic for an overwhelming amount of sex workers who may lack the financial means and or government identification to comply or be in a position where they are discriminated against and denied licenses such as HIV positive sex workers or sex workers who use substances. Heavy is the stigma against people who are HIV positive and it is imperative to educate the populace about U=U to help end the stigma once and for all. U=U is an abbreviation in reference to people living with HIV who have an undetectable viral load and therefore are completely untransmittable to other people. People who are living in a country where they are undocumented are completely left behind under legalization. Drawing from my own lived experience as a sex worker who lived and worked in a country other than my own where I was completely undocumented without any legal status I was put in some very precarious positions by not having the proper licenses which definitely jeopardized my safety. Working at what's known as a massage parlor, or "rub and tug" required mandatory city licenses which required a police background check and valid government identification. I lacked the ability to get these because of my status but fortunately through a stroke of luck I was able to work there anyways. I worked with others who didn't have the licenses because of their exorbitant cost and then there

were some who didn't have the licenses as it's stigmatized and they didn't want it attached to their identity. There were multiple times when bylaw came in and we had to go fleeing out the back door, sometimes in winter, barefoot in the snow and had to hide outside in frigid temperatures to avoid getting a very hefty ticket for being unlicensed, and I was personally avoiding potential deportation. There was another time when I was highly pressured to do something that was way beyond my boundaries at work by a man who identified himself as a cop (I don't know if he actually was or not) he had picked up on my accent and alluded to the fact that he held the power in that situation and knew that I wasn't supposed to be there. Legalization mandates licenses, and registrations that aren't accessible or realistic for all sex workers. It forgets how intertwined sex work is with immigration, classism, poverty, drug use, and physical and mental health because the people who write these laws are out of touch with real life sex workers and the social issues connected to sex work. Avoiding the police due to lack of licenses may push workers into seeing riskier clients, working in more isolated areas and traveling to far remote locations. At its core legalization is an impractical system that doesn't minimize criminalizations harmful effects but instead magnifies them on the most marginalized of sex workers.

The Nordic model, partial decriminalization, the Swedish model, equality model and the end demand model. It goes by many names but many sex workers like to refer to it as the entrapment model since this policy criminalizes purchasing sex, but not selling it. The reasoning for this structure derives out of a fundamentally ignorant notion that all sex workers need to be rescued. Conflating sex trafficking with sex work is indicative of a perilous misapprehension of consent. It's incredibly dangerous to view us only as victims as it undermines our bodily autonomy, and negates our free will. Some proponents of this model understand that not all sex workers are trafficked but view us through a grossly small minded lense of pity and think that we all must be dumb, brainwashed, and lack alternative employment

options or are incapable of anything else in life. Since hyper femininity and a greater attention to cultivating the physical appearance can be common amongst sex workers and civilians tend to assume we all have a highly glamorous look I'd also say this line of thinking is misogynistic, some people just hate and judge women who cultivate their appearance for no reason. This condescending attitude is nothing more than whorephobia disguised as charitable goodwill and hurts sex workers by promoting stigma. For me sex work is very empowering, I find it to be a play on the entitlement of patriarchy and a slap in the to society that sexualizes femmes holding beauty in high esteem while simultaneously looking down upon it. With sex work I have full agency over my sexuality and it feels fantastic to be able to harness it and use it for my own personal gain. The Nordic model seeks to take away the empowerment that I feel by eradicating sex work. Sex workers need clients to generate income and the criminalization of clients directly interferes with that income. Criminalizing clients also impacts the physical safety of sex workers by encouraging unsafe working environments. A potential client who is in fear of breaking the law is much less likely to comply with a sex worker's screening process. Outdoor workers are forced into less publicized areas and have less time to decide if a client is safe because of the risk of his arrest. Overall there will be less clients giving sex workers less options of who we can see. This will result in us working in riskier conditions with sketchy clients to compensate for income loss. Just as with criminalization and legalization we see that pushing sex work underground makes it more dangerous. The demand for sex isn't just going to suddenly disappear but what will appear with the Nordic model is more violence against sex workers.

If sex workers don't want to live and work under criminalization, legalization or partial decriminalization, what system of regulations do they want? Decriminalization is what I'm personally in favor of. It's the removal of criminal penalties for adults who participate in the consensual selling or buying of sex. When criminal laws are removed the same civil laws that

apply to other industries will still apply to the sex work industry. Decriminalization is not complete chaos of sex work, or the glorification of it. Sex trafficking, child sexual exploitation, rape, and violence would still be illegal. Decriminalization is a policy that saves the lives of sex workers through reducing violence by removing the threat of arrest of workers and clients. The fear of arrest and legal prosecution is what prevents sex workers from seeking help and justice. Decriminalization evolves into destigmatization by removing the taboo criminal element. Sex workers are everywhere. We're your neighbors, accountants, teachers, nurses, we're in line with you at grocery stores, at your parent teacher meetings, we are your friends and family. I can guarantee you that you know someone who is a sex worker. We're not going anywhere, you cannot deny our existence. It's time we as a society brought sex work out of the dark shadows of shame and stigma and into the light where we deserve to exist just like an other human being.

Decriminalize Now!