

## Are all sex workers victims of trafficking and exploitation?

No, many sex workers choose their profession voluntarily and have agency in their work. Conflating sex workers with sex trafficking victims dismisses this agency and, as a result, diminishes consideration of the need for labor rights in sex work. This oversight harms both sex workers and victims of sex trafficking. More so, efforts by anti-sex trafficking advocates often enhance this oversight and can actually cause greater harm to sex workers by not addressing their presence in the industry.

There are several factors perpetuating this myth. The first is a general stigma towards sex workers and false presumption that no sex workers have agency and all sex workers are victims of men's oppression, regardless of their stated consent. This falsehood has made its way into public advocacy, policy making, feminist commentaries, and anti-trafficking initiatives.<sup>1</sup> More so, research has shown that the notable bias surrounding discussion of sex work and sex workers affects public opinion that informs policy debates<sup>2</sup>.

The second is imprecise language and conflation of exploitation, sex trafficking, and sex work in research, advocacy, and media. Sex workers are adults who consensually provide sexual or erotic services in exchange for goods or money. Sex work is always consensual but, like most laborers, there may be exploitation. That does not inherently mean they are victims of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is a form of human trafficking and occurs when someone has been forced into the sex trade via fraud, coercion, or deception, and can sometimes include extreme examples of exploitation. Exploitation occurs when a sex worker is taken advantage of for personal or financial gain. This can include unfair treatment, manipulation, or abuse of power dynamics. While exploitation can occur in various work environments, including sex work, it does not automatically equate to sex trafficking. Sex trafficking represents an extreme form of exploitation, involving force and a lack of consent.

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<sup>1</sup> O'Brien, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Hansen & Johansson, 2023

Despite specific definitions of each, the exploitation of sex workers is often conflated with sex trafficking. Sex workers are more likely to be exploited when they operate in poor conditions, but this could be said of many laborers and is not the same as being trafficked. Additionally, recruitment into sex work is also not the same as sex trafficking. Some recruitment into sex work can be consensual, like recruitment into other jobs, and must also not be automatically conflated with sex trafficking.

A third factor perpetuating this myth is vague policy aimed at addressing sex trafficking that fails to distinguish between victims and sex workers. Policy on sex trafficking often utilizes vague or ambiguous statements, which has made it possible for anti-sex worker groups to conflate sex workers with victims of trafficking and thereby strip sex workers of their rights. For example, vague language in policy that aims to get rid of sex trafficking by removing the demand for commercial sex has also been taken up by policymakers and anti-sex work advocates to attempt to banish sex work overall. There are even U.S. governmental incentives, known as the TIP Report, for foreign governments that minimize demand for commercial sex..<sup>3</sup> However, sex work has been a stable industry for centuries and is unlikely to go away, so many of these policies inevitably worsen access to safety and human rights for sex workers (and sex trafficking victims) without actually diminishing sex trafficking. The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women has called for a sex worker-centered approach to anti-trafficking efforts, noting the harm of frameworks that do not uphold the right of sex workers to work.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, sex workers are often left out of conversations on legislation and advocacy efforts.<sup>5 6</sup>

Overall, there is a false but deeply held belief by our country's societal discourse and political leaders that sex workers and victims of trafficking have similar experiences with similar needs. However, this is not true and the perpetuation of this myth is harming both victims and consensual sex workers.

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<sup>3</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Global NEtwrok of Sex Work Projects, 2018

<sup>6</sup> O'Brien, 2015

## **Myth 1: Are all sex workers trafficked or coerced into the sex trade?**

No, many sex workers proactively pursue their careers for various reasons, including income, autonomy, flexibility, and enjoyment - just like all other jobs.

The lived experiences among sex workers exist on a broad spectrum, and like all other careers, the agency with which one operates within that career is varied. Bettio and colleagues highlighted how freedom of choice for sex workers is not a dichotomous option that they either do or do not have. Instead, it exists on a continuum, as it does for most professionals. The degree of agency sex workers feel can be influenced by legalization, the type of sex work one does, and economic constraints.<sup>7</sup> Often there are underlying systemic factors that prompt sex workers to choose this profession out of pursuit of financial or physical needs. Researchers have found a wide range of these examples, including sex workers who intentionally opt into an indentured sex work arrangement in return for migration to countries with more opportunity<sup>8</sup>, cam models who have chosen this work to make more money while maintaining physical distance from clients<sup>9</sup>, and trans sex workers who enter sex work partly because they faced higher discrimination in the workforce but also because they could earn far more money as sex workers.<sup>10</sup>

Sex work can also offer access to income for those who physically struggle to sustain traditional full-time employment. Sex workers with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses, such as Crohn's Disease or fibromyalgia, have found "traditional" jobs enhance their pain or illness, are unrealistic to accomplish logistically, or fail to accommodate their needs even when the law requires companies to do so. Sex work, on the other hand, provides autonomy, flexibility, and often higher financial return for fewer hours of labor.<sup>11</sup> Despite the challenges that come with sex work, research has found it to be a less physically harmful and a more accessible option than most available jobs outside of the sex industry.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, there are also sex workers who have chosen the career simply because they enjoy it as a way to make money, feel empowered, and/or have agency over their

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<sup>7</sup> Bettio et al., 2017

<sup>8</sup> Plambech, 2016

<sup>9</sup> Matthews, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Botti & D'Ippoliti, 2016

<sup>11</sup> Jones, 2022

<sup>12</sup> Jones, 2022

schedule.<sup>13 14</sup> While this experience requires privilege that not all sex workers have, it is an equally valid and prevalent reality within the sex worker community.

## **Myth 2: Don't efforts to fight trafficking help sex workers?**

Not necessarily. Sex workers and victims of trafficking require different policies to ensure their safety, health, and human rights are secure. Failure to consider the specific needs of sex workers actually risks harming both sex workers and victims of trafficking, and sex workers often report feeling their needs are unsupported or overlooked by anti-trafficking agencies.<sup>15</sup>

There are several risks of conflating anti-trafficking efforts with sex worker advocacy.

First, the conflation of sex-trafficking victims and sex workers has pathologized sex workers as victims of their own trauma and paints these individuals as unintelligent and/or lacking agency. This false storyline has enabled advocacy groups and policymakers to dismiss sex workers' calls for labor rights and refuse funds to sex-worker-led organizations under the belief that sex workers are victims and lack agency or intellect to run their own businesses or advocacy initiatives.<sup>16</sup> This diminishes efforts to increase human rights for sex workers and dismisses the reality of lived experiences of autonomous, consensual sex workers.

Secondly, the conflation of trafficking victims and sex workers has led to policy that focuses on removing or criminalizing the sex trade, such as through 'end demand' models, that inevitably hinder the safety and human rights of sex workers. Research has shown that end demand models, also known as the Nordic model, don't work.<sup>17</sup> In fact, advocates for criminalization tend to overlook how sex workers experience agency and instead contribute to the portrayal of sex workers as victims.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, centering all sex workers as victims dismisses the harm of criminalization on sex workers and overlooks the specific needs and rights of autonomous sex workers. The criminalization of sex work can enhance exploitation — when criminalized, sex workers become easy targets for violence or abuse because what they are doing is illegal and reporting such abuses would expose them to risk of arrest and/or other legal or physical

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<sup>13</sup> Torres, 2018

<sup>14</sup> Sells, 2018

<sup>15</sup> Freedom Network USA & National Survivor Network, 2023

<sup>16</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2021

<sup>17</sup> Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2021

<sup>18</sup> Bettio et al., 2017

consequences.<sup>19 20</sup> Sex workers report increased policing to curb sex trafficking has led to physical and sexual assault by police officers and decreased access to safety measures out of fear for police retribution.<sup>21</sup> More so, criminalizing online platforms that host consensual sex workers' advertisements has also minimized harm reduction tools such as bad date lists or vetting, forcing sex workers into more dangerous situations.<sup>22 23</sup>

The criminalization of sex work has further diminished their rights from being centered in other human rights conventions or declarations. As a result, sex workers often face poor working conditions, violence, police harassment and discrimination.<sup>24</sup> This has led both sex workers and victims of trafficking to face legal consequences if they seek help from law enforcement or healthcare workers. An increase in sex worker rights could increase access to safety and support for all individuals operating in the sex trade, including victims of trafficking.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, research does not unilaterally suggest that outlawing sex work will keep trafficking victims safer. Albright and D'Adamo found that criminalizing sex work actually increases the risks associated with sex trafficking by maintaining stigma and mistreatment by law enforcement and the general public. Additionally, criminalization makes it easier for traffickers to exploit victims because it is not safe for trafficking victims to seek help and risk being arrested. Instead, addressing the systems that create vulnerability in communities is a key part of inhibiting sex trafficking.<sup>26</sup>

### **Quotes of empowerment from sex workers:**

"Who doesn't want to help people explore different things? Why can't I be there for other people that need that and want and deserve to feel beautiful?" -Chayse, sex worker in Australia <https://www.bbc.com/news/disability-65422489>

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<sup>19</sup> Decker et al, 2015

<sup>20</sup> Albright & D'Adamo, 2017

<sup>21</sup> Freedom Network USA & National Survivor Network, 2023

<sup>22</sup> Mantle, 2022

<sup>23</sup> Musto et al., 2021

<sup>24</sup> Decker et al, 2015

<sup>25</sup> Albright & D'Adamo, 2017

<sup>26</sup> Albright & D'Adamo, 2017

## References

*Woodhull Freedom Foundation conducted focus groups with participants from Spokes Hub to develop the myths for this Fact Checked series. [Spokes Hub](#) is a free online academy aimed at supporting people with lived experience in the sex trade in developing their voice and authority as advocates. Their contributions were used throughout this series to ensure the myths and content discussed aligned with the lived experiences of the impacted community. We are grateful for their insights and knowledge on this important topic.*

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