Woodhull Freedom Foundation

Sex Worker Rights are Human Rights

Sex workers are stigmatized as socially disruptive, dirty, and shameless, and society judges them more harshly than their non-sex worker peers. This has led to their neglect by policymakers, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and members of the public.[1] The stigmatization of sex work leads to bad policy, which harms both sex workers and victims of sex trafficking. Therefore, a greater understanding of sex workers as complex and diverse people is a vital part of achieving human rights and ensuring greater access to resources and safety for both sex workers and victims of sex trafficking.

All sex workers suffer the consequences of dehumanization, which is when we see others as less than human[2] and therefore less deserving of fair and respectful treatment.[3] However, not all sex workers experience dehumanization at the same rate. The racial, class, and gender prejudices present in society also impact the treatment of sex workers, with low-income, Black and brown, and trans sex workers receiving harsher judgment and legal treatment than their white, higher-earning peers. More so, these biases also exist among sex workers themselves. Known as the "whorearchy," the sex worker community has its own internal hierarchy based on the type of work and amount of money someone makes. Escorts who charge high rates or strippers who don't provide full-service work may reject and maintain distance from street-based workers. This hierarchy, perpetuated inside and outside the sex worker community, leads to unjust treatment and inequitable access to resources and social support for sex workers.

Society continues to assume sex workers are a monolith, with little understanding of who sex workers are, their nuanced experiences, and the lives they live. This perpetuates the false assumption that sex workers are drastically different from the rest of the population, with unrelatable, or undignified, values and lives. This assumed otherness perpetuates dehumanization[4], leading to loss of access to advocacy, fair legal treatment, and humane policy. However, increased connection to sex workers' emotions, experiences, and preferences would be an important step in overcoming dehumanization.

1 Kellie et al, 2021

2 Agadullina et al, 2021

3 Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016

4 van Loon et al, 2024

People make harsh, often untrue judgments about their moral codes, values, and lifestyles. The reality is that the only difference between a sex worker and anyone else is the type of labor they do. Sex workers go to the grocery store, take their kids to school, and clean their homes. They laugh, cry, grieve, and feel just like everyone else. And they care about their communities, families, and often, their clients. There should be no exceptions when discussing human rights. Human rights are universal and not dependent on what type of labor someone does.

Myth 1: Aren't all sex workers treated the same?

No. While all sex workers experience elements of dehumanization, prejudice varies greatly depending on the race, gender, body type, and sexual activity of the sex worker.

Social prejudices against sex workers are prominent and impact how different sex workers are viewed and treated by external systems. For example, white, wealthier escorts are perceived as having greater morality or empowerment than full-service sex workers who are not white, cisgender, young, thin, and/or have lower socioeconomic status.[5] [6] These biases amplify already-present discrimination in law enforcement. Black and Hispanic people are already more likely to receive negative police attention than their white or Asian counterparts; the intersectionality of being Black or brown *and* a sex worker compounds the danger one might experience if they occupied only one of these demographic categories.[7] [8] [9]

Beyond race and class, sex workers also experience differences in treatment based on the services they provide. While both men and women attribute lower moral status to all women who partake in penetrative sex or nudity as part of their job,[10] those working on the street are the most visible and most likely to be arrested for sex work. In contrast, those working solely online or as high-end escorts have a greater ability to evade unwanted police attention because they are less visible and often do not fit the stereotypical profile of a sex worker. In a 2024 focus group conducted by Woodhull Freedom Foundation to learn more about sex workers firsthand experiences, participants repeatedly reported that

5 Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022

6 Daniel et al, 2019

7 Widra, 2024

8 Ghandnoosh & Barry, 2023

9 Wang, 2022

10 Kellie et al, 2021

racism, classism, homophobia, fatphobia, and transphobia are imbedded in people's perception of them, impacting their pay, others' presumptions about the kind of sex work they do, and how they are treated by clients, fellow sex workers, and law enforcement.

This hierarchical stigmatization of sex workers is also perpetuated within the sex worker community, with people inside the group having more nuanced prejudices about different sectors of sex work.[11] Referred to as the whorearchy, many sex workers judge each other based on the type of work they do, the degree of nudity or sexual activity they engage in, and the people or clients they are engaging with. For example, full-service sex work, in which a worker has sex with a client, is more stigmatized than pornography because porn actors are working with other performers and not clients. On the other hand, people who do camming, stripping, or professional dominatrix work are viewed more favorably because they sometimes don't have penetrative sex[12], may have less contact with the client[13], and are viewed as having more agency.[14] Sex workers who are cisgender women with closer proximity to whiteness also report

Myth 2: Does understanding sex worker identities really impact human rights?

Yes. Currently, most people fail to see sex workers as humans with multifaceted identities and experiences, leading to a dehumanization that allows policy and social stigma to neglect sex workers' well-being and survival.

Dehumanization occurs when we see others as less than human, lacking the emotionality and experiences that we might relate to.[15] Dehumanized groups are often seen as less deserving of moral treatment and more deserving of harsher punishments and prejudice.[16] Sexualized women, for example, are more likely to be dehumanized than non-sexualized women[17] and people are more likely to be aggressive or withhold resources from women they perceive to be having casual sex.[18] Occupations can also impact dehumanization, and those seen as morally, socially, or physically dirty are often most stigmatized.[19]As such, sex workers are among the most stigmatized occupational groups[20] and are more likely to face

11 Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022
12 Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022
13 Sawicki et al., 2019
14 Puffer et al, 2024
15 Agadullina et al, 2021
16 Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016
17 Morris et al, 2018
18 Kellie et al, 2021
19 Agadullina et al, 2021
20 Benoit et al, 2014

greater degrees of dehumanization and social isolation than others.[21] This can include poor treatment by social service providers, law enforcement, landlords, and financial institutions, such as banks. Stigmatized groups also experience a greater likelihood of physical and mental health issues, and a lessened ability to access resources like healthcare and education.[22]

This systemic marginalization of sex workers relies on the assumption that most people do not know and cannot relate to people who would participate in sexual acts to make money. The mere presumption that sex workers must have fundamentally different or bad values can cause them to be viewed as subhuman,[23] which allows them to be denied the same rights and comforts of other society members and/or to be viewed as victims without their own voice or agency; this gives way to limiting policy that over emphasizes sexual infections or injection drug use and under prioritizes health and social services that sex workers, and victims of trafficking, need.[24]

However, this is a false assumption, and the general public often fails to see the similarities between themselves and sex workers. Sex workers are people with their own relationships, preferences, and families,[25] working to find the same balance of survival, ease, and fulfillment that others are also looking for in their careers. This understanding is important because when we can see parts of ourselves in other people, we can humanize and care for them more easily.

The diversity of sex worker populations is similar to the diversity of non-sex worker populations. A 2023 Canadian study found sex workers to have a diverse range of educational backgrounds, incomes, health statuses, and housing statuses, and this is often overlooked by grants and support programs. Similarly, there was a notably diverse group of sex workers present at Woodhull's 2024 focus group on sex workers. All participants were sex workers and represented a diverse mix of identity markers; they were white, Black, Asian, Native American, Jewish, Straight, Gay, Pansexual, Bisexual, women, men, transgender, cisgender, and disabled sex workers present. They were parents, sisters, brothers, friends, students, advocates, uneducated, and highly educated.

21 Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022

22 Daniel et al, 2023

23 Van Loon et al, 2024

24 Mellor & Benoit, 2023

25 Daniel et al, 2023

While these markers still tell us little about the lives these sex workers lead, they serve as a reminder that sex workers look, learn, and love like all of us. Stigmatization relies on society forgetting this humanity and instead presuming that sex workers are drastically different from themselves and anyone they know. This has given way to the harmful treatment and discriminatory policy present today.

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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