

## Choice, Circumstance, and Coercion: The Spectrum of Sex Workers' Consent

Sex work is the consensual exchange of sexual services for money or goods, including housing, food, or other basic necessities.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, in the context of sex work, consent is contingent on payment. Sex work can occur in many different forms and settings, including street-based, web-based, escort services, and video camera work, among others.<sup>2</sup> However, dominant narratives often conflate sex work with sex trafficking and falsely assume that all sex workers are coerced.<sup>3 4</sup> These narratives perpetuate a very narrow perception of sex work, sex workers, and why people engage in sex work. These false assumptions erase the agency of sex workers and the diversity of experiences in sex work.

People sell sex for a variety of reasons, including choice, circumstance, or coercion.<sup>5</sup> People who are performing labor under coercion, force, or fraud are trafficking victims—not sex workers. Sex work is legitimate work, and therefore, motivations for entering or continuing to engage in sex work can be similar to motivations to engage in any other job, including financial need, flexibility, or job satisfaction. However, the criminalization of sex work and subsequent stigma often restrict the perception of sex workers' choice and autonomy. It is therefore important for policy and programming to support the needs of sex workers and affirm their autonomy and choice.

### Myth 1: Can Sex Work be a Choice?

Yes, individuals sell sex for a variety of reasons. Laborers in the sex trade operate along a spectrum of consent, defined by the three C's: choice, circumstance, or coercion. They can also move back and forth along this continuum throughout their life.<sup>6</sup> Consent is always conditional on compensation; without payment, there is no consent.

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<sup>1</sup> Sex Workers & Allies Network

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ditmore, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Bettio, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Rivera, 2024

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

- 1) Choice refers to individuals who freely choose to enter sex work as a form of labor.<sup>7</sup> These workers may prefer sex work to other available jobs because it is enjoyable, financially rewarding, or more flexible.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, these workers often have more control over how they work and what they do. For example, a sex worker who freely chooses sex work might have more agency in choosing indoor or online sex work, which generally provides more autonomy and safety.<sup>9</sup>
- 2) Circumstance includes those who enter sex work due to limited available options.<sup>10</sup> This can be due to a variety of reasons, including financial constraints, lack of access to education, or immigration status. For these individuals, sex work may feel like the most viable or least harmful option available. This can be especially likely for people who experience discrimination or difficulty in traditional jobs, such as those with disabilities or trans and non-binary people.<sup>11</sup> Circumstantial factors are not exclusive to sex work and usually impact decisions to work in a wide range of labor sectors, including agriculture, food service, and care work.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, these factors are often the result of larger structural and systemic constraints that impact decision-making, such as poverty, racism, ableism, and gender discrimination.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, virtually all decisions to engage in any form of labor, particularly sex work, are at least partially shaped by these circumstantial and structural factors.
- 3) Coercion refers to individuals who are forced or manipulated into performing sexual labor.<sup>14</sup> While coercion can include trafficking, coercion can also look like violence, threats, or extreme exploitation.<sup>15</sup> Anti-sex work narratives often focus exclusively on coercion and trafficking as the primary experience of everyone engaged in sex work.<sup>16</sup> These dominant stereotypes falsely assume that all sex workers are coerced. However, it is important not to conflate this category with all sex workers. Read more about the difference between sex workers and victims of trafficking and the implications of this conflation [here](#).

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<sup>7</sup> Sawicki, 2019

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Jones, 2021

<sup>10</sup> Rivera, 2024

<sup>11</sup> Jones, 2022

<sup>12</sup> Sex Workers & Allies Network

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Rivera, 2024

<sup>15</sup> Sex Workers & Allies Network

<sup>16</sup> Bettio, 2017

Individuals engage in sex work for many reasons.<sup>17</sup> Flattening sex work into a binary narrative of either victimhood or empowerment can be harmful for people anywhere on the spectrum of consent. To assume that all sex workers engage in sex work because they are forced or coerced perpetuates the narrative that sex workers have no agency and that sex work is not real work. Alternatively, framing sex work as empowerment suggests that all sex workers should feel wholly fulfilled by their work for it to be valid, but this is not something we expect other laborers to feel about their work. Both empowerment and victim narratives dismiss productive policy change and worsen the stigma against sex workers because they promote a single, reductive view of sex work which ignores the diversity of experiences and dismisses larger structural conditions.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, these assumptions, which exceptionalize sex work and decisions to engage in sex work, can make it more difficult for sex workers to enter and leave the sex industry, or negotiate better working conditions.<sup>19</sup>

## **Myth 2: Do People Only Choose Sex Work out of Desperation?**

No, sex work can offer flexible and autonomous working conditions, especially for people with marginalized identities who have been excluded from traditional work environments.

Particularly for indoor and online sex workers, sex work can provide significant choice in what hours to work, where to work, who they work with, and which services to provide. Sex work, therefore, can differ from other jobs that may require long, grueling hours with set schedules and limited autonomy.<sup>20</sup> In a study on the erotic webcam industry in the United States, 56 percent of participants said they were not motivated to cam by money alone.<sup>21</sup> Instead, participants emphasized the flexibility and autonomy of the sex industry and the ability to escape a rigid nine-to-five job, creating an independent schedule, and working from home.<sup>22</sup> This autonomy can allow people to structure their work around other priorities, such as parenting or education. For example, a single parent may choose sex work, which can offer higher pay for fewer hours and the ability to work on their own terms, over a low wage hourly job with a fixed schedule.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Berger, 2012

<sup>19</sup> Sex Workers & Allies Network

<sup>20</sup> Rosen, 2008

<sup>21</sup> Jones, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Jones, 2021

<sup>23</sup> Sawicki, 2019

The autonomy and flexibility offered by the sex industry can be particularly valuable for people with marginalized identities who have been excluded from other employment opportunities. For people with disabilities, rigid schedules and long hours of intense labor can be incredibly difficult and unsustainable.<sup>24</sup> Many disabilities, including chronic pain and mental health conditions, also involve unpredictable flares and remissions, making it more difficult to keep a traditional job.<sup>25</sup> This difficulty can be exacerbated by inaccessible workspaces and discrimination from managers and co-workers.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, sex work, particularly online sex work, can allow people with disabilities to have flexibility in their working conditions and environment.<sup>27</sup>

Trans and non-binary people often face gender policing and discrimination in traditional work environments, where they may be misgendered, forced to conform to binary dress codes, or be denied employment due to their gender presentation.<sup>28</sup> These environments can be alienating, unsafe, and incredibly discriminatory, making it difficult to work a traditional job. However, sex work may offer a space where individuals can express their gender identity more freely and have further control over how they present themselves. As a result, trans and non-binary people sometimes turn to sex work not only for financial reasons, but because it offers autonomy, safety, and gender self-determination that is often unavailable in traditional employment.<sup>29</sup> From a study of trans women engaged in sex work in California, almost 30 percent said they chose sex work because of gender discrimination in other labor sectors.<sup>30</sup>

Pleasure and job satisfaction can also be important factors that draw people to sex work or encourage them to continue. It is important to recognize that, as with any occupation, job satisfaction is not a prerequisite for sex work to be legitimate. However, acknowledging that sex workers can experience satisfaction in their work challenges the stereotype that all sex workers are coerced or exploited. In a Canadian study analyzing factors for entry into sex work, one quarter of participants said they were attracted to parts of sex work, including opportunities for sexual and personal exploration, sexual gratification, and expression of sexuality and gender identity.<sup>31</sup> Sex work can serve as a way to reclaim agency, desirability, and bodily autonomy, particularly for people excluded from dominant

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<sup>24</sup> Jones, 2022

<sup>25</sup> Tastrom, 2019

<sup>26</sup> Jones, 2022

<sup>27</sup> Jones, 2021

<sup>28</sup> Tastrom, 2019

<sup>29</sup> Benoit, 2017

<sup>30</sup> Fisher, 2023

<sup>31</sup> Benoit, 2017

narratives of attractiveness, such as people with disabilities.<sup>32</sup> A 2019 study of “big beautiful women” (BBW) webcam performers highlighted how sex work led to an increase in empowerment and self-acceptance for participants.<sup>33</sup> Thus, some sex workers experience significant pleasure and empowerment from sex work while resisting exclusionary standards of attractiveness and desirability.

## Policy Recommendations: Expanding Choice

- Policies and programs that recognize sex work as legitimate work can increase safety and agency for sex workers.
- Neither full nor partial decriminalization affirms the autonomy and agency of sex workers. Instead, they harm sex workers in pushing the sex industry further underground and creating barriers to health and safety protections.<sup>34</sup> Often, partial decriminalization, including End Demand reforms, explicitly denies the ability of sex workers to choose sex work. Additionally, these reforms restrict or prohibit online platforms and indoor sex work, which provide more autonomy and safety than outdoor sex work. Read more about how partial decriminalization harms sex workers and interferes with safety protections here.

## 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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<sup>32</sup> Jones, 2022

<sup>33</sup> Jones, 2019

<sup>34</sup> Berger, 2012

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