

ON ESSENTIAL SOLIDARITY WITH SEX WORKERS

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"Scratch a Communist, and find a Philistine. Of course, you must scratch the sensitive spot, their mentality as regards women." - V. I. Lenin

In this I will be clarifying the essential nature of solidarity with sex workers to any serious leftist movement, especially in regards to migrant rights, women's rights, queer rights and anti-racism.

I am not interested in any discussions about personal feelings in regards to the sex trade, nor do I care about any utopian conversations about a society in which sex work does not exist. The fact is that sex work does exist, and any discussion therefor must focus on ways to protect the lives, rights and dignity of sex workers *right now*.

I acknowledge that there are cis men who engage in prostitution, and I have no desire to erase or ignore their experiences and marginalisation. However, statistically speaking the overwhelming number of sex workers are women, particularly migrants and people of colour, and queer people, especially trans people, are over-represented. This is due to the economic marginalisation and enforced precarity of women, racialised people, and trans people who are excluded from employment, education and institutional access to social services, especially for migrants in a border regime that creates a tiered system of access to rights and criminalises entire populations based upon their location of birth.

Firstly I will address the term "sex work" itself. There is an oft propagated notion that defining sex work as work is somehow indicative of a glamorization of the sex trade, apologia for sexual violence and exploitation, or a desire to expand and increase the amount of sex work that happens. There is, at the same time, an argument that *all* sex work is inherently assault, and as such to term it work is to ignore the reality of the sex trade's exploitative nature.

"Part of believing me when I say I have been raped is believing me when I say I haven't been." - Nikita, 2017 Annual General Meeting of Amnesty International UK.

"Prostitution is only a particular expression of the universal prostitution of the worker" - Karl Marx

In understanding that not every act of prostitution is sexual assault, it is essential to gauge the level of bodily exploitation that goes into all categories of work in a capitalist system.

As someone without capital, you are coerced into selling your labour to live. Without selling your labour, you would die. The capitalist then, is leveraging a threat of death, leveraging your very life, for your labour. Does that make it correct to then equate all wage labour with slavery?

In the same manner, while the prostitute is coerced economically into selling sexual labour to live, that economic coercion is not inherently equitable with sexual assault. To give an example of the ways in which a body's services can be sold: a massage therapist is paid to provide touch. That massage therapist is performing a service that in other contexts may be considered intimate.

A clerk at a grocery store is asked to come into the boss's office, where he removes his shirt, hands her oil, and asks for a massage. This is a clear case of sexual violation. Does this then mean that the massage therapist's very livelihood is a sexual violation? Of course not, because the massage therapist has negotiated and consented to a level of touch prior to the massage.

Say then, that a client demands a massage therapist perform oral sex. This is, again, a clear case of sexual violation. Because the massage therapist consented to providing a massage, and not any other forms of intimate contact.

In sex work, a sex worker negotiates and consents to a set of intimate contacts. These are not in and of themselves assault. Another example: an actor agrees to a scene in which she is groped in a bar. A different actor is groped off-set without consent in the exact same manner.

The reason there are delineations between what is acceptable and unacceptable sexual or intimate contact is that they occur under different contexts and with negotiations of consent. Many people struggle with understanding this in regards to sex work, because they believe two things:

- 1) that every act of sex/penetration is inherently an act of domination. This is a chauvinistic and moralistic feeling that is socially reproduced in many societies, but that holds no objective truth.
- 2) that sex workers are selling their bodies/consent. They are not. They are not selling their bodies any more than another worker sells theirs. They are selling their labour. And they are certainly not selling their consent. An integral part of sex work and providing safe conditions for sex workers is allowing negotiation of the boundaries of consent.

This is crucial: by conflating all acts of sex work as sexual violence, you ignore a sex worker's ability to negotiate the boundaries between what is consensual activity and what is assault. If all acts of sex work are considered sexual violence, then there is no recourse for sex workers to declare when they have been assaulted.

Every sex worker deserves the ability to determine for themselves the lines of consent, and to be believed when they say that something is assault. In order to be believed when they name something as assault, they must then be believed when they assert certain acts are not assault.

In *Revolting Prostitutes*, Molly Smith and Juno Mac cite Silvia Federici, who has long maintained the link between women's subjugation to men through housework and "wifely duties" and sex work, whereby a woman's sexual and intimate labours are commodified and sex is work. To Federici, the only difference between a housewife and a sex worker is that a sex worker gets paid.

While organizing for Wages for Housework, in 1975 Federici wrote: "*to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it.*"

Mac and Smith make the argument that this extends to other aspects of work that is traditionally not considered work: by first having work accepted as such, the workers may then more easily struggle to resist or reorder such work.

In such a way, acknowledging that sex work is work is the first step in a larger struggle to restructuring society's relations to sex work, and ultimately, to ending sex work. Asserting that sex work is work is not to say that it is good work, or harmless work, or that it has fundamental value. It is to establish that the workers engaged in the work need rights and protections as workers.

In *Invisible Lives*, Viviane K. Namaste shows the way that transsexual street workers are unable to access necessary hormones because the gender identity clinics don't recognize their work as prostitutes to be real work. By refusing to acknowledge sex work as work, street workers are denied access to social services and medical institutions essential to their lives.

"The International Black Women for Wages for Housework campaign specifically linked unwaged housework to reparations for slavery and imperialism, drawing links between the subsidization of capitalism by factory wages and unwaged labor in the home and on plantations, strengthened through immigration controls and laws criminalizing sex work" (Walia, Border and Rule).

Yuly Perez, of the sex workers' union National Organisation for the Emancipation of Women in a State of Prostitution—which was part of a 35 000 worker strike across Bolivia in protest of the closure of brothels and an increase of violent policing of prostitutes—says that *"people think the point of our organisation is to expand prostitution in Bolivia. In fact, we want the opposite. Our ideal world is one free of the economic desperation that forces women into this business."*

Sex worker organization is concerned with creating the conditions under which sex workers can work safely—as Mac and Smith argue, *"People should not have to demonstrate that their work has intrinsic value to society to deserve safety at work. Moving towards a better society—one in which people's work does have wider value, one in which resources are shared on the basis of need—cannot come about through criminalisation. Nor can it come about through treating marginalised people's material needs and survival strategies as trivial."*

While sex work is a large and diverse category that spans countless different occupations, in this I am focused on survival sex work: sex work carried out on the streets or in brothels in order to earn the money needed to live. The most precarious and vulnerable sex workers deserve to be the primary consideration in this discussion; as such, throughout this essay I employ the term prostitute as well as sex worker to ensure that it is understood that this conversation is about the trade of sex for money, and not other forms of sex work such as camwork or stripping, as those experiences are different and requiring of separate analyses in order to ensure an accurate account of the material conditions therein. These varied sex work occupations may overlap, but this essay seeks only to explore the ways in which solidarity with one of the most undervalued class of workers, who live on the margins of society and often in extreme precarity legally, socially, and economically, is essential to a forward-thinking and ethical leftist movement.

As radical feminism distanced itself from sex workers and within the 80s and 90s began to argue for the censorship of porn, anti-prostitution became firmly ensconced in the movement, with writers such as Janice Raymond making assertions that "prostitution is rape that's paid for." At the same time many pro-sex feminists began to argue on behalf of the "empowerment" offered through sex work; neither approach is helpful to understanding the lives of sex workers. They both focus on the idea of "sex as symbol," with middle class (mostly white) women creating entire bodies of literature arguing for or against sex work as either empowering or a reinforcement and representation of the patriarchy's domination over women. What they had in common, however, was the absence of sex workers' voices, and a disregard for the very real circumstances faced by people on the street every day.

The debate led to the emergence of two main tropes in prostitution discourse: the Shameful Prostitute and the Happy Hooker.

The Shameful Prostitute is the carrier of society's worst aspects. As Shulamith Firestone describes in *The Dialectic of Sex*, in a patriarchal society man is conditioned to associate love, affection and care with the Mother. Through the incest taboo, that form of relationship is divorced from sexuality. This can be seen as early as medieval European literature, in which knightly figures professed their loves for pure, chaste women, devoid of sexuality. The sexuality requires another outlet: this is the Prostitute. Viviane K. Namaste describes in *Sex Change/Social Change* the elevation of the middle class white woman during industrialisation and the early formation of the nuclear family to a place of private life: property of the husband, to take care of the house and raise the children, and removed from spheres of public life and isolated from communal relations.

The underclass however, with no property and the women working alongside of the men, represented the public woman. The private woman was the property of a single man, the public woman was the property of all. Turning back to Firestone, we see the dilemma that gave rise to the public woman. The man would choose the Mother to be his wife, to clean the house and cook the food and raise the children and provide all of the affection and care that the Mother provides. However, the man may respect the Mother, but he could not associate the Mother with feelings of "vulgar" and "base" sexuality without first degrading her. And thus the Prostitute, the public woman, became an essential outlet for this repressed sexuality. By virtue of her socio-economic status, to the man, the Prostitute was always-already degraded, and thus an object of sexual desire.

This deeply capitalist and hierarchical series of relationships is represented through the Shameful Prostitute, which to anti-prostitute feminists is the ultimate symbol of patriarchal degradation. Reducing prostitutes to a figural concept, a symbol, however, erases the possibility of their literal existence. Whatever a prostitute symbolizes to anti-prostitute feminists is unrelated to the needs that she faces in living her daily life, and to label her and constrain her with all of the baggage of patriarchal subjugation of women is to deny her agency. By demonizing and stigmatising the symbolic Prostitute, the real prostitute is further marginalised, making her susceptible to elevated violence both systemically and interpersonally.

The Happy Hooker, symbol of "empowerment" through sexual liberation, is the other side of the same coin. Symbolically prefigured, the Happy Hooker denies the literal human underneath. Sex work is not liberating or empowering in and of itself, and portrayals of such threaten to erase the very real danger, exploitation and discrimination that sex workers face. The "empowerment" that comes through sex work is economic empowerment, which would not be necessary in a society that guaranteed economic stability to all. By seeking to counter the arguments of anti-prostitute feminists, pro-prostitute feminists can fall into the same trap of ignoring the very real concerns of sex workers: for this reason it is essential for sex workers to be centred in discussions regarding sex work, and to be at the forefront of actions and organization designed to help sex workers.

This is where I think it is essential to stress that when sex workers are centred, that must be sex workers who currently sell sex. There is a trend for anti-prostitute feminists to platform and centre former sex workers as a way to lend weight to their arguments; it's important to remember, however, that former sex workers no longer economically rely on selling sex, and so any potential changes to how society organises or relates to sex work necessarily does not impact them as it would a current sex worker.

Mac and Smith contend that the archetype of the Exited Woman becomes “*the ultimate symbol of female woundedness, with the criminalisation of clients as feminist justice.*” The Exited Woman shares her stories—usually focusing on visceral and uncomfortable details, especially of sexual violence and exploitation—to elicit powerful emotional responses to mobilize other non sex-workers into action in regards to sex work.

The very real violence and danger, exploitation and sexual violation faced by former sex workers should not be dismissed. However, Exited Women leveraging those stories to impact the lives of women currently still involved in sex work, to either criminalise them or to make the conditions by which they are able to sell sex and thus survive become more hostile, is not the answer. Not everyone’s experience of sex work is the same, and no stories of victimisation can be painted over sex workers as a whole, nor can people who no longer rely on the sale of sex be the forefront of discussions regarding the conditions of the sale of sex in the here and now.

There are two main currents of feminism within sex work discussions: carceral feminism and anti-carceral feminism. Carceral feminism is that which relies on police and the state to protect women, and anti-carceral feminism is that which seeks to transform society to address harms without police. These two currents are at direct odds, not only in regards to sex work, but also to a myriad of other problems that women face, such as domestic and intimate partner violence.

Carceral feminists present two possible models of addressing sex work: the full criminalisation model, and the Nordic model.

Anti-carceral feminists also present two possible models of addressing sex work: regulation, and decriminalisation.

Before we go farther, I will give a brief explanation of the four models, however, the bulk of the focus will be on the Nordic model, as this is the model most often championed by the left.

Full Criminalisation is exactly what it sounds like: under this model, all participation in the sex trade is illegal, subject to police intervention. This is the model that is most common globally, including for most of the United States (with some exceptions in Nevada). With full criminalisation, sex workers, clients, and all third parties are in direct violation of the law, resulting in exposure to arrest, police violence, jailing, court fines, and criminal records. This model is punitive, and drives the sex trade underground, which makes it much more dangerous. For anyone who takes the stance that sex workers are the victims of exploitation, it should be obvious that this system punishes the victims for that very exploitation and blames them for their circumstances.

Expanding and empowering policing and prisons, criminalising more people, driving the precarious even further into precarity: there are no redeeming qualities to the full criminalisation model, and studies show that it has no impact in reducing the sex trade, but has a massive impact in how much violence sex workers face both from the state and from those involved in the sex trade.

Regulation (or full legalisation), is sometimes presented as an ethical alternative. Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and some places in Nevada all use this model. In regulation, sex work is legal, and regulated by the state. In the words of Mac and Smith, this creates a “charmed circle.” This means that any sex work that happens outside of the regulated industry is fully criminalised, which pushes the most precarious sex workers into the same model that we just so readily dismissed as punitive.

Why would some sex workers do sex work outside of the regulated industry? By regulating sex work, the state gives power to managers, who choose how many people to hire, what wages they make, how long they must work. Sex workers know they are competing for employment, and so they can be pressured into accepting work conditions that they otherwise would not.

Trans sex workers, especially those that don't pass, are widely excluded from regulated sex work. For instance, in Turkey they are banned from all state brothels. Migrant sex workers are by law excluded from regulated sex work. Migrants, especially undocumented migrants, make up a large portion of the sex industry. In regulation models, all migrants are still subjected to deportation, thus making them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

People with disabilities, mad people, addicts, seropositive sex workers are all also excluded in regulated sex work, and are thus in this model still living under full criminalisation. There are sex workers who may live too far from a regulated zone or brothel.

Regulation can serve only to create a two-tiered system where all sex workers outside of the charmed circle are criminalised, and those sex workers within the circle are easily exploited as to lose employment would result in having to engage in illegal sex work.

Regulation also gives the state the power to create a capitalist institution out of sex work, thus cementing it as a social inevitability, a supposed necessity that must always be done. Under regulatory models, sex workers can not work to eventually undo the very existence of sex work.

It's clear that full criminalisation and full regulation are both deeply flawed models that punish sex workers and have no power to transform the very nature of sex work.

Let's discuss instead the model that gets the most support, the Nordic model. Under the Nordic model, it is the clients of sex workers and third parties (managers, brothel-runners, etc) who are criminalised for engaging in the sex trade. This model is often proclaimed to be the most ethical, as it seeks to protect sex workers while simultaneously laying the blame for their exploitation upon the clients, and reducing demand by arresting them.

The Nordic model is used in Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Ireland, France and Canada.

In order to fully understand the impacts of the Nordic model, it is important to have a grounding in the ways that the state and the police shape the lives of sex workers, especially people of colour, migrants, addicts and trans prostitutes.

For many, the spectre of sex trafficking is that which haunts their decisions when it comes to the sex trade. Prostitution must be stopped in order to prevent this sex trafficking; often times the sex trafficked victim is used as a leverage to invoke policies that harm the domestic prostitute. This type of dichotomy is counter-productive: only a false sense that domestic prostitutes have fundamentally different material interests than migrant prostitutes can lend weight to this, which is based on an imagined narrative that most sex workers who wish to organize must be privileged and middle class, choosing sex work rather than engaging in the sex trade out of necessity.

Earlier it was shown that most sex workers are economically marginalised, and engage in street sex work as a survival strategy. Their networks and organisations are fundamentally and inextricably linked

to those of migrant sex workers, just as domestic policing is fundamentally and inextricably linked to border policing.

This system of policing borders and cities is the backbone of the Nordic model, for under this model the police would be empowered to “safeguard” the lives of sex workers from their exploiters: the clients, managers, and traffickers. It is imperative to never lose sight of who is intended to oversee any legislation or administration of policies and laws regarding sex work.

In 1905 Britain established its first modern anti-immigration laws, the Aliens Act of 1905, in response to fears about “the white slave traffic” fuelled by anti-Semitic panic in the wake of Jewish immigration.

In the US, some of the earliest anti-immigration legislation included the Page Act of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the Scott Act of 1888, which targeted Chinese immigrants, especially sex workers, and led to a campaign of determining which women were coming as wives and which as sex workers. In 1924 the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act limited migration based on census quotas, restricting especially Slavic and Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and prohibited all Asian immigration. That same year, the Indian Citizenship Act imposed US citizenship on Indigenous people., and allowed them to deport those Indigenous tribes that they deemed to be “Canadian” or “Mexican.”

In *Border and Rule*, Harsha Walia details the history of militarized and policed borders as functions of racial capitalism in creating populations of super-exploitable racialised workers. By leveraging xenophobia to stoke white supremacist nationalism, states are able to secure ever larger funding to increase the policing of borders and expand their militarized influence.

The formation of borders in North America served to remove Indigenous people from their lands, and the first passport system, the Birch certificates that allowed travel between America and Canada, severed Indigenous people from their traditional lands and movement patterns, seeking to divorce them from the cultural and spiritual ties to the territory.

The cementing of borders has allowed capitalist nations to control the flow of migration, which gives them incredible leverage in directing the expropriation of resources and capital. By with-holding legal access to their territories, migrants who seek to follow the flow of capital from their homes—destabilized and exploited by the Global North—are forced to make dangerous and often fatal journeys to the imperial core, where upon arrival they are either detained (sometimes indefinitely) or deported. Those who are able to enter the territory then are disenfranchised and criminalised, and must live their lives unable to access institutions, social services, or the rights extended to the citizens of that territory. Their interactions with the police and state are always coloured by a fear that their undocumented status will be discovered, and they will be detained or deported.

Borders create hierarchies determined by race, caste, class, sexuality, gender, (dis)ability and nationality. Under these dire circumstances, expanding the power of policing has life-destroying consequences for migrants.

What does it mean to expect border police to “safeguard” women from sex trafficking?

Between 2012 and 2018, detainees filed 1,448 complaints of sexual violence against ICE and 33,126 complaints of abuse between 2010 and 2016.

“In immigration detention, as in carceral settings generally, trans women are particularly susceptible to violence and report sexual harassment, strip searches by male guards, denial of access to medical care, and solitary confinement under the guise of protective custody” (Walia). Trans women also face longer detention, averaging more than twice the length of detention as cis people.

With the militarization of Mexico’s southern border, 520 000 Central American migrants were apprehended between 2015 and 2018. Another 70 000 disappeared in what the Mesoamerican Migrant Movements calls a “migrant holocaust.” 80% of the women reported sexual extortion and rape.

Australia’s migrant detention has been shown, through a government-commissioned review, to have been guilty of sexual assault and rape of women and minors, and to have even led to migrant women becoming impregnated by their assaulters.

In 2012 MSF treated 697 migrant survivors of sexual violence in Morocco.

Europe’s largest refugee camp, the Moria refugee camp on Lesbos, which was meant to house 3 000 detainees, holds over 19 000 people, over 40% of whom are minors. The UNHRC received 174 reports of sexual and gender-based violence.

There are countless statistics about the abuses women face in the militarized borders of the world. Rather than get bogged down in unending statistics, I would like to question the logic that empowering border agencies to fight trafficking could help in any way to reduce sexual violence and exploitation.

Trafficking, and thus sex trafficking, is broadly interpreted as any attempt to bring a person across a border illegally. The easiest way to address this is to remove the legal obstacles in crossing the border. People will migrate regardless of the law: this is especially true considering the imperialistic leveraging of capital that destabilizes Global South nations in favour of the North. The militarized border then serves to prevent those people from entering legally where they do not meet criteria of ability, gender, class and race. Thus people are forced to enter through dangerous and illegal means. Anyone who helps them to do this is considered to have engaged in trafficking. If the migrant, precarious and economically deprived in the new nation does sex work, that was now sex trafficking.

In the cases in which the trafficking actually is exploiting the migrant (the migrant is lied to, abducted, indebted, forced into sex work etc), the migrant can not seek help for fear of deportation and detention. Thus anti-trafficking initiatives actually serve to increase the amount of trafficking by increasing border security, and decrease a migrant’s recourse when trafficking happens. Meanwhile, people who are genuinely just helping migrants cross a border (often times even family and friends) are also labelled as traffickers, arrested, and the migrant is still detained and deported as a “rescued victim.” Anti-trafficking laws are never concerned with whether or not the migrant wished to be rescued, or whether they would rather have stayed in the country they are now in (which they usually indebted themselves and risked their lives to enter).

In Robyn Maynard’s *Policing Black Lives*, as well as Angela Y. Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, we can see the myriad ways that police in Canada and the US (and abroad) enact sexual violence on women, and reinforce systems of violence in the streets. In the US the police are much more likely to perpetrate domestic violence. Sexual assault is the second most commonly reported form of police violence. On duty police commit sexual assaults at more than double the rate of the general US population.

Countries that have adopted the Nordic model have seen what prison abolitionists like Beth Richie, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners and Mariame Kaba have been saying all along: the carceral punishment system does not reduce crime. Police enact systems of surveillance, violence, and criminalisation: they can not be the solution to exploitation or violence.

Rather than lower the demand for sex work, Nordic models have instead empowered police and border agencies to increase surveillance of sex workers. Sex workers must work in more precarious positions than before: their clients are afraid of getting caught, and so sex workers are forced into working in more isolated locations, or agreeing to go to second locations. They are less able to negotiate the boundaries of consent, as the client is unwilling to sit around in case of police. In the cases where there are fewer clients, sex workers don't have less need of money. Instead they lose bargaining power, and must accept doing things they would otherwise prefer not to, or else risk not finding another client.

Sex workers are also more likely to go to a client's home rather than bringing a client to a room she rents, as that could result in eviction, and clients know that is when they are at most risk of being arrested. Clients are less likely to agree to divulging personal information for screening, as they wish to remain anonymous so as to avoid prosecution.

Meanwhile clients, knowing that what they are doing is already illegal, are more likely to engage in violent behaviour. Sex workers have need of the money they make, and clients do not need to have sex with sex workers. Because of this discrepancy there will always be a power imbalance, and limiting the amount of clients does not reduce demand for sex work, but it does reduce the individual sex worker's power to negotiate.

In Norway, a government report found that the price of sex work went down after the introduction of the purchase ban, showing the weakened negotiating power of sex workers and indicating that sex workers were put into even more economically precarious positions.

The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security found that *“more abuse takes place than previously. . . for those working on the street life has become much harder. . . The law on the purchase of sex has made working as a prostitute much harder and more dangerous.”*

In Ireland, sex worker safety organisation Ugly Mugs says it received 1 635 reports from sex workers with concerns about violent and abusive clients in the five months following the sex purchase ban in 2017, a sixty-one per cent increase on the same period in 2016.

Migrant sex workers in Nordic model countries are still deported. The police still harass and extort sex workers. If two sex workers choose to work together for safety, they are both open to being charged as pimps, as each is considered a “third party” to the other's sex work. Landlords are threatened by police into evicting sex workers, as the landlord is considered to be “running a brothel” if a sex worker brings a client back to her apartment.

We can see then that the Nordic model doesn't offer any solace for the sex worker. It is based on an idea that sex work must be stopped, that through performing sex work a woman is losing something or being violated, and that therefor her clients must be punished. This is achieved regardless of the impact it has on the sex worker, an impact that is in many cases absolutely ruinous. How could the safety of sex workers be guaranteed through the very systems that makes the sex worker's life so dangerous?

The final model of sex work is the one most anti-carceral feminist sex worker organisations support. It is one that works within the systems of abolition and societal transformation. This is full decriminalisation. Unlike in the regulatory model, in decriminalisation, sex work is legal by default. With neither sex workers nor their clients criminalised, the sex worker is able to regain some of the power needed to negotiate safer conditions. Sex workers can work together for safety, can rent out rooms to take clients, can take out ads that allow them to clearly delineate the bounds of their consent, can screen clients, and can access social services and institutions without fear of their work being discovered.

Employers at brothels are beholden to labour laws, and sex workers can form unions for organised action. Assault and harassment can be reported, and sex workers can report exploitative managers for violating their rights. In every employment situation regardless of the type of work there is tension in the workplace between the workers and the managers; it is essential then that we strengthen the power of the workers to forward their demands and give them as much leverage against their employers as possible.

New Zealand currently operates under the decriminalization model, however it is flawed. This is the first step in a longer process of realizing the safety and rights of sex workers. Along with decriminalisation of sex work itself, it is necessary also to decriminalise migration and addiction. Border laws that create hierarchies wherein rights are extended only to those with certain papers must be ended.

“On the one hand, the decriminalisation of sex work is a protective factor against the exploitation of sex workers, since they have the right to challenge exploitation. However, the policy which prohibits migrant sex work means that not all sex workers fully benefit from decriminalisation. . . It is vital that the benefits are further strengthened by. . . extending rights to migrant sex workers who are holders of temporary permits.” - The Global Alliance Against Traffic In Women.

More than that, robust social services are needed. As long as migration is criminalised, as long as Māori, trans and homeless populations are still over-policed, sex workers have struggles ahead.

Education, healthcare, mental health and addiction services, housing: these are all essential aspects in realizing a robust reform of the sex trade. All aspects of society that marginalise and disenfranchise segments of the population, that put them into economic need and outside of social safety nets will lead to people engaging in sex work. However, every step taken to lessen the repression of sex workers and to ensure their survival is a step in the right direction. For when sex workers are lifted economically, they can choose to leave the sex trade, either through education or voluntary exit programmes that teach job skills.

Part of securing new employment is eradicating the stigma that socially isolates sex workers: the longer that sex workers are seen as workers in society, the less the stigma will persist, which will allow them to pursue other employment without having to hide their previous sex work experience.

Decriminalisation removes the police as the method of controlling sex workers, and allows instead their integration into society as full citizens. Part of abolition struggle is to remove our reliance on policing and envision new ways of organising society that don't rely on the punitive carceral justice system. In this way, the issues that sex workers face can be addressed through the introduction of social services that help society as a whole, rather through an expansion of violent prison systems that remove people from society through incarceration or drive them to the fringes.

Much like with drug use, when a market is criminalized it does not prevent the market from existing: rather it creates the purest form of capitalist free market. A market completely devoid of oversight or recourse for the workers. Decriminalising sex work will help to redress the imbalance of power that sex workers face as they are able to openly organise and engage in struggle.

Sex workers deserve our solidarity in this struggle, as they've given so much of themselves to struggles through the years.

In medieval Europe brothel workers formed guilds and orchestrated strikes for improved working conditions. In the fifteenth century, prostitutes in Bavaria asserted before a city council that what they did was work. In 1917 200 prostitutes marched in San Francisco to demand the end of brothel closures. A speaker said *"Nearly every one of these women is a mother or has someone depending on her. . . They are driven into this life by economic conditions. . . You don't do any good by attacking us. Why don't you attack those conditions?"*

In 19th century Britain and Ireland prostitutes created mutual aid networks, sharing income and child care (a tradition that is alive in sex worker communities to this day).

When eight sex workers were murdered in Thika, Kenya, in 2010, hundreds of sex workers, including the Kenya Sex Workers Alliance came from around the country to protest police violence. Aisha, a sex worker in Thika, said, *"we wanted people to know that we call ourselves sex workers because it is the wheat our families depend on."* Sixty years earlier, in the 1950s prostitutes joined the Mau Mau revolution to free Kenya from British rule.

In the 60s street trans sex workers were at the front of the charge in the Compton Cafeteria and Stonewall Uprisings, putting their lives on the line to battle police for queer liberation. They also were in the line of fire for the fight for civil rights.

STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), founded by two street sex workers, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera who were involved in the Stonewall Uprising, was a network of radical street queens who worked together in community. Sylvia Rivera joined the Gay Liberation Front and the Young Lords, marched to protest Angela Davis's arrest, and met in conference with Huey P. Newton.

In *Disarm, Defund, Dismantle*, sex workers contribute their knowledge on the importance of sex worker organizing in tackling violent policing and the criminalisation of racialised people.

Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project is one of the oldest sex-worker-led organizations in Canada and has worked to protect street sex workers, and provide support for trans people. Their essay *Sex Worker Justice – By Us, For Us: Toronto Sex Workers Resisting Carceral Violence* details their work in searching for a missing Black and Indigenous trans street worker, Alloura Wells, when police refused to mobilize a search for her. They have been active in abolitionist movements, understanding the necessity of ending policing and prisons for the lives of sex workers. Their work with helping trans street workers access hormones is documented in Namaste's *Invisible Lives*.

Trans rights and sex workers rights are deeply linked: trans people are frequently kicked out of homes, excluded from institutions and social services, and often work as prostitutes. 44% of Black trans women in the US have done survival sex work.

As Viviane K. Namaste says, “systemic and institutionalised discrimination against prostitutes impedes and prevents their access to health care and thus the ability of many transsexuals to live their bodies as they choose. Such discrimination is evident in numerous locations: gender identity clinics, prisons, and health care and social service agencies. It is discrimination against prostitutes that orders the experiences of many transsexuals—especially MTF transsexuals—within the institutional world. How relevant is a “transgendered” social movement that does not make the decriminalization of prostitution a priority?”

In 1974 Ethiopian sex workers joined the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions and engaged in strike actions with them against the government.

In 1975 sex workers in France occupied churches to protest poverty, criminalisation and police violence. In London, the English Collective of Prostitutes occupied churches in King’s Cross in 1980.

Marxist feminists like Silvia Federici and the Wages for Housework movement has from its inception been intertwined with the organisation of sex workers, and has stood in solidarity with them in their quest to have their labour recognised as real work so that they might demand their emancipation from such work through a radical transformation of society.

In the words of Black Women for Wages for Housework: “*When prostitutes win, all women win.*”

Further Reading

Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide – Andrea Smith

Are Prisons Obsolete? - Angela Y. Davis

Abolition. Feminism. Now. - Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, Beth Richie

Insurgent Love: Abolition and Domestic Homicide – Ardath Whynacht

Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism and the Rise of Racist Nationalism – Harsha Walia

Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics – Jules Joanne Gleeson

Transgender Marxism – ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke

How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective – ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

We Do This ‘Til We Free Us – Mariame Kaba

Revolting Prostitutes – Molly Smith and Juno Mac

Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada From Slavery to the Present – Robyn Maynard’s

Disarm, Defund, Dismantle: Police Abolition in Canada – ed. Shiri Pasternak, Kevin Walby, Abby Stadnyk

Caliban & The Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation – Silvia Federici

Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism – Silvia Federici

Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle – Silvia Federici

Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transgendered and Transsexual Individuals – Viviane K. Namaste