

# A BEGINNERS' GUIDE FOR SEX WORKERS RIGHTS ACTIVISTS



Pointers on how to handle media myths and frequently asked questions by media representatives





## ABOUT

This document has been developed for sex workers rights activists as a template on how to approach some of the most commonly asked questions by media representatives. It can be intimidating for activists with no experience to work with journalists and you might not feel confident enough to engage with them. But as sex workers, you have the real-life knowledge from your experiences, and this makes you an expert on sex work. Still, it is important that you feel able to communicate your thoughts and arguments in a way that is useful and safe for yourself, for your community and sex workers' rights. We hope that this guide will give you some directions so that you can become more confident. This document is not meant to tell sex workers what they should think or say but merely to make you aware of the common topic of interests shown by media when talking about sex work and of the rhetoric commonly used by sex workers' rights movement to tackle these questions.

We encourage sex workers rights activists to use this document to improve/develop their own answers while encouraging journalists to focus on topics related to safety and rights of sex workers rather than sensational topics or personal questions when discussing sex work and sex workers' rights. Often media outlets and journalists tend to focus on more sensational aspects of sex work due to their misconception or prejudices. It is important to remind them that their actions have real life consequences and media plays a role in furthering stigma and discrimination that sex workers face. You must consider your own personal experiences and the national / local context you are in before answering each question.

You will find a list of additional resources at the end of this guide on many topics relevant to sex workers' rights that were produced by some of the sex worker-led networks and other organisations. We hope this resource is useful for you.





## WHEN WORKING WITH JOURNALISTS IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW THAT:

- It is advisable to do some online research about the media outlet or journalist that is contacting you before agreeing to work with them. This would give you valuable insight about their work ethics and position on certain topics and might affect your decision to work with them or not.
- You can always ask to see the questions / topics they want to focus on before agreeing to meet and you can make suggestions / changes if necessary.
- You can choose the time, date and place of the interview. It is best practice to never invite any journalists to where you work or live.
- You can choose the number of people present in which the interview takes place.
- Your consent must be taken before any photographs or video footage is taken.
- You can say 'no' to any demand or refuse to answer any question that you find irrelevant, hostile or incriminating.
- You can stop the interview and leave at any stage if you feel uncomfortable.
- You can demand to review the work that has been done before it is published.



# MYTH BUSTING OPPORTUNITIES AND QUESTIONS ON SEX WORK, REGULATIONS AND OTHER INTERSECTING ISSUES

## “What is sex work?”

Sex work is an income-generating activity and can be defined as consensual provision of sexual services for money and/or goods. The key terms here are: **consensual** and **work**.

## “Who are sex workers?”

‘Sex worker’ is an umbrella term to define anyone who sells or exchanges their own sexual labour for resources or material gain. This could be cash, food, accommodation or any other necessity. The term includes all genders and covers:

- sex workers who work outdoors, in hotels, brothels or from a domestic property.
- strippers and erotic dancers,
- massage parlour and sauna workers,
- erotic masseurs,
- porn actresses / actors,
- webcammers and phone sex operators.

## Always the victim myth: “Isn’t prostitution ‘paid rape’?”

Lack of consent is key to the definition of rape. Rape is a type of sexual assault carried out against a person without that person’s consent. Sex workers consent to provide services in exchange for money and goods. Conflating sex work with rape is dangerous because it undermines the importance of consent and agency of individuals. Sex workers are able to distinguish between rape (non-consensual) and sex work (consensual).

## **Bad women myth: “Are sex workers morally corrupt people?”**

The majority of sex workers are women, single mothers, trans, migrant, homeless and from other socially marginalised communities who are trying to provide for themselves and for people who are dependent on them. Demonising sex workers for trying to survive is pointing our fingers to the wrong direction. Instead, the media and the public should demand socio-economic reforms and address the inequalities in society that creates poverty.

Additionally, people decide to work in the sex industry due to a variety of reasons such as flexible working hours, better pay than other employment opportunities available to them and other unique personal realities. At the end of the day sex work, as other work, is an economic activity people engage in to pay for living expenses such as rent, food or bills.

## **Sex work and drug use: “Are all sex workers drug users?” / “Do people engage in sex work to support their drug habits?”**

All kinds of people use drugs. Some sex workers use drugs, and some don't. Sex workers who use drugs are part of our community and deserve better working conditions, basic human rights and access to stigma free health and harm reduction services. We want to protect the rights of all sex workers whether they use drugs or not.

## **Sex work and HIV/public health: “Are all sex workers HIV positive? Are sex workers vectors of disease?”**

Sex workers being vectors of disease is one of the most common myths. The truth is that sex workers care about their own health. After all, health issues lead to inability to work and generate income. Sometimes sex workers even act as sex educators for their clients, exactly for the purpose of staying safe and healthy. Criminalisation and penalisation of sex work has negative effects on the health of sex workers as well as public health. For example, if police officers are using condoms as evidence to persecute sex workers or their clients, then safer sex practices put workers in danger of arrest and may push workers or their clients to bypass safer sex practices. Decriminalisation of sex work is recognised as the best way to protect public health by international bodies such as the World Health Organization.

Some sex workers live with HIV and our focus is to protect the rights of all sex workers, regardless of their HIV status. Sex workers living with HIV are part of our community and it is crucial for them to access stigma free and affordable health services and treatment.

## **“Isn’t it wrong to allow a HIV positive sex worker to keep working? Shouldn’t they stop working?”**

People mainly go into sex work due to financial reasons. In many countries the vast majority of sex workers are women, trans people, ethnic minorities, single parents. When a person chooses sex work to feed themselves or their families who are dependent on them, they don’t have the luxury to stop. Even if they wanted to quit sex work, sex workers living with HIV still would be in need of financial security. Without first providing stigma free/easy-to-access health care and alternative financial resources, it is not fair or realistic to expect them to quit what they do.

It is crucial for sex workers who live with HIV to be able to access prevention and treatment methods. With effective treatment, people living with HIV can become undetectable which means that even without condom use HIV cannot be passed. Additionally, we shouldn’t forget that safer sex practices (such as condom use, Prep etc.) are the responsibility of both sex workers and clients.

## **Sex work and trafficking: “Are sex workers victims of trafficking?”**

Trafficking is not equal to sex work. Sex work is an activity where the persons’ consent to provide certain services in exchange or resources. Trafficking is a human rights violation and consent does not exist. Exploitation, including the kind of exploitation considered trafficking, is best prevented through securing workers’ rights, migrants’ rights and the empowerment of sex worker communities to challenge exploitation, including trafficking and forced labour.

Furthermore, the anti-trafficking laws in many countries are widely used to criminalise and deport migrant sex workers by conflating trafficking and sex work.

Sex workers everywhere are fighting for safe workplaces and for the empowerment of sex workers. We believe that those who exploit or abuse sex workers must be held responsible. The best way to ensure this is by decriminalising sex work.

## **“If we ban sex work or punish clients who buy sex, can we stop human trafficking?”**

No, criminalising any aspect of sex work wouldn't stop human trafficking. First of all, sex work shouldn't be conflated with trafficking. People engage in sex work for different reasons but whatever the reason, sex work happens with consent of individuals. There are already many strict laws and regulations in place to prevent human trafficking and yet they are not enough. In order to stop human trafficking, the focus must be shifted towards the root causes of trafficking such as poverty, social and gender inequalities, wars, conflicts etc. Additionally, it is due to the current migration laws and border policies people feel the need to go to smugglers and these laws need to be reviewed and changed in order to welcome individuals who are experiencing poverty, violence or are generally searching for a better life.

Criminalising clients or any aspect of sex work pushes the industry underground. This makes both sex workers and victims of trafficking and exploitation less likely to report crimes because they have less trust in authorities and less opportunities to access justice.

## **Sex work and third parties: “Are you fighting to give more power to pimps?”**

We want to protect the rights of sex workers. Our focus is to help workers and not third parties. Third parties can be anyone sex workers work with / for. This may include bosses, managers, security guards, drivers etc. However, in criminalised settings, even sex workers' cleaners, partners or the flat owners are in danger of facing criminal charges. We argue that sex workers should have the autonomy to decide whether they work with a third party or not. If they chose to work with a third party, we want sex workers to have more power negotiating with managers. But also, where sex workers are not protected by the law, they should be able to pay for their own security. Under decriminalisation, sex workers and any third parties could be subjected to labour law. Once this is the case, sex workers can report any abusive third party to the authorities without being afraid of the police. This takes the power away from the third parties' hands and transfer it to sex workers. Additionally, the laws on third parties are often used to criminalise sex workers who work together for security reasons. As a result of these laws, in many countries sex workers are being charged with pimping each other due to sharing a flat and working together. That is why we need decriminalisation of sex work, including third parties.

## “Are you arguing that clients have a right-to-buy sex?”

No, we are advocating for sex workers’ rights and this includes the right to refuse a client if we want to. In any other service industry, workers reserve the right to refuse a client if the client’s behaviour is unacceptable. What we are arguing is for sex workers to have the same rights as other workers. Under decriminalisation, sex workers would have the right to say ‘no’ to any potential client and can’t be forced to work by any third party/manager. Decriminalisation would give sex workers the rights they need so they can make their own decisions about when they work, where they work and who they work with.

## “What is the Swedish model (client criminalisation)?”

The Swedish model is an approach to sex work where the clients of sex workers are criminalized. It is also known as ‘sex buyer law’ because it aims to eliminate the demand. [Amnesty International](#), [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) and many other organisations oppose this type of legislation and call for the repeal of these laws. [The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS \(UNAIDS\)](#) also favor the decriminalisation of sex work. There is insufficient evidence that the Swedish model of criminalization of clients actually reduces demand. The number of visible street-based sex workers might decrease but this doesn’t mean sex workers stopped working. Due to the criminalisation of clients, sex work is simply pushed underground. This in turn makes it more dangerous as it eliminates the ability of sex workers to report crimes and violence to the police.





## “Why does criminalisation of sex work, including client criminalisation (the Swedish model), harm sex workers?”

Criminalisation, including of clients and third parties, harms people who sell sex. When clients are criminalised, they may feel nervous about getting caught and sex workers have to rush or skip screening processes they use for safety - for outdoor workers, the client may rush the worker to get in the car more quickly; in the case of indoor sex workers, clients might refuse to give their names or identifying information. This pushes clients to be more anonymous which makes them more dangerous to sex workers. The number of clients might initially go down, while the number of sex workers remain the same, which increases economic instability and vulnerability to poverty. This further reduces the autonomy sex workers have to refuse dangerous clients. If a sex worker has seen no clients today, they will have more pressure to see a client who seems dangerous tomorrow. Reducing the number of clients makes workers less able to refuse clients.

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*“Criminalization of clients and third parties hasn’t been effective in achieving its intended goal of abolishing—or even reducing—sex work. In France, for example, the purchase of sexual services was criminalized in 2016 and two years later a study demonstrated that the impact on sex workers was severe, including major deterioration in living conditions and greater exposure to violence. In Sweden, where criminalization of the purchase of sexual services was introduced in 1999, online advertisements for sexual services have increased exponentially in the past decade.”*

(Understanding Sex Work in an Open Society)

The criminalisation of clients doesn’t ‘save’ sex workers – sex workers are still criminalised for example, if they work with a friend for safety. Under the Swedish model, workers can struggle to leave sex work because of criminal convictions (for example, for brothel-keeping if you work with a friend), and general discrimination. This makes it hard to get another job and it leaves sex workers with more limited options, as they may have a gap on their CV or be forced to lie about previous employment.

## “What legal framework is best at protecting sex workers? What is decriminalisation of sex work?”

The decriminalisation of sex work is the removal of criminal and administrative penalties for sex work including penalties for clients and third parties. Decriminalisation is different than legalisation of sex work such as in countries like Turkey, Greece, Netherlands. In countries where sex work is legalised, it is no longer prohibited, and there is legislation to control and regulate it. The extent and type of legislation varies from country to country and may be regulated by work permits, licensing or tolerance zones which usually work against the most marginalised sex workers. For example, in Turkey, sex work is only legal if it is done in registered brothels and only Turkish citizens who are cis women are allowed to work in these brothels leaving out migrant sex workers, male sex workers, trans sex workers etc. Additionally, decriminalisation that sex workers advocate for goes beyond just removal of penalties for buying or selling sex. What we are advocating for is not a semi-depenalisation of some aspects of sex work like we see in many countries including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the UK. The global sex workers' rights movement is advocating for full decriminalisation of sex work including third parties.

There are only a very few countries that we can take as an example when we talk about decriminalisation of sex work. New Zealand became the first country to decriminalise prostitution in June 2003. The purpose of this law was to “decriminalise prostitution (while not endorsing or morally sanctioning prostitution or its use); create a framework to safeguard the human rights of sex workers and protect them from exploitation; promote the welfare and occupational health and safety of sex workers; contribute to public health; and prohibit the use of prostitution of persons under 18 years of age.” In New Zealand’s decriminalisation model, selling and buying sex are not criminalised, sex work is recognised as work, sex workers are able to work together for safety and work with third parties, if they choose to do so. Decriminalisation removes the sanctions around sex work and regulates it under labour law. This creates a safer environment for sex workers while helping fight trafficking.

Similar to New Zealand’s version of decriminalisation, two Australian states also have introduced full decriminalisation of sex work (New South Wales in 1995, Northern Territory in 2019).

## “Why is decriminalisation of sex work good?”

Decriminalisation gives sex workers more autonomy/agency which allows sex workers to work more safely. It removes the laws which harm sex workers – for example, soliciting laws which target workers on the street, or brothel-keeping laws which criminalise workers for working with a friend. It replaces this harmful criminalisation with workers’ rights – for example for brothel workers, the right to refuse a client without fear of being fired by the establishment, the right to a safe workplace, or the right to be free from discrimination while working or after they stopped working.

Decriminalisation means workers have increased power when dealing with managers. For example, in New Zealand, a sex worker took her brothel manager to an employment tribunal for workplace sexual harassment and won – Under decriminalisation, sex workers can expect to have workers’ rights. Sex workers are often openly discriminated against when trying to find other work. In New Zealand, under decriminalisation, there is an anti-discrimination law which makes it illegal to discriminate against sex workers because of their past involvements in sex work and to block them from getting another job. Sex workers also experience discrimination around child custody & in the media. Decriminalisation would challenge this. Decriminalisation and freedom from other forms of legal oppression means the removal of criminal laws targeting the sex industry, and the protection of sex workers through labour law and health and safety frameworks.

Decriminalisation is not a solution for all the challenges sex workers face but it is a crucial big step in the right direction.

## “Did the number of sex workers go up in New Zealand after decriminalisation?”

No, there was no increase in the number of people in the sex industry after decriminalisation of sex work in New Zealand. Additionally, after decriminalisation sex workers were able to seek help from the police and are able to access justice and health services without fear of stigma, discrimination or criminalisation, making it safer while providing support services for sex workers who want to quit sex work.

## “Did the number of reports of violence go up in New Zealand after decriminalisation? Why?”

Yes, because when reporting is made safer for people, they will report more. Sex workers are not able to report violence because they are afraid of the police due to criminalisation of their work. When sex work is not criminalised/penalised, sex workers are able to go to the police without fear of arrest. More reporting also increases access to support services for workers. Decriminalisation gives the message of ‘we want you to be safe and to have rights regardless of whether you want to stay in sex work or want to leave’.



**RIGHTS, NOT VIOLENCE !**



# PERSONAL QUESTIONS

## “Do you like being a sex worker?”

Like in any industry, we all might feel a range of different ways about our work. Some of us might find it empowering and others might not. My personal feelings are not representative for the whole sex worker community. What matters is we want rights and safety for all sex workers.

## “Would you want your daughter or sister to be a sex worker?”

The question shouldn't be whether I would like my daughter/sister to be a sex worker or not. The question should be 'would I want them to be safe, healthy and have human rights and labour rights if they were sex workers' and the answer is: yes! And the way to secure human rights for all sex workers is decriminalisation of sex work.

**TIP:**

You may choose to explain your own feelings towards sex work but it can be beneficial to stress that your personal experience and feelings with sex work don't represent the all sex workers. This way you may prevent creating a certain stereotype of a sex worker.

## “Does your family/partner know you are working in the sex industry?”

Different sex workers have different relationships with their loved ones. Some sex workers are open to their families or partners about what they do and some are not. It is a complicated and often difficult topic of conversation because sex work is highly stigmatised in society. Due to this stigma and criminalisation of sex work, sex workers might choose not to disclose their involvement in the sex industry which can have negative effects on sex workers' mental health. The same stigma and criminalisation also prevent sex workers' access to health services or from reporting violence to the police. The fight for sex workers' rights therefore must include fight against stigmatisation of sex work.

## “What is the price of your services?” / “How much money do you make from sex work?”

This is a personal question, and it is not relevant to the topic of sex workers’ rights. Sex workers are a diverse community of people from every walk of life. Some sex workers are poor, and some sex workers are doing ok. Usually in media there is a tendency to focus on sex workers’ earnings in order to portrait them as poor, helpless victims or extremely wealthy, upper-class citizens. Both are stereotypical, and the truth is that majority of sex workers would fall somewhere in between, just like everyone else. What is missing in our lives is access to support for those who are most vulnerable and marginalised such as street-based sex workers, migrant sex workers, single mothers, LGBTI sex workers, or sex workers of colour.

## “Who are your clients?” / “What type of men purchase sex?”

Like in any service industry, sex workers come across diverse types of clients. Clients can be from any profession, socio-economic background. There is no one type of client or sex worker.

## “Have you ever experienced physical, mental or sexual violence from clients and how do you deal with it?”

Many sex workers are left vulnerable to violence due to stigma, discrimination and lack of preventative and protective laws. Stigma and discrimination against sex workers often shape the practices that are violent and problematic. Criminalisation of sex work while preventing sex workers from reporting any violence they may experience to the police, also gives the perpetrators of violence, (the police being one of them) more impunity because they know that sex workers are not protected under laws and that they are likely to get away with it. This is why we need full decriminalisation of sex work so that sex workers can contact police and health services without the fear of being arrested or judged. Many sex workers who experience violence look for support from their communities or trusted mental health services. However, the number of these services are extremely low, and in some countries, they don’t exist at all.

**TIP:**

You may choose to share your own personal experiences and explain how the current laws made it more difficult or prevented you from accessing protection and justice. Or maybe you had a good experience with the police and observed some good practices before? You can share these positive examples too.

## “Have you ever reported violence to the police or any other institution?”

In countries where sex work is criminalised, access to justice and police protection is not always an option. Sex workers don't feel like they can trust police and are afraid of being arrested or fined due to criminalization of sex work. In many countries police officers are often perpetrator of violence and many sex workers have had negative experiences with them. For sex workers to be able to reach out to police for protection or to report violence, the current laws that criminalise sex work have to change and sex workers' rights must be secured through decriminalisation.

**TIP:**

You may choose to share your own personal experiences and explain how the current laws made it more difficult or prevented you from accessing protection and justice. Or maybe you had a good experience with the police and observed some good practices before? You can share these positive examples too.

## “Do you live/work alone?”

In many countries where sex work is criminalised/penalised, working together or living together with other sex workers for safety is also criminalised through pimping laws/third party laws. It is safer for sex workers to work together, but in many cases sex workers are being charged with pimping each other and their flat is considered a brothel. These laws also bring tremendous amount of danger for the families of sex workers for the same reason, as they can also be regarded as third parties by the police. Because of this, sex workers might choose to work alone, and by doing so they become more prone to violence by people who pose as clients. Additionally, because sex work is criminalised, reporting these incidents is often not possible. That's why sex workers need full decriminalisation of sex work, including third parties.

**TIP:**

In many countries working together with other sex workers is a crime. Please make sure you are not giving away any personal details if you are worried that this could be used against you.



## “Do you have a pimp?”

This is a personal question, and it is not relevant to the topic of sex workers' rights. However, it is true that some sex workers may choose to work with a third party in different capacities. Having to work with a third party is not inherently bad for sex workers, but as in other sectors, abusive managers/bosses exist in sex work too. This is why sex workers need labour rights and decriminalisation in order to be able to report any abusive manager. Decriminalisation would be empowering for sex workers as we see in the case of New Zealand.

**TIP:**

In many countries third party involvement in sex work is criminalised. Please make sure you are not giving away any personal details if you are worried that this could be used against you.

## “Are you sharing your earnings from sex work with others?” / “Who profits from your work?”

Many sex workers are single mothers who are trying to provide for their children. In other cases, migrant sex workers send their earnings to their families in their country of origin. Many sex workers do share their earnings with others just like people in other sectors. Sex workers have families and friends who might depend on them for financial help. Because of criminalisation of sex work, the people who depend on the income of sex workers are also in danger of facing charges and being accused of pimping.

**TIP:**

In many countries working together with other sex workers is a crime. Please make sure you are not giving away any personal details if you are worried that this could be used against you.

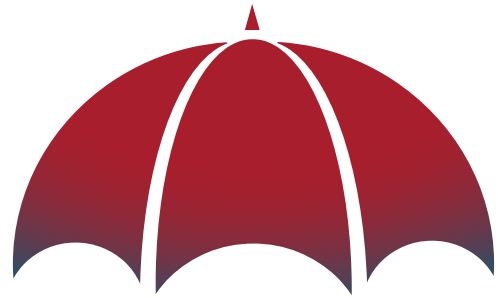




## ADDITIONAL READING:

- SWAN'S 'ARREST THE VIOLENCE'
- SWAN'S 'FAILURES OF JUSTICE'
- SWAN'S 'MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT OF SEX WORKERS'
- SWAN'S 'SEX WORK LEGAL FRAMEWORKS'
- ICRSE'S 'TRAFFICKING 101'
- ICRSE'S 'INTERSECTION TOOL KIT'
- ICRSE'S 'CRIMINALISATION OF CLIENTS'
- ICRSE'S 'NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US'
- NSWPS 'SEX WORKERS WHO USE DRUGS'
- NSWPS 'STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCED BY SEX WORKERS LIVING WITH HIV'

- NSWP'S 'MIGRANT SEX WORKERS'
- NSWP'S 'SEX WORK IS NOT TRAFFICKING'
- Amnesty's 'INTERNATIONAL POLICY ON STATE OBLIGATIONS TO RESPECT, PROTECT AND FULFIL THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF SEX WORKERS'
- Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women's 'MOVING BEYOND 'SUPPLY AND DEMAND' CATCHPHRASES: Assessing the uses and limitations of demand-based approaches in anti-trafficking'



**SWAN**

**SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS  
ADVOCACY NETWORK**

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