

SEX
WORK

and

FEMINISM

a guide on the feminist principles
of sex worker organizing

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INTRODUCTION

The last decade saw increasing attacks against sex worker communities globally, not only from governments and political actors but also from abolitionist feminist activists. While governments chose to tackle “the issue of prostitution” through punitive, rather than social measures by directly criminalizing sex workers, or indirectly punishing them by offences of drug use and possession, homelessness, hooliganism or vagrancy, abolitionist feminists mobilized and lobbied for the introduction of the criminalization of clients (also known as the Swedish Model). This model criminalizes the purchase of sexual services, at the same time it pushes sex workers into clandestine working environments, exposing them to health risks and violence.¹

In Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA), similar abolitionist proposals so far have not reached legislative levels, but public debates surrounding sex work have intensified. In the region, abolitionist feminists might not have very close ties to governments (yet), however, they shape public opinion through their platforms and media connections, and frequently (cyber-)bully sex worker rights activists.

In order to prepare its membership for potential abolitionist campaigns, the Sex Workers’ Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) initiated conversations with its members on topics related to sex work and feminism. SWAN organized several physical and online workshops, where sex workers had the chance to reflect on their relations with women’s rights or feminist groups, to formulate counter-arguments to anti-sex work narratives, and to learn more about the feminist movement(s) and their cooperation with sex-worker led initiatives beyond and within the CEECA region.

This brief document is the result of these discussions. Its primary aim is to introduce the topic of feminism to sex worker activists, who might not label themselves as such or use feminist terminology due to pejorative connotations of the term in CEECA, but nonarguably engage in feminist work. The publication also lists commonly formulated abolitionist arguments that accompany advocacy for the introduction of the Swedish model, and contrasts them with counter-arguments from sex workers. Finally, this guide highlights the feminist principles of these sex worker-led collectives and organizations, aiming to help human rights, social justice, and women’s rights activists situate sex workers’ struggles in the wider feminist movement(s).

¹ For a summary of the impact of the Swedish model on sex workers:
<https://www.sexworkeurope.org/news/general-news/stop-ignoring-evidence-client-criminalisation-endangers-sex-workers>

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FEMINISM

Feminists hate men and want women to be more powerful than men.

Feminists want to achieve equality between genders as there is huge political, economic, and social disparities currently between them.

Feminists constantly try to change our languages by for instance adding female endings to the names of professions.

Many feminists indeed are concerned about the patriarchal nature of our languages, but usually also deal with more pressing issues, such as violence against women.

Feminists are angry.

Many of them are vocal about the systemic change required to achieve equality. Calling outspoken women angry has a long history of silencing and ridiculing.

Feminists are unattractive and not feminine.

Feminists come in every shape and form: they can be feminine, masculine, gender nonconforming. The gender expression of someone should not influence how their feminist activism is perceived.

If you are a feminist, you cannot be religious.

Feminists can be religious, atheistic, and somewhere in between.

All feminists care about their career and do not support stay-at-home moms or housewives.

Feminists come from all social classes. Many advocate for the recognition of domestic labour or (informal) care work, including sex work.

Feminists don't believe in marriage.

Many feminists are married, but highlight important issues around marriage in their advocacy, e.g. forced and early marriages, in-partnership violence.

A GLOSSARY OF FEMINIST TERMINOLOGY

"We, sex worker rights activists are often lost in the language of feminists. I believe that if we want to be successful in amplifying sex workers' issues and challenges locally and internationally, we need to start using a more feminist vocabulary and be proactive in approaching potential allies and getting them on board."

Webinar participant, Kyrgyzstan

The following terms have been widely used in feminist literature and activism, however some of them might be completely new to sex worker rights activists from CEECA. The list of definitions is not intended to serve as rigid terminology, especially given that feminist ideas and terms constantly evolve. The purpose of this section is to acquaint sex workers from CEECA with notions that might be relevant to their work and can be adapted to local organizing.²

■ **Abolitionist feminist**

Abolitionist feminists use the terms “prostituted woman,” “women in prostitution,” or “people exploited in prostitution,” to refer to any woman who sells any form of sex. They define all sex work as “violence against women”, thus they want to abolish the sex industry.

■ **Carceral/state feminism**

Carceral/state feminism advocates for enhancing and increasing prison sentences for gender-based violence, and views the state as the liberator of women, rather than their oppressor. The term was coined by Elizabeth Bernstein to describe a type of feminist activism which categorises all forms of sexual labor as sex-trafficking.

² The following resources were used for the glossary:

Dastagir, A. E. A feminist glossary because we didn't all major in gender studies. USA Today. Available:

<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/03/16/feminism-glossary-lexicon-language/99120600/>

Crehan, M. Feminist glossary. Available:

<https://rosie.org.au/blog/feminist-glossary/>

■ Choice feminism

Choice feminism is a popular form of contemporary feminism, encouraging women to embrace the opportunities they have in life and to see the choices they make as justified and always politically acceptable. Choice feminism also operates with neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism, while downplaying the need for political and collective action against systematic inequalities.³

■ Commodity feminism

Commodity feminism is a type of feminism that co-opts the movement's ideals for profit, e.g. selling clothing with feminist messages, produced by low-paid precarious workers.

■ Consent

(Sexual) consent is the agreement to engage in a (sexual) act. Sexual activity without consent is considered rape or other sexual assault. See "Yes means yes" and "No means no" on the evolving definitions of consent in the feminist movement(s).

■ Feminism

The theory of and activism around the political, economic, and social equality of sexes/genders.

■ Gender

Gender is "the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men", according to the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention.⁴

■ Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence targets a particular gender disproportionately. Under the European Union's Victims' Rights Directive gender-based violence is understood as "violence that is directed against a person because of that person's gender, gender identity or gender expression or that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately".⁵

3 Thwaites, R. (2016). Making a choice or taking a stand? Choice feminism, political engagement and the contemporary feminist movement. SAGE Journals, Volume: 18 issue: 1, pp. 55-68. Available: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1464700116683657>

4 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

5 Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA. Retrieved from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32012L0029>

■ Gender equality

“The concept that people of all genders have equal conditions, treatment, and opportunities for realising their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development”.⁶

■ Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is the integration of a gender perspective into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of laws, policies, measures, and programs, with a view to promoting gender equality and combating gender-based discrimination.

■ Gender roles

Gender roles are expectations assigned to each gender and refer to stereotypical male or female traits or actions. For instance, sex workers often defy gender roles as they are the primary earners in their family or work at night, which is in many contexts not allowed for women.

■ Internalized sexism

When the belief in women’s inferiority becomes part of one’s own worldview and self-concept.

■ Intersectional feminism

Intersectional feminism analyses how people’s overlapping identities – including race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability status – impact the way they experience oppression and discrimination. Intersectional feminist organizing centres the needs of those who face intersectional discrimination and violence, such as sex workers.

■ Misogyny

Dislike of, contempt for, or deeply ingrained prejudice against women.

■ Narcofeminism

A young feminist movement. Its vision is a world where women who use psychoactive substances allow themselves to be themselves and are given the opportunity to develop and fulfill their potential.⁷

⁶ UNICEF(2017). Gender equality. Glossary of Terms and Concepts. Available:
<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/1761/file/Gender%20glossary%20of%20terms%20and%20concepts%20.pdf>

⁷ <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/narcofeminism/>

■ **No means no**

A feminist anti-rape slogan that emphasizes sexual consent. See “Yes means yes”.

■ **Patriarchy**

A hierarchical-structured society in which power is concentrated with, cis-hetero men.

■ **Rape Culture**

A society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalizing or trivializing sexual assault and abuse.

■ **Sex positive**

An attitude that views sexual expression and sexual pleasure, if it is based on consent, positive.

■ **Slut Shaming**

The action or fact of stigmatizing a woman for engaging in behaviour judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative.

■ **Transfeminism**

Transfeminism is a form of feminism that includes all self-identified women, regardless of assigned sex, and challenges cisgender privilege. Self-determination is one of its key principles.

■ **Victim-blaming**

When the victim of a crime or harmful act is held fully or partially responsible for it.

■ **Waves of feminism**

Modern Western feminist history is often split into three time periods, or “waves”:

1. 1st wave (1830s- early 1900s): the Suffrage movement, focused on gaining the right to vote
2. 2nd wave (1960s - 1980s): focused on equality at the workplace, sexuality, family and reproductive rights
3. 3rd wave (1990s - present): similar in its demands to the second wave, but became more mainstream. Many believe that there is a 4th wave, which is more intersectional, queer, and trans-inclusive, and digitally driven.

■ TERF

The acronym for “trans exclusionary (so called) radical feminists,” referring to activists who are transphobic.

■ Transmisogyny

Dislike of, contempt for, or deeply ingrained prejudice against trans women and feminine trans people.

■ SWERF

The acronym for “sex worker exclusionary (so called) radical feminists,” referring to activists who state that prostitution oppresses women.

■ Yes means yes

A paradigm shift in the way we look at rape, moving beyond “no means no” toward the idea that consent must be explicit.



A BRIEF LOOK AT FEMINIST ACTIVISM IN THE CEECA REGION

Feminism under state socialism and communism

There is extensive scholarship exploring whether feminism existed during the communist and state socialist era. Some argue that combining communism and feminism is impossible, because communism is nothing other than “state patriarchy,” while feminism’s defining characteristic is its demand for women’s autonomy.⁸ Highlighting different social needs of sexes and women’s inequality was also impossible in public discourses as it would have undermined the proclaimed key principle of equality under socialism and communism.

However, many researchers acknowledge that women’s organisations in CEECA were able to act quite autonomously from the Communist Party and achieve the wide-scale integration of women into the world of work, which unquestionably led to a higher social status independently of their husband, making use of their own resources.⁹

Women’s organisations in the communist/state-socialist era frequently relied on anti-capitalist messaging to promote women’s issues, and they strategically used Marxist-Leninist language to reach their goals. They enforced family-friendly measures by selling them as a unique feature of socialism. Due to this activism, countries of the region introduced “progressive” measures that lacked even in Western-Europe and the United States, such as high quality education and training for women, maternity leave, child benefits, daycare facilities, public laundries, and canteens.¹⁰

Feminists outside of the region were inspired by these numerous women-friendly policies, and some Marxist feminists advocated for the inclusion of domestic work within the waged capitalist economy. The most well-known example is the International Wages for Housework Campaign, which was launched in the 1970s by members of the International Feminist Collective and became a global initiative to create a discourse on the value of housework and its relation to the economy.¹¹

⁸ Miroiu, M. (2007). “Communism was a State Patriarchy, not State Feminism,” *Aspasia* 1, pp. 197–201.

⁹ Černá, M. (2006). “Women under socialism : what degree of emancipation?”. *Cahiers du CEFRES*. N° 30, Le communisme à partir des sociétés = Communism from the viewpoint of societies (ed. Muriel Blaive). Available: http://www.cefres.cz/pdf/c30/cerna_2006_women_under_socialism.pdf.

¹⁰ Ghodsee, K. (2004). “Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women’s Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe.” *Signs*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 727–753. Available: www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/380631.

¹¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wages-for-houseworks-radical-vision/>

Feminist activism after the collapse of the Soviet Union

Despite feminist achievements, greater interest in feminism only spiked after 1989, with the dismantling of borders, the circulation of various publications, and new possibilities for civil society. In academia and activism alike, feminists in the region were mainly influenced by the Western “second wave” and its aftermath.

Feminist civil society organising was boosted by United Nations, European Union, and Council of Europe directives and policies aiming at gender equality (gender mainstreaming). While gender mainstreaming held the promise of finally bringing about many of the policies feminists in Eastern Europe had been demanding, it ended up undermining many of their efforts, and moreover, it triggered an anti-feminist backlash. The policies furthermore were rarely accompanied by substantial changes in public discourse or the political process. Local feminists did not become more visible, neither did their demands and ideas receive much more attention.

Participants in SWAN discussions on sex work and feminism highlighted that a core demand of feminist organizers in the region is enacting legislation that protects victims/survivors of domestic/in-partnership violence. Gender-based violence is also high on the agenda of the European Union and Council of Europe, and while many feminist groups campaigned for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, anti-gender and anti-feminist actors mobilized the public against the Convention in recent years.

The 2011 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, known as Istanbul Convention¹², establishes standards on preventing and combating gender-based violence. The legally binding instrument is based on the understanding that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is committed against women because of their gender or that affects women disproportionately. It is the obligation of the state to fully address it in all its forms and to take measures to prevent violence against women, protect its victims, and prosecute the perpetrators.

In the Convention, the term “gender” is defined as “the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men”. Under the Istanbul Convention, the definitions of “gender” and “sex” are two separate concepts. The Convention’s explanatory report emphasises that the “term “gender” under this definition is not intended as a replacement for the terms “women” and “men” used in the Convention.¹³

12 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention>

13 <https://rm.coe.int/istanbul-convention-factsheet/168078ec5c>

The transnational anti-gender campaign opposing the Istanbul Convention began unfolding around 2012. In April 2012, the then minister of justice in **Poland** publicly opposed the ratification of the Convention. The key argument against the Convention was the inclusion of the concept of "gender". Opponents saw it as a danger to traditional families and values, including the traditional role of women and men. This was embedded in a more general campaign against "gender ideology". Other arguments included that it promoted homosexuality and "transsexuality", and discriminated against men. The Convention however was ratified in 2015, but upon ratification Poland issued a declaration that it "will apply the Convention in accordance with the principles and the provisions of the Constitution"¹⁴. Since its entering into force, several attempts have been made to renounce Poland's commitment.

In **Slovakia**, ratification was postponed several times. In 2018, the prime minister declared Slovakia would not ratify the convention. He called it as a controversial document that could violate the constitution and lead to the introduction of same-sex marriage and emphasized that it "needlessly questions natural differences between men and women and calls them stereotypes"¹⁵.

In **Bulgaria**, not only far-right parties, but even left-wing political actors turned against the Convention.¹⁶ The Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Orthodox Church initially backed the convention, but later changed their communications and started to vocally oppose it. In 2018, after 75 members of parliament asked the Constitutional Court for an opinion about the constitutionality of the Convention, it ruled that the law does not conform to the Bulgarian constitution.

In **Hungary**, women's rights NGOs were not part of or invited to the group tasked with the preparation for the Convention accession in 2013. A negative shift in government communication was detected in the following years. At the end of 2017, leaders of the governing party started to openly speak against the convention, arguing by using a misinterpretation of the concept of gender. In 2020, amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the national parliament adopted a political declaration that rejects the ratification of the convention, after the co-ruling Christian Democrats party (KDNP) submitted a policy statement arguing that certain parts of the convention go against the country's migration policy due to its strong gender-based asylum claim provisions.¹⁷

Anti-gender forces mobilized against the Convention on the international level as well. In March 2018, 333 organizations from 9 countries turned to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe requesting the modification of the convention in relation to its content regarding "gender".¹⁸

¹⁴ https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/210/declarations?p_auth=4ebx9lxL

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-treaty-idUSKCN1G620F>

¹⁶ <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101352166/bulgarian-socialist-party-reaffirms-opposition-to-istanbul-convention-in-official-statement>

¹⁷ <https://hungarytoday.hu/hungary-istanbul-convention-parliament-declaration/>

¹⁸ See their full letter: <https://www.irs.in.ua/files/publications/Letter-to-Secretary-General-of-CoE-Thorbjorn-Jagland.pdf>

Rise of anti-trans and anti-sex work feminists

"The feminist movement in Russia is concentrated around universities in large cities, led by active, successful, educated women. On their platforms, migrant women or poor women do not have any voice or presence. These feminists are strong and have political influence, contacts in media, but in those circles sex workers or those who speak about intersectionality are not represented at all."

Webinar participant, Russia

Not only political parties and religious actors oppose the concept of gender (and often, sex work), but leftist feminists activists as well. Discussants in the SWAN webinars emphasised that TERF activism in the region often overlaps with anti-sex work abolitionist advocacy, frequently labelled as Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminism (SWERF). SWERF activist regularly translate articles from Western-European and U.S. authors, and have an established online presence. Although most often, these groups' activities are limited to online commentaries, there are cases when conflicts become frictions within feminist organizing. In **Ukraine**, for instance, several Facebook groups, such as FeminismUA, FemUA Nordicmodel, and Resistanta withdrew from the 2018 Women's March, because Legalife-Ukraine, the sex worker advocacy organisation, was listed as an organizer.¹⁹

Another example of abolitionist radical feminist intervention occurred in **Serbia**. In 2016, following pressure from feminist academics and NGOs, Serbia criminalized the purchase of sexual services through amendments to the Public Law and Order Act. The success of these amendments was influenced by abolitionist feminist organizations. Advocacy to introduce the Swedish model, however, led to criminalization of both selling and purchase of sexual services. After the law entered into force, sex workers became punishable by prison sentences that are twice as long than before and tenfold administrative fines of up to 1300 EUR. Sloboda Prava ("Equal Rights"), a sex worker-led organization reports that sex workers, many of them precarious trans sex workers, are forced to work with more clients in order to be able to pay fines and evade police, often in secluded locations that are dangerous and where they are exposed to violence by many perpetrators. It is almost impossible for sex workers to get help from police in cases of violence, as this would lead to self-incrimination and the arrest of them and their clients as well.²⁰

19 Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (2019). Nothing about us without us! A brief guide on meaningful involvement of sex workers and their organisations in Central-Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA). Available: https://www.swanet.org/files/swanet/NothingAboutUsWithoutUs_ENG_web.pdf

20 Equal Rights (Sloboda Prava) (2019). SHADOW REPORT TO THE UN CEDAW COMMITTEE SEVENTY-SECOND SESSION. Available: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCEDAW%2fCSS%2fSRB%2f33869&Lang=en

While sex worker organizations are becoming more active in international human rights spaces, such as in the consultation process of the Committee on Monitoring the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), backlash might follow from local feminist groups. This happened with Amelia, a sex worker rights group in **Kazakhstan**, which submitted a shadow report²¹ to the monitoring mechanism in 2019. Following the Committee's recommendations on ending forced HIV testing and establishing exit services, many radical feminists started to vocally call for the introduction of the Swedish model, the criminalization of sex workers clients.²²

"We have many allies among feminists, especially among young feminist in Poland. We also have feminist donors who support us and allies among pro-abortion movement, which we are part of too. Unfortunately, we also have radical feminist movement here, they are attacking us through media, are hostile toward the trans community and copy the Western pattern of anti-trans and anti sex work feminists. Luckily, the LGBT movement is gaining support, so this anti-trans rhetoric does not get too popular."

Webinar participant, Poland



21 https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2fCEDAW%2fCSS%2fKAZ%2f37320&Lang=en

22 Information received from the representatives of Amelya, Kazakhstan.

ABOLITIONIST DISCOURSES AND COUNTER ARGUMENTS

As highlighted by participants of the SWAN online meetings, abolitionist radical feminists tend to be affiliated with academia and have good connections to media and even to governments, in some instances. Sex workers often lack academic training and wide platforms to formulate their views on sex work based on lived experiences, thus debates can become polarised and unbalanced.

In the following section, we list pointers to common abolitionist statements, based on sex workers' collectives' prior history of engaging with or reacting to SWERF and abolitionist attacks.

« Sex work is not real work and it is never a choice. »

- Sex work is work, a form of livelihood and economic activity. Sex workers consensually exchange their own sexual labour or sexual performance for compensation. Labelling it as work does not mean sex work is viewed as positive or negative; it simply emphasizes that it is an income-generating activity.
- Sex work is a typical informal service economy job in that it does not benefit from legal protection through the state. It mainly employs women, often (undocumented) migrants; entry requirements are low in terms of capital and professional qualifications; and skills needed for the job are often acquired outside of formal education.
- Many sex workers enter the sex industry as they are excluded from the formal economy or state benefits to achieve a decent standard of living.
- Focusing on choice, which is a very abstract concept and depends largely on contextual factors, takes away attention from topics that are pressing concerns for sex workers, such as precarity, exploitation, and (police) violence.
- Sex workers decide to engage in sex work for a myriad of reasons, similarly to how anyone considers taking on a job: some are attracted to flexible working hours and the amount of work, some find it financially rewarding, others cannot take on a wide range of jobs being disabled, some prefer working independently or together with other peers, e.g. trans women.

- Whether someone voluntarily works in the sex industry or is forced, should not influence their entitlement to rights. In criminalized settings, neither sex workers, nor victims of trafficking can benefit from protection, which should be ensured by sufficient compensation, sensitive, victim-centered services instead of police raids and criminal proceedings.

« Sex workers sell their bodies. »

- Clients of sex workers purchase sexual acts, not body parts. Sex workers consent to providing agreed upon services under negotiated conditions for a limited time. If one breaches these conditions, that should be classified as rape or sexual assault.
- To state that it is impossible to consent within sex work takes away from sex workers the ability to name their own boundaries, and the ability to speak out against violence.

« Prostitution equals trafficking. »

- Sex workers engage in sex work voluntarily, though often facing limited choices. Trafficking - as per the Council of Europe definition - is “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”
- Sex workers often suffer exploitation and forced labour in the sex industry, just as many other workers in other industries, e.g. fishery, agriculture, garment industry etc. Labelling exploitative situations as trafficking masks the true causes of violence against sex workers, namely criminalisation of sex work and the consequent lack of access to labour rights and justice.

« Sex work is never without violence. »

- No profession or workplace is without violence against women. According to the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, up to 75 per cent of women in a professional capacity or in top management jobs have experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime.²³
- Equating violence that occurs in the context of sex work with sex work itself has dangerous consequences for sex workers: it diminishes and minimises the actual violence that is committed against them and reduces violence to “workplace hazard”. This contributes to victim-blaming when sex workers report incidents to services or authorities.
- The role of criminalisation and policing is crucial in eliminating violence against sex workers. However, the current reality in many countries is that instead of protection, law enforcement further expose sex workers to abuse. Recent research reveals that sex workers who had been exposed to repressive policing—such as recent arrest, prison, displacement from a workplace, and extortion or violence by officers—were three times more likely to experience sexual or physical violence by anyone, for example, by clients, partners, or people posing as clients²⁴.

« Sex workers are victims of patriarchy. »

- Victimizing sex workers without them thinking about themselves as victims is patronizing. Instead, feminists should build on their knowledge, experiences, and organizing skills. Sex workers come from various backgrounds and are often the first ones to be impacted by policies, thus this wealth of knowledge should be capitalised upon in feminist organising and policy-making as well.
- Sex workers fight for labour rights, and in many countries are drivers of labour organizing, together with other marginalised workers.

23 Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA). 2014. Violence against women: an EU-wide survey, main results. (Vienna, FRA).

24 L Platt et al., (2018). Associations Between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A systematic review and metaanalysis of quantitative and qualitative studies. PLoS medicine, vol. 15 issue 12, 11 December 2018. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>

« Sex worker activists are “happy hookers”, not representative of prostituted women. They are part of the pimp lobby. »

- Sex workers form diverse organisations across Europe and Central Asia, with sex worker leadership and sex worker colleagues.
- Their organisations operate under hostile conditions. They have to fend off government smear campaigns, lack of state funding, and activist burn-out. Still, they carry out vital programs for sex workers, such as harm reduction services, legal aid, anti-violence projects, or police trainings.

« Those in the sex industry have all suffered trauma in their life. »

- There is no empirical evidence showing that childhood trauma is more common amongst sex workers than in the general population.
- Labelling someone with psychiatric diagnosis is not a feminist act.



THE FEMINIST IDEALS OF SEX WORKER ORGANIZING

Sex workers have a long history of exclusion from feminist organising and policy-making. However, many women's rights and feminist organizations and collectives support sex worker groups and actively work on mainstreaming the movement's call for decriminalisation. The below manifesto²⁵ - signed by more than 180 organisations - is an example of feminists supporting sex workers and the feminist principles of sex worker organizing.

"We call for a feminist movement that situates gender injustice within patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist societies, and is inclusive of trans people and sex workers. Our criminal justice systems are oppressive, and therefore we do not see increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the only solution to violence against women, trans people, and gender inequality. We believe in community interventions, long-term organising, and mobilisation against the complexity of violence against women and trans people, including economic inequalities, and the lack of accessible social security nets and services.

- 1. We acknowledge sex workers' as experts in their own lives and needs. Feminism, as it has always done in the past, has to support women's agency and self-determination over their work and their bodies. Sex workers should be no exceptions.
- 2. We respect sex workers' decision to engage in sex work. As feminists, we reject misogynist statements according to which sex workers "sell their bodies" or "sell themselves": to suggest that sex entails giving away or losing part of yourself is profoundly anti-feminist. Women are not diminished by sex. We further reject any analysis which holds that sex workers contribute to the "commodification of women, sex or intimacy". We will not blame sex workers for causing harm to other women but patriarchy and other oppressive systems.
- 3. We affirm sex workers' ability to claim consent. To state that it is impossible to consent within sex work takes away from sex workers the ability to name their own boundaries, and the ability to speak out against violence. To propagate the idea that clients "buy" sex workers' bodies or consent – and as such can do what they want to a sex worker – has dangerous real life consequences for sex workers. Furthermore, by

25 Available: <https://feministsforsexworkers.com/>

posing all sex work as a form of violence, such ideas can lead to a crackdown on sex work in the name of tackling violence – even though crackdowns on sex work actually increase sex workers' vulnerability to violence.

- ▶ **4.** We advocate for measures that provide real help and support to victims of trafficking, with full respect for the protection of their human and labour rights. As such, we denounce the conflation of migration, sex work and trafficking. As a result of this conflation, migrant sex workers are particularly targeted by police harassment and raids, detention and deportation, and are pushed into clandestine working environments where they are more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.
- ▶ **5.** We fight to eliminate all forms of violence against sex workers. Sex work is not a form of sexual violence but sex workers are especially vulnerable to sexual and intimate partner violence due to criminalisation and often intersecting oppressions such as sexism, whorephobia, homophobia and transphobia, racism and classism. Oppression and criminalisation make sex workers vulnerable to violence from individuals, social services, the police, immigration officials, and the judiciary. Regarding sex work as inherently violent and sex workers' consent as invalid serves to normalise violence against them.
- ▶ **6.** We work every day to end misogyny in all spheres of life. Misogyny, however, is not the cause of sex work, but arises as a response to women's acts and choices, whether that is wearing make-up, having an abortion, or selling sex. We name misogynist sentiments and acts as the problem, and reject calls to change or eliminate behaviours that 'provoke' misogyny. To attempt to eliminate sex work on the grounds that it supposedly provokes misogyny is to agree with those who state that some women's actions – such as selling sex – are intrinsically deserving of misogyny.
- ▶ **7.** We respect migrants' rights. Migrant women face limited access to work and often little or no access to social security. Some of those seeking refuge sell sexual services out of very limited options to earn their living. The criminalisation of clients, and other forms of sex work criminalisation put migrant sex workers under a constant threat of police violence, arrest, and deportation, denying their right to access to justice and redress. The criminalisation of clients removes their income, while offering them no alternatives for survival.

- 8. We support LGBT rights. Rejection of LGBT people from their family, obstacles to education and employment in cissexist and heteronormative social structures often result in sex work being one of the very few economic and employment opportunities for LGBT people, especially trans women. Anti sex work laws do not benefit LGB and trans people as they don't address these complex facets of social marginalisation. This is particularly the case for trans women, as laws that criminalise sex work are particularly used to profile and persecute this group, regardless of whether the person in question is even a sex worker.
- 9. We call for full decriminalisation of sex work. There is strong evidence that the Swedish model and all other forms of sex work criminalisation harm sex workers. The Swedish model pushes them into poverty, reduces their power in negotiations with clients, criminalises them for working together for safety, evicts and deports them. By enabling sex workers to organise as workers, decriminalisation decreases sex workers' vulnerability to exploitative labour practices and violence.
- 10. We speak up against women's increasing precarisation in labour. Historically in Western societies under capitalism and patriarchy, women's work (domestic work, care work, sex work, emotional labour) considered "feminine" have been undervalued, underpaid, or completely rendered invisible and unwaged. Women globally, including sex workers, have jobs that are less well paid and more insecure: they work under exploitative conditions – from criminalised, seasonal or temporary employment to home work, flexi and temp-work, to subcontracting, working as freelancers, or as self-employed persons. Sex work has similarities to other types of care work, in that it is mainly associated with women, and often migrant women or women of colour. Care workers, like sex workers, often do not enjoy the same labour rights as workers in jobs associated with men. Advocating for sex workers' rights therefore has to emphasise their labour rights and needs to address precarious working conditions and exploitation in the sex industry, and advocate for legal frameworks that give power to sex workers as workers.
- 11. We demand the inclusion of sex workers in the feminist movement. Their inclusion brings invaluable insights, energy, diversity and experience of mobilisation to our movement and challenges our assumptions about gender, class and race. Sex workers were some of the world's first feminists, and our community is diminished without them."



