

dear

social workers,

reducing harm we cause

people in the sex trades

*a zine by social workers, sex workers
and social workers in the sex trades*

*Dear Social Workers;
Reducing Harm We Cause People in the Sex Trades*

First Edition

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*= perspectives from lived experience

dear social workers,

Most of us enter this field because we care deeply about the health and well-being of our communities and want to create meaningful social change. But how often are we actually harming the people we say we want to help? Social workers work with people in the sex trades, whether we know it or not, anywhere we practice. We're taught the importance of culturally responsive social work, but how many of us are taught anything about the lived experience of sex workers?

When we first started this project, decriminalizing sex work was an issue we gravitated towards supporting, but really didn't know much about. What we found is that it's a very complex and nuanced issue that intersects with social justice issues such as race, gender, class, immigration status, and disability status, and that many different stakeholders have many different views on sex work and the efforts to decriminalize it. We can't speak to all of those views, and we don't claim to be experts. We made this zine in an effort to be continuously learning together and to amplify the voices of the sex workers organizing for their own rights. We hope that this zine motivates the social work community to think critically about social workers as agents of social control and the harm we can cause people in the sex trades through our involvement with systems like child protective services, law enforcement, and through perpetuating stigma of sex work through saviorism, paternalism, and moral absolutism.

We asked sex workers how social workers can better support them and their answers ranged from ways to improve social services, to helping sex workers access jobs in the field,

to learning about issues that impact them so we can better understand and affirm them, and more. We hope to draw social workers into supporting the movement to decriminalize sex work by reducing the stigma we carry, learning better ways to practice social work with people in the sex trades, and to highlight the voices of people who are impacted by criminalization.

Lastly and most importantly, thank you to the sex workers who collaborated with us every step of the way of this project. From those who sat down with us for initial conversations to help us understand the movement, to those who shared their experiences in the pages of this zine, and everyone who held space for us as we stumbled towards allyship.

In Solidarity,

Melissa, Jordan, Daniel, Lane, Wendy, and Jess

feedback

Let us know what you think! Did you learn something new? Is there content from this zine you plan to incorporate into your practice? Maybe there is something you wish had been a little different. We would love to hear from you!

Take our 2-minute survey using the QR code or by going to:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/693J7JR>



the difference between sex work and trafficking, and why a social workers role is one of humility

A textbook will tell you Sex Work is consensual, while trafficking is not. But the law doesn't see it that way. And neither does the general public. Ask your local Sheriff to provide a report on recent arrests for prostitution and he'll give you a list of names caught in federally funded trafficking stings. Ask if they were paying for or selling consensual sex and I doubt the officer will be able to tell you, or recognize the difference. The general public, however, consumes whatever data is served to them. And so the story that is spun is one of a hero with a badge and a growing epidemic of trafficking victims.

The intersection of sex and money requires nuance. After nearly a decade of working in the social services industry and a few stints trading consensual touch for cash, I prefer to use three terms instead of the traditional two. Sex Work, the exchange of sexual touch for money, will cause you to break a sweat. Frankly, it's physical labor. And dangerous? Can be. But so is working on an oil rig or toiling away in a coal mine. The difference being a coal miner has the respect and support from their community to organize for better working conditions, equipment, or pay. And if their safety is ever compromised or labor exploited, there are avenues they can pursue to rectify that wrong. Actors in the porn industry rarely have that luxury when their consent is violated. Dancers who try to organize for better conditions typically get blacklisted. A full-service sex worker who is stalked? Threatened? Beaten? Raped? Police intervention isn't an option.

Human Trafficking is often used interchangeably with Sex Work, but is an umbrella term which includes both Sex and Labor trafficking. With the sexual exploitation of children falling under sex trafficking. This is the third term I choose to

by corinne hawk

highlight when approaching this subject. To me, a consenting, adult sex worker who finds themselves in a DV situation with a partner who takes their money is wholly different from a young child being sold by a relative.

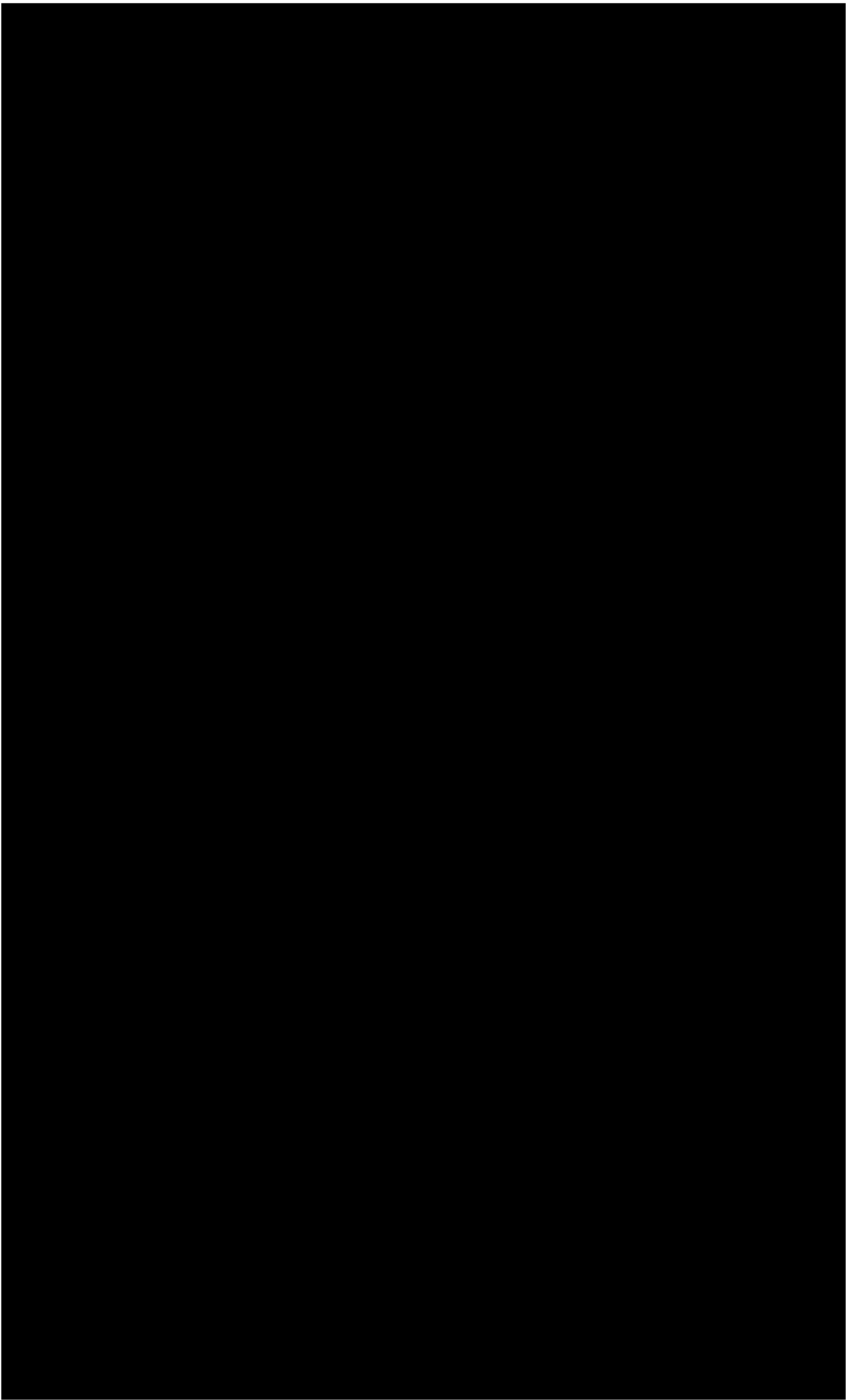
When we think of Human Trafficking, we only think of sex. Thus, the whole notion of trafficking is divorced from labor. The conflation of Sex Work and Trafficking likely has something to do with this, and speaks to how Sex Work is not seen as a legitimate form of labor.

This misunderstanding gravely impacts how these laws are written and carried out. A full-service sex worker who works independently, for an agency, in a pair, or for a pimp, might be charged with prostitution or trafficking. Regardless of the charge, each carries a sentence. Legitimate trafficking victims being required by the state to perform victimhood by meeting certain requirements to have their sentences reduced, though rarely expunged. Either way, consenting, adult Sex Workers and Victims of Trafficking find themselves forced to endure barbaric conditions as they are funneled into the largest trafficking ring the world, the US for-profit prison system.

The narrative is a simple one. A Sex Worker is both a victim and a criminal. A John is a pervert who gets off on women being forced to do whatever he wants. Whenever a Social Worker comes in contact with someone in the Sex Industry, this narrative follows. In many ways, we are just like the man with a badge. We call ourselves a witness, but often only to our own projections. We enjoy our role as the helper. Often acting out our savior complexes to the point of burn-out.

A Social Worker could learn a lot from a veteran sex worker, if they took the time to listen. Hustling isn't about money. It's about relationships, mutual satisfaction, and healthy boundaries. A good hustler listens empathetically, pays attention to body language, knows their limits, and doesn't take things personally. It's rare to meet a Social Worker who is able to leave their work at work. Who is able to feel nourished by the work they do and not exhausted by another treatment plan review. I've maybe met one or two Social Workers still employed by an agency that had the kind of people skills you see in a club. Even with all those letters next to our name, we still have more to learn.

It is inevitable, as a social worker, to come in contact with someone involved in the sex industry. Their work, just like ours, can be overwhelming, dangerous, or draining. Our role is to support, not save. Finding resources that help to inform how they navigate their jobs, such as self-care, boundaries, safety, communication, and reviewing any impact their job may have on their relationships. Beyond this, the more aware we are of how legislation can impact their lives, the better resource we can be.



legal models of the sex trades

There are several different models which address the legality of sex work—ranging from full criminalization to full legalization and regulation—and each has varied implications for addressing sex workers’ human rights and labor rights. Each model has drawbacks and advantages for people in the sex trades and those who purchase their services. It is essential to note that no model fully addresses the issues impacting those in the sex trades, and there are broader social issues beyond the issue of criminalization that impact sex workers.

Criminalization

The United States largely operates under a model of criminalization, in which there are criminal penalties for the sale, solicitation, and purchase of sexual services. Full criminalization penalizes both seller and buyer. For more information on the impacts of this model, check out the article in this zine titled, “How Criminalization Harms People in the Sex Trades” .

Partial Decriminalization

Partial decriminalization describes the penalization of those who facilitate, solicit, and/or purchase sexual services. Under this model, people in the sex trades are not criminalized, but those who purchase their services are. This model criminalizes third parties such as managers and hosts. This model is referred to as the Nordic model, after its implementation in Scandinavian countries. Partial decriminalization also referred to as the “End Demand” or Entrapment model, which theorizes that criminalizing buyers will reduce the demand for sexual services. This model limits the ability of people in the sex trades to practice harm reduction when selecting when and where to meet potential clients. Wary of being prosecuted, buyers may insist on a remote location, refuse to give their legal name, or behave more erratically. Additionally, sex workers may be pres-

by lane wilde (he/him)

sured by police to testify against their clients when the criminal legal system attempts to prosecute buyers.

Decriminalization

When sex work is decriminalized, the sale and purchase of sexual services is no longer criminalized. Decriminalization would not eliminate laws on violent acts, human trafficking, rape, or child sex abuse. In the United States, women of color are more likely to be targeted and arrested on prostitution charges. While decriminalization would reduce the arrest of those selling sex services, people in the sex trades who are Black, brown, 2SLGBTQ+, and disabled would still face risk of police harassment and violence for their identities. By not imposing codes or licensing, this model does not criminalize workers who would have barriers to completing any aforementioned restrictions. Indoor full-service sex work was decriminalized in Rhode Island for nearly 30 years from 1980 until 2009.

Legalization

Legalization of sex trades regulates the sale, solicitation, and purchase of sexual services, including implementation of taxes on wages. Sex work would be regulated by labor and administrative law, as are other businesses. Legalization may also regulate who can buy or sell sexual services, how, and under what context. Strip-tease dancing in clubs is an example of the legalization of some sexual services. Full service sex work remains illegal in every state except Nevada, where privately owned brothels are licensed and regulated by the state.

Sources:

Decriminalizing Sex Work's "Debunking the Entrapment Model"

Siobhan Brooks's "Innocent White Victims and Fallen Black Girls"

UNLV Sex Industry 2012 Report

Full Crim

Sex Workers



Buyers



Partial Decrim

Sex Workers



Buyers



= Criminal Penalties

Full Decrim

Sex Workers



Buyers



Legal

Sex Workers



Buyers



= No Criminal Penalties

how criminalization harms people in the sex trades

In the United States, sex work is largely criminalized, including but not limited to the prohibition of selling, soliciting, and purchasing of sex and sexual services. Under repressive criminal policies, sex workers experience disproportionate violence and sexual health risks, including STI transmission, condomless sex, coercion, harassment, police violence, and even death. Police contact risks abuses of power such as bribery, extortion, arbitrary arrest, failure to provide equitable access to the justice system, as well as physical and sexual violence.

The repercussions of these policies and stigmatization ripple into legalized sex trades through poor regulation and police abuse of power. In Portland, Oregon, dancers report physical, verbal, and sexual assault, and unmitigated workplace hazards, all underreported to the law due to the existing tenuous and distrustful relationship with police.

While people of all genders work in the sex trades, cis-gender women and transgender communities are most impacted by sex work criminalization and are more likely to be subjected to arrest and incarceration when compared to their cis male counterparts. Mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and expansion of US legal and carceral systems have increased surveillance of sex workers, disproportionately affecting people of color. According to Jasmine Phillips (2015), 62% of all US minor prostitution arrests are Black girls. Sex workers may not seek appropriate medical care out of fear of interacting with mandatory reporters, the child welfare system, or police. Online, recent federal laws criminalizing websites where people in the sex trades connect with clients have forced sex workers into more dangerous environments. It is within this intersecting context of violence and oppression that sex workers - motivated by a hope of creating safe, equitable, and

by jessica brennis, melissa gant, daniel mcree,
wendy soriano-valencia, jordan valentine, lane wilde (he/him)

destigmatized working environments - have built movements to decriminalize their profession and shift perceptions of sex work to be seen as a legitimate form of labor.

The criminalization and policing of sex work in the US can be traced to Congress's adoption of the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic Act in 1910, resulting in most states banning the sale of sex in an effort to maintain public order, prevent sexually transmitted infection, and protect women from exploitation. The end of Prohibition gave rise to the policing of "prostitutes, 'B-girls', 'notorious queers', 'flagrant homosexuals', 'screaming queens', and other 'sex deviates' who patronized public establishments" (Chateauvert, p. 22). Vice squads, or moral squads, were responsible for the entrapment of sex workers in sting operations, resulting in the disproportionate arrest of Black and brown trans women. Their tenure, in combination with gentrification, shaped the geography of sex work by effectively banishing sex workers from areas of commerce into more isolated areas of cities, making sex workers and other marginalized people more susceptible to violence from the police and others. Criminalization throughout the 1900's gave rise to concerns of sex trafficking in the late '90s. Conflation of sex work with sex trafficking gained public traction in the early '00s after passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, whose primary goal was to change the perception of sex workers from criminals to victims. Decriminalization efforts have become more pertinent with the expansion of the prison industrial complex during the war on drugs, increased surveillance post-9/11, and the subsequent passing of the Patriot Act, which heightened employment barriers for those with criminal records.

The stories told about what decriminalization would mean are as varied as the reasons for engaging in the

profession. Some narratives are about sexual freedom and getting the patriarchal, puritanical cultural ideals out of their bedrooms. Other stories are about individual liberty (“my body, my choice”), and what the limits of government should be.

Black and trans sex workers are those most directly impacted by criminalization (Lyons et. al., 2015), and their stake in decriminalization is situated within the larger context of the increased criminalization that occurs at the intersection of their identities. One notable contested meaning within the movement comes up around creating potential to report abuse. Some proponents argue decriminalization would mean that sex workers would be able to report and seek recourse for abuse. However, as the violence sex workers experience often comes at the hands of the police, opening up avenues for increased contact with law enforcement is not a stated goal of those most impacted by criminalization. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that decriminalizing sex work alone will not alleviate all poor conditions faced by people in the sex trades. One of the limitations of decriminalizing sex work is that without other concurrent movements addressing other forms of violence oppression, people in the sex trades will continue to be negatively impacted by racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of oppression based on their other identities.

The decriminalization of sex work will create more space for people working in the sex trades to seek legal help if they find themselves in a dangerous situation or want to press charges. While decriminalization makes police contact less harmful for some, it may not be the case for those in the trades who are people of color, trans, or use drugs. Decriminalizing sex work may decrease stigma, allowing workers to seek medical attention without fear of discrimination.

When the conservative sexual morality is stripped away, consensual sex work is a form of labor. Therefore, sex workers are entitled to the same legal protections as any other worker, including the right to unionize, the right to workplace

safety, the right to adequate pay, and other labor protections. Many in the sex trades argue that the work they do actually liberates them from the low-pay work typical of the neoliberal job market. This view also sees the criminalization of sex work not as a response to the violence sex workers face, but one of the main causes of that violence. Movements to decriminalize sex work not only seek to change laws and statutes, but also shift the way sex work is viewed by the dominant culture.

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interview with emi koyama

Emi Koyama is a Seattle-based activist and sex worker working at the intersection of racial justice, sex worker rights and trans rights. I reached out to her after I learned about her work on the successful repeal of prostitution loitering laws in Seattle, and our conversation helped me deepen my understanding of how the movement to decriminalize gained momentum in the mainstream political conversation, where the movement is headed, and who it is led by.

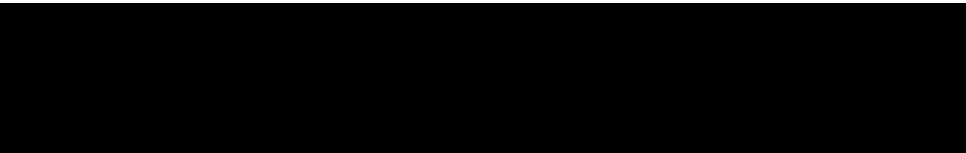
Emi works with the **Coalition for Rights & Safety for People in the Sex Trade** (www.rightsandsafety.org) and **Aileen's**, a peer-centered organizing and hospitality space by and for women in the sex trades (www.aileens.org).

Melissa: *Sex workers have not always been seen as stakeholders or had access to spaces where they can advocate for laws they are directly impacted by – do you feel like the movement for decriminalization is led by sex workers?*

Emi: Sex workers are most often not invited to policy conversations, I'm working with an org called the Coalition for Rights and Safety right now to insert themselves into these conversations. For example, the city is about to implement a bill that was passed that will decriminalize sex work for youth (note: *youth under the legal age of consent were previously able to be charged with prostitution*) but a lot could go wrong with the implementation and it's difficult to have our voices heard because we aren't being invited into the meetings being held to discuss how to implement the policy change.

Melissa: *Seattle recently repealed prostitution loitering laws, have you seen that change impacting sex workers lives?*

Emi: In 2018, there was a city task force to address issues faced by formerly incarcerated people reentering the community, the repeal was recommended by them and because it



was the lowest hanging fruit in all of their recommendations, the city went for it. But law enforcement was still pushing for the law to stay in place because it was the pre-text they frequently used to stop Black women and trans women, so the repeal stalled. The uprisings in 2020 forced small changes from the city, and the city conceded on the loitering laws (and a few other laws) as a concession to protestors. However, judges were still issuing SOAP (*Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution*) orders, and law enforcement could stop people in certain areas to check if they had a SOAP order as a way around the repeal. I was able to talk to some judges and prosecutors with mixed success because each said the other was the one with the discretionary power.

Melissa: *The messaging of ‘sex work is work’ seems to be more and more prominent in the mainstream and the framing of sex worker rights as a labor issue/workers’ rights, is that strategic messaging from the movement or how do you think that has come about?*

Emi: In other countries, there are mass movements of sex workers that are labor movements. But in the US, that is an argument coming mostly from people who are more privileged and is removed from the day to day reality of criminalization, and criminalization is applied unevenly – on the basis of gender and race. I’m not against that argument, but it’s not how I approach things. It’s also easier for people to hear about decriminalization from a framework of individual liberty and sexual freedom, and in an abstract way about values.

A lot of people involved in the work to legalize marijuana are now working on legalizing/decriminalizing sex work. They are Silicon Valley venture capitalists, white male libertarians who

think the government shouldn't interfere with what they do with their money. Last year, they hired people to go to democratic town halls to ask Warren and Sanders questions about sex work – no matter the candidate's responses, either for or against decriminalization, they could use that to further split the liberal vote and benefit Trump. So, they were fundraising by saying hey you can support Trump by supporting the movement to decriminalize sex work.

Rich white men are stepping in with the kind of money sex workers have never seen before, throwing millions of dollars in, sex workers can't compete with that, so they dominate what you see in the media. Sex worker movements are women/queer/trans movements, not a straight cis male movement like the marijuana movement, and they are trying to take over.

I talked to one of these Silicon Valley guys about medical marijuana and how they used dying cancer patients, one of their strongest arguments for medical marijuana, to pass medical and then when they moved towards legalizing, they would have the infrastructure and the industry in place. It would also create government bureaucracy, which grows over time, and creates opportunity for industry to capitalize. So, I heard this and thought ok well in your story, sex workers are the product to be sold, it doesn't empower sex workers. Marijuana is a plant, but sex workers are people. So I think when sex workers are saying "sex work is work", they are trying to assert their rights in a way that's palatable to a white male libertarian world, so they can be left alone.

Melissa: *What does the movement need? What can people who are not sex workers do to support the movement for decriminalization? And what should they not do?*

Emi: Efforts to decriminalize needs to be part of a larger framework of criminal justice reform, Black Lives Matter has been inclusive of Black sex workers from the beginning and

they understand that it's not an abstract idea but is one of the ways that Black lives are controlled and threatened. We also need to create economic resources so people can survive and have more choices, create better jobs, support parents... really look at the conditions that support people's lives instead of looking to the police as a solution.

There are different things you can do if you have close friends or family or are sex workers, but if you don't have that connection, the best thing you could do is support movements to defund the police in general and question the role of police in society. Decriminalizing sex work should be part of a larger framework of decriminalizing people, especially Black and trans people. It's important to situate the movement within the larger movement of criminal justice reform.

Lastly, lots of sex workers are forced into diversion programs instead of going to jail. But it's still a forced treatment under the threat of criminalization, it's not an alternative, it's still part of a system of social control. We need to include other ways that the state imposes control over people's lives, and treatment as diversion still punishes and coerces and is still focused on reducing crime – which is counter to what counseling and treatment should be.

bipoc sex workers in communities of color and the disadvantages:

Cumulative Violence and PTSD Symptom Severity Among Urban Street-Based Female Sex Workers. (2021). Journal of Interpersonal Violence., 36(21/22), 10383-10404.

Violence against women and girls remains a pressing public health issue globally. There are multiple disadvantages that women and girls face in American society– imagine the challenges faced by BIPOC sex workers who come from low-income communities. Disadvantages for those coming from communities of color include lack of support, guidance and adequate resources in order to have positive job experiences. While sex work is a form of labor, it's a stigmatized one, especially for women of color, and has co-existed with violence for generations. There is not sufficient research on BIPOC sex workers and the many disadvantages that they experience within this job role, and not much advocacy is spoken about all the trauma and insufficient support or resources that is given to them.

“At baseline, 61% of FSW screened positive for PTSD symptoms.” This Information is only for Baltimore, Maryland, which has a large Black community. While the research only shows a small percent of the BIPOC community who participated in the research are sex workers, we know the impact of PTSD is likely even greater due to multiple layers of social disadvantages.

by wendy soriano-valencia

Entry to Sex Trade and Long-Term Vulnerabilities of Female Sex Workers Who Enter the Sex Trade Before the Age of Eighteen. (2020). *Journal of Urban Health.*, 97(3), 406-417.

“Overall, 73.2% of women entered the sex trade to get drugs, 35.6% of women entered to get basic necessities such as food or housing, and 17.2% of women entered to support their children or family” (Table 2). Of significance, 20.8% of those aged < 18 years at entry reported being either coerced, threatened, pressured, misled, tricked, or physically forced into trading sex compared to 4.6% in those who entered at an older age group (p value < 0.001). Younger girls who become sex workers in communities of color have a likely chance of being easier manipulated into doing stuff way out of their role, and without the insufficient advocacy for better working conditions and proper care in the sex work industry, they can be led down an unsafe path.

Singer, R., Crooks, N., Johnson, A.K. et al. COVID-19 Prevention and Protecting Sex Workers: A Call to Action. *Arch Sex Behav* 49, 2739–2741 (2020).

“The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted people of color as well as those affected by systemic poverty.” The pandemic itself impacted everyone. Yet, not everyone received the support they needed to stay healthy and be financially stable during losses of jobs due to no contact. Due to the disproportion of the impact that it has caused in low-income communities of color, sex workers are highly

disadvantaged when it comes to the proper care and advocacy as they were also impacted by a global pandemic.

When we talk about sex workers, lets also remember the disadvantages that BIPOC workers experience because of race. The discrimination that exists against women and girls who do this work is dehumanizing and workers are not respected for the work they do. As we do this kind of work as social workers, we need to remember that there are still people who are marginalized and oppressed due to their race and the work that they do. It is our role as social workers to advocate fully, especially for those that are not seen.



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mandatory reporting and sex work

Most professional social workers are required by law to act as mandatory reporters and report any suspected abuse or neglect of minors to child welfare authorities. This can impact the relationship between sex workers and social workers. One study in England showed that close to 70% of sex workers surveyed were parents (Elsdon et. al., 2021). Sex workers who are parenting may be hesitant to engage with social workers or service providers out of fear that will be reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) because of their profession, even if their children are not experiencing abuse or neglect. The assumption that sex workers are unfit parents increases the stigma and shame many in the profession already face. It also often means that sex workers may not seek out services, which can leave them even more vulnerable and with fewer options to get their needs met.

While social workers are required to follow the law, they can take several steps to ensure that mandatory reporting laws are not a barrier to sex workers accessing services or getting the help they need. Keep in mind, every social work role is different, different agencies and organizations have different policies and procedures, and laws vary across jurisdictions.

1. Educate Yourself.

Ensure that you adequately understand the mandatory reporting laws in your state or jurisdiction. Seek out additional trainings and information on this and ask CPS and/or trainers for specific guidance around sex work and mandated reports. You need to be well informed on exactly what information requires a mandated report so that you can let your clients know before they

by daniel mcree

engage with you. Do not assume that just because a parent is a sex worker you have to make a report to CPS. Familiarize yourself with your agency's policies and procedures and bring up the issue of sex work in supervision.

2. Practice Informed Consent with Clients

Be upfront with your clients about any mandatory reporting requirements you have. Be as specific as possible; some clients may not understand that the information they choose to disclose may lead to a mandatory report. This can damage trust with a client and lead to feelings of entrapment. Informing your client of mandatory reporting laws at the very beginning of service delivery allows them to decide whether they engage with you or what information they choose to share. One study on mandated reporting showed that 60% of participants changed what they were willing to share with service providers once they were told about a service provider's mandatory reporting requirements.

3. Stay Informed on Sex Worker Positive Services in Your Area

If a client chooses not to engage with you because of your mandatory reporting requirements, be able to refer them to sex worker-positive service providers, organizations, and mutual aid networks that can offer support and help them meet their needs. Connect with sex worker-led organizations in your area for accurate information on where sex workers can get help.

4. Focus Your Information Gathering on the Service You're Providing

Do not ask clients detailed questions about their work or how they earn money unless it is relevant to the services you are providing. If a client decides to disclose that they are engaged in sex work after you've informed them of any mandatory reporting requirements, do not ask them the intimate details of that work if it has no relevance to the services they receive from you. Be upfront about the kind of information clients are required to disclose to receive services. For example, if it is required for clients to report income, let clients know that only refers to verifiable, taxable income (this is just an example, learn the specifics of your program's/agency's policies).

5. Advocate for Decriminalization!

Much of what makes sex work unsafe for their families has to do with the profession being criminalized and forced “underground”. Social workers have a responsibility to not only understand the harm that their profession can inflict on sex workers and their families, but also to push for changes to harmful laws that impact this population. If sex work is decriminalized, it can be easier for sex workers to do their work in a way that doesn't jeopardize their safety or that of their families. It also means they can engage with social service providers without fear of being reported to CPS.

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Elsdon, R., O'Shaughnessy, R., Hodge, S. M., & Murray, C. D. (2021). Becoming a mother in the context of sex work: Women's experiences of bonding with their children. *Health Care for Women International*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2021.1949598>

how social workers harm sex workers

Since the beginning of the social work profession, social workers have been working with sex workers. In many ways this work has been, and continues to be, harmful to sex workers who are already vulnerable to violence and oppression largely due to the criminalization of their work (Wahab, 2002). This section explores some (but not all) of the ways in which social workers can inadvertently harm sex workers.

Engaging in Carceral Social Work

Carceral social work is social work that uses punitive or coercive interventions (often in collaboration with the criminal justice system) to control marginalized populations. This approach is about controlling the behavior of clients instead of empowering them to decide what is best for them. Carceral social work appears in a variety of settings, but it is often based on the idea that getting someone involved with law enforcement and the criminal justice system is helping them “fix” their socially unacceptable behavior. For sex workers, this can lead to a criminal record, traumatic experiences in jails and prisons, involvement with CPS, and can leave them worse off financially. Carceral social work also includes referring clients to services that work closely with law enforcement or the criminal justice system (parole officers, prosecutors, CPS.)

Enforcing sexual morality

By upholding normative sexual morality, social workers can foreclose on an effective way for clients to get their needs met. By advising clients to only engage in monogamous, non-transactional, and heterosexual relationships, social workers can disempower sex workers from using the resources they have available to them to earn money and stay safe. This can increase their vulnerability and put them in a

by daniel mcree

more precarious situation, especially in a time when social services are scarce.

Upholding stigma and judgment

When social workers view sex work as a shameful, illegitimate way to earn money, they reproduce the stigma that sex workers continually face. Feeling stigmatized, judged, and unworthy can cause sex workers to not engage with service providers and access needed services. This stigma can also have a negative impact on the mental health of sex workers and erode their feelings of self-worth and personal agency.

Using sex work as a barrier to access services

Some service providers see sex work as legitimate reason to deny a client service. For instance, homeless or domestic violence shelters may not allow someone who is engaging in sex work to stay at the shelter, citing safety concerns. Also, some social services require proof of income to qualify for services. This can exclude sex workers whose income is largely “under the table.” Additionally, in some jurisdictions, sex workers charged with prostitution crimes have to report as sex offenders. When service providers have zero tolerance policies that don’t consider the specifics of a client’s criminal history, they can exclude sex workers who are not a threat.

Assuming Sex Work is a Problem in Need of an Intervention

By assuming that sex workers are inherently exploited and in need of “saving,” social workers deny clients their personal agency. This view assumes that a sex worker couldn’t possibly decide to make money through sex on their

own accord. It frames sex work as the problem instead of the criminalization of sex work. It also excludes the possibility that the problems in a client's life may be due to other factors. This can lead to ineffective interventions that worsen a client's situation. Moreover, it's condescending to treat sex workers as objects of pity. This can erode trust with service providers and reinforce the stigmatization of sex workers.

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on social workers and sex workers

6 stays in rehab
20+ stays in psych wards
2x probation, 2x incarcerated
chronically homeless
disabled
in poverty; that's my running tally

Needless to say, I've had my fair share of experiences with social workers. The worst part is never feeling safe or in good hands. I had always found myself jealous of my friends' case managers, wishing those couple friends of mine who studied social work and went on to pursue careers in the field could have a say and not a random cis-man named Eric or Carl or Aaron or Jacob or Dustin or something. Longing for something that, even just vaguely, helped me to feel reassured and understood. Some people need to get used to working with a social worker. For me, since it had started so early in my life due to CPS hanging around my family, it seemed to come naturally at first. I grew up in an extremely financially and emotionally unstable home, I trusted easily, I believed people who said they wanted to help me. I was a little kid.

That was until my first stint in rehab as an adult in 2017, a few months after my 18th birthday. During my biopsychosocial intake, I worked with a couple different people—a medical doctor, a psychologist, and then a social worker. It had all gone pretty smoothly until half way through my conversation with the social worker. Maybe it was because I didn't expect it at all, maybe it's because I didn't expect him to use this language, maybe it was my own pent up feelings, but it cut through the air and into my gut when he asked me, "So, Lonnie, are you involved in prostitution?"

I told him no, and that I was a sex-worker. He did not

by lonnie (he/him)

reserve the right to use an outdated word at me like that. I would have rather him ask me if I "turn tricks," even if it would've been only marginally more comfortable. Anything but the 'P-word."

He giggled under his breath when I said this. I didn't say anything. At this point, I had learned to expect disrespect from most people. It was a difficult chapter of my life. He proceeded to ask me how long I had been in the trade, if I was trafficked, if I was aware of the possible legal repercussions. It occurred to me at this point that I was in an institution to receive treatment for my addiction to "illegal substances." Instead of answering his questions, I just let him know that every single client he has seen in that facility could technically end up incarcerated for their drug use, I told him that I didn't understand what was different about being a sex-worker. I was just making money that I needed to survive, and stay well. I then asked him to please move on. He did. Unfortunately, I said too much, because I spent the next 90 days getting more staff-attention out of concern that I was a full service sex-worker rather than the attention I had asked for to treat my heroin, Xanax, methamphetamine, cocaine, and ketamine addiction. It felt awful. I felt embarrassed.

This is the reason I attribute to using within 4 hours of leaving. This may be the reason I became hardened to the idea of help, treatment resistant, and defiant towards therapists and social workers. Hell, when I ended up in prison only a couple months after the fact, I was pissed and I spent a lot of time thinking about how I should be in a sober-living house, because that's what I wanted and was pushed away out of the fear that somehow, my job made me incapable of getting sober.

The social worker who asked me this in 2017 set the precedent for any and all treatment I received for the 3 years following that event—that was when it kind of stuck, and I received treatment without facing a harsh judgment like that. The precedent was avoidance, dishonesty, frustration, walking out, and walking away. The precedent became anger and fear, boiling in my belly until the bubbles overflowed out of my mouth. I was so resentful of the idea of getting help for what felt like forever. Always intrusive, always non-conductive. No matter how badly I wanted to be better, I couldn't get there. I couldn't open up. I lied. Told countless people I worked random jobs that I didn't have. Some of them simple things like retail, others a little more egregious sounding like a contortionist at a circus. I lived in fantasy land in front of all professionals. They didn't know anything about my life outside of treatment other than my mental health diagnoses, the meds I was on, and the amount of each substance I was addicted to, my vitals, and when in the psych ward, the few things they would overhear me talking to my peers about. I was made ashamed of my means of survival, and I have been blessed with the strength to heal and the privilege of professionals involved in my treatment and case in general being more accepting.

If you are a social worker reading this, I have only one request—please ask yourself how you can treat sex workers better starting right this very minute. All people should be treating people who are sex workers better- but when you are working so closely with people of so many different experiences in a social work environment, that understanding and sensitivity may make or break people's trust for resources available to them.

how decriminalization aligns with social work values

“Following the Code of Ethics, social workers must respect the dignity and worth of sex workers and their right to self-determination; combat racism, sexism, and classism as it intersects in the lives of sex workers; vigorously support victims of the sex industry and sex workers who have been victimized; and, provide support that meets the needs of sex workers” (Wahab 2)

Social work aligns with the movement to decriminalize sex work because a foundational ethical principle in social work is service, which seeks to “address social problems” (NASW Code of Ethics) while pursuing social justice. Understanding that sex workers can many times have intersecting targeted identities, it is important to address the social problems that lead to certain identities being oppressed. Social workers have a commitment to social justice and the elimination of suffering, which aligns with the movement to decriminalize sex work. The movement to decriminalize sex work seeks to remove barriers for sex workers and to address the inequalities people working in the sex trade face.

The National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics states that social workers will pursue “social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers’ social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice” (NASW Code of Ethics). These values align with the move-

by jessica brennis

ment to decriminalize sex work because they both seek to address the causes of poverty, violence, and oppression among their constituents. The movement to decriminalize sex work advocates for safer working conditions for people in the sex trades, as well as better access to housing, health care, and employment. By decriminalizing sex work, sex workers would not be arrested for working and therefore would not have a criminal record which would create barriers to accessing these things.

A social work ethical standard is recognizing and upholding the dignity and worth of every person. Decriminalizing sex work would allow “sex workers to be treated as human beings worthy of dignity and respect... [needing] adequate food, clothing, shelter, and... to feel worthwhile” (Wahab 10)

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more kinds of meaningful work

I've had no shortage of jobs in my life. "Jack of all trades" doesn't even begin to cover it. Primarily, the work I've done in my life has been working excruciatingly physical kitchen jobs, running events for hundreds of people, and more recently, teaching. After ten years in kitchens, I found my way into social services; unsurprising, given that the venn diagram for kitchen folks, and folks with trauma, is a fucking circle.

In the last twelve years I have worked at several levels of service provision. These jobs, mostly in *on-the-ground* types of programs that are working every day with folks actively trying to survive homelessness, poverty, addiction, mental illness, systemic prejudice and a host of other barriers have been where I have found my niche. Unsurprisingly, I feel right at home in these sometimes chaotic environments, and to say that some of my closest and dearest friends are people you find in these places, is an understatement.

During all of this, I've also done a variety of types of sex work, in person and online.

I can say honestly and certainly that sex work was the least taxing, least exploitive and most lucrative of those professions. As social workers, and service providers, we are often taught socially and academically that work in the sex trades is "not a real job" or not work we would encourage clients to pursue or remain in. Instead, we coach or persuade clients to look for work that will likely be more exploitive, pay less and provide less time work/life balance.

This is particularly true, I think, for LGBTQIA2S, neurodiverse and disabled folks. We often suffer through jobs that are not affirming to our identities, or downright dangerous to our well being. We make less than our peers, and are promoted less often. We spend a considerable amount of time advocating to just have our basic needs met and respected in

by c.b.

the workplace. So, when the pandemic hit, and the choice was to go back to work in the service industries (which had the highest death rates in any profession during pre-vaccine covid) or create an OnlyFans or Patreon and charge friends and strangers for a video of you masturbating and *get paid well*- it was a no brainer. For many of us, sex work is a place of empowerment, it allows us to create characters and fantasies and play with them, until we find what fits. It allows us to work through trauma and rework harmful narratives. It also provides an essential function of society, which no matter what kind of social or moral prohibition exists- has been a consistent element since we first started creating civilization.

Is sex work dangerous? Yes, it absolutely can be, but I have more literal and figurative scars from kitchen work and social services.

So, what I want to tell you is to shift your own perspectives, challenge your own internal biases around sex work, and sex industries. Make sure when we are coaching and teaching about ways that people can support themselves that we are not automatically dismissive of these ways of navigating late stage capitalism.

best practices for supporting sex workers

One important way social workers can support sex workers is to understand that sex work is work. People working in the sex trades often engage in sex work because their work can meet a financial need. According to a study done with sex workers in Seattle, the people interviewed “made decisions based on their evaluations of their perceived choices” (Wahab 146). Social workers need to acknowledge that sex workers are doing what they need to do to make money. Working in the sex trades can offer a more flexible schedule, can put money in the hands of workers quickly, and can meet the needs of people living with disabilities that need to work. Understanding that sex work is work will also reduce stigma around the idea of gaining income from sex work. Social workers can support sex workers by utilizing a strengths perspective, which validates sex workers personal power and agency in their lives (Wahab 156).

Social workers can support sex workers by understanding that many sex workers have intersecting targeted identities. The stigmatization around sex work further oppresses those working in the sex trade, limiting their ability to access housing, medical care, and legal protection. Social workers are committed to working with those who experience oppression and advocating for social justice, which is why it is essential social workers support sex workers.

Social workers can support sex workers by understanding that the goal of social workers is to better serve those who work in the sex industry (Wahab 154). It is not the role of social workers to tell others what is best for them, or to protect them, but rather to support sex workers meeting their needs in their life and work. When social workers view the people they work with as victims, they “disempower their clients by obscuring individual agency and personal potential for

by jessica brennis

change” (Wahab 156). Those working in the sex trades sometimes are unable to secure other forms of work due to a variety of factors, including personal choice. Finding employment in the mainstream workforce is not always an option for all sex workers. Encouraging those working in the sex trades to simply 'find another job', is not only reinforces social work's paternalistic tendencies but also reveals a privileged perspective.

Social workers can also support sex workers by understanding why people get into the sex trades and how social workers can best support that individual. Supporting sex workers and understanding what they are doing and what has led them there will enable social workers to empower the person they are working with in reaching their goals. Social workers need to “discard negative stereotypes and judgmental attitudes” (Wahab 155) about sex work.

Social workers can also support sex workers by valuing the life experience of sex workers, especially when hiring for a position that affects sex workers' lives (COSWO 30). A huge way social workers can support sex workers is to advocate for the decriminalization of sex work. Criminalization of the sex trades targets sex workers and can make it more difficult for sex workers to access housing and medical care as well as find employment if they have a criminal record. Social workers can also support sex workers by naming “sex workers as a key population” in policy and programming “so their specific needs are understood” (COSWO 30).

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resources

Sex Worker-led Organizations and Mutual Aid Oregon Based

Oregon Sex Worker's Committee | oregonswc.org

Former and current sex worker committee working towards shaping decriminalization policy in Oregon through public education.

Haymarket Pole Collective | haymarketpole.com

“Advocating proactive policy and equitable treatment for Black and Indigenous workers by facilitating restorative justice in the adult entertainment industry”

PDX Sex Worker Resource Project | pdxswrelief.squarespace.com

SW'er ran, mutual-aid fund for Portland-based sex workers.

Portland Sex Worker Outreach Coalition (SWOC) | pdxswoc.wordpress.com

“SWOC is a Portland, Oregon-based coalition of social service providers concerned with the safety, dignity, and diversity in needs of those working in the sex industry. It is our goal to educate ourselves and our community regarding the issues most relevant to sex workers in an effort to reduce associated risks of the sex trade and promote basic human rights for all those working in the sex industry.”

Stroll PDX | [instagram.com/strollpdx](https://www.instagram.com/strollpdx)

Harm-reduction advocacy group ran by and for sex workers.

The Cupcake Girls | thecupcakegirls.org

Non-profit that supports both those working in the sex trades and those who are affected by trafficking. This organization provides support in accessing resources, case management, and mentorship.

Meals 4 Heels | meals4heels.com

Meals 4 Heels is the world's only late-night meal delivery service providing nutritious, punctual, and professional food delivery to sex workers and sex-positive clientele.

The US and Abroad

Hacking//Hustling | hackinghustling.org

“Hacking//Hustling is a collective of sex workers, survivors, and ac-

complices working at the intersection of tech and social justice to interrupt violence facilitated by technology”

Global Network of Sex Work Projects | nswp.org

Network map of sex-worker led organizations

Sex Workers Outreach Project | swopusa.org

“Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA is a national social justice network dedicated to the fundamental human rights of people involved in the sex trade and their communities, focusing on ending violence and stigma through education and advocacy.”

Red Canary Song | redcanarysong.net

“A Grassroots collective of Asian & migrant sex workers and allies organizing transnationally”

St. James Infirmary | stjamesinfirmary.org

“The first occupational health and safety clinic in the U.S. run by Sex Workers for Sex Workers” Founded by Margo St. James in San Francisco

Decriminalize Sex Work | decriminalizesex.work

“Decriminalize Sex Work (DSW) works to improve policies related to all forms of sex work and to end the prohibition of consensual adult prostitution in the United States.”

Aotearoa - New Zealand Sex Work Collective | nzpc.org.nz

“The NZPC is run by sex workers, for sex workers, and advocates for the rights, safety, health, and well being of all sex workers. We are committed to working for the empowerment of sex workers, so that sex workers can have control over all aspects of their work and lives”

[Coyote RI](https://coyoteri.org) | coyoteri.org

Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics Rhode Island Chapter

Tits and Sass | titsandsass.com

Service journalism by and for sex workers.

resources continued...

SWOP-USA | swopusa.org

Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA is a national social justice network dedicated to the fundamental human rights of people involved in the sex trade and their communities, focusing on ending violence and stigma through education and advocacy.

The Pineapple Support List Of Therapists and Counselors | pineapplesupport.org

“Pineapple Support offers those working in the online adult entertainment industry free or low-cost therapy and emotional support. We have an ever-growing team of sex-worker friendly, LGBTQ, and kink-aware therapists who provide in-person as well as online video therapy, group therapy, and workshops”

Zines, Media, and Public Articles

International Whores' Day Zine | internationalwhoresday.com

Zine by a group of sex workers for the NYC sex working community
[I Started Portland's Stripper Strike—We Still Have Serious Work to Do | Vogue](#) | bit.ly/3vBLRoS

[Social Work, Critical Feminisms, and Sex Work](#) | bit.ly/3rGkh1l

Youtube video of round table discussion on Social Work, Critical Feminisms, & Sex Work.

[Old Pro Project](#) | oldprosonline.org/oldproproject/

The #OldProProject seeks to elevate sex worker history through art and to strengthen community networks by funding and supporting collaborative projects. Our goal is to change the stories that are told about sex workers. We believe that by reclaiming our place in history, we can claim our human rights for generations past, present, and future.

Collateral Damage: Sex Workers and the Anti-Trafficking Campaigns | bit.ly/3Mg3Lgm

Academic Articles

Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Coercive Interventions With Sex Workers

Wahab, S., & Panichelli, M. (2013). Ethical and Human Rights Issues in Coercive Interventions With Sex Workers. *Affilia*, 28(4), 344–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913505043>

Sex worker affirmative therapy: conceptualization and case study

Katie Bloomquist & Eric Sprankle (2019) Sex worker affirmative therapy: conceptualization and case study, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 34:3, 392-408, DOI: 10.1080/14681994.2019.1620930

Decreasing Human Trafficking through Sex Work Decriminalization

Albright E, D'Adamo K. Decreasing Human Trafficking through Sex Work Decriminalization. *AMA J Ethics*. 2017 Jan 1;19(1):122-126. DOI: 10.1001/journalofethics.2017.19.1.sect2-1701. PMID: 28107164.

A decade of decriminalization: Sex work ‘down under’ but not underground

Abel, G. M. (2014). A decade of decriminalization: Sex work ‘down under’ but not underground. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 14(5), 580–592. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895814523024>

The Economic Consequences of Decriminalizing Sex Work in Washington, DC—A Conceptual Model

Srsic, A., Dubas-Jakóbczyk, K., & Kocot, E. (2021). The Economic Consequences of Decriminalizing Sex Work in Washington, DC—A Conceptual Model. *Societies*, 11(3), 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11030112>

I've Got to Make My Livin': Black Women's Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century ... - Cynthia M. Blair

Blair, C. M. (2010). Rage and rescue: African American anti-vice reform strategies. In *I've got to make my livin': Black women's sex work in turn-of-the-century Chicago* (pp. 187-222). University of Chicago Press.

Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains - Back Alleys and Backpages on Stitcher

Black, N., & Hill, T. (co-hosts), Calida, P., Morena, M., Jones, M., Wahab, S., & Federici, S. (2020). Back alleys and backpages [podcast episode]. *Lost Highways*. (60 minutes)

resources continued...

Resources for Social Workers

How to Ethically Serve Sex Workers - w/ Central Ohio Sex Worker Outreach | bit.ly/3vCM3Nj

Guidelines: Mental Health Professionals Working w/ Individuals Involved in the Sex Trade | bit.ly/3K7zGOo

The Toolbox: What Works for Sex Workers | bit.ly/3OyMCjK

Finding a Sex Worker Affirmative Therapist | bit.ly/37Ebsyb

NASW - Commercial Sex Workers and Social Work Practice | bit.ly/3k8LHbK

Donate!

Oregon Sex Worker's Committee | <https://donorbox.org/eugene-oswc-human-rights-commission>

PDX Stripper Strike | <https://www.ywcapdx.org/ripperstrike/>

feedback

Let us know what you think! Did you learn something new? Is there content from this zine you plan to incorporate into your practice? Maybe there is something you wish had been a little different. We would love to hear from you!

Take our 2-minute survey using the QR code or by going to:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/693J7JR>

