

Sex- workers

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My grandmother, who lived from 1890 to 1961, told her four daughters never to “look down on” prostitutes, as it is “thanks to those women that the streets are safe for the rest of us”. Wise words.

In many places, prostitutes are not only looked down on, but can be charged with criminal offences. That makes little sense when you think about it. Clearly, sex workers (most of whom are women, but this article can also apply to male sex workers) render a valuable service; if they didn't, nobody would pay them and the trade would not exist. Sex work is driven by demand for it, not by sex-workers themselves: if you wanted to abolish sex work, you would need to stop men wanting to pay for it, which is unlikely to happen.

By reducing sexual violence to all women, that service is valuable to society at large, not just to customers who use it. Any other profession rendering such valuable services to the community would command support and respect, especially in view of how dangerous and unpleasant it can be. Yet sex-workers are often disdained by both men and women. That is unfair and destructive.

Women who are obliged to work clandestinely are necessarily deprived of proper protection against violence and exploitation and access to things like adequate health care.

A number of countries, mainly in northern Europe, but also New Zealand, have recognised this and legalised or decriminalised sex work. They aim to improve sex workers' conditions and access to health and legal services, including to provide trafficked girls and women legal protections they need. But the results seem to be mixed; partly, it seems, because some legislation, well-intentioned as it is, is often poorly designed.

If you want to help sex workers, a good place to start would be to consider why people do sex work. There seem to be four main reasons.

They choose to, either as a full-time profession, or part-time to top up other earnings. They may do so as a permanent occupation, or temporarily, for example, to fund expensive tertiary studies.

They simply lack alternative career opportunities.

They are forced to by drug dependency.

They are trafficked or sold into prostitution - sometimes by their own families - thus adding a new dimension to “family values”.

Of these, only the first entails free choice, suggesting that most sex workers would rather do something else. Better access to education and technical training and

hence more fulfilling career opportunities, together with health and legal support would restore their some of choice in how to earn their living. Importantly, it would also reduce many human rights abuses and restore shattered lives. Also important is that it would lead to better pay and working conditions for voluntary sex workers by reducing competition from those forced or coerced into it.

It also helps to ask the women themselves what they would find helpful and practical. Because so much sex work is clandestine, even in places where it is legal, this can be hard to do. But it is not impossible, and would avoid some of the unintended consequences of well-intentioned but impractical rules. For example, a recent study by Humanity in Action of the Netherlands, cited rules stipulating a minimum legal age of 18 or even 21 for sex work. Reasonable as that sounds, as younger women are less likely to have thought through the consequences of sex work, it ignores the fact that men who prefer younger women and girls will not shift their preference, so that the effect would be simply to drive the trade in younger women and girls underground, hurting those victims by depriving them of the services and support they need. It also re-empowers pimps and traffickers, cuts off escape routes for trafficked girls and undermines the negotiating power of voluntary sex workers.

Sensible legislation and regulation of sex work are clearly minimum requirements of a civilised society. Yet even the best conceived laws to protect sex workers - and all the consultation in the world - will bring limited benefit so long as they are treated with contempt by the society they serve. Time to change how we think about sex work and sex workers.

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