

Reframe Health and Justice

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Right now, anti-trafficking conversations live in a false binary. If you read most of the articles on anti-trafficking efforts there is often an unquestioning, glowing review from one side and sex workers saying no on the other. Media coverage of anti-trafficking overwhelming lack any critical lens, and the desire to do something is, in and of itself, success. Any voices which point out the consequences of these intentions are portrayed as exclusively oppositional, as opposed to wanting more than thoughts and prayers.

What this ultimately obscures is the overlooked space that both honors sex workers rights as both complimentary and foundational to serious anti-exploitation work. But not only are sex workers rights and anti-exploitation work not in opposition they are integral to each other.

In every other industry which fights trafficking and exploitation, workers are understood as both the experts and the changemakers. In any basic understanding of anti-trafficking in industries from factory labor to domestic work, labor rights and economic justice frameworks are centered instead of criminalized. In many other places in the world, this is also true for the sex industry, and there are meaningful lessons that we can take to improve anti-exploitation and anti-trafficking efforts in the sex trade. While many of these efforts would face criminal penalty in the United States, there is much to learn about the power of organizing, self-employment and what happens when sex workers find human rights instead of violent rescues.

Worker-Owned and Co-operative Workspaces

Many of us have openly opined about what it would be like to be able to work in a space which is collectively managed and owned by the sex workers who also are employed there. Many of us were spurred into this conversation by Thailand's famed [Can-do bar](#).

Trafficking is the exploitation of another person through force, fraud or coercion. Addressing anti-trafficking work means creating anti-exploitation practices in workplaces, creating low-barrier pathways to accessing resources for marginalized communities, and improving access to justice (and not exclusively criminal legal system-based answers) for those who have been exploited.

When workers are more in control of their workplaces and working conditions, vulnerability to exploitation is reduced. Worker-driven solutions to employment concerns have been a foundational way of addressing exploitation in other areas of work. This is a natural outcome of co-operatively owned and operated businesses. Especially for industries that lack access to traditional labor enforcement mechanisms (like informal labor) or where labor rights enforcement is scarce (fucking everywhere you know Texas and Florida don't have Departments of Labor?), developing industry and workplace standards means changing culture instead of policy, making worker-owned co-operatives all the more important.

In Thailand, all aspects of sex work are criminalized, with frequent raids and arrests of sex workers. In 2015, the Empower Foundation, a sex worker-focused and led organization counted [53 separate raids](#) (GAATW). Despite this, the Can-Do Bar was established in 2006 by [Empower](#) to provide a message to the world about what a safe space can be for sex workers. The first floor of the bar is touted for a good atmosphere and affordable drinks, while the second floor operates as an art space which talks about the experiences of Thai sex workers. [The space is cooperatively owned](#), organized and run by sex workers and has been heralded as a model to address human trafficking by the United Nations Convention on Women.

Co-operative spaces in the sex industry are not entirely new the United States. In 2003 the already unionized [Lusty Lady moved to a co-operative model](#) for their club in the wake of management announcing they were going to close the club. Upon collectivization, workers began receiving an hourly wage, and worker-owners who bought in were able to split profits at the end of the year. The club has since closed, but its emblazoned in the story of workers rights for sex workers in the US.

Collective Organizing Against Economic Violence

VAMP is an India-based collective which has already changed the world. The organization, [which evolved out of SANGRAM in 1996](#), now boasts thousands of sex worker members, and decades of success in fighting the harm in every day lives of sex workers. When the organization began health and HIV/AIDS transmission was the most pressing issue in the day to day lives of its members and the organization began pushing back on the health systems which were refusing to serve sex workers, compromising their health.

When health conditions began to stabilize, VAMP shifted its focus to addressing violence and working conditions in the local area. While trafficking is an issue in many communities, trafficking and exploitation is widely contextualized as one form of violence experienced by workers at the hands of management, clients, and the state. Anti-trafficking work may be best situated within the scope of broader anti-violence work, a battle that VAMP was willing to take on.

The development of sex worker collectives was essential to pushing back against the varied perpetrators of violence that were impacting peoples lives. VAMPs collectives confronted exploitative brothel owners, violent clients and local political officials who were enacting violence against members. They became spaces, [said Meena Seshu of SANGRAM](#), that if you were in trouble you could go and theyd help resolve your problems, including like that of debt-bondage which is more on account of local caste-based money lenders than madams. The use of these collectives to address problems such as debt bondage, one of the common mechanisms for trafficking and exploitation, was instrumental in changing exploitative practices, and now it is the women who set the rates of interest and not the money lenders.

The use of collectives to confront problems is not an outlier but a common intervention for those who subscribe to transformative justice and community accountability mechanisms. To this day, VAMP harnesses the power of community accountability stemming from collective organizing to address exploitative practices against sex workers.

Organizing Harm Reduction and Mutual Aid

One of the most power anti-exploitation and anti-violence tools that is the backbone of sex worker organizing across the globe is the sharing of information and resources that come with sex worker organizing. Harm reduction and mutual aid are often applied terms for things like hanging out and talking and this is just what we do for each other that make community building life-saving. When sex workers get together to share bad date information, tips on how to improve or diversify their income streams, advice on which strolls are more lucrative and shielded from cops, sex workers are doing the life-saving work of harm reduction and mutual aid. While this often happens on couches or text threads, some organizations are able to provide a space for this kind of work to happen. [Stella](#), based in Montreal, Canada is one of those organizations and communities.

[Stella](#) provides a range of support and services for sex workers in the area, with an ethos of trying to meet sex workers where they are at and provide a space for sex workers to determine their own path. This comes in the form of direct support, information, and building the community to offer both of those things. [Butterfly](#) is a similar community-based organization which specifically organizes Asian migrant sex workers, a community both disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation and disproportionately impacted by anti-trafficking violence. Workers described that the organization had provided legal information on how to face police, offering emotional support and connecting them to other workers, supporting them to leave an exploitative workplace carefully so ther would not be trouble n the future, taking them shopping or to medical appointments, or, in [one workers] case, assisting with communication outside of detention, (GAATW, 186).

In a very real sense, these organization are providing the information to allow sex workers, especially migrant sex workers, the information needed to avoid exploitative situations, recognize exploitation, exit strategies to leave exploitative settings, and avoid the negative consequences of anti-trafficking efforts.

Collective organizing in the United States is the foundation of worker-led change, and a weighty criminal offense for sex workers. Information sharing and mutual aid easily falls within the purview of facilitation of prostitution or receiving the proceed of prostitution. A worker-owned collective would be brothel keeping. And if any of these forms of support use a listserv or website, SESTA/FOSTA would put you up for a maximum of 25 years in federal prison. Decriminalization wont end trafficking in the sex trade. What it would do is lift one of the major barriers to serious anti-trafficking efforts for sex workers that are grounded in economic justice, worker-driven solutions and human rights-based anti-trafficking work. There are incredible strides being made across the world to fight exploitation, and its long passed due that we are able to recognize, celebrate and maybe even implement them at home.

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