

Reframe Health and Justice

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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June 2nd is International Whores Day or International Sex Worker Day in commemoration of French sex workers acts of resistance against their criminalized living conditions in 1975. Forty-four years later, sex workers in the United States continue to advocate for better living and working conditions. Complete decriminalization of prostitution (both the seller and buyer sides) is often seen as the silver bullet that, once achieved, will restore the health and rights of all sex workers. Decriminalizing all sex work would better afford sex workers opportunities for safer working environments, protection and recourse against violence and exploitation, and financial stability.

However, proselytizing for policy change doesn't address the cultural elements that reinforce stigma and violence. As we have seen with the scaling back of some drug crimes, legislative immunity without reducing police presence or intervention in the lives of street-based people often means that people continue getting harassed or arrested by police for something different. The Sex Worker Outreach Project USAs [Good Samaritan Expansion Toolkit](#) outlines the handfuls of times when someone involved in the sex trade called for emergency support during an overdose expecting to be protected by Good Samaritan Overdose policies, only to be arrested for a solicitation-related offense. With an onslaught of new anti-homeless and anti-loitering charges passed across the United States in the last few years, the most marginalized sex workers will continue to experience the harms of criminalization even after sex work is decriminalized.

The sex worker rights movement, in partnership with the drug policy reform movement and LGBTQ liberation movement (to name a few), should move beyond decriminalization, and towards anti-criminalization and police reform. Anti-criminalization recognizes the ways in which policies are intrinsically connected and the vast system of carceral control that is hard for low-income people of color and queer and trans people to escape. We want decriminalization, but decriminalization is not enough; it can't be the end goal. Anti-criminalization supports systemic change inclusive of policy reform, divestment strategies that shift money from the prison industrial complex to social and harm reduction services, and police reform.

Another way to complicate conversations around and advocacy for sex work policy reform is to increase discussion and agreement on what we will accept on our way to decriminalization and anti-criminalization. Rights are often awarded gradually and only to some. What policies, regulatory advances, and programs can be instituted today that will have the greatest impact tomorrow and move towards the change we want to see in the world long-term? Examples of bricks that might be laid on the road to anti-criminalization are [immunity for reporting violence](#), [no condoms as evidence protections](#), removing anti-prostitution and [Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution zones](#), [pre-arrest diversion programs](#), interventions that are [sex worker-informed and operated](#), and modernizing HIV testing mandates as well as [HIV criminalization](#) statutes.

Finally, attention must be given not only to what we do and advocate for, but how we engage in this advocacy. The sex trade is an immense and diverse industry. It will be nearly impossible to institute policies and system change that serves everyone all at once. Who is doing what well and how can we all work together without cannibalizing each other? How can we hold each other up while still offering critiques of the others work and strategies? We won't all agree all the time, so how can we direct our outrage towards the systems that harm us rather than our own community members who might not agree with us? What does [healing justice](#) look like in the context of sex worker rights and intersectional activism? Without answering these questions, we might never achieve the kind of living and working conditions that our French predecessors were fighting for decades ago.

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