

HIPS

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

<https://filtermag.org/decriminalize-sex-work-trans-lgbtq/?fbclid=IwAR3HGC4YRBJI8pLE4U-G7XIxVZ4d99rMrylJ6rvIH8XnczETyTI10YJ8us>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Every day, people do what they need to do in order to survive. That is clearer today than ever before. For the first time in nearly a century, 40 percent of Americans who were making under \$40,000 a year are [out of work](#), many wondering where their next meal is going to come from or how they will keep the roof over their head.

For the LGBTQ+ community, especially trans women of color like myself, that is nothing new.

Many of us were shoved out of our homes as teenagers and discriminated against when seeking jobs. We turned to the only available resource we had left to survive.

Do we want to do it? Different people would answer differently, but for many, that's not a question we have the luxury of asking. For many of us, too, drug use is sometimes a vocational necessity, one of the few available resources we have to cope with the unimaginable discrimination and emotional distress of our day-to-day experiences. Harassment from police and too often, arrest remains one of the biggest occupational hazards.

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Any analysis of the drug war that fails to center the impact on sex workers would be very incomplete, and the impact on trans women of color is particularly acute. Black and Black Multiracial trans people participated in the sex trade at a rate of 40 percent, according to the 2015 [National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#) (NTDS), and Hispanic or Latinx trans people at 33 percent, with transfeminine respondents participating at about twice the rate of transmasculine respondents.

As a Meth Services specialist for [HIPS](#), one of two syringe exchange programs in the nation's capital, I know this all too well, and have seen first-hand how the criminalization of drugs, paraphernalia and sex work make my community less safe.

For one, police targeting and harassing participants who receive services from our needle exchange can deter them from getting what they need to prevent the spread of HIV and hepatitis C, as well as naloxone to reverse overdose and save lives.

Criminalization of drug use and sex work also does nothing to reduce the actual occurrence of these activities, as they are both needed on some level for survival. And of course it does nothing to address the structural inequalities, such as poverty and discrimination, that LGBTQ+ people again, especially trans women of color, are subjected to. Trans sex workers had experienced discrimination in the wider jobs market at a rate of 69 percent, found NTDS, and 83 percent had previously been subjected to experiences at school including harassment and assault.

Instead, criminalization just drives both sex work and drug use underground, making them riskier because they are done alone and in the shadows, increasing the incidence of assault and fatal overdose. And getting arrested for either during COVID-19 will inevitably expose us to unsafe conditions in jails.

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The fight for sex workers rights has always been an inseparable part of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Similarly, the movement to end the War on Drugs and repair its harms is intimately tied to the economic and health prospects of sex workers, especially those of color and those of trans experience.

During this unprecedented Pride Month, the first ever occurring during one of the worst global pandemics in history, it's vital to acknowledge the ways that trans sex workers of color have led and continue to lead important campaigns to save our own lives in places like New York and the District of Columbia.

We've been on the front lines, laying the groundwork to decriminalize sex work, decriminalize drug paraphernalia, expand harm reduction tools, and take back the power that lives in our own voices.

With COVID-19 currently wreaking havoc on justice-involved people, many police departments across the US are reducing the amount of arrests, especially for charges like drug possession, to minimize the frequency of contact between law enforcement and the public and redirect scarce resources to virus-related activities. These types of policies should extend further. Law enforcement should end raids, arrests, and prosecutions of people engaging in survival and gig economies during the pandemic.

More broadly, local governments could prioritize [mutual aid](#), a community-based resourcing strategy that prioritizes local, informal, inclusive support. The concept of mutual aid was pioneered by queer and trans activists long before the pandemic, but this framework is especially valuable in these current times, to ensure that everyone is cared for and that no one gets left behind.

Criminalization is the risk factor.

This turbulent moment may also create the opportunity for larger, systemic reform. There is nothing inherently more dangerous about sex work than any other profession. As long as sex work is illegal, millions of workers will be deprived of rights, dignity and autonomy, unable to access any public safety-net, and forced to make choices between personal security and financial stability.

Criminalization is the risk factor. A society that decriminalizes sex work, prioritizing compassion over condemnation, is one that is safer, healthier, and more just.

But this is a fight trans women of color cant win alone. With our allies, we must acknowledge that decriminalizing sex work and ending the War on Drugs are central to reaching true LGBTQ+ equality. Otherwise, a substantial portion of us the most disadvantaged among us will continue to be left behind.

This article is the second in a four-part series to mark Pride Month, exploring the intersections of drug policy and LGBTQ rights and produced in collaboration with the Drug Policy Alliance. (DPA has previously provided a restricted grant to The Influence Foundation, which operates Filter, to support a Drug War Journalism Diversity Fellowship.) The first article in this series was [How the Drug War Is a Tool to Criminalize LGBTQ+ People](#).

Photo of London Pride March by MaybeMaybeMaybe via [Wikimedia Commons/Creative Commons 2.0](#)

Jessica is a trans woman living in Washington, DC who has dedicated her time to advocating for people in the US and abroad. Working on numerous political campaigns and as a member of the Democratic National Committee, she has canvassed and campaigned for LGBTQ and economic equality. She received her bachelors in American Studies from George Washington University and has spend much of her academic life understanding power hierarchies, race relations, LGBTQ identity and state policies. Now at [HIPS](#), Jessica is working towards destigmatizing addiction and behavioral health, and reducing harm to DCs meth-using community.

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