

# Sex Workers Outreach Project

## Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

**<https://swopusa.org/blog/2017/07/10/moral-panic-monthly-super-bowl-anti-sex-trafficking-campaign-harms-minnesota-sex-workers/>**

## Campaign and Advocacy

*This is the first installment of our coverage of the moral panic surrounding Super Bowl LII set for February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Under the guise of anti-sex trafficking and safety, Minnesota campaign efforts reinforce harmful anti-sex work moral [and actual] policing of marginalized sex work communities and promote increased violence and stigma.

Throughout the Twin Cities, [anti-trafficking crusaders](#) continue to panic over the [myth](#) that sex trafficking increases in cities when large sporting events occur. Articles have been published in the *Star Tribune*, *City Pages*, *Pioneer Press*, *MPR News* and *TC Daily Planet* which have, unsurprisingly, failed to address the nuance of combating abuse in the sex industry, and instead have reinforced stereotypes of sex workers and myths about sex trafficking.

Over the past year, local law enforcement and non-profits launched a multi-faceted and multi-million dollar campaign to battle sex trafficking surrounding the upcoming Super Bowl by increasing awareness through advertisements and training, and increasing sting operations (i.e., posting fake advertisements on Backpage and arresting sex workers and buyers). Unfortunately, the only awareness that is being raised during this campaign is an acute awareness that NGOs and law enforcement have irrational and unwarranted fears of individuals who sell sex.

The outcome of this campaign has done nothing to impact actual sex trafficking or sexual exploitation. It has been used to justify more state-sanctioned police violence against people who sell sex. Sting operations have been conducted on multiple occasions throughout Minnesota, and individuals who sell sex have suffered the unjust and traumatic legal and social repercussions as a result. Police officers have a history of threatening, exploiting, and raping sex workers as part of their violent tactics to eradicate the industry. Furthermore, sex workers are dismissed and victim-blamed if reporting an assault to the police. For anti-trafficking campaigns to use police to allegedly *help* marginalized sex work communities is nonsensical and harmful.

The creation and implementation of this campaign did not involve the primary stakeholders in this issue: Current sex workers in Minnesota. There are peer-driven organizations like the [Sex Workers Outreach Project](#), [Red Umbrella Project](#), [HIPS](#), [PACE Society](#), and many others that serve the needs of sex workers, who argue that sex workers deserve basic human rights including the decriminalization of their work. Instead of consulting these groups, the campaigns supporters have attempted to rescue and simultaneously arrest and increase surveillance of the sex work community; who is viewed as little more than a community of victims who are unable to make decisions about their own bodies and labor. The International Labor Organization, The World Health Organization, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and many other social justice organizations all recommend that sex work be decriminalized and unjust laws against sex workers be eliminated in order to treat sex work as just that work and to help reduce exploitation using this de-stigmatizing lens.

This anti-sex trafficking campaign in Minnesota problematically conflates sexual exploitation with sex work. This further stigmatizes and harms those in the adult sex industry, and also diverts resources away from helping any actual victims of exploitation. If law enforcement were to focus solely on sex buyers (the Nordic Model), the approach of rescuing sex workers also does harm as it ignores the fact that sex workers do not want or need to be a rescue project, and it makes the selling of sexual services more difficult and dangerous if purchasing sexual services is criminalized. This sentiment reflects inaccurate assumptions that all sex workers are victims who are trafficked, coerced, or otherwise forced into selling sexual services, which is based on unfounded stereotypes regarding restrictive gender roles and antiquated notions of what people, namely women in this narrative, should do with their sexuality (i.e., not sell sex).

Like all labor industries, exploitation can exist within sex work. However, fighting sex-trafficking and sexual exploitation requires a surgeons scalpel, not a moral crusaders sword.

To better serve the health and safety needs of those working in the sex industry in our community, such campaigns must listen to the voices and needs of current sex workers who are impacted most by these policies. This must start with asking current sex workers what their needs are and how to increase access to material resources that are wanted, instead of increasing policing, surveillance, and arrest of sex workers and their clients.

**To take immediate action on this issue, contact [Star Tribune](#), [City Pages](#), [Southside Pride](#), [Pioneer Press](#), [MPR News](#), and [TC Daily Planet](#) to insist that they STOP censoring sex workers voices, STOP promoting moral panics which lead to state sanctioned violence and publish the narrative of those most impacted: sex workers.**

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