

Work

I've heard some of my white friends say that they're in prostitution because of the power. Well, for Black women it's for the money.

– Gloria Lockett¹

Prostitution is not productive. The only 'product' of the sex trade is an orgasm for a man. That's not productive, that's not 'work'.

– Sharon Hodgson, Labour MP²

Capital had to convince us that [housework] is a natural, unavoidable and even fulfilling activity to make us accept our unwaged work. In its turn, the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that *housework is not work*, thus preventing women from struggling against it, except in the privatized kitchen-bedroom quarrel that all society agrees to ridicule, thereby further reducing the protagonist of a struggle. We are seen as nagging bitches, not workers in struggle.

– Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework*

Is Work Good?

As a society, we obsessively valorise work as a key locus of meaning, status, and identity in our lives. At the same time, we struggle with shit jobs, falling wages, and the correct suspicion that what many of us do for money all day contributes nothing of real value to our lives or communities. Instead, we mostly just make profits for people further up the chain. In this confused and confusing context, to *do what you love* is deeply aspirational, a lean-in fantasy that gives an individual the illusion of control, a daydream of power in the office – and, in reality, a significant class-marker. The women interviewed in magazines about their morning routines are invariably early risers

not because they're cleaning the office in question, but because they're running it – and we are taught a moral lesson connecting their happiness to their productivity, to the accoutrements of their good life: the high-end gym, the smiling personal assistant, the architecture firm, the fresh flowers. They are here to show us: *work is good*.

The Erotic Professional and the anti-prostitution activist share the assumption that work is good. The Erotic Professional, as we saw in the last chapter, cultivates an image of professionalism and economic achievement, emphasising her specialised skills, equipment, and talent. Her narrative includes the status symbols associated with success: a large income, leisure time, a good education, home-ownership, and so on. Positioning herself within a context of luxury goods and conspicuous consumption is also an advertising strategy; it signals to wealthy clients that she is on their level, and that spending substantial sums on specialist forms of sex (or 'connection') is legitimate.

Along with sex positivity, the idea of the disabled client is often crucial to the politics of work that the Erotic Professional espouses. The disabled client, more than other men, typifies the figure of the *deserving* client. His need – seen as primarily a need for intimacy and connection rather than carnal passion – both professionalises and sanctifies the sex worker, portraying her in the soft, flattering light of a physical therapist or disability-rights advocate, and granting her work legitimacy through this lens. Not only does the Erotic Professional derive authentic pleasure from her work, but she does so within a framework of social value: who could deny such a man – depicted as desexualised, unthreatening and deserving – the intimacy and connection he craves? This is a patronising, ableist way to view disabled people. It is also an inadequate approach to sex workers' rights, which should hinge on workers' rights to safety, not on the purported social value of the work.

Through these fantasies and elisions, the Erotic Professional upholds mainstream notions of who deserves what. She agrees that *prestigious* work deserves respect and rewards – she merely wishes to expand our collective understanding of what prestigious work *is* to

include herself, with her high income, her BDSM vocational calling, or her therapeutic approach to the deserving disabled client. The Erotic Professional's political expression regularly includes the claim that the sex industry is amazing to work in, much more so than any other job. This line of argument makes the purpose and demands of the sex workers' rights movement unclear: what problem are we trying to fix, if the situation is already perfect?

In a sense, anti-prostitution feminists implicitly agree with the Erotic Professional. They, too, think that the question of whether sex work is work should primarily be fought on the terrain of whether sex work is *good* work. They merely disagree that commercial sex could ever fall into the category of 'good work'. They therefore position work *in general* as something that the worker should find fulfilling, non-exploitative, and enjoyable. Deviation from this supposed norm is treated as evidence that something cannot be work. 'It's not work, it's exploitation' is a refrain you hear again and again.³ One feminist policymaker in Sweden told a reporter, 'Don't say *sex work*, it's far too awful to be work.'⁴ Awfulness and work are positioned as anti-thetical: if prostitution is awful, it cannot be work.

Anti-prostitution feminists and even policymakers often ask sex workers whether we would have sex with our clients if we weren't being paid. Work is thus constantly being re-inscribed as something so personally fulfilling you would pursue it for free.⁵ Indeed, this understanding is in some ways embedded in anti-prostitution advocacy through the prevalence of unpaid internships in such organisations. Equality Now, a major, multimillion-dollar anti-prostitution organisation, instructs applicants that their eight-to-ten week internships will be unpaid (adding that 'no arrangements can be made for housing').⁶ Such posts are common: Ruhama advertises numerous volunteer roles that could easily be paid jobs. In 2017, a UK anti-slavery charity came under fire in the national press for advertising unpaid internships.⁷ In 2013, Turn Off the Red Light, an Irish anti-prostitution NGO consortium, advertised for an intern who would not be paid the minimum wage. The result of these unpaid and underpaid internships is that the women who are most able to build careers in the women's sector – campaigning and setting

policy agendas around prostitution – are women who can afford to do unpaid full-time work in New York and London. In this context, it is hardly a surprise that the anti-prostitution movement as a whole has a somewhat abstracted view of the relationship between work and money.

Work may be mostly positive for those who can largely set the parameters of the conversation, like high-profile journalists. However, this does not describe reality for most women workers or workers in general (or even many journalists).^{*} Most workers suffer some unfair conditions in the workplace and would not, as a rule, do their jobs for free. Work is often pretty awful, especially when it's low-paid and unprestigious. This is not to say that this state of affairs is good, or that we should accept it because it is normal, but nor is it useful to pretend that work is generally wonderful and exclude from our analysis the demands of workers whose experience does not meet this standard.

As with other jobs that women do, sexist devaluation of 'women's work' erases the emotional labour and hustle that constitutes the bulk of sex workers' actual efforts, reducing our job to simply being available for penetration at all times. Indeed, one of the key ideas used to treat prostitution as 'not-work' is the idea that we are simply holes: that we are offering up *purchased consent*. 'A man paying a woman for sex does so on the premise that he can do what he likes with her body in the time he has purchased it', writes one UK feminist.⁸ Although perhaps easy to distractedly nod along to, commentary such as this reveals itself, upon closer inspection, to be perpetuating what it claims to condemn. A massage therapist who – like a sex worker – sells time and services rather than a physical product is not doing so 'on the premise that [a client] can do what he likes with her

* Sexual harassment and racism remain rife in the media, and journalists higher up on the chain are notorious for stealing ideas and credit from younger and more marginalised journalists, particularly women, people of colour, and working class and disabled people. The prestige of journalism jobs can be used against early-career journalists, who face being told – explicitly or implicitly – that if they won't do this job or stay quiet about that problem, there are a hundred others who will.

body in the time he has purchased’, and to make such a statement about a massage therapist would be obviously horrifying. That it can be claimed about sex workers shows how deep the belief goes that women who sell sex give up all bodily boundaries: it is a belief shared – and mutually reinforced – by those who assault us and those who imagine themselves our defenders.

Not only are such claims misogynist, they are also absurd. Consider common sex-industry acronyms such as OWO (‘oral without’, i.e., a blowjob without a condom) in adverts posted by workers and reviews posted by clients. The existence of such terminology speaks to a *shared expectation* that sex workers have boundaries to which they expect clients to adhere. After all, if boundaries become meaningless after money changes hands, why do these adverts and reviews bother to convey – in sex-industry jargon created specifically to communicate these details – that Mia sells oral sex with a condom while Jade offers ‘oral without’? Mia or Jade’s specifications around condom use would become irrelevant if their consent had actually been ‘purchased’.

Just as forcing a massage therapist to give you oral sex would constitute sexual assault, because she is *not* giving you the ‘right’ to her body when she sells massage services, forcing a sex worker to (for instance) have sex without a condom constitutes rape *precisely because* the sex worker has *not* sold the right for a client to use her body ‘as he likes in the time he has purchased it’. In this way, a sex worker is no different from an actor who knows the difference between performing a love scene and having her breasts groped after the cameras have stopped rolling, or the movie’s producer pressuring her to give him a ‘massage’ in his trailer. If we are serious about safety for sex workers in a post-Weinstein era, we will extend to them the same faith we give to film stars in their ability to differentiate between sexual touch at work and sexual touch that – even *in the workplace* – is assault.

Our ability to understand such assaults as rape depends on *not* understanding sex work as purchased consent, wherein sex workers hand over control of our boundaries and bodily rights with the exchange of cash. As sex worker Nikita told the 2017 Annual General

Meeting of Amnesty International UK, 'Part of believing me when I say I have been raped is believing me when I say *I haven't been*.'⁹

We live in a culture where it is assumed that to penetrate someone sexually is intrinsically an act of dominance and to be sexually penetrated is to be made subservient. This means that the mistreatment of sex workers begins to seem natural. If we who sell sex are already degraded through penetration, then the further degradation of being written about as garbage cans, flesh holes, sperm receptacles, orifices, or blow-up dolls is seen as fact rather than as actively reproducing and perpetuating misogynist discourse – and all in the name of feminism.

In being candid about bad workplace conditions, sex workers fear handing a weapon to political opponents; their complaints about work paradoxically become 'justification' to dismiss them as not 'real workers'.¹⁰ As one prominent UK feminist joked, 'Ever thought about having multiple penises shoved up you as a career? ... The longer you do it the more your earning potential decreases, but they say there's a fetish for everything!'¹¹ The joke is that sex workers 'mistakenly' think that what they do is work, even when that work can be sexist and ageist. Of course, if being subject to sexist and ageist discrimination at work excluded someone from the category of worker, *most* older women workers would be excluded: the gender pay gap increases with age.¹² If the only 'real' worker is one who suffers no workplace oppression or exploitation, then *all* organising for workers' rights becomes superfluous.

Some workers are lucky enough to have good pay, meaningful work, and autonomy, but most of us feel the sharp edge of exploitation in some way. Perhaps your boss took a cut of your tips, or forced you to work on your partner's birthday or during your grandfather's funeral. Perhaps you've started to resent the way your time-sheets always seem to entail an extra fifteen minutes of unpaid work at the end of the day, or how long you spend on your commute – time that's not only uncompensated but actively *expensive*. You're paying to get to work, and the company you work for is absorbing the benefit. In an important sense, waged work *is* exploitation. In a capitalist economy, bosses generate profits by paying you less for your labour

than the money they make when the product of your labour is sold. It is not reasonable to assume that any kind of work – including sex work – is generally good.

Is Work Bad?

In the Parliament building, the small group of sex workers who had traipsed through the rain to meet with a Scottish government minister were asked to speak briefly about why we had entered prostitution. We went around the table. One single mother with several children explained that she got into sex work to support her family; another explained that, as an undocumented migrant, sex work was one of the few jobs available to her; a third explained that when she came out as trans and started her transition, she lost her mainstream job. A man talked about the homophobia he had experienced in other workplaces.

The minister was not impressed. She observed that we all seemed to have started selling sex in order to *get money*, in a tone suggesting not only that she was slightly incredulous, but that selling sex in order to earn an income seemed terribly mercenary to her. She contrasted our stories with those of sex workers who use drugs – *they* weren't in prostitution for economic reasons, were they?

Of course, sex workers who use drugs certainly *are* in sex work for economic reasons – either to get money with which to buy what they need (like housing or drugs) or as part of a direct trade for these same things. In the cacophony that followed the minister's question, as everybody tried to speak at once, this central point was lost.

People sell sex to get money. This simple fact is often missed, forgotten, or overlooked. This can be because sex workers are stigmatised to the extent that their motives are pathologised; it becomes inconceivable that people could do something considered so strange and terrible for the same mundane, relatable reasons that govern everybody else's everyday lives.* (Doubly so if they are sex workers who use

* The nineteenth-century French physician Louis Fiaux said prostitutes in his studies displayed 'the psychology of a child, the inattention of the young savage, the ... emptiness of a prehistoric brain still bathed in animality'. C.

drugs.) Sometimes the centrality of money is more deliberately hidden because to do so serves a political purpose. If a right-wing politician downplays the extent to which sex work is about generating a decent income and instead emphasises the extent to which it is driven by a 'criminal underworld', he can sidestep awkward questions about the connections between prostitution, poverty, and government policy – and align anti-prostitution measures with populist 'tough-on-crime' approaches. For example, Texas has some of the most extensive laws in the United States when it comes to criminalising pimps, traffickers and criminal gangs – but the state legislature has repeatedly failed to fund services for sex trafficking victims, let alone fund programmes that would meaningfully address poverty and failures in the child-welfare system.¹³

Pathologising sex workers as unable to make 'good' decisions, rather than seeing them as people largely motivated by familiar, mundane needs, can lead to disastrous consequences. In 2013, a Swedish family court ruled that a young mother named Jasmine did not know what was best for herself; the court saw her sex work not as a flexible job that gave her a livable income while caring full-time for her children, but as a form of 'self-harm'.¹⁴ The judge ruled that as she was engaged in self-harm, that she was unable to care for her children, and disregarded her warnings that her ex-partner was violent. Her ex was awarded child custody. When she visited him in order to see the children, he stabbed her to death.

Dismissing Jasmine's prosaic, material reasons for doing sex work was key to the state's fatally inadequate response to her needs. The belief that sex workers aren't making – and can't make – good decisions leads us not to a feminist utopia, but to coercive, punitive modes of 'reform'.

Downplaying the practical and economic dimensions of prostitution also does some ideological heavy lifting for anti-prostitution feminists. For example, Catherine MacKinnon writes, 'If there were no buyers, *there would be no sellers*, namely traffickers.'¹⁵ MacKinnon's

Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century France*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, 211–12.

misidentification of ‘people who sell sex’ as ‘traffickers’ erases the fact that people who sell sex might be driven by economic need – a need which will not be solved by attempting to eradicate prostitution through criminal law. After all, if we forget for a second that people go to the streets because they need money, we needn’t grapple with what will replace the income they lose – or what the implications will be for their safety when they desperately try to recoup that income.¹⁶

Remove money from the conversation and sex workers seem bizarre or broken. As one academic writes, ‘The notion that prostitutes have distinctive personal biographies has a long and unhappy history: male myths about “the psychopathology of the prostitute” persist’ – and, in the twenty-first century, these myths have a feminist veneer.¹⁷ The sex worker, it is stated or implied, is not capable of understanding her own best interests and is instead acting out her childhood trauma. Anti-prostitution campaigner Kat Banyard, for example, argues that assuming a history of childhood sexual violence among sex workers ‘makes sense’ because ‘common consequences of childhood sexual abuse include difficulty asserting boundaries’.¹⁸ Sex working survivors have pushed back on this attempt to pathologise their lives. As Lori Adorable writes, ‘It’s not because of some kind of permanent “damage” or trauma-reenactment compulsion. It’s because [childhood sexual abuse] survivors often lack family support.’¹⁹ In other words, people who have fled an abusive family home have a compelling need to avoid returning to it and may sell sex as a strategy to avoid such a return. This is a material need, not a pathology.

‘Economic necessity is the main imperative for women becoming involved in prostitution’, according to UK Home Office researchers.²⁰ Academic Julia Laite writes, ‘Several late-nineteenth-century studies found that up to half of the women selling sex in Britain had been domestic servants, and that many had hated it so much they had willingly left service.’²¹ Laite quotes a 1920s sex worker asking an arresting police officer, ‘What will you give me if I do give this up? A job in a laundry at two pounds a week – when I can make twenty easily?’²² Writing in the 1980s, sex worker Nickie Roberts echoes these perspectives:

Working in crummy factories for disgusting pay was the most degrading and exploitative work I ever did in my life ... I think there should be another word for the kind of work working class people do; something to differentiate it from the work middle class people do; the ones who have careers. All I can think of is *drudgery*. It's rotten and hopeless; not even half a life. It's *immoral*. Yet as I say, it's *expected* of working class women that they deny themselves everything ... Why should I have to put up with a middle class feminist asking me why I didn't 'do anything – scrub toilets, even?' than become a stripper? What's so liberating about cleaning up other people's shit?²³

Through the lens of economic need, people's reasons for engaging in sex work reappear not as aberrant or abject, but as a rational survival strategy in an often shitty world. As another set of researchers note, women 'are more likely than men to be unemployed, to be under-employed and to be low paid'; in the face of these obstacles, 'prostitution can be the more attractive option'.²⁴

Dudu Dlamini, a sex worker in South Africa, says,

I had already been in Cape Town cleaning people's fucking bloody houses. I'd done lots of washing for people in different houses. I'd wake early in the morning and open the windows, clean, cook, make porridge for their children, take their children to school, and do their ironing just for a place to sleep, for a plate of food, not even a cigarette on top of it. So I was *done* with that.²⁵

A migrant woman in the UK who sells sex in a flat says, 'This job is better; the money is good and quick. The cleaner job was really hard work and no good money. I still say I'm a cleaner, I have to lie, but I don't want to be one.'²⁶

Race and disability are key factors in sex work demographics. Pluma Sumaq writes that, for many people of colour, 'Prostitution is not what you do when you hit rock bottom. Prostitution is what you do to stay afloat, to swim rather than sink, to defy rather than disappear.'²⁷ An anonymous Māori mother writes,

My body isn't capable of working a 40-hour week, nor allowing me to become qualified at something that pays well. I'm disabled from

working, and I'm part of a society that doesn't take care of people like me, people like my daughter [who is also disabled] ... Being a sex worker means I can work when I am able and have days off when I'm not ... I can spend lots of time caring for my daughter.²⁸

Like other marginalised groups, LGBTQ people are over-represented in sex work.* Discrimination, rejection, and abuse – both at home and in wider communities – increase their precarity and vulnerability in a homophobic and transphobic society, leaving prostitution as one of the remaining viable routes out of destitution. Trans women in particular often find that formal employment is out of reach. Increased school drop-out rates, lack of family support, and lack of access to adequate healthcare (including the means to finance gender-affirming treatment) leave them exposed to poverty, illness, and homelessness. One-quarter of homeless youth in London are LGBTQ, and of that group nearly seventy per cent were forced out by their families.²⁹

It is very difficult to prevent anyone from selling sex through criminal law. Criminalisation can make it more dangerous, but there is little the state can do to physically curtail a person's capacity to sell or trade sex. Thus, prostitution is an abiding strategy for survival for those who have nothing – no training, qualifications, or equipment. There are almost no prerequisites for heading out to the streets and waiting for a client.† Survival sex work may be dangerous, cold, and

* 'A larger proportion of the transgender community is involved in sex work compared to the proportion of the population of cisgender women who are sex workers. This is indicative of the often marginalized status of transgender people in society. Deeply-embedded prejudiced attitudes inhibit LGBTI people from accessing education, thus impacting their access to livelihood options and housing. These individuals also tend to have less access to justice and to social support services due to stigma and institutionalized discrimination.' Amnesty International, 'Amnesty International policy on state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of sex workers', POL 30/4062/2016, 26 May 2016, [amnesty.org](https://www.amnesty.org), 5–6.

† Many sex workers cite other positives to opting to work on the street – for instance, the sense of community or camaraderie, and complete flexibility. Street-based sex work has the lowest barriers to entry of any form of sex work. For instance, if your drug use, mental health, or caring responsibilities make sticking to a routine or turning up to pre-arranged shifts difficult, you can

frightening – but for people whose other options are worse (hunger, homelessness, drug withdrawal) it's there as a last resort: the 'safety net' onto which almost any destitute person can fall. This explains the indomitable resilience of sex work.

For some anti-prostitution campaigners, concerns about the sex industry stand in place of a wider critique of capitalism. 'Why is the Left in favour of the free market only when it is women's bodies being bought and sold?' asks Julie Bindel.³⁰ This question either misunderstands or misrepresents the argument. What the Left actually favours is *labour rights*, to redress the balance of power between employers and workers. In a capitalist society, when you criminalise something, *capitalism still happens in that market*. When we are asked, in a capitalist society, to choose between criminalising commercial sex and decriminalising it, we are not offered an option for the 'free market' to *not* govern the proceedings. Look at the United States, where the use, sale, and distribution of drugs is, for the most part, criminalised. If, in Julie Bindel's analysis, it can't be a capitalist market because it is criminalised, are those activities therefore happening on a communist or socialist basis? Maybe the US drugs market operates as a gift economy?

In fact, as the US drugs market devastatingly illustrates, capitalism is in many ways at its most intense in criminalised markets. This is because in criminalised markets there can be no regulations, no workers' rights. With commercial sex criminalised, *there can be no workers' rights*, whereas with commercial sex decriminalised, people who sell sex can access labour law. The left supports the decriminalisation of sex work because the left supports workers having rights.

The high prevalence of marginalised people in prostitution is seen as evidence for its predatory strangeness, but in reality, it reflects the normalised, systemic failures of mainstream society. This reflection is so sharp it makes people uncomfortable – but rather than

work around that through street-based sex work. You don't need to pay for a space to work in or specialist equipment (for example, BDSM-related kit or club-specific outfits). As such, people often opt for street-based sex work when they have very few resources to spare, as a way of surviving catastrophes such as homelessness.

seeing that the source of their discomfort is the economic inequalities that produce this situation, they 'other' the problem by locating its source in prostitution. A similar dynamic can be seen in punitive responses to homelessness, such as fining people for begging or rough sleeping and installing 'anti-homeless spikes' to prevent them from using doorways for temporary shelter. An Oxford city councillor gave too-explicit an account of the underlying reasoning when he said, 'I would like to go to some of these rough sleepers and say, "You are a disgrace." I don't think it would do any good, but they ought to have more respect.'³¹ It's not hard to detect a commonality here with responses to street-based sex work, not least in how so many policy advocates emphasise decreasing the *visibility* of street-based sex work (rather than, say, increasing sex worker safety or decreasing poverty) as a key metric of success. The visibility of homelessness and street-based sex work makes people angry with those who are sleeping rough or selling sex outdoors.

To say that prostitution is work is not to say it is *good* work, or that we should be uncritical of it. To be better than poverty or a lower paid job is an abysmally low bar, especially for anyone who claims to be part of any movement towards liberation. People who sell or trade sex are among the world's least powerful people, the people often forced to do the worst jobs. But that is precisely why anti-prostitution campaigners should take seriously the fact that sex work *is a way people get the resources they need*. Instead, this is airily dismissed – losing a bad job, we're told, is no big deal.³² Losing jobs is how we achieve social change, we're told. Anti-prostitution feminist Meghan Murphy writes, 'I suppose we shouldn't try to stop the oil industry because people will lose jobs? It isn't super progressive ... to defend harmful practices lest people lose jobs.'³³ Those who make these arguments imagine 'changing society' through taking something away. (Of course, many of these jobs are not directly analogous to sex work: oil workers, bankers, and nuclear scientists are not already at the bottom of the social pile.) But people with relatively little are right to be fearful when their means of survival is taken away. British miners in the 1980s didn't strike on the basis that mining was the most wonderful job – they were simply correct

in their belief that, once mining was taken from them, Thatcher's government would abandon their communities to desperate poverty. Likewise, few sex workers would object if you sought to abolish the sex industry by ensuring that they got the resources they need *without having to sell sex*.

Instead, however, one Labour politician cites what she considered to be sex workers' 'low' income to argue that reducing it even further could not be a real concern.* It is *when* people's incomes *are* low that reducing them is a terrifying prospect; it is when jobs *are* bad that workers most need workers' rights.

Outsiders often think that selling sex must be a pretty horrible job, and many sex workers would agree. However, these sex workers may locate the problem not in *sex* but in *work*. Striking workers rely on their ability to refuse wages: the temptation to break the strike increases as your money runs out. In any negotiation, the most power is held by the side which is most able to walk away. We see this asymmetry of need within sex work – as anti-prostitution feminists often like to point out, no man *needs* to buy sex; it is ultimately a recreational activity. Sex workers, however, *do* have a need. As Dudu Dlamini says, 'What it's all about is money ... What am I gonna eat with my kids? My kids are hungry now. I need quick cash ... I felt,

* When Scottish Labour politician Rhoda Grant sought to criminalise the purchase of sex in Scotland in 2012, she faced criticism from sex workers regarding fears over loss of income and resulting poverty. She responded by citing research showing that the average sum earned by a sex worker in an encounter with a client was thirty-seven pounds, 'dispelling the myth' that sex work is a lucrative career. The obvious implication is that this is already such a 'low' amount that reducing sex workers' income could not be a serious concern, but thirty-seven pounds per client – which might be twenty minutes to an hour's work – is *not* an obviously low sum to women otherwise earning the minimum wage, at the time, of £6.19 an hour (the research focuses on highly marginalised women working in a deprived part of England, so the prospect of even that wage was probably not available to them). Ms Grant – who earns £67,000 a year – and her doubly oblivious approach to money, poverty, and work in many ways exemplify carceral feminist thinking about economics and the sex industry. See R. Grant, 'Proposed Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex (Scotland) Bill (2): Summary of Consultation Responses', Scottish Parliament, 2013, www.parliament.scot.

“I will go. I will survive. And I will come back with money. I will take care of my kids.”³⁴ In an important sense, clients are not the demand but the *supply*; for sex workers, clients represent the supply of resources into our lives.

We have witnessed clients using internet forums to organise a boycott against escorts in their area, forcing them to all drop their rates. The clients are, of course, easily able to forgo the luxury of commercial sex – and, as a result, their ringleader knows that the escorts are likely to yield, as he and his buddies can outlast the workers indefinitely. The person selling sex *needs* the transaction far more than the buyer does; this need makes the sex worker vulnerable. In the same way, a street-based worker suffering a lack of business after a police crackdown becomes desperate, and desperation makes them less able to refuse unfair demands. Compromise means capitulating to the client’s fears about avoiding the police; if he wants to do business in an unlit park at midnight to stay hidden, then he can make that demand or simply leave without paying. People are attracted to the concept of a Nordic-style law that criminalises only the sex buyer, and not the prostitute – but any campaign or policy that aims to reduce business for sex workers will force them to absorb the deficit, whether in their wallets or in their working conditions. As a sex worker in the Industrial Workers of the World observes,

I find that how easy, safe, and enjoyable I can make my work is directly related to whether I can survive on what I’m currently making ... I might be safer if I refused any clients who make their disrespect for me clear immediately, but I know exactly where I can afford to set the bar on what I need to tolerate. If I haven’t been paid in weeks, I need to accept clients who sound more dangerous than I’d usually be willing to risk.³⁵

When sex workers speak to this, we are often seemingly misheard as defending some kind of ‘right’ for men to pay for sex. In fact, as Wages For Housework articulated in the 1970s, naming something as *work* is a crucial first step in refusing to do it – on your own terms. Marxist-feminist theorist Silvia Federici wrote in 1975 that ‘to demand wages for housework does not mean to say that if we

are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite. To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it.’³⁶ Naming work *as work* has been a key feminist strategy beyond Wages For Housework. From sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s term ‘emotional labour’, to journalist Susan Maushart’s term ‘wife-work’, to Sophie Lewis’s theorising around surrogacy and ‘gestational labour’, naming otherwise invisible or ‘natural’ structures of gendered labour is central to beginning to think about how, collectively, to resist or reorder such work.

Just because a job is bad does not mean it’s not a ‘real job’. When sex workers assert that *sex work is work*, we are saying that we need rights. We are not saying that work is good or fun, or even harmless, nor that it has fundamental value. Likewise, situating what we do within a workers’ rights framework does not constitute an unconditional endorsement of work itself. It is not an endorsement of capitalism or of a bigger, more profitable sex industry. ‘People think the point of our organisation is [to] expand prostitution in Bolivia’, says ONAEM activist Yuly Perez. ‘In fact, we want the opposite. Our ideal world is one free of the economic desperation that forces women into this business.’³⁷

It is not the task of sex workers to apologise for what prostitution is. Sex workers should not have to defend the sex industry to argue that we deserve the ability to earn a living without punishment. People should not have to demonstrate that their work has intrinsic value to society to deserve safety at work. Moving towards a better society – one in which more people’s work *does* have wider value, one in which resources are shared on the basis of need – cannot come about through criminalisation. Nor can it come about through treating marginalised people’s material needs and survival strategies as trivial. Sex workers ask to be credited with the capacity to struggle with work – even to hate it – and still be considered workers. You don’t have to like your job to want to keep it.