

# Understanding the Complexities of Sex Trafficking and Sex Work/Trade

*ten observations from a sex worker activist/survivor/feminist*

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version 1.2

1. Start from the assumption that women's (and other people's) experiences in the sex trade are diverse and complicated, just like women's experiences in the institution of marriage.
2. Sex trade is often one of the few means of survival employed by members of marginalized communities. Criminalizing or taking away means of survival without replacing it with other, more preferable options and resources (as judged by people who engage in this activity) threatens the lives of marginalized people. If, on the other hand, we could actually provide more preferable options and resources, there is no need to criminalize or take away the option of trading sex.
3. The presence of consent does not imply fairness of the transaction, because consent can exist under deeply problematic relationships of power. Consent does not imply that one is solely and individually responsible for all consequences of the act performed consensually.
4. There is nonetheless a meaningful distinction between consensual and unconsensual sexual transactions because it helps us to recognize modes of intervention that are helpful rather than counter-productive to those involved. People who engage in consensual sex trade are harmed if the transaction is stopped, while those who are part of unconsensual acts are harmed if the transaction isn't stopped.

5. Work under neoliberalistic capitalist economy is often exploitative and degrading. Treating sex work "just like any other work" is inadequate when "other work" are often performed under unsafe or exploitative conditions. Selling and buying of sex as commodities can be exploitative and degrading, as are selling and buying of labor, health, and safety in the neoliberalistic capitalist marketplace.

6. Legalization or decriminalization of prostitution will not end State violence against people in the sex trade. There are other laws, such as those concerning drugs, immigration, and "quality of life" crimes, that are being used against them. Arguments over how the law should classify prostitution (legalizing, decriminalizing, criminalizing, Swedish model, etc.) eludes realities of communities that are targeted by State as well as societal violence.

7. It is undeniable that the mainstream pornography and sex industry reflect and perpetuate women's lower status in relation to men. But so do mainstream media and workplaces—sometimes in more harmful ways.

8. It may seem theoretically plausible to eliminate sex trafficking by ending the demand for commercial sexual services. But in reality, any artificial reduction of demand through increased policing would be immediately followed by a decline of price, which would in turn create

more demand again. "End demand" policies have a devastating impact on the women's bargaining power to negotiate for more money and safer acts, putting their safety and health at greater risk.

9. Many "experts" and "spokespersons" for the anti-trafficking movement are social, fiscal, and religious conservative extremists who have promoted anti-welfare, anti-immigration, anti-gay agenda. These very policies break down families and make women and children vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Feminists and human rights activists must choose our allies.

10. We cannot fight sex trafficking effectively without partnering with sex workers, people in the sex trade, and their advocates. All over the world, it was workers organizing among themselves that have challenged and transformed exploitative and abusive working conditions, not police officers or politicians. In addition, people working in the sex industry have access to insider knowledge that need to be incorporated into any successful campaign to combat sex trafficking and other human rights violations within the industry.

*Please send your feedbacks to: emi@eminism.org*