



Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights

Sex Worker Myths vs Reality

Many myths surround sex work and the sex industry. However, most do not stand up to factual examination.

Myth: There is no good reason for anyone to go into or remain in sex work.

Reality: For many people, sex work is their best or even their only opportunity to earn enough to support their families. Like all people, sex workers need empowerment through access to health care, job training, education, an end to discrimination, and opportunities to make a living wage in more than one way. They also face social stigma that can prohibit their movement into other forms of labor.

Myth: Most sex workers are coerced or forced into doing it.

Reality: No evidence supports this claim. Millions of people are involved in sex work worldwide. In a July 2006 study, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that current estimates of the number of people trafficked into any kind of work, including sex work, were questionable: "The accuracy of the estimates is in doubt because of methodological weaknesses, gaps in data, and numerical discrepancies. For example, the U.S. government's estimate was developed by one person who did not document all his work..."¹ Sex workers are individuals whose reasons for engaging in sex work – and leaving it – are personal, economic and social – as complex as anyone's reasons for involvement in any type of work.

Myth: Allowing sex work to happen without criminalizing it will encourage human trafficking and coercion into the sex industry.

Reality: Giving sex workers more rights would likely discourage trafficking into sex work. For example, in Thailand, many people support extending labor and social security rights to sex workers on grounds that such policies would promote health and safety protections, allow labor unionization to improve working conditions, and expose and reduce the number of both coerced and underage sex workers. In India, organized sex workers work to identify minors and trafficked persons in their brothels and seek help for them.²

Myth: Demand for sex work drives human trafficking.

Reality: People are susceptible to the lies and tricks of human traffickers because they are seeking better lives, a way out of poverty, joblessness and discrimination. Although the numbers are questionable,³ the International Labour Organization estimates that of the 2.45 million people trafficked internationally and internally between 1995 to 2004, the majority were coerced into involuntary servitude in farming, domestic house work, restaurant work, sweatshops etc. About 43 percent of cases involved forced commercial sex.⁴ In fact, the GAO report states that the U.S. State Department has claimed that legalized or tolerated prostitution nearly always increases trafficking, "but does not cite any supporting evidence."⁵

Myth: Focusing law enforcement efforts on the customers of sex workers will stop the commercial sex trade.

Reality: It is not the number of customers but economic trends and social conditions such as unemployment and a shortage of living wage opportunities that determine the number of sex workers at any given time. Addressing basic human needs for education, equal opportunity and a realistic array of economic options would help to ensure that no one who enters sex work does so because of trickery or coercion. Studies of a 1998 law in Sweden that criminalizes customers found it pushed sex workers underground, where they are invisible to the law, subjected to more violent situations and more susceptible to being sold on the black market.⁶

Myth: Sex workers are dangerous to the general population because most have diseases – they transmit HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

Reality: Sex workers are often more knowledgeable about sexual health – and practice safe sex more often – than the general population. They often act as sexual health educators for their clients and should be mobilized, not demonized, in the struggle to control HIV/AIDS. Where sex workers are not treated as outsiders or criminals, they are able to pursue health care that does not stigmatize them or violate their human rights. When sex workers know their human rights will be enforced and respected, they can and do seek health care and promote condom use by clients, safer working conditions and protection against violence. Where they are stigmatized, denigrated, jailed and forced underground, they live in the shadows without health care or legal protection.

Myth: Raids of brothels are the best way to help trafficked sex workers.

Reality: Raids of brothels typically lead to the arrest, detention, incarceration and deportation of people caught there. In many places, those caught in a brothel raid are more likely to be abused by the authorities than helped.⁷ Most “rescue” efforts assume that all sex workers are trafficked. Empowering sex workers to identify and assist people who have been coerced is the most effective way to combat trafficking into sex work. Solutions to trafficking are complex. Pulling people out of brothels neither “saves” nor “rescues” them. Civil society needs to address the factors that allow people to be lured into trafficking situations.

1 United States Government Accountability Office, “Human Trafficking: Better Data, Strategy, and Reporting Needed to Enhance U.S. Antitrafficking Efforts Abroad,” (Washington, D.C.: 2006) p. 2.

2 Ditmore, Melissa. “In Calcutta, Sex Workers are Organizing”. In *Affective Turn*, Patricia Clough and Jean Halley, eds. Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

3 United States Government Accountability Office, “Human Trafficking: Better Data, Strategy, and Reporting Needed to Enhance U.S. Antitrafficking Efforts Abroad,” (Washington, D.C.: 2006) p. 12.

4 Ibid., p. 12.

5 Ibid., p. 25.

6 As documented in “Purchasing Sexual Services in Sweden and the Netherlands, Legal Regulation and Experience,” a report by a Working Group on the legal regulation of the purchase of sexual services, published by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Police Affairs, October 8, 2004; Don Kulick, “Four Hundred Thousand Swedish Perverts”, *GLQ*, 11:2, pp 205-235. Duke University Press, 2005; Elizabeth Bernstein in “The Meaning of the Purchase,” *Ethnography*, 2(3) 389-420.

7 Empower Chiang Mai, “US Sponsored Entrapment,” *Research for Sex Work* 8, (2005) 25-27.