



Salil Shetty
Secretary General
Amnesty International

Dear Mr. Shetty,

The Sex Workers Project applauds the recent move for Amnesty International to support the human rights and dignity of those in the sex trade by supporting decriminalization policies. As an organization with fourteen years of experience providing services and support to those individuals engaged in the sex trade across the spectrum of choice, circumstance and coercion, we strongly support full decriminalization of sex work both as a policy that both respects human rights and as a step towards supporting victims of human trafficking into the sex trade.

Human trafficking is a serious problem that deserves serious reflection and solutions rooted in the lived experiences of those in exploitative conditions. No one should be forced to engage or remain in sex work by coercion or circumstance, and human trafficking laws and policies should clearly reflect that human trafficking into any form of labor is a crime. To this end, policies must aim to reduce or eliminate trafficking by empowering the disenfranchised and directly addressing structural disadvantages that allow trafficking to thrive. Valuing the self-determination and autonomy of individuals is at the core of those efforts. The Sex Workers Project supports anti-trafficking policies that are committed to human rights and calls for, among other things, empowerment of even the most marginalized people; the right to live free from violence and discrimination; the right to freely choose gainful work, and the right to enjoy healthy working conditions; the right to privacy and the right to exercise autonomy and personal freedoms without government interference; the right to control one's health and body, including sexual and reproductive freedom; and equality of opportunity for people to enjoy the highest attainable level of health. Anti-trafficking efforts must be firmly rooted in human rights and confront the structural, polycausal underpinnings of exploitation.

As criminalization is one of the pillars which keep people in exploitative conditions and unable to seek support when trying to escape those situations, we commend Amnesty International for considering the endorsement of decriminalizing sex work and focusing their efforts on eliminating the structural factors that result in people working in the sex industry due to coercion or circumstance. Amnesty International has a history of focusing on the complex and structural marginalization that many other human rights organizations face, and this is another example in this steadfast commitment to human dignity. Understanding the way that criminalization creates a population targeted for violence, exploitation, stigma, and discrimination is a key factor to trying to address the resulting abuses. This policy is a bold move towards forcing us to take stock of lived experiences, and respond to the issues that trafficked persons and sex workers alike as causing concrete harm. But if we do not listen to those most impacted by these debates, we will only contribute to the harm faced, often disproportionately by those most marginalized.



We recognize, though, that this is still a very difficult position for many. Even for those who believe that sex work is inherently harmful, criminalizing sex work creates harm in and of itself and only adds to the hardship of those working in the commercial sex industry. Criminalization creates stigma. Criminalization allows authorities to harass, intimidate, and exploit sex workers and individuals who are profiled as sex workers. Criminalization entrenches people in poverty and forecloses the ability of people to leave the sex trade. To protest the decriminalization of selling sex is to insist on further harming sex workers, including those trafficking victims who are forced into sex work. It values the voices of those who wish to have conversations above the experiences of those who will face the consequences of those conversations, and drives a stake through the heart of basic human dignity for those in the sex trade.

Likewise, criminalizing buyers of sex and those who live off of the proceeds of prostitution harms sex workers, including those trafficked into commercial sex. Criminalizing non-coercive facilitators of sex work puts sex workers at risk by making it harder for them to hire security, drivers, or to work together due to the fear of prosecution. Criminalizing acts like “living off of the proceeds of prostitution” puts the family and friends of sex workers at risk of being criminalized for sharing expenses with a sex worker. This leads to further stigmatization and isolation of sex workers. Additionally, these laws are most often used to harass the poorest and most marginalized in the community. Criminalizing buyers, but not sellers, pushes sex workers to engage in riskier practices in order to protect clients from criminalization. Criminalizing buyers shrinks the market for commercial sex without providing alternative avenues to make a living wage for sex workers. This pushes sex workers to engage in riskier practices in order to maintain their income. These pitfalls are most acute for victims of trafficking who are forced into sex work and have no choice to seek other forms of employment.

The Sex Workers Project acknowledges that people enter into commercial sex for complex and varying reasons. We are committed to the dignity and human rights of those in the sex trade. We seek to end the marginalization and institutional harms which force those to enter and remain in the sex trade under exploitative conditions. We seek to end the stigma which silences individuals and creates conditions of isolation and vulnerability. We seek to end the discrimination which keeps people from accessing resources, including other forms of work. We fight daily to lift the voices of those in the sex trade and center them in conversations on the issues directly impacting their lives. We fight to end the violence, shame, marginalization and dehumanization that those in the sex industry face. We celebrate having another partner in that fight by supporting policies which would combat these issues head on.

In Solidarity,
The Sex Workers Project