



Working Group on Sex Work and Human Rights

Sex Work: What's In a Name?

It has nothing to do with being "politically correct"

It is a truism that labels shape opinions. They can also block new opinions. If our goal is to foster understanding, compassion and policies based on human rights for a group of people who have long been ostracized, condemned, ridiculed, discriminated against and scorned – even by many who use the services of that group's members – we need to think about the names we call those people.

Are the labels dismissive? Do they dehumanize the people involved, allowing us to treat them as "other," as non-people, as objects without needs or human sentiment? Do they mask hypocrisy in our attitudes? Do they actually *perpetuate* discrimination? If so, a new name is needed.

The historic civil rights movements of our recent past have rejected countless offensive labels that come instantly to mind – those referring to people of color, women, religious minorities, the disabled, the aged, and virtually every ethnic and national group on earth. Replacing dehumanizing insults with simple descriptive and informative terms requires everyone to talk about those people as human beings.

Sex workers were the first to use the terms *sex work* and *sex worker*. The terms have been adopted by numerous international health, labor and human rights organizations, including the United Nations and its affiliated agencies.

The term *sex worker* is neutral, descriptive and informative without being judgmental. It recognizes sex work as a reality, whatever the speaker's opinion about the work itself. It does not distinguish by gender, race, ethnicity or creed. It allows the possibility of the worker's dignity and ability to make decisions. Most of all, it affirms the humanity of the person.

Such a simple change is far more than "politically correct" – it can reshape attitudes. Such a reshaping is critical if we are to arrive at policies and practices that are realistic, humane and genuinely helpful to society and to the people concerned.

Urban Justice Center

123 William Street, 16th floor, New York, NY 10038
Tel: (646) 602-5690 • Fax: (212) 533-4598