

# Assumptions used to discredit sex workers

a briefing  
from SCOT-PEP

*Content note: as part of unpicking these assumptions around sex workers, this briefing note has to describe them. As such, this briefing contains reference to the ways that racism, experience of mental illness, drug use and surviving sexual violence (including childhood sexual violence) are used against sex workers.*

**There are many assumptions made about sex workers. These assumptions have the effect of discrediting sex workers' capacity to speak meaningfully about their lives, and about policy. This discreditation most seriously affects more marginalised sex workers, with the effect that their voices are often lost from policy discussions that directly impact them – policy discussions which would most benefit from hearing their insight and expertise. This briefing note aims to ensure that when these assumptions about sex workers arise in discussions, participants have the tools that they need to resist the push towards simplistic or binarist thinking that these stereotypes inevitably create, as well as making conversations safer for marginalised sex workers who might otherwise be shut out or discredited by these assumptions.**

## **ASSUMPTION #1:**

### **All/most sex workers are drug addicts.**

The group of sex workers who founded SCOT-PEP included sex workers who used drugs. Drug-using sex workers (and sex workers who have previously used drugs) are an integral part of our community. However, rather than affirming that drug-using sex workers are central to our community, this assumption disempowers the people it describes by seeking to imply that further criminalisation – and rigid or coercive forms of 'support' – are needed to compel people who sell sex and use drugs into what's deemed to be their 'best interests'. In fact, people who use drugs and sell sex deserve services which respect and uphold their self-determination (which may include support with reducing or changing drug use, sex work, or both). Support or healthcare which people have not entered into voluntarily is ineffective and can even be harmful (for example by making people afraid to access services or disclose their needs); it can also be a violation of human rights.

Furthermore, by positioning drug-using sex workers as self-evidently simply in need of 'rescue', people who invoke this assumption are objectifying drug-using sex workers, choosing to speak for them rather than allowing them to speak for themselves, and deliberately erasing the fact that people who sell sex and use drugs can articulate their own needs and demands. Sex workers who use drugs are at the intersection of two forms of stigma and criminalisation – they are experts on the harms that stigma and criminalisation bring. As drug-using sex worker Kitty says on the way in which drug-use is used to discredit: *"If you're a 'bad' sex worker they take away your agency but if you're a 'good' one you're not representative and you harm all women... Patriarchy maintains itself by a similar system of catch 22s"*<sup>1</sup>.

It is a particularly gruesome irony that this assumption is invariably invoked as part of an argument for further criminalisation (often in the form of the Swedish model), despite the reality that drug-using sex workers can themselves already capably attest the extent

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<sup>1</sup> Outcasts Among Outcasts: Injection Drug-Using Sex Workers in the Sex Workers' Rights Movement, pt: <http://titsandsass.com/outcasts-among-outcasts-injection-drug-using-sex-workers-in-the-sex-workers-rights-movement-part-1/>

to which criminalisation (whether of drug use or of sex work) profoundly exacerbates harms, and does not prevent the criminalised activity from occurring<sup>2</sup>. Put simply, if people are selling sex in order to pay for drugs, and they are unhappy with that situation, the criminalisation of their income source does not help them to solve their issue.

Finally, words like ‘addicts’ are stigmatising and out-dated. Since the 1960s, the World Health Organization has recommended replacing the word ‘addiction’ with words like ‘dependency’, which can express a range of severities<sup>3</sup>. International drug-user rights group INPUD asks for people to “refer more neutrally to ‘people who use drugs’, ‘drug users’, or ‘people with drug dependencies’, to focus on describing people”, rather than “reducing [drug-users] to a pathologised identity”<sup>4</sup>.

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## ASSUMPTION #2:

### Sex workers were abused as children.

Some sex workers are survivors of childhood violence. Their experiences and needs are important, and they deserve sensitive and non-judgmental support on their own terms. Instead of engendering support, the way that this assumption is deployed is often harmful and hurtful to sex workers who are survivors, and makes the spaces in which this assumption is prevalent (whether that’s policy discussions or support services) unsafe for sex working survivors.

For example, this is often used as an ‘obvious’ argument in favour of criminalisation, as if arguing for criminalisation requires no more explanation than simply voicing this assumption<sup>5</sup>. Instrumentalised in this way, this stereotype speaks over sex working survivors, and implies that they are too damaged to make their own decisions as adults. It silences sex

workers, by requiring that people disclose a history of sexual violence in order to be considered a ‘representative’ sex worker, while simultaneously co-opting the experiences of anyone who does disclose this into an argument for criminalisation – regardless of what they themselves are actually saying. As sex worker Eithne Crow writes, “*being a survivor is used against people to invalidate their decisions. Think about that for a moment. Not only has someone had to survive abuse in the first place, it’s now being used against them to discredit what they are saying about their own lives*”<sup>6</sup>. Sex working survivor Tara writes, “*it’s about the institutionalized idea that if I’m not too privileged to speak than I must be too [messed up] to speak and if that’s not it there’s probably another reason you can find not to listen*”<sup>7</sup>.

It is possible that there are a disproportionate number of people selling sex who are survivors – of this kind of violence, or other kinds. As sex worker Lori argues, that is not because experience of abuse in childhood damages people’s capacity to make ‘good decisions’: instead, it’s a testament to the lack of support that our society offers survivors<sup>8</sup>. Selling sex is something people can do if they have little else – for example, if they cannot avoid homelessness by returning to live temporarily with their parents. Our response to that should not be to try to take that last option away from them, but to expand their options. As L, a survivor and former sex worker writes, “*If we had legislation and social programs attacking poverty, drug criminalization, mental health issues, violence against women and other ‘push’ factors as aggressively as prohibitionists currently hope to attack the sale and purchase of sex, then there wouldn’t be much of a sex industry to worry about... Ending demand, even if it could be done, would not address the factors that pushed me into prostitution*”<sup>9</sup>.

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2 When Sex Work and Drug Use Overlap; Harm Reduction International; p6: [http://www.ihra.net/files/2014/08/06/Sex\\_work\\_report\\_%C6%924\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ihra.net/files/2014/08/06/Sex_work_report_%C6%924_WEB.pdf)

3 [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/terminology/who\\_lexicon/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/terminology/who_lexicon/en/)

4 <http://www.inpud.net/en/news/open-letter-russell-brand-end-war-drugs>

5 For example, see: <http://www.object.org.uk/the-prostitution-facts>

6 <https://eithnecrow.wordpress.com/2015/06/18/arguing-rights/>

7 I’m Katha Pollitt’s Highly Educated Leftist – and a Trafficking Victim, <http://titsandsass.com/im-katha-pollitts-highly-educated-leftist-and-a-sex-trafficking-victim/#comment-83533> (comment)

8 “It’s not because of some kind of permanent ‘damage’ or trauma-reenactment compulsion. It’s because CSA survivors often lack family support”: Lori Adorable, January 2015, <https://twitter.com/LoriAdorable/status/555432872853901313>

9 A Tunnel, Not A Door: Exiting Conditioned, Generational Sex Work: <http://titsandsass.com/a-tunnel-not-a-door-exiting-conditioned-generational-sex-work/>



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**ASSUMPTION #3:****Most sex workers like it/  
most sex workers hate it.**

Conversations about the safety and rights of people who sell sex are frequently derailed as the participants try to put a specific percentage on the proportion of sex workers who love or hate sex work (or want to 'exit' or feel 'empowered'). If people want to leave sex work, they should be given support to do so, but as a tool for analysing whether sex workers deserve rights and safety, this conversation is not meaningful. We shouldn't require workers to feel a certain way about the work that they do, or want to leave it, or want to stay in it forever, as a precondition of (or disqualification from) them receiving labour rights, justice and safety.

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**ASSUMPTION #4:****Most/all sex workers are  
trafficked or have pimps.**

The idea of traffickers or 'pimps' is partly about sex workers' fear – and experience – of abusive managers, but when used by people who don't sell sex, is also an expression of anxieties that are deeply racialised. The language of traffickers and 'pimps' creates a situation where violence can be blamed on a racialised 'other', and avoid implicating more familiar structures within society and the state. As Emi Koyama writes, "[the spectre of the trafficker] is very scary for parents, yet is more comforting than a more accurate and nuanced view of the world which says we must pay attention to the impact of poverty, racism, sexism, neoliberalistic global capitalism and its assault on the public safety net, homophobia and transphobia, and unjust immigration laws"<sup>10</sup>. This is not to let abusive individuals off the hook (sex workers have an obvious interest in not doing so), but the focus on them to the exclusion of context and complexity leads to 'solutions' which worsen harm for those who are most at risk of it. As Hadil

Habiba writes, "A relationship exists between messaging about people in the sex trade as victims and the violence that we experience. When our experiences get portrayed as only horribly violent and we get represented as only powerless, then no one is surprised when violence does happen, and no one asks for our input about how we want to end violence, because 'everyone knows' what happens to us"<sup>11</sup>.

Many sex workers do have abusive or exploitative managers, because criminalisation means sex workers are unable to hold managers to account, or access labour laws. Unsurprisingly, this makes workers very vulnerable to abuse. D writes, "I really hate the line that pimps would benefit most from decriminalisation... I'm in no position to let the police know about what happened to me. Criminalisation and stigma led me to him"<sup>12</sup>.

Migrant sex workers (especially undocumented migrants) are particularly vulnerable to workplace exploitation due to the double layer of criminalisation that they are subject to; once as sex workers (which may entail the criminalisation of their manager, colleagues, landlord, partner or friends), and next for their migrant status, which may make them fear detainment, deportation, and the criminalisation of people around them – including family and friends – under anti-trafficking laws. Research among migrants who sell sex in London found that "instances of exploitation happened almost exclusively to people who were undocumented at the time"<sup>13</sup>, suggesting that punitive anti-migrant policies are a key factor in creating the context in which migrant workers become vulnerable to abuse. Rather than increased 'anti-trafficking' related crackdowns on migrants, which exacerbate the factors which make migrant sex workers vulnerable, the people who the researcher spoke to – which included migrants who sold sex in conditions which would be considered trafficking – asked for the full decriminalisation of sex work and routes for undocumented

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10 War On Terror, War on Trafficking, Emi Koyama, [http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/trafficking\\_web%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/trafficking_web%5B1%5D.pdf) p31

11 <http://www.usprisonculture.com/blog/2013/04/16/guest-post-the-ugly-truth-ad-campaigns-about-the-sex-trade-will-always-fail/>

12 "I really hate the line that pimps would benefit most from decriminalisation. That's bullshit. Pimping's illegal here but I'm in no position to let the police know about what happened to me. Criminalisation and stigma led me to him": D, August 2015, <https://twitter.com/desiredxthings/status/63118158444596224>

13 [www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations\\_of\\_the\\_Services\\_Offered\\_to\\_Migrant\\_Sex\\_Workers\\_in\\_Haringey\\_and\\_Enfield\\_by\\_SHOC\\_2011\\_p16](http://www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations_of_the_Services_Offered_to_Migrant_Sex_Workers_in_Haringey_and_Enfield_by_SHOC_2011_p16)



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people to become documented<sup>14</sup>. Caring about people who are trafficked or ‘pimped’ entails listening to their experiences and insights, rather than using their situation as a prop to argue for policies which they say will harm them.

In addition to conjuring up racially-charged spectres of ‘pimps’ and traffickers, this assumption relies on racialised stereotypes about women of colour and migrant sex working women. Koyama notes that nineteenth century ‘anti-trafficking’ panics focused particularly on “Asian women in brothels... under the premise that they must be sex slaves, because they were considered hyper-submissive and therefore incapable of exercising agency”<sup>15</sup>. Modern claims that “80% of women involved in off-street prostitution [in London] are foreign nationals” are followed up by the immediate assumption that most of them are “likely to have been trafficked”<sup>16</sup>. This contrasts with the findings of research that actually asked migrant women about their experience of selling sex, which found that most intended to migrate for sex work, and that “most women viewed their best interest in being able to work and be paid – and treated appropriately – within the sex industry”<sup>17</sup>. As one migrant sex working woman says, “If this was a story of man setting out on an adventure... he would be the hero. But I am not a man. I am a woman and so the story changes. I cannot be the family provider. I cannot be setting out on an adventure. I am not brave and daring. I am not resourceful and strong. Instead I am called illegal, disease spreader, prostitute, criminal or trafficking victim”<sup>18</sup>.

Bad laws and policies make migrants who sell sex disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation, but to simply assume that they are trafficked speaks to a troubling tendency to disregard the voices and resilience of migrant sex workers (especially women), and propagating this simplistic trope without listening to the insights of those most affected leads to policies that harm those they are

ostensibly supposed to help. As X:Talk, a UK organisation run by and for migrant sex workers says, “mainstream anti-trafficking campaigns that reduce women to only passive victims – under the control of organised crime or of cruel men – produces and justifies deportation of migrant sex workers and increases the criminalisation and exploitation of workers in the sex industry”<sup>19</sup>.

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#### **ASSUMPTION #5:**

#### **Most people who sell sex do so on the street.**

Street-based sex workers are profoundly harmed by criminalisation and stigma, and as such should be centred in our analysis. For obvious reasons, street-based sex workers are more visible than sex workers who work in other ways, and this visibility is ramped up by newspaper picture desks which invariably choose a pair of disembodied legs on a street corner to illustrate articles about sex work – rendering street-based sex workers the archetypal image of ‘the prostitute’. However, although exact numbers are unclear (for instance, no one knows how many sex workers there are in the UK), it is generally accepted that street-based sex workers comprise between ten and twenty percent of the sex working population of the UK. The number of sex workers who work outdoors has been steadily declining almost everywhere in the world since the turn of the millennium, due to the widespread accessibility of mobile phones and the internet enabling many previously street-based sex workers to work differently (although some sex workers prefer street-based work<sup>20</sup>). Policymakers should be wary of the claimed ‘success’ of legislation in ‘reducing the numbers’ of street-based sex work – primarily because aiming to ‘reduce numbers’ does not prioritise safety – but also because such claims fail to take account of obvious developments like the increased availability of technology like mobile phones.

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14 [https://www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations\\_of\\_the\\_Services\\_Offered\\_to\\_Migrant\\_Sex\\_Workers\\_in\\_Haringey\\_and\\_Enfield\\_by\\_SHOC\\_2011\\_p17](https://www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations_of_the_Services_Offered_to_Migrant_Sex_Workers_in_Haringey_and_Enfield_by_SHOC_2011_p17)

15 War on Terror, War on Trafficking, Emi Koyama, [http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/trafficking\\_web%5B1%5D.pdf](http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/trafficking_web%5B1%5D.pdf), p32

16 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmhaff/23/23we19.htm> paragraph 1.5

17 [https://www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations\\_of\\_the\\_Services\\_Offered\\_to\\_Migrant\\_Sex\\_Workers\\_in\\_Haringey\\_and\\_Enfield\\_by\\_SHOC\\_2011\\_p14](https://www.academia.edu/3791072/Evaluations_of_the_Services_Offered_to_Migrant_Sex_Workers_in_Haringey_and_Enfield_by_SHOC_2011_p14)

18 The Honeybringer [documentary film], 16.33: <https://vimeo.com/69901249>

19 [http://www.xtalkproject.net/?page\\_id=18](http://www.xtalkproject.net/?page_id=18)

20 <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1744977/pdf/v081p00201.pdf>, p202



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**ASSUMPTION #6:****Sex workers are women.**

In most places in the world, most sex workers are women. Work that is associated with women (for example, childcare) has often not been recognised as work. Not recognising work associated with women as real work lead to the exploitation of women workers (and workers of any gender doing 'women's work'), because if something isn't work, it isn't subject to labour laws and trade union support (domestic workers are a good example of this). This is one of the reasons why the struggle of sex workers to gain recognition as workers – and thereby fight abuse and exploitation – is a feminist struggle. However, not all sex workers are women! All over the world, sex work is done by people of all genders, including men (cis<sup>21</sup> and trans), nonbinary people, and two-spirit people. In some parts of the global south, it is fairly common for male sex workers sell sex to female clients who are in the country as tourists<sup>22</sup>. Jurisdictions that criminalise homosexuality have a larger number of male sex workers, as criminalisation means gay and bisexual men are more socially excluded, and people who might otherwise have had non-commercial relationships seek out discretion through payment.

Implicit in the idea that sex workers are all women is the assumption that women who sell sex are heterosexual and cis. Many women who sell sex are lesbian, bisexual or queer – their clients are mostly men, but can also be people of other genders. As a sex worker from the Scarlet Alliance says: “[*having sex with*] men for money doesn't make me less queer!”<sup>23</sup>

Trans women often sell sex due to transmisogyny in other workplaces, and – in countries where healthcare is not free – the need to find a way to pay for gender-related healthcare. Janet Mock has written about the collective bonds among sex working trans women: “*watching these women every weekend*

*gathered in sisterhood and community, I learned firsthand about bodily autonomy, about resilience and agency, about learning to do for yourself in a world that is hostile about your existence”*<sup>24</sup>. Trans women are often erased in conversations about sex work: for instance, data about HIV among trans women is missing due to these women being wrongly included in statistics regarding ‘men who have sex with men’<sup>25</sup>. Anti-prostitution campaigns often foreground white cis women as sympathetic victims to be ‘rescued’, while trans women – especially trans women of colour – are not seen as sympathetic or ‘innocent victims’, and so bear the brunt of the increased police attention that these campaigns bring, including harassment and police violence.

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**ASSUMPTION #7:****Sex workers are ‘damaged’, ‘crazy’, or mentally ill.**

Some sex workers are mentally ill. People can have pre-existing mental health problems when they start sex work, or sometimes people develop mental health problems while doing sex work. Sometimes sex work can be a factor in causing or exacerbating mental health issues – or it can be helpful in terms of how people manage or recover from their illness.

The assumption of trauma or unhappiness can be used to create a safe space. For example, rape crisis centres assume that service-users may be struggling in some way, and as such create a calm, non-judgemental environment. In contrast, assumptions about mental health are used to dismiss sex workers – not to create a safe space. This quote from a social worker at the Stockholm Prostitution Unit is a good example: “...to be frank, who wants to buy a sad whore? I mean prostitution is about playing a role, I am being what you want me to be, I am horny, I am happy... they would never get any buyers if they were crying in the streets right, but it's all an act”<sup>26</sup>. This is dismissive

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21 ‘Cis’ means ‘not trans’, akin to the meaning of ‘heterosexual’ compared to ‘homosexual’.

22 <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2013/08/meet-middle-aged-women-who-are-britains-female-sex-tourists>

23 Every Ho I Know Says So, Scarlet Alliance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTdBLCo1Qk>, 2mins 49seconds.

24 <http://janetmock.com/2014/01/30/janet-mock-sex-work-experiences/>

25 <http://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/PolicyBrief-TG%289%29.pdf>, p2

26 Swedish Abolitionism as Violence Against Women, Dr Jay Levy, [http://www.sexworkeropenuniversity.com/uploads/3/6/9/3/3693334/swou\\_ec\\_swedish\\_abolitionism.pdf](http://www.sexworkeropenuniversity.com/uploads/3/6/9/3/3693334/swou_ec_swedish_abolitionism.pdf), p3



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and judgemental, and having to use services which perpetrate this kind of stigma is in itself bad for sex workers' mental health. As a sex worker in Sweden describes: "...they were only making things worse. So when I go home from them, I was crying, and I was feeling like, 'Oh my god, what a bad dirty people I am'... I'm not a bad girl... I'm not a bad person, I just needed some help"<sup>27</sup>.

Sex workers with mental health problems do not deserve to have their experiences co-opted into an argument for further criminalisation, not least because criminalisation (and the stigma that criminalisation entails) is actually a key factor in exacerbating mental illness among sex workers. Research found: "a large part of their relatively poor mental health had to do with the negative manner in which the sex trade is depicted in our society. The illegalities of the sex trade and its dishonourable public reputation tended to negatively affect how workers feel about themselves and what they did for a living"<sup>28</sup>. This is reflected in what sex

workers in criminalised settings report – for example, in Sweden, sex workers state that stigma against them has intensified, and "they feel they are being treated as incapacitated persons because... their wishes and choices are not respected"<sup>29</sup>.

As a sex worker within SCOT-PEP says, "Sometimes the work I do does harm my mental health, but the issue of sex work and mental health is never brought up by people who want to ask us for our suggestions for solutions as to what could help. They're using it against us, to imply we're 'too crazy' or 'too broken' to know what's best for us. When the work I do harms my mental health, the 'solution' isn't to advocate for more criminalisation of my workplace – that just makes me more precarious and gives me less power in my interactions with my clients or manager." Sex workers who are living with mental illness are capable of speaking for themselves, and should not be used as a simplistic trope or as de facto argument for criminalisation.



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<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p6

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.safersexwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/DispellingMythsReport.pdf>, p70

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.government.se/sb/d/13420/a/151488>, p34