

10 WAYS TO BE A GREAT ALLY TO SEX WORKERS

1. Introduction 2. Who Are Sex Workers' Allies? 3. 10 Ways To Be A Great Ally To Sex Workers
4. Getting Started As An Ally 5. Resources

THIS INFOSHEET IS PART OF A SERIES OF 5 PRODUCED BY STELLA IN COLLABORATION WITH ALLIES TO EDUCATE AND MOBILIZE COMMUNITIES AROUND LEGAL ADVOCACY AND DECRIMINALIZATION OF SEX WORK.

1. The Basics: Decriminalization of Sex Work 101
2. Sex Work and the *Charter*
3. Challenging Prostitution Laws: *Bedford v. Canada*
4. Language Matters: Talking About Sex Work
5. 10 Ways to Be a Great Ally to Sex Workers

2

WHO ARE SEX WORKERS' ALLIES?

Sex workers' allies can be found in all places: we have allies that organize with us during marches, demonstrations and lobbying efforts, those who support us from behind the scenes, others who provide services or resources to us and others, still, who do research about us or with us. Some of us have allies in colleagues, clients, birth and chosen families, lovers, partners and others we are intimate with.

Sex workers sometimes have difficult relationships with allies who may not always recognize the power they hold in their own lives or within our movement. Other could-be allies may be directly or indirectly promoting stereotypes and practices that lead to discrimination and structural violence against sex workers.

Service providers, health care professionals, researchers, academics, feminists and people in positions of social power can make great allies to sex workers and have an important role to play, as do our allied movements.

Allies who are part of health care systems can help sex workers access non-discriminatory and relevant health services. Other service providers can ensure that our needs and realities are reflected in the services they offer – this includes how, where and when services are offered. Researchers and students are important to us as they have the power to disseminate our realities, educate their peers, and their work can eventually have impacts on policy, practice and others' research agendas. Feminists and other marginalized groups can help make space for sex workers in allied movements. Our families, friends and loved ones can be supportive to us when we experience discrimination. All of these allies have common interests with sex workers and play a role in our efforts to improve our working and living conditions.

1

INTRODUCTION

No social movement is without the support of its allies. As a social movement that prioritizes and builds sex worker leadership, we would not be successful without the recognition, energies, resources and hard work of our allies and allied movements. This means we need to constantly reflect on the role of our allies within our movement and within our lives. These reflections are always important, and even more so in a context when we need strength, support and resources to mobilize around legislative reform. They are most important because legislative reform does not erase the historical oppression and continued stigma and discrimination against sex workers, and therefore our need to continue to build allyship.

3

10 WAYS TO BE A GREAT ALLY TO SEX WORKERS

There are many ways that you can show your support as an ally (and it doesn't involve you becoming a sex worker! We like you just the way you are). Your support is important to us as individuals and to the sex worker rights movement as a whole.

Sex workers have been writing about and to allies for a long time. There are multiple sources of information such as infosheets, websites and videos that have been created on how to be a good ally to sex workers. We have inspired ourselves from these writings and provide a list of insightful resources for further reflection. *ener à une réflexion plus approfondie.*

1. LANGUAGE MATTERS : CONSIDER THE WORDS YOU USE

Stereotypes, assumptions and inaccurate representations impact how others see us, talk about us and engage with us. They also impact how we see and feel about ourselves. The words used when speaking about sex work matter – whether in media, legal argumentation, everyday conversations or anytime you talk or write about sex work.

The *stigma* surrounding sex work shapes the way people talk about sex workers. Words are powerful; they can be used to hurt, degrade and shame us. For example: slut, whore, ho, skank and hooker are words often used to negatively describe sex workers. Some sex workers find it empowering to reclaim these words. Every sex worker identifies differently. Some of us call ourselves whores, prostitutes or sex workers. We love being asked what language may be most appropriate depending on the setting.

Any kind of degrading talk about sex work or jokes at a sex worker's expense – regardless of who is (or isn't) listening – reinforces stigma, which makes the world a harder and more dangerous place for sex workers to live and work.

"Be cognizant of the significance of language. Familiarize yourself with the appropriate terms and use them conscientiously and respectfully and avoid derogatory words or images."

-Prostitutes of Ottawa, Gatineau, Work, Educate and Resist (POWER), The Toolbox

For more discussion around language see Stella's InfoSheet #4, Language Matters: Talking About Sex Work: <http://www.chestella.org/docs/StellaInfoSheetLanguageMatters.pdf>

2. PROVIDE RELEVANT SERVICES

Being a great service provider means knowing how to adapt your services to your clientele. We have a lot of experience with this as sex workers – some clients want to spend a lot of time in discussion, others want to spend a lot of time in the bedroom! Clients may communicate what they are looking for and often we tailor our service to each client's needs. Similarly, we need the services we access to be relevant to our needs. Some service providers are very focused on our sex work. For example, we may access a therapist because we want to talk about a friend we are concerned about. Or we may go to the doctor to consult about our itchy elbows, not our vaginas. There are many trainings and resources created by sex workers for other professionals that would be useful to help make your services relevant and popular with sex workers.

"If you offer help, I want it to address my immediate needs! Not something that will help me 5 years from now. For instance, if I don't have food, a place to sleep or my fix, then scholarships for school have very little relevance in my life"

-SWOP USA, How to Be an Ally to Outdoor (Street-Based) Workers

"Therapists recognize diverse ways that individuals involved in the sex trade experience work and construct sex trade work vis à vis the rest of their life. For some individuals, sex trade work may be a major source of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction and harm) and an important identity attribute. For others, sex trade work may be a small part of their sense of self, as a temporary, short-term way to earn money, and something they only spend a small time thinking about and that has a very small role in their total self-concept."

-Pros Network Chicago, Guidelines for Mental Health Professionals

See POWER's Toolbox for guidelines for different kinds of service providers:

<http://powerottawa.ca/home.html>

3. RESEARCHING SEX WORK: TRANSPARENCY, ETHICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY ARE THE KEYS!

Researchers, students and reporters collecting information about sex work or sex workers have ethical guidelines they need to follow. Being a great researcher means being transparent about these ethical obligations and about your role, and the role of the sex worker organization you are contacting. Some researchers like to use the words "community" or "partnership" because they are useful catch phrases for them to receive funding. These words also imply a level of obligation and commitment to including input from sex workers. Good researchers keep in mind the power imbalance that exists between the researcher and the "researched", particularly when doing research with marginalized communities.

In Maggie's Sex Worker's Action Project *Guidelines for Researchers, Students, Reporters and Artists Who Are Not Sex Workers*, they encourage people to ask themselves the following questions when doing research, as guidelines to communicating with a sex worker or sex worker organization:

- A. What is your relationship to the sex industry?
- B. How have sex workers been involved in the creation of, planning and execution of this project?
- C. How do you believe that this project or story will directly benefit sex workers?
- D. All work on sex workers involves some risks to the sex workers involved. How have you considered these risks and how you will prevent them?

Maggie's complete guidelines can be found here: <http://maggiestoronto.ca/uploads/File/A-note-to-researchers.pdf>

4. DEFEND AND STAND IN SOLIDARITY

Being a feminist ally to sex workers may sometimes mean confronting anti-sex work feminists. The ways that anti-sex work feminists invisibilize us can be painful and exhausting. This invisibilization within feminist communities is historically deep rooted and personal for all women – it becomes even more personal for sex workers when we are the targets of these divisions. Our allies also experience discrimination by their association with us. However, in these moments, sex workers need our feminist allies to prioritize our experience of discrimination and stand

up to anti-sex work feminists who reject us. Stigma and discrimination against sex workers takes its hardest toll on sex workers, not on our allies.

"Scootch over and make room: Sex workers, along with many other women with marginalized identities, have given up on feminism, having been ignored since the beginning of a movement... encourage sex workers to engage and speak up in your feminist spaces – and make sure everyone around them is listening."

-Olive Seraphim, How to be A (Feminist) Ally to Sex Workers

For more on how to be a good Feminist Ally, see Olive Seraphim's "How to be a good Feminist Ally": <http://oliveseraphim.tumblr.com/post/43302287609/10-tips-on-how-to-be-a-feminist-ally-to-sex-workers>

5. EDUCATE YOURSELF!

It is important to ask questions, be informed and to acknowledge the expertise that sex workers have about our lives and work. However, please keep in mind that it can get tiring and frustrating to constantly field questions and educate others about sex work. Proceed with caution and respect, and think first about what and why you are asking.

You can help us out by educating yourself and in turn educating those around you. There are so many resources that you can access to increase your knowledge about the sex worker rights movement, how to be a better ally, the impact of stigma and discrimination and the experiences of sex workers in different sectors of the industry and parts of the world.

"Educate Yourself: If you're going to be vocal about a matter that affects countless people around the globe, inform yourself about it. Visit the websites and blogs of sex workers, activists and allies...Take into account the direct voices of sex workers and not just of theorists or politicians. If you see a statistic cited, check the source and examine the ways in which it was gathered."

-Monica Shores for Ms. Magazine

"There's a fine line between asking someone validating questions about their work and fetishising or demanding education for fascination value. What is ok to ask sex workers will vary with individuals."

-Sunny, Ho Lover: about dating & friending sex workers

6. EDUCATE OTHERS!

The representation of sex workers in the

media and pop culture is rarely accurate. This makes it harder for sex workers to live and work in dignity and with respect. There are many myths that circulate about sex workers: that we experience sexual abuse more than other women and are therefore "tainted", that we use drugs, are controlled by "pimps" or we have no other option for work. Some of us live these realities while others of us do not. This is how stereotypes and stigma function.

Though it may be hard for you to speak up and challenge others when you hear them making jokes or degrading sex workers – it is important (and it gets easier with practice). Use your knowledge to help educate and inform others, to challenge stereotypes and to stand up for us.

"As you learn the above things, stand up for sex workers when conversations happen. Share your personal stories if you so choose. Don't let the stigma, bigotry and shame around sex work continue."

-SWOP Chicago, How to be An Ally to Sex Workers

Also see Stella's 14 Answers to Your Questions: <http://www.cheststella.org/stella/?q=en/14answers>

7. RECOGNIZE OUR COMMONALITIES AND BUILD STRONGER MOVEMENTS

Sex workers are diverse in our realities and our experiences of sex work. We are equally diverse in our experiences of discrimination. In addition to the various locations that we work on the street and indoors, sex workers are trans, people of color, queer, Indigenous, homeless or living in poverty, geographically isolated, drug users or living with a physical or mental disability – we have various needs for advocacy. Many of us experience stigma and discrimination not only because of our sex work, but because of the various ways we are situated based on our class, race, gender, citizenship status, mobility, mental health, to name a few. To build stronger movements, we need to make visible the shared and unique ways that we experience inequality, disadvantage and discrimination while maintaining our advocacy efforts around the human and labour rights of sex workers.

This means recognizing how our identities and circumstances make our experiences of discrimination unique. Recognizing the diversity within our movement helps us link with other movements. It also helps us consider and challenge the different ways we experience discrimination and how this interacts with our experiences of sex work. Through

this we can build stronger movements and can be better allies to each other.

In February 2012, the sex workers at Maggie's Aboriginal Sex Workers Education and Outreach Project wrote a statement about Indigenous women in sex work that highlights some of these intersections and ways we can be stronger allies to each other, including how non-sex working allies can help us build stronger movements.

Maggie's Aboriginal Sex Workers Education and Outreach Project statement can be found here: http://maggiestoronto.ca/news?news_id=80

8. USING YOUR POWER!

One of the most helpful things that allies can do is help us to access systems and resources that are not available to us or that we cannot access – whether because of the outright discrimination we experience, or because of the internalized stigma that we have been living with for so long.

"Sex worker organizations...have been working for decades to get their own systems of safety, mutual support and community funded and implemented. What we don't usually have is the power to make these real. Our allies with access to resources and power of academic could push for community based strategies led by those most impacted to get the funding and support they deserve"

-Juliet November (bornwhore.com), Well-meaning: A note of caution to our allies

9. BE DISCRETE

Considering the way the mainstream public talks about and treats sex workers it is no surprise that *coming out* as a sex worker can be terrifying. For some sex workers, coming out can mean rejection from family, friends, and partners, losing employment or housing, and can result in experiences of violence and abuse.

If someone comes out to you as a sex worker, they most likely trust you to be discreet, respectful and non-judgmental. Just because someone comes out to you, does not mean they are out to other friends, family, partners or neighbors. It is your job as an ally to keep this information confidential unless told otherwise; outing a sex worker without consent is not only disrespectful but can have serious consequences for a sex workers' life, work, relationships, health and safety.

"#5: A minority of sex workers are completely 'out' to everyone they meet, but most are somewhere on a spectrum between 'my friends know' and 'you're the first person in

my real life I've told'. It is not up to you to decide who else gets to know. In certain circles, telling people that you're dating a sex worker might get you appreciative gasps of shock, a smattering of activist/feminist cred – whatever, it doesn't matter. It's her choice who she lets know what she does."

-Anonymous Because of #5: How to Date a Sex Worker

"Understand that being the partner of a sex worker is difficult; you have to manage concealing information from friends or being judged for the work your partner does. You have to accept your partner being in intimate situation with other people"

-Cassandra, Dispatch from a Dominatrix: How to be a Better Partner to Sex Workers

10. HELP SUPPORT SEX WORKER LEADERSHIP!

The sex worker rights movement prioritizes sex worker empowerment and leadership, and allies can play a very important role in supporting this. The expectation of sex worker leadership leaves some allies wondering what their role is, and at other times feeling excluded. Sex worker leadership and sex worker only spaces are not intended to exclude our allies – they are intended to empower sex workers! This empowerment and affirmation is really important when we are invisibilized and disempowered by structural systems and institutions on a daily basis. Sex worker leadership is also a proven and most effective method of peer support and improving health amongst sex workers.

Allies who encourage sex worker spaces and who step aside for sex worker leadership are demonstrating their support for our self-determination. While at first it may seem tokenistic, this practice is one that earns you the most respect.

We need our allies to step in and speak about sex work at moments where we cannot.

Stepping in is greatly appreciated, as is knowing when to step to the side and make room or give up your place to a sex worker. It is empowering for us when we are seen and heard in spaces where we are usually ignored. Allies have an important role to play in opening these doors for us, and then giving us the space we need to do our thing.

4

GETTING STARTED AS AN ALLY

1. Check out the links (below) to great resources on how to be an ally to sex workers.
2. Ask your sex worker friend, family member or partner what would make them feel supported and how you can be a better ally to them personally.
3. Research or contact your local sex worker rights organization.

We suggest organizations that are sex worker led and working towards decriminalization and against all forms of criminalization of sex work. Also ensure that the organization approaches human rights advocacy from an evidence-based, rather than a moralistic approach. These two websites are great resources for finding sex worker led organizations in every corner of the world:

- <http://bayswan.org/> (Prostitutes Education Network)
- www.nswp.org (Global Network of Sex Work Projects)

4. Come out to our events!

General Tips for Allies:

Juliet November (bornwhore.com). Born Whore: Well-meaning: A note of caution to our allies
<http://bornwhore.com/2013/01/28/well-meaning-a-note-of-caution-to-our-allies/>

Monica Shores for Ms. Magazine: How to Respect Sex Workers
<http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/09/02/how-to-respect-sex-workers/>

Olive Seraphim: 10 Tips on How To Be A (Feminist) Ally to Sex Workers
<http://oliveseraphim.tumblr.com/post/43302287609/10-tips-on-how-to-be-a-feminist-ally-to-sex-workers>

Sarah Elspeth: How to Be an Ally to Sex Workers
<http://sarahelspeth.com/2012/01/11/how-to-be-an-ally-to-sex-workers/>

SWOP Chicago: How to Be an Ally to Sex Workers
<http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/how-to-be-an-ally-to-sex-workers/>

SWOP Chicago: How to Be an Ally to Sex Workers Part Two: for Institutional Leaders
<http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/how-to-be-an-ally-to-sex-workers-institutions-community-leaders/>

SWOP USA: How to Be an Ally to Outdoor (Street-Based) Workers
<http://www.swopusa.org/how-to-be-an-ally-to-outdoor-street-based-workers/>

Resources for media, health practitioners and others who want to ally and support sex workers:

Maggie's, Toronto Sex Workers Action Project: Guidelines for Researchers, Students, Reporters and Artists Who Are Not Sex Workers
<http://maggiestoronto.ca/uploads/File/A-note-to-researchers.pdf>

Maggie's Aboriginal Sex Workers Education and Outreach Project: Indigenous People in the Sex Trade: Our Live, Our Bodies, Our Realities (statement)
http://maggiestoronto.ca/news?news_id=80

PROS Network Chicago: Guidelines for Mental Health Professionals

<http://www.prosnetworkchicago.org/guidelines/>

Prostitutes of Ottawa, Gatineau, Educate, Work and Resist (POWER): The ToolBox: What Works for Sex Workers
http://powerottawa.ca/POWER_Report_TheToolbox.pdf

Stella, l'amie de Maimie: 14 Answers to Your Questions:
<http://www.chezstella.org/stella/?q=en/14answers>

Stella, l'amie de Maimie: Language Matters: Talking About Sex Work
<http://www.chezstella.org/docs/StellaInfoSheetLanguageMatters.pdf>

SWOP Chicago: Language Tips – Mental Health Professionals
<http://redlightchicago.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/languagetips-final.pdf>

SWOP Chicago: Resources for Helping Professionals
<http://redlightchicago.wordpress.com/learn-about-sex-work/resources-for-service-providers/>

Resources for partners of sex workers:

« Anonymous Because of #5: How to Date a Sex Worker »
<http://christianbvega.blogspot.ca/2013/04/how-to-date-sex-worker.html>

Cassandra, « Dispatch from a Dominatrix: How to be a Better Partner to Sex Workers »
<http://thelstop.org/2013/02/dispatch-from-a-dominatrix-how-to-be-a-better-partner-to-sex-workers/>

Sunny, « Ho Lover: about dating & friending sex workers »
<http://bornwhore.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/ho-lover-zine.pdf>

Helpful Organizations for Sex Worker Allies:

SWAFF (Sex Worker Allies, Family & Friends):
<http://swaffbay.wordpress.com/swaffbay@gmail.com>

SWOP-New Orleans (SWOP-NOLA): For Friends, Family and Allies of Sex Workers:
<http://swop-nola.org/friends-family-of-sex-workers/>

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Stella is a community organization created and run by and for sex workers. At Stella we provide support and information to sex workers so that we may live and work in safety and with dignity.

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