



SEX WORK

14 ANSWERS TO YOUR QUESTIONS
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Sex work is met with a lot of prejudice and stereotypes, which make up the whole stigma. This stigmatization has a major influence on the lives, working conditions and the health of women who are working in this industry. It furthers these women's isolation and social exclusion, and compromises their dignity.

This booklet is intended for social services and health professionals, police officers and community workers, as well as people from the media, the justice system or the government. Its purpose is to shed light on some preconceived ideas about sex work and to suggest a few ways to improve services offered to these women and to support them in a respectful and empathic way. Without being exhaustive, this booklet will hopefully increase awareness and reduce ignorance. As professionals, we can do a lot to make sex workers benefit from prejudice-free public or community services. We can take action to oppose stigmatization in our environments and make better-informed interventions to properly fulfill these women's needs. These women, just like any others, want openness and support.

1. WHY USE THE TERM SEX WORK INSTEAD OF PROSTITUTION?

The morally charged term, "prostitution", has been associated with deviance, corruption and criminality, and still is today. The use of the terms like "prostitution" and "prostitute", restrict a person's identity to the activities she engages in. The negative labels or words like "prostitute" and "whore" reduce a person to one dimension: engaging in sexual activities for money. Sex workers need these activities to be defined as work because they view their occupation as an activity that generates income. Using the term sex work therefore helps draw a distinction between the economic activity and the person's identity. Who sex workers are should not be confused with the work they practice. Sex workers are much more than the work that they do, just like other human beings! Speaking in terms of sex work also helps take prostitution out of an invisible or unspeakable space, thereby removing moral charges that promote stereotypes and stigmatization.

Speaking about sex work allows a rethinking of this activity in terms of contracts, improvement of working conditions and sex workers' ability to negotiate the different aspects of services they offer (acts, rates and duration). Speaking about sex work paves the way for action about workers' rights: the right to work safely and in health; the right to not be raped, harassed or discriminated against; the right to associate with other workers for protection; and the right to dignity and integrity.

Speaking about sex work also enables taking action that highlights and respects our fundamental rights granted in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms. We are collectively responsible for ensuring that these rights are respected.

2. WHAT DO SEX WORKERS DO?

Sex work includes various activities such as soliciting on the street or in other public areas, nude dancing with or without contact, providing erotic massages, visiting or receiving through an escort service, acting in pornographic movies, animating erotic phone or webcam conversations, and offering specific or specialized services like domination or fetishism.

Sex work is diverse and may apply to sexual or erotic activities for payment. It therefore goes beyond prostitution, which exclusively describes the exchange of sexual services for payment.

Sex workers use physical, psychological and interpersonal abilities to perform their work; technical and personal skills; money management skills and the capacity to deal with the strong prejudice against them. All of this knowledge has a direct impact on their ability to make a living from sex work.

3. WHY DO SEX WORKERS DO THIS WORK?

This is the most frequently asked question. Sex workers would very simply reply that they do this work to make a living. Just like other professions, there are various motivations for choosing this one. Some like the flexible schedule, some enjoy meeting many people from different walks of life, and some are comfortable with sexuality, nudity, keeping others' secrets, listening and giving moral support.

While some sex workers change occupation within the sex industry, some keep the same job, and others leave for new horizons. It is possible to practice sex work for a few weeks, a few months or many years, similarly to other occupations. There is no standard path.

Why choose to do sex work? While sex workers are often asked this question, gas pump attendants, office clerks, doctors and lawyers are seldom asked to explain their motivations behind their profession. Being conscious of and challenging this double standard contributes to the social integration of sex workers and, as a result, to the fight against their marginalization.

4. IS PROSTITUTION LEGAL IN CANADA?

Prostitution, the exchange of sex for money or other valuable considerations, is legal in Canada. However, the *Criminal Code of Canada* deems illegal the acts associated with prostitution that allow it to take place. It is forbidden for sex workers, for example, to practice prostitution at home, to maintain another place for this purpose or to work with another sex worker in this same place (section 210 of the Criminal Code). Sex workers can also be evicted if they are considered guilty of using their place of residence for prostitution purposes. The Code also criminalizes professional relationships that are established for security purposes (such as referring a client to a sex worker), for economic reasons (such as hiring someone to answer the phone or place ads), for transportation or for ensuring that an initial agreement is respected (for example, with an employer, a manager, a driver or a receptionist) (sections 211 and 212 of the Criminal Code).

This criminalization effectively lends a judicial aspect to sex workers' personal relationships because police officers can assume that roommates, intimate partners and family members financially benefit from prostitution. The Code also prohibits "communication for the purpose of engaging in prostitution", (section 213), which prevents a clear and direct negotiation about the services offered.

The current legislation makes it difficult to perform sex work in safe conditions. It is also very rarely applied to protect women from violence. Because of this, it is important to be aware of the laws' effects on the working and living conditions of sex workers, and is equally important to strive towards the respect of sex workers' fundamental rights.

5. WHAT DO SEX WORKERS AGREE OR REFUSE TO DO?

No two sex workers are exactly alike. Each worker sets her own rules and limits as to which acts she is willing to perform, what prices she charges and how long the services last. Negotiation is therefore an essential component of sex work. Each worker can agree to perform certain activities and refuse to perform others. It is false to believe that a sex worker is bought or rented: the sale is about pre-established sexual or erotic services that fall within the activities that a sex worker is offering, and within her limits. A sex worker's limits are not negotiable.

In an intervention with a sex worker, it is important to accompany her in a way that her self-esteem, as well as her ability to assert herself and set her limits are reinforced. Personal and professional assertion makes up a key element of the establishment of working conditions that promote the health and safety of sex workers.

6. ARE SEX WORKERS UNDER THE CONTROL OF PIMPS?

According to stereotypes, a pimp is a man who controls a sex workers' work and income. The reality is that many sex workers work independently. Some choose to associate with colleagues to share their resources, such as a workplace. Some prefer working for various employers, particularly women or men who own escort agencies or massage parlours. Some associate with partners to ensure that they get help and protection in case of need. The stereotypical image of the pimp does not correspond with the different contexts for sex work. Sex work may, indeed, require maintaining professional relationships with third parties such as employers, managers, drivers or receptionists, for economical or security reasons, or to make sure that the initial agreement is respected. The criminalization of pimps (employers or third party) makes it difficult to perform sex work safely. Once again, this criminalization is seldom used to protect women against violence.

Sex workers who are under the control of another person are most often in a situation of conjugal violence within their working context. This situation results from the intimate ties that sex workers may have with the employer or third party. When sex workers want to file a complaint and break the cycle of conjugal violence, their efforts are difficult because they are criminalized.

7. DO SEX WORKERS HAVE A LOVE LIFE?

Sex workers have a private life and a love life outside of their professional life. Many are mothers of one or more children of various ages. When it comes to intimate and sexual relationships, sex workers are able to establish and maintain deep and lasting love relationships. Some prefer being single, some have one or several partners. Some identify as heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual or queer. There are single, married and divorced women amongst sex workers. Some live alone or with a partner...

When supporting a sex worker, it is important to consider her life as a whole and to avoid focusing the intervention on the work she performs.

8. DO SEX WORKERS DISCUSS THEIR WORK WITH THEIR FRIENDS AND FAMILY?

Some sex workers openly discuss their work. Some choose to talk about it with only a few trustworthy people, and some prefer keeping silent about it. The prejudice and stigmatization from society, and from friends and family, have an influence on a woman's decision whether or not to "come out" as sex worker or discuss her work-related activities.

All kinds of preconceived notions about sex work milieus and people who perform this work are circulating. Easy associations are made with drug use, sexual assault and organized crime, to name a few. This often reflects the ignorance surrounding the diverse realities of sex work and it reinforces sex workers' victimization and silence.

It then becomes difficult to assert oneself as a sex worker or to speak openly about what there is to like about this work without being judged. Keeping silent for fear of judgement has a deep impact on one's health and well being, especially in a society that values work and employment. Each worker chooses to reveal herself or not depending on her needs, her entourage's open-mindedness and her social environment.

The creation of a trust relationship, which allows sex workers to feel free to speak can only be achieved with an open attitude, respect and an absence of judgement.

9. HAVE SEX WORKERS BEEN SEXUALLY ABUSED DURING THEIR CHILDHOOD?

One out of three women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. Like many women, some sex workers have been the victims of a sexual assault during childhood. However, there are other sex workers who have never been sexually assaulted. The majority of sexual assault victims do not work in the sex industry.

It is generally difficult for all women to lodge a complaint against their assailant. Sexually assaulted sex workers, whether at work, in their love life or in their social life, fear not being believed or fear being categorized as sexually depraved, as if forcing a sex worker to perform a sex act was a normal situation and not an assault. Whether there is payment or not, any sex act performed without consent is an act of violence.

When it comes to abuse and sexual assault, sex workers, like other people, should be protected by police services, receive proper hospital care and benefit from

adequate psychosocial services without fear of being judged. They should receive the appropriate help without being afraid of being denounced, harassed, despised, attacked or criminalized again.

10. DO SEX WORKERS USE DRUGS?

For many people, sex work and drugs go hand in hand, so they assume that all sex workers are drug users. Because of the considerable stigmatization, many believe it is difficult or even impossible to perform sex work without using drugs. However, the reality is more complex. Some sex workers use alcohol or drugs recreationally, on an occasional or a regular basis, but some never use them at all. Those who use drugs while working or overuse them become much more vulnerable to abuse and risk having great difficulty setting their limits in regards to acts, prices and duration of services they offer. Drug addiction can put their health and security at risk. These workers may end up with a client they barely trust or accept one who refuses to wear a condom. Assaultants can also take advantage of this situation.

Without over-generalizing about the association between sex work and drugs, it is important to recognize that drug use can impact some sex workers' ability to negotiate safer sex and increase their vulnerability in a way that compromises their security as well as their health.

11. ARE SEX WORKERS VULNERABLE TO HIV?

All sexually active women can be vulnerable to HIV infection. Though the number of partners has an influence on the level of vulnerability, many sex workers regularly protect themselves against HIV infection at work, because of the nature of their work and the prevention campaigns in sex work settings. As safer sex professionals, they consider condoms to be an essential work tool.

The ability to negotiate various sexual services depends on a sex worker's working conditions. Criminalization and repressive policies create a stressful environment that can hinder the ability to negotiate safer practices. Access to information and to means of protection is limited because of clandestinity generated by current laws. This illicit context also limits sex workers' access to services and health care because they fear being discriminated against. In short, laws and policies have both a direct and an indirect influence on a sex workers' vulnerability to HIV, the speed at which her HIV infection progresses or develops into AIDS and her ability to deal and live with HIV or AIDS. It is important to note that when sex workers do contract HIV, it is most often not at work but rather through an unprotected personal relationship or injection drug use, particularly in prison.

12. WHAT IMPACT DOES SEX WORK HAVE ON THE HEALTH OF SEX WORKERS?

Whether criminalized or not, sex work is not recognized as work. Sex workers do not have access to the same fringe benefits that other workers enjoy. However, their concerns about health and safety in the workplace are similar. Even if they take care of their health, their security and their dignity, sex workers cannot always

escape work-related stress. Prejudice, oppression, shaming and harassment from police officers or others are heavy burdens they carry in their daily lives. Hence, the stigmatization and the social and judicial context operate as determinants of sex workers' health: they define options, influence choices and create the physical and social environment in which sex workers live. This marginalized situation interacts with other known health determinants, such as income inequality, lifestyle habits, family situation and age.

When accompanying and helping sex workers, it is important to take into consideration the impact of stigma and social exclusion on sex workers' lives.

13. WHAT DO SEX WORKERS NEED?

Women, transvestites and transsexuals working in the sex industry need to have better control over their working conditions. They need to gain or improve the personal skills and abilities that allow them to live and work in a healthy way with dignity.

Women who do sex work need:

- * To be recognized as full citizens.
- * To be listened to without being judged.
- * To be taken seriously.
- * To be integrated into the community without fear of being ostracized.
- * Their human rights to be recognized and respected.
- * The abuse and coercion they are subjected to to be reported as a violation of their integrity.
- * To have access to public services without discrimination.
- * To have access to work-related social and judicial services.
- * Their work to be decriminalized.

To fulfill these needs, it is, above all, necessary to recognize the women who perform sex work. We can also individually improve their health and wellbeing by reinforcing their self-esteem and their abilities; by improving their integration into their communities; by improving their access to judicial, community and health services; and by facilitating the appearance of non-stigmatizing social representations.

With a broader vision of health and security that takes into account the impact of stigmatization, we will better understand the diverse realities that sex workers contend with and will be more helpful when responding to their needs. We will be able to truly put an end to the social exclusion of sex workers as we engage in and contribute to the development of a social, judicial, political and media context that is free of prejudice.

14. HOW TO BETTER INTERVENE WITH SEX WORKERS?

If you respond to a sex worker request for help, it is important to:

- * Be conscious of your own values, your prejudices, your attitudes and your behaviour, and then seek to understand the motivation behind them. It is necessary to take the time and make a conscientious effort in this.

- * Be careful about overgeneralizations and avoid merging this woman with the stereotypes surrounding her.
- * Adopt an open-minded attitude. Watch, listen and ask questions to understand her world of references and her experiences.
- * Validate and focus on her needs and expectations: reassure her and consider her, above all, a person like any other.
- * Respect her rhythm of progression. This will facilitate the creation of trust.
- * Inform her of the services provided and her rights.
- * Meet her needs or direct her towards a more appropriate resource.
- * Create a resource bank in your organization that will address sex workers' specific needs.
- * Support the fight against the stigmatization of sex workers.

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