



Sex Workers' Conversations with Feminist Allies

Feminists and sex workers

Sex Worker Speak

- Morality, double standards, a discomfort with the erotic, accompanied by an unwillingness to listen to sex workers themselves has hindered alliances between what should have been “natural” allies.
- Sex work must be included in mainstream feminist analysis, challenging as it does several basic foundations of patriarchal control: sexual, financial and reproductive.
- Sex workers recognize the ills of trafficking and can combat it, when they are strengthened as workers with a right to fight against criminalization of the trade.

Summary of the issue

What is it about sex work that arouses much passion amongst many feminists? From outrage over the exploitation of women's bodies to pity for the hapless victims of male lust, it has been difficult to view sex workers as going about the daily business of earning a livelihood by providing sexual services for money. While victimhood and exploitation are easy to empathize with and mobilize around, money for sex has engendered not just noisy public debate, but quiet squeamishness even among feminists. Even feminists who advocate liberation from restrictive sexual mores have generally not viewed commercial sexual transactions as “work”. Feminists and sex workers have only recently begun to talk to each other. The dialogue has been difficult due to the awkwardness, hesitation and hostility from feminists towards sex workers and those working for their rights.

The notion that sex work debases women and transforms them into objects of control and exploitation is premised on the belief that a cash transaction strips a supposedly intimate act like sex of its inherent worth. It is therefore believed that no 'good' woman would actually opt for sex work as a viable livelihood option and those women who 'readily' do so do not comprehend the inherent patriarchal sexual exploitation of their body and self and are therefore laboring under “false consciousness”. The growing recognition of male and transgender sex workers has not led to much rethinking or reframing of classic feminist positions around the “poor helpless prostituted victim woman”.



The women's movement has for several decades engaged with issues related to the body. The conflation of sexuality and reproduction, the reduction of women into uteruses and vaginas and the fragmentation of women in reproductive health policies demanded an engagement with the construction of the female body and 'control' over it. Where contraception and fertility control mark the intersection of female sexuality and reproduction, sex work marks the intersection of female sexuality and work. This is a convergence that has demanded a complex response that is still evolving. Morality, double standards, a discomfort with the erotic as well as unease about multiple sex partners, accompanied by an unwillingness to listen to sex workers themselves has hindered alliances between what would have been “natural” allies. Feminist theory and practice – a powerful liberatory force challenging inequities in every sphere – seemed to have faltered, and even failed, when it came to the issue of commercial sex. The debates around trafficking further bolster the idea of sex work as violence. Anti-trafficking rhetoric holds that bodies are unwillingly 'sold' and transported across borders. Providing sexual services for money [sex work] is conflated with selling of a body to another [trafficking].

Sex workers are increasingly articulating sex work as work, as a business, and do not consider themselves as either criminals or victims. Because feminism posits prostitution as violence, this viewpoint forecloses any discussion over whether sex work can be chosen as a livelihood option. In order for the stigma of discrimination to end and fundamental rights to be extended to sex workers to pursue their livelihood in safety and dignity, societal perception must be transformed. Sex workers in the business recognize the ills of trafficking and child sexual abuse and are taking measures to combat these crimes. This is only possible if sex workers are strengthened as workers with a right to fight against criminalization of the trade.

There is a need to examine the troubled relationship between mainstream feminism, the human rights discourse and sex workers' rights in negotiating the knotty terrain of sexual politics. Over the years, collectivization, community mobilization and fighting for the right to a 'voice' has helped centre the debate on sex work by the people in sex work themselves. The women's movement is not a monolith, and there is need to forge alliances between those working towards autonomy, dignity and fundamental rights, re-defining these to include the most marginalized of individuals and communities.

“Because feminism posits prostitution as violence, this viewpoint forecloses any discussion over whether sex work can be chosen as a livelihood option”.

