

Whorelornny





whoreconomy



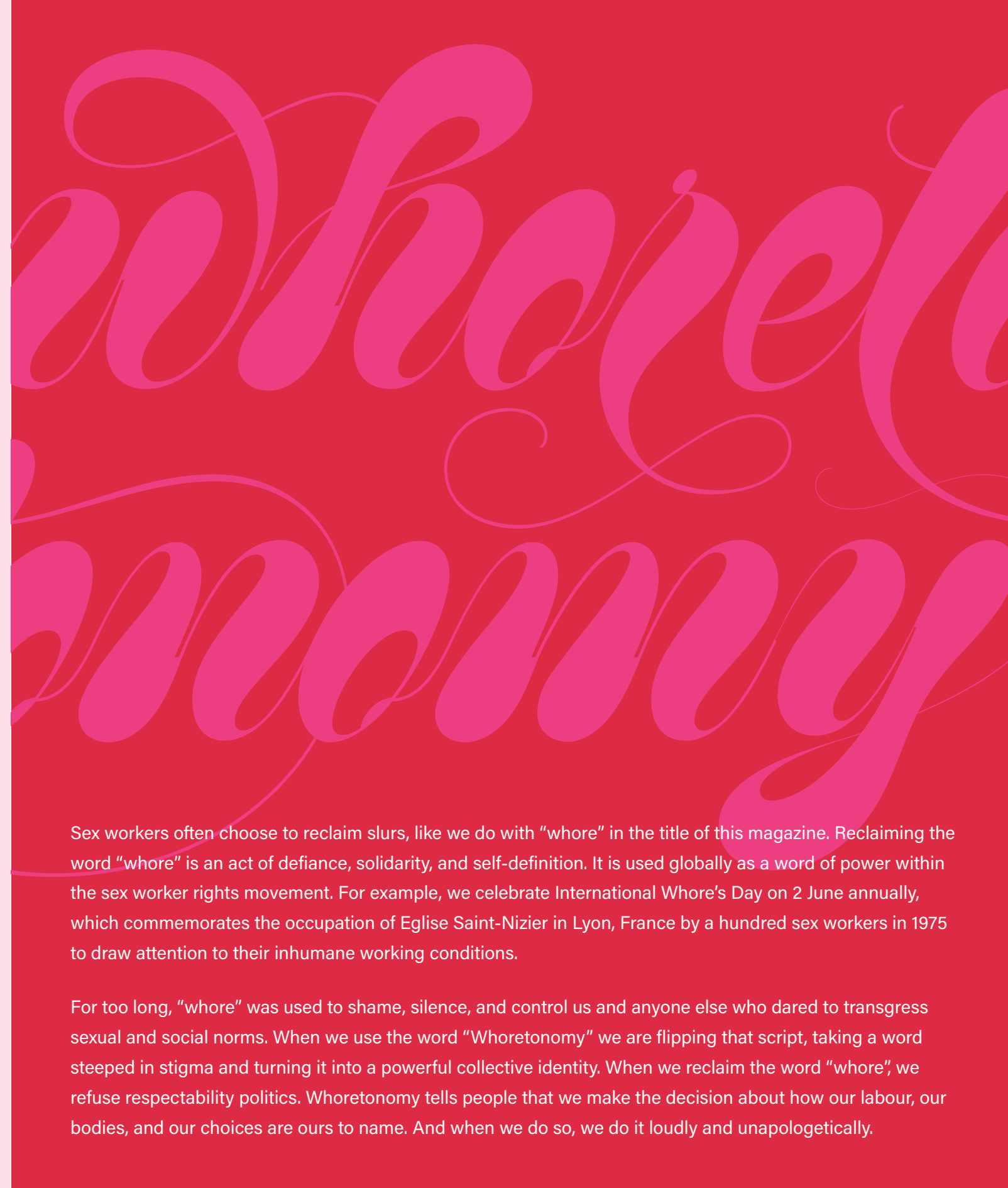
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Whoretonomy is power over our own labour. It is the unapologetic declaration that bodily autonomy includes the right to choose, refuse, and define sexual labour.

As sex workers, our right to bodily autonomy does not disappear the moment we've been paid. The stigma we face, and the moral panic that surrounds our work, does not invalidate our rights or justify state intervention, criminalisation, or paternalistic "rescue."

Whoretonomy is also the right to care for our own sexual health without surveillance, coercion, or government oversight masquerading as protection. It is a refusal of the politics of pity and the narratives that frame us as victims in need of rescuing, rather than as workers demanding rights, safety, and respect.

Whoretonomy is a demand for the recognition that sex workers are the experts in our own lives, and for the acknowledgment that sex work is work.



Sex workers often choose to reclaim slurs, like we do with "whore" in the title of this magazine. Reclaiming the word "whore" is an act of defiance, solidarity, and self-definition. It is used globally as a word of power within the sex worker rights movement. For example, we celebrate International Whore's Day on 2 June annually, which commemorates the occupation of Eglise Saint-Nizier in Lyon, France by a hundred sex workers in 1975 to draw attention to their inhumane working conditions.

For too long, "whore" was used to shame, silence, and control us and anyone else who dared to transgress sexual and social norms. When we use the word "Whoretonomy" we are flipping that script, taking a word steeped in stigma and turning it into a powerful collective identity. When we reclaim the word "whore", we refuse respectability politics. Whoretonomy tells people that we make the decision about how our labour, our bodies, and our choices are ours to name. And when we do so, we do it loudly and unapologetically.

We ARE SCARLET ALLIANCE

Scarlet Alliance is the national peak body for sex workers and sex worker organisations in unceded Australia. Our work is grounded in peer leadership, collective care, and a commitment to sex worker rights, health, safety and justice.

Scarlet Alliance is a peer-run organisation, and we take pride in our work being done by sex workers, for sex workers. Every staff and board member is a current or former sex worker, ensuring our advocacy, programs, and decisions come directly from lived experience.

Our work is grounded in our values of accountability, autonomy, collectivism, participation, solidarity and transformation. We fight for equality and social, legal, political, cultural, health and economic justice for past and present workers in the sex industry.

As the national peak body for sex workers in Australia, our members include sex worker organisations and projects, and individual sex workers across Australia. Together, we create a powerful national voice that uplifts and defends the rights of all sex workers.

Always was, always will be.

Scarlet Alliance is a national organisation working across so-called Australia. We recognise that this land was stolen and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty has never been ceded. Colonisation is ongoing and continues to harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other racialised communities through policing, surveillance, and discriminatory laws.

We recognise and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as powerful leaders in sex worker movements and in broader social, cultural, and political life. We honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sex worker advocates whose knowledge, strength, and resistance have long shaped our movement and continue to guide our work.



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CHAPTER 01

WHORETONOMY IS FREEDOM

WHORETONOMY IS FREEDOM

Freedom to choose where, when and how we work, without fear of restrictive laws and punitive policies. Freedom to travel for work, education and fun without encountering militarised borders and racial profiling. Freedom to have control over our own bodies and sexual health without the interference of governments and laws. Freedom to fully participate in society without stigma and discrimination.

FREEDOM

009

FREEDOM TO *work*

Full decriminalisation means treating sex work as work, and not as an exception that needs extra controls. Sex workers have advocated for years that sex work is work, yet this is rarely reflected in the law.

Governments, policy-makers, self-described “feminist” advocates and organisations, and even well-meaning allies in the broader community often misunderstand what decriminalisation actually means. Too often, this results in legislative models and campaigns that harm us and limit our rights.

Put simply, full decriminalisation means removing all laws that treat sex work as different from other jobs. This means getting rid of: sex work specific criminal laws, special licensing systems, police powers and any other rules that treat sex workers, our coworkers, our workplaces or our clients differently from other workers and businesses.

Decriminalisation does not mean sex work becomes unregulated. Instead, sex workers are covered by the same workplace, planning, tax, health and criminal laws as everyone else. Full decriminalisation applies to all sex workers and types of sex work, and must also include anti-discrimination and anti-vilification protections for sex workers.

In Australia, it’s common to hear people say “sex work is legal now” but that’s not always true. What we have in many places is “legalisation”, a system that treats sex workers as a problem to manage rather than workers with rights. It pieces together a set of rules that apply only to sex workers, including special licences, registration systems, police powers, and zoning laws. Ultimately, it is just stigma dressed up as regulation. Sex workers are then forced to navigate this puzzle, choosing between compliance and working in ways that feel safe.

The trap with this model is that choosing our autonomy and ways of working that make us feel safe, turns us into criminals. People may refer to the “two tiered system” which describes the legal structure that splits the industry into legal and illegal sectors based on licensing. What this does is create “good sex workers” and “bad sex workers” and the police decide who gets punished. The reason sex workers want decrim, and only decrim, is because it does not try to rearrange the pieces of a broken puzzle, it gets rid of it altogether. Legalisation and licensing put sex workers on a leash. Decriminalisation cuts it off.



WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT DECRIMINALISATION?

Decriminalisation is fundamental to upholding sex workers' rights to participate fully in public life and achieve economic empowerment. It enables our financial agency, security and independence.

Decriminalisation for health.

Decriminalisation is the *only* model of sex industry regulation to enable evidence-based public health outcomes, including Australia's obligation to end HIV transmission.

Sex work-specific legislative frameworks, such as criminalisation and licensing, create barriers to accessing healthcare. This includes sexual health prevention, testing, and treatment.

Laws that criminalise sex workers with sexually transmissible infections (STI) or blood-borne viruses (BBV), or that mandate condom use or compulsory testing, perpetuate stigma. They are based on outdated information about safer sex and wrongly assume that sex workers will not engage in safer sex practices or voluntary testing unless forced to do so by law.

Sex work decriminalisation is also an essential aspect of reproductive justice. While the right to bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRH) are recognised as fundamental human rights, these rights are consistently and increasingly eroded by the state, and private lobby groups.

By positioning sex workers and other groups like LGBTQI+ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people of colour and migrants as "deviant" or a problem to solve, we are shoved to the fringes of society, and our human rights are overlooked.

Sex work decriminalisation mitigates these harms and is part of Australia's commitment to human rights.

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT SEX WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA HAVE HIGHER RATES OF STI AND BBV THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION.



Decriminalisation for safety & justice.

Criminalisation, licensing and planning laws that force sex workers into industrial areas all harm our health and safety.

Criminalisation is consistently linked to increased physical and sexual violence against sex workers, perpetrated by clients, intimate partners, employers, and police. It drives stigma and fosters hostile environments, making it less likely that sex workers will report violence, seek justice, or access health and support services. And why would we? Evidence shows that when sex workers do report violence, we risk prosecution or further victimisation.

Planning laws that push sex work into isolated industrial areas are dangerous. These locations often lack public transport, adequate lighting, and basic amenities. Laws that try to ‘control’ street-based sex workers are also ineffective, exacerbate risks and create further barriers to accessing health and support services. Sex workers need to be able to choose where we work. When we have that freedom, we make decisions based on privacy, safety, and access to amenities and clients.

CRIMINALISATION COMPROMISES SEX WORKER SAFETY AND WELLBEING, DISRUPTS VITAL PEER NETWORKS, MAKING IT DIFFICULT FOR OUTREACH SERVICES TO CONNECT WITH US. IT HINDERS OUR ABILITY TO ORGANISE, REPORT CRIME, AND ACCESS SUPPORT.

SEX WORKER WORKPLACE SAFETY CAN BE REGULATED FAIRLY AND TRANSPARENTLY LIKE ANY OTHER INDUSTRY. SEX WORKERS DESERVE THE SAME RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS AFFORDED TO ALL WORKERS.

Decriminalisation for sex worker rights.

It’s simple. Decriminalising sex work increases our access to resources, rights, and opportunities that enable sustainable livelihoods and personal well-being, including access to justice.

There is strong global evidence that shows the decriminalisation of sex work, combined with safe and accessible migration pathways and resourcing for peer-led sex worker organisations reduces sex workers’ vulnerability to trafficking, slavery, and exploitation. Decriminalisation in Australian jurisdictions has enabled the development of workplace health and safety guidance material for the sex industry, creating guidance for workplaces and regulators.

**BODILY
AUTONOMY
CANNOT BE
ACHIEVED
WHILE SEX
WORK IS
CRIMINAL-
ISED.**



Bodily autonomy cannot be achieved, while sex work is criminalised. Sex workers should be recognised as leaders within the fight for bodily autonomy, as their lived experiences through police surveillance and incarceration uniquely situates them as experts in understanding the impact criminalisation of bodies has. They must also be understood as experts in fighting back against the state control over their bodies. The current movement against criminalisation of abortion and pregnancy can learn from the decades of organising and advocacy of sex workers, who have been consistently fighting against state regulation of their bodies and their choices.

MACKENZIE DARLING

'My Body, My Choice: Why the Decriminalization of Sex Work Is Essential for Reproductive Justice' O'Neill Institute, Georgetown Law (15 December 2022).

DECRIM IS THE ONLY MODEL OF SEX INDUSTRY REGULATION THAT ENABLES EVIDENCE-BASED PUBLIC HEALTH OUTCOMES, INCLUDING SEXUALLY TRANSMISSIBLE INFECTION (STI) PREVENTION.

IT SUPPORTS SEX WORKERS' SAFETY, WELLBEING, AND INCLUSION, AND PROTECTS US FROM VIOLENCE.

Full decriminalisation of sex work is acknowledged and endorsed by respected international organisations and policy makers, including:

- UNAIDS
- World Health Organisation
- International Labour Organisation
- Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
- Amnesty International
- Human Rights Watch
- United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Development Programme, and United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls

ONLY *rights* WILL STOP THE *wrongs*

Adapted from NSWP (Global Network of Sex Work Projects), based on their resource *Decriminalisation vs Legalisation: Understanding Key Differences in Sex Work Legislation.*

LEGALISATION IS...

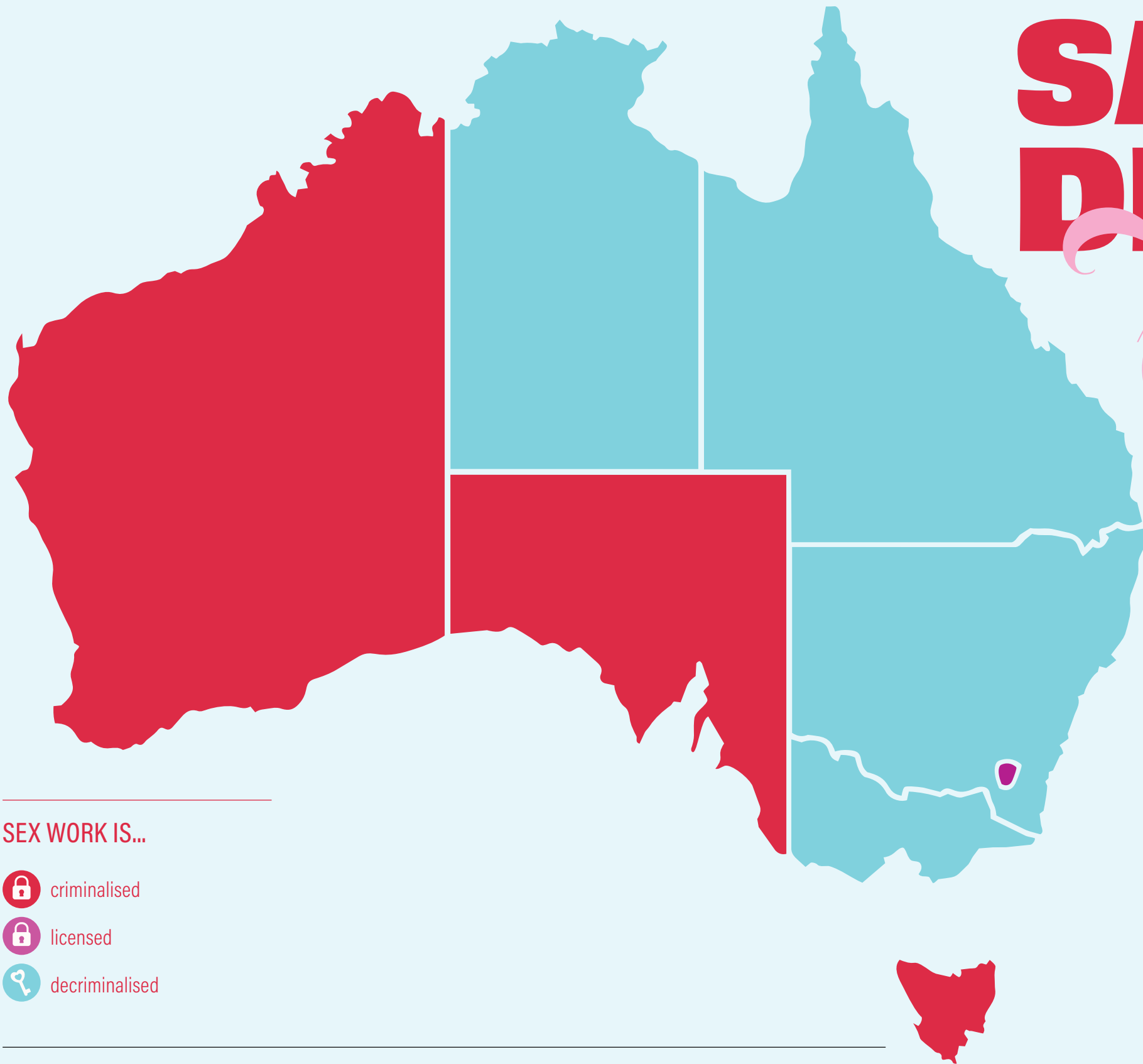
- not a solution to end stigma and discrimination.
- not endorsed by the majority of sex worker-led organisations and their allies as it perpetuates stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation.
- a way for the state to exert more control over the sex industry.
- not a guarantee of human rights. Sex workers who cannot comply are still marginalised and subject to penalties and human rights violations.
- conditional - sex workers can only work legally if they comply with regulations and laws. If not, they are penalised, similar to sex workers in criminalised contexts.

DECRIMINALISATION IS...

- not aimed at forcing or enticing individuals to enter sex work, but is about respecting the right to choose one's occupation and to work in safe and healthy conditions.
- not a partial approach. When any aspect of sex work is criminalised or penalised, sex workers remain subject to legal oppression.
- centred on upholding sex workers' agency and bodily autonomy.
- the model favoured by the vast majority of sex worker-led organisations worldwide.
- not an endorsement of exploitation, human trafficking, or the involvement of minors in the sex industry, which remain illegal.
- not the absence of regulations; occupational health and safety standards which apply to other businesses and industries also apply to sex work.
- the removal of all criminal and/or administrative penalties associated with sex work among consenting adults.
- the recognition of sex work as a legitimate form of labor like any other.
- aimed at promoting the health, safety, and human rights of sex workers.

SAME JOB, DIFFERENT

Laws



SEX WORK IS...



criminalised



licensed



decriminalised

Sex work laws across Australia.

Did you know that in some parts of Australia sex work and sex workers are still criminalised? Cross a state border and the law about your job can change instantly.

In Australia, only New South Wales, Victoria, the Northern Territory and Queensland have decriminalised sex work. However, New South Wales and Victoria have gaps regarding street based sex work.

Scarlet Alliance and our members will continue to campaign for sex worker rights and the full decriminalisation of sex work in every state and territory across unceded Australia. The fight for sex work to be recognised as real work in Australia is far from over. Until all sex workers are free from discrimination, stigma and criminalisation, none of us are truly free.



SEX WORK LAW: Decriminalisation

NEW SOUTH WALES

As the first jurisdiction in the world to decriminalise sex work, New South Wales (NSW) began this process in the late 1970s, with reforms largely completed by 1995.

Over the following decades, most aspects of sex work have been decriminalised, with exceptional controls now primarily occurring through planning laws administered by local councils.

The absence of anti-discrimination protections means that sex workers in NSW have reported experiencing discrimination from local councils, landlords, and building management. Sex workers also report discrimination in areas such as housing, education, banking and financial services, and employment.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN NSW INCLUDE:

- Key icon: Street based sex work is restricted to certain areas.
- Key icon: There are a small number of criminal laws relating to sex work establishments, however these are unenforced.
- Key icon: Advertising restrictions are also in place, but are unenforced.
- Key icon: Local council laws can prohibit or restrict sex services businesses and independent (private) sex workers.



SEX WORK LAW: Decriminalisation

VICTORIA

Sex work is now largely decriminalised in Victoria (VIC) following the introduction of the Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022 (VIC), which repealed the previous two-tier licensing system that had criminalised many sex workers.

Decriminalisation was implemented in two stages, with full effect from 1 December 2023. The changes removed registration requirements for private (independent) sex workers, as well as mandatory testing and condom use laws, and introduced anti-discrimination protections.

However, the reforms did not provide full decriminalisation for street-based sex workers. Scarlet Alliance, Vixen and Victorian sex workers continue to advocate for the full decriminalisation of all forms of sex work. No sex workers can be left behind.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN VIC INCLUDE:

- Key icon: Sex work is mainly governed through laws that apply to everyone, e.g. public health law and work health and safety law.
- Key icon: It is lawful for a person over 18 to provide sexual services to a person 18 years or over.
- Key icon: Street-based sex work is legalised, with restrictions on where and when street-based workers can work. Criminal penalties apply for breaching these rules.



SEX WORK LAW:
Decriminalisation

QUEENSLAND

Sex work in Queensland is fully decriminalised following the passing of the Criminal Code (Decriminalising Sex Work) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2024. This win was achieved by the tireless advocacy efforts of Respect Inc, DecrimQLD and Queensland sex workers.

This reform came into effect from 2 August 2024, which ended the previous two-tier licensing system and decades of discriminatory regulation by police and the Prostitution Licensing Authority.

Sex work in Queensland is now regulated through laws that apply to all individuals and businesses, including public health and work health and safety requirements. All sex workers are protected from discrimination, including current and former workers and those associated with them, such as friends or family. Accommodation providers, landlords, and hotel owners are now prohibited from discriminating against sex workers.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN QLD INCLUDE:

- Sex workers and sex work businesses are subject to the same laws that apply to everyone, e.g. public health law and work health and safety law.
- Like other businesses, planning law location restrictions (council regulations) apply.
- Strip clubs remain separately legalised under the Liquor Act 1992 as adult entertainment businesses, not sex work businesses.
- Street-based sex work is fully decriminalised.



SEX WORK LAW:
Decriminalisation

NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Northern Territory (NT) was the third jurisdiction in the world to decriminalise sex work. The Sex Industry Act 2019 (NT) represents decades of sex worker-led activism and advocacy from SWOP NT, the Sex Worker Reference Group (SWRG) and Scarlet Alliance, and support from Unions NT and allies.

Sex work is fully decriminalised in the Northern Territory, meaning that sex workers and sex work businesses are subject to the same laws that apply to all individuals and businesses generally. This includes laws governing employment, occupational health and safety, workers compensation and rehabilitation, planning and taxation.

In the NT, it is illegal to discriminate against a person because of past or present engagement in sex work. This means that all sex workers are protected, including full service workers, sexual massage providers, online sex workers, people who do sex for favours, strippers, porn performers and people who are presumed to be sex workers.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN THE NT INCLUDE:

- Universal employment law and protections, workers compensation and work health and safety regulations apply to sex workers in exactly the same way they apply to any other worker or workplace.
- It is lawful for a person over 18 to provide sexual services to a person 18 years or over.



SEX WORK LAW: Licensing

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Sex work in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) is governed by the Sex Work Act 1992 (ACT) and operates under a licensing system, where some forms of sex work are legalised while others remain criminalised. The sex worker led group Decrim ACT, alongside Scarlet Alliance and SWOP ACT, are currently campaigning for full decriminalisation in 2026.

Licensed brothels and escort agencies, as well as sole operator (independent) sex workers, are legalised, while unregistered businesses, street-based sex work, and independent workers operating together are prohibited. Legalisation primarily occurs through exceptional business registration, planning controls, and public health requirements, including mandatory condom use. While independent sex work is lawful and does not require registration, workers must operate alone, and there are restrictions on collaboration and street-based work.

Due to gaps in anti-discrimination protections, sex workers in the ACT continue to report experiencing discrimination in areas such as housing, employment, education, and financial services.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN THE ACT INCLUDE:

-  Brothels and escort agencies must be 'Registered' (licensed).
-  Private (independent) sex work is lawful, but workers must work as 'sole operators,' (completely alone).
-  Condom use is mandatory, and criminal penalties apply.
-  Street-based sex work, cooperative working arrangements and unregistered businesses are illegal.



SEX WORK LAW: Criminalisation

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Sex work is criminalised in Western Australia (WA), and is regulated by the Prostitution Act 2000. The law is silent on the provision of sexual services in exchange for payment when occurring alone, and organised activities associated with sex work are illegal.

The most complicated aspect of WA's laws is the difference between what the laws say and how they're actually enforced.

Private (independent) sex work conducted alone is lawful. However, local councils, building management organisations (body corporates or strata orgs), property managers and landlords may prohibit sex workers operating from private residential premises.

Working in a brothel as a sex worker is itself mentioned in the law. However, the keeping and running of a brothel is illegal, meaning that brothel owners, managers and receptionists are criminalised, but this is rarely enforced.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN WA INCLUDE:

-  Local councils, landlords and building management (strata or body corporate) may ban sex work in residential areas. This means private sex workers who work from home, even alone, may risk eviction.
-  Condoms must be used for all sex work services, and criminal penalties apply.
-  Owning or operating (e.g. as a manager or receptionist) a sex work business is illegal, but this is rarely enforced.
-  Street-based sex work is illegal in WA, and is heavily policed.



SEX WORK LAW:
Criminalisation

TASMANIA

In Tasmania (TAS), sex work is partially criminalised under the Sex Industry Offences Act 2005 (TAS). This means that some types of sex work are lawful, and others are illegal.

In Tasmania, one or two sex workers can run a 'sexual services business' together, as long as neither person manages or bosses the other. These businesses can offer both incalls (clients visit the worker) and outcalls (workers visit clients).

Commercial sexual services businesses (such as a brothel or massage parlour, or anywhere with more than two sex workers and/or has a manager) are illegal, although it is not a crime to work for one. Street-based work, including approaching or waiting for clients in public places is also illegal in Tasmania.

Police officers can enter any premises if they reasonably believe that sex industry offences have taken or will take place there. They can search, photograph, visually record, and take evidence from the premises.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN TAS INCLUDE:

-  Private (independent) sex workers can work with one other sex worker, but only if neither person manages the other. This also means that brothels, erotic massage parlours and escort agencies are illegal, although, it is not a crime to work for one.
-  Private (independent) sex workers and their clients must not permit any child to be on the premises during the service.
-  Condoms must be used for all sex work services.
-  Street-based sex work is illegal everywhere in Tasmania.



SEX WORK LAW:
Criminalisation

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In South Australia (SA), sex work is criminalised under the Summary Offences Act 1953 (SA). Despite numerous attempts at reform since the late 1970s, decriminalisation has not been achieved. This defies evidence-based research, and fails to acknowledge the health, safety, and human rights risks posed by sex work criminalisation.

South Australia operates under the strictest anti-sex work laws in Australia. While the exchange of sexual services for money is not itself criminalised, the activities associated with it are. Broad definitions in the law mean that any place where sex work occurs, including private homes and hotels, are classified as a brothel, effectively making it impossible for in-person sex work to occur lawfully.

Police can enter a sex work premises at any time without a warrant and commonly 'entrap' sex workers by pretending to be a client, engaging them in incriminating discussions about sexual services, and often attempting to pay them. South Australian sex worker peer organisation, SIN and independent legal experts believe these tactics may be unlawful, however, they continue to occur.

LAWS AND RESTRICTIONS IMPACTING SEX WORKERS IN SA INCLUDE:

-  Brothels and escort agencies are illegal in SA. 'Brothel' is broadly defined as any place used for sex work, including private homes, clients' premises, hotels, massage parlours, and multi-worker businesses.
-  Police use entrapment tactics against private sex workers and businesses and can enter premises at any time without a warrant.
-  People living with a sex worker may be criminalised if deemed to benefit from sex work earnings, although this is not recently enforced.
-  Clients and non-sex worker staff may also be criminalised if found in a place frequented by sex workers. This is also not recently enforced.

WORDS ARE

A LEGACY OF DISRESPECT

The words we use about sex work are more than semantics. They carry power, history and consequence.

Retiring the word 'prostitute' in favour of 'sex worker' isn't language policing, it's about accuracy, dignity, and safety.

The word 'prostitute' has always had negative connotations. The first recorded use of the word was in 1530:

(verb) | *to sexually dishonour oneself*

The word has been used as an insult since 1607 and by the end of the 17th century it was used as both an insult and to refer to the profession. The term has been and continues to be used to dehumanise and harm us. Contemporary dictionary definitions include:

(noun) | *a person who deliberately debases themselves (for money)*

(noun) | *a person who engages in sexual intercourse for pay*

(verb) | *to devote to corrupt or unworthy purposes; to debase*

The word 'prostitution' carries criminal connotations, particularly because it is often used in legislation that criminalises sex work. Using the term reinforces harmful and incorrect perceptions of sex workers as 'deviant' and of lesser value to society.

Whorephobic language is dehumanising. It suggests that sex workers are 'disposable' and therefore it perpetuates the idea that violence against us is acceptable. Crimes against sex workers are often ignored or treated less seriously, particularly in jurisdictions where sex work is criminalised.

The media are also fond of using the term to dehumanise and 'other' us. When the word is used in reporting, there's usually an increased risk that the story will be sensationalised, or that blame is laid on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

power

WE ARE SEX WORKERS

The term 'sex work' was coined by Carol Leigh (also known as the Scarlot Harlot), a sex worker, artist and founding member of the San Francisco sex worker organisation COYOTE (Call off Your Old Tired Ethics). In November 1978, she attended a conference hosted by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media. Although supportive of anti-violence efforts, she was disappointed that a workshop on the 'sex use industry' excluded workers' perspectives.

As a sex worker, Carol Leigh rejected the idea that her labour was a form of 'use,' and instead argued for a term that acknowledged both its sexual and economic dimensions, one that could unite people across diverse forms of sexual labour worldwide. Over the next two decades, the term was adopted by sex workers, activists, and human rights organisations worldwide, reflecting a shared recognition that framing sex work as work is central to decriminalisation, improved working conditions, and access to justice and human rights.

The 'P' word is ours to reclaim.

People often defend the use of the word 'prostitute' with the argument that it is 'just the name of the profession.' However, the term has been and continues to be used in stigmatising and demeaning ways, reinforcing negative attitudes towards sex workers. No matter how it's used or framed it will always carry a legacy of disrespect.

Like other whorephobic terms such as 'hooker' and 'whore,' some sex workers choose to reclaim it. But these remain slurs and should not be used by those outside the community. Reclamation is ours to define and use on our own terms. Using language like "sex work" and "sex worker" is an intentional shift that frames our work and community with dignity and respect.



How to achieve *Slutopia*

Dr Hilary Caldwell is an academic with a Master of Health Science and a Master of Applied Science. Her doctorate, 'Women Who Buy Sex in Australia' was the first study in the world to explore women buying sexual services and was informed by her professional career in the field of sexology and two decades of sex work. She is kinky and queer, a mother and a grandmother. The following is an excerpt from her book 'Slutdom: reclaiming shame-free sexuality', reprinted with permission of the author.

Deconstructing the power of slut-shaming starts within ourselves. I know this because my experiences have forced me to address my own internal demons, and I couldn't help others until I had helped myself. Internalised slut-shaming is that little voice that says you won't be accepted or even loved if you want to be sexually empowered.

Internalised slutphobia affects most women, but for sex workers, the feeling is ramped up to be internalised whorephobia.

Biological science has finally shot down the idea that women and men have different sexual urges. Social science showed that sexual behaviour is controlled socially. People began recognising that patriarchy was a system of control that gave men more freedom and power over women. The sex industry was seen as a service for men. Sex-working women were by then considered victims of patriarchy. Men and other genders of sex workers were not recognised. Despite the sexual revolution, sluts for money were still considered to be 'damaged goods.'

Since the turn of the century, casual sex has generally been regarded as a common and non-harmful activity. Sex work too, is gradually gaining higher status, and we can see celebrity porn stars and an increasing visibility of loud and proud sex worker activists campaigning for human rights. Every sex worker and client who comes out of hiding (including me) helps to challenge the myths that support stigma.

The only real defence against slut-shaming stigma is to reject it and show pride. Sexual practices have not always been stigmatised in all cultures and may not be in the future.

Being labelled as a slut can happen to people in any number of situations and can take various forms, but the results are often the same – perpetuating feelings of shame, humiliation and fear.

When most people think about a slut, they think about the sex act and doing it in some offensive, overly enthusiastic or unsafe way.

Perceptions of what a slut is and does haven't changed much over the generations, despite women experiencing increasingly more sexual freedoms. And despite increasing examples of sexual empowerment in the media, women tell me that they still experience slut-shaming at the grassroots level.

Despite inroads to women's empowerment and these positive improvements, which have been decades in the making, ordinary women, including young women in their twenties and thirties, are still experiencing stigma and double standards.

The system that gives more sexual power to men will change when more women refuse to wait for men's attention and instead initiate relationships and sex on our own terms. We have been afflicted by a Madonna-whore dichotomy and we internalise our shame. We deny ourselves pleasure and deflect our stigma onto others. It doesn't have to be this way.

When women are enjoying better sex, the people they have sex with will too. Sexual equality is good for everyone.

This is the perfect time for sluts to rise up and demand sexual pleasure for ourselves, when, how and with whom we choose. Women need to be able to fuck like men. I don't mean with any sort of penetrative device, but with how we behave: refusing to be shamed and making the moves. We need to drive consent conversations to enable great emotionally connected sex with those who are ready to meet us equally. When men realise the toxicity that outdated ideas of masculinity have brought them, they may be ready to embrace a more passive, empathic sexual role and will then end up having the best sex of their lives.

Achieving Slutopia is something that all people can contribute to. The first and most difficult step is to notice and understand the effects that slut-shaming has had on you.

Once we truly embody the knowledge that sexual shame is unnecessary, we can cast it off and begin to help others. You don't need to be wanting or having lots of sex to feel sexually empowered. The pyramid of slutphobia and whorephobia will be dismantled brick by brick when we respect sluts and all women.

Place a high value on your right to experience pleasure and commit time and energy to the cause. Understand your body as a site for your own sexual desires and boast about sexual thrills. Allow your orgasms to reduce your stress, heal past traumas, soothe aches and pains, and feel for yourself the energising role of your sexual appetite. Use your slutty sexual satiation to contribute to your identity and drive you forward with real inner confidence, empathy and compassion.

Being a slut is affirmative action.

WHAT IS A SWERF?

Sex worker exclusionary radical feminists (SWERFs) position themselves as advocates of women's rights and protectors of dignity and safety. However, once you scratch the surface, what emerges isn't justice or liberation, but control, stigma, and policy positions consistently undermine sex workers' safety.

'Sex worker exclusionary feminist or feminism' is often framed as protection, but it actually undermines the rights, safety, and autonomy of sex workers. SWERFs aren't saving anyone. SWERFs don't call themselves SWERFs of course. They prefer terms like 'radical' or feminists who oppose the sex industry. SWERF is closely tied to TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminism), which denies the validity of trans identities.

SWERFs routinely campaign against sex worker-led advocacy, working to discredit our organising through falsehoods, misrepresentation, and targeted harassment. What is often presented as protective intervention actually centres control and exclusion. This reflects a broader saviour complex that assumes sex workers need rescuing.

At its core, SWERF ideology refuses to recognise sex work as work and instead collapses all forms of sex work into exploitation, erasing the agency, diversity, and lived experience of sex workers. It positions sex work as a tool of oppressive patriarchal structures and as something inherently degrading to women.

Some SWERFs acknowledge that consensual sex work is possible. However, they argue that those who participate in it, along with feminists who support sex workers, are complicit in sustaining what they view as an immoral, misogynistic 'abuse' industry.

This goes beyond theoretical disagreement; SWERF ideology has tangible consequences in the real world. When sex workers are spoken for rather than included in decision-making processes that affect us, it results in laws and policies that harm our safety, rights, and wellbeing.

SWERF POLICY IS HARMFUL

Most insidiously, SWERF politics align with conservative and carceral ideas. Anti-sex work campaigns often rely on increased policing, surveillance, and border control which disproportionately impacts migrant sex workers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sex workers, sex workers of colour, and trans sex workers.

SWERF ideology and policy is the opposite of feminist solidarity. It's an expansion of systems that already harm marginalised communities wrapped up as feminism and women's empowerment.

Criminalisation frameworks, particularly the 'Swedish model' often championed by SWERFs, claims to target the clients of sex workers while 'protecting' workers. But a substantial body of international research tells a different story. Studies from multiple countries including Canada, Ireland, and France, show these laws push sex work further underground increasing isolation, reducing workers' ability to screen clients, and heightening our vulnerability to violence.

Amnesty International, the World Health Organisation, and UNAIDS all support full decriminalisation not as an ideology, but as evidence-based practice for health, safety, and human rights.

Sex workers want rights.

Sex workers have been clear for decades that we want rights, not rescue. Decriminalisation, labour protections, peer-led services and the ability to work collectively are what improve safety and wellbeing. These aren't hypothetical solutions, they are backed by global evidence and by the lived experience of the communities most affected.

Someone saying they are a 'feminist' doesn't mean they are including sex workers. SWERFs are everywhere. They are politicians, working in 'feminist' organisations, and can be influential advocates or celebrities speaking up about shared causes like sexual violence. They speak about sex workers as if we have no autonomy or agency.

If feminism is about bodily autonomy, labour rights and self-determination then excluding sex workers isn't just contradictory, it's indefensible.



Feminists, listen to sex workers

Dr Elena Jeffreys, Policy and Advocacy Manager at Scarlet Alliance, reflects on tensions within feminist movements and the ongoing need to centre sex workers' voices. In this piece, she challenges feminists to listen, without assumption or expectation, to the people most directly affected.

If you really want to fight patriarchy, start by hearing the voices of the people actually on the frontlines of bodily autonomy. We know what safety, choice, and liberation looks like and we don't need you to save us.

We take our sex worker peer education, sex worker organising, activism and politics very seriously. This is not a joke. This is not an academic indulgence. Sex worker activism is not a career path. We are not here to further our careers and we are not trying to salvage the whore stigma in our lives and professionalise our CV by doing sex worker activism.

Activism is not a cop out from the day-to-day discrimination we face as sex workers. Our sex worker activism could also be called labour organising, and without it we wouldn't have any rights.

Everything that sex workers have won in terms of work conditions, dignity, health and access to services, we have won because we have fought for it ourselves.

Some within the broader feminist movement have labelled those of us who do advocacy in the sex worker rights movement as "privileged" and "happy hookers" who are unable to understand the hardships "real" sex workers face.

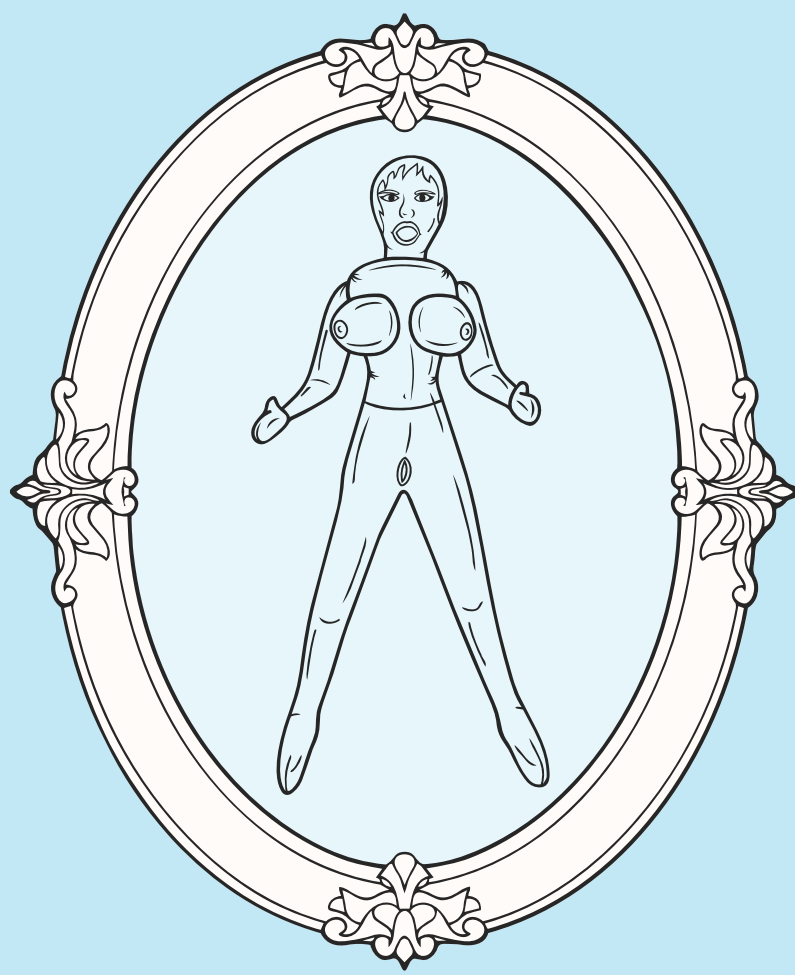
Do not assume anything about the sex workers you meet at the Women Deliver Conference or any other feminist conference.

Do not assume anything about the sex workers you meet on social media, who you see in the media, who you see doing advocacy.

Do not assume we have not been victims of assault, discrimination, family breakdown, abuse, violence, bad work conditions, domestic violence, poverty, police corruption or crime.

We are people, just like you, who have faced everything in a life that any human being faces. But as sex workers we also face deep-seated stigmas which mean that if we don't disclose to you our stories of tragedy and the demeaning experiences we have faced, we run the risk of not being believed by you.

This is what we call "tragedy porn": A desire in the feminist movement to hear tragic stories of hardship from sex workers, and when we don't tell them, we face the accusation that we are covering up the "truth" about sex work. We are expected to 'perform' stereotypical tragedy porn for feminist audiences and when we don't we are disbelieved.



We won't perform our tragedy for you. Because to live our lives with strength, you need to accept us at our best. We want feminists to stop punishing us for our strengths, stop rewarding us for our pain, stop gaining privilege on the back of our needs, and to listen when we speak. We will continue to speak out about our rights and you need to hear us. If you deny our experience, you deny our existence. We are already fighting bad laws; we don't need to be fighting half of feminists as well.

POLICED, PROFILED *PUSHED OUT*



Australia's border control and anti-trafficking interventions disproportionately impact the human rights of Asian migrant sex workers. Restrictive migration policy, costly and opaque brokerage systems, and limited access to legal information create structural vulnerabilities that undermine migrant sex workers' safety, autonomy, and rights.

Australian Border Force (ABF) operations include armed and militarised raids of sex industry workplaces, targeting Asian migrant sex workers for visa checks, visa cancellations, detention and deportation.

These raids are often framed as efforts to detect and deter exploitation and trafficking but the reality is that they fail to support migrant workplace rights. Raids are traumatising and dehumanising. Australian authorities use terms such as 'workplace visits' and 'compliance checks'. However, raids involve intimidating behaviour, carrying weapons, and using militarised tactics such as surrounding the building. Sex workers who are subjected to these raids are often from migrant and refugee backgrounds. They are separated and questioned without interpreters, and asked to sign documents they do not understand. Questions are intrusive, stigmatising, and migrant sex workers fear that the information collected will be used against them in the future, impacting upon future migration and work opportunities.

Raids foster anti-authority sentiment and mistrust. They have created a fear of immigration and other authorities among Asian migrant sex workers, undermining the protective benefits of sex work decriminalisation, workplace health and safety and programs such as the Workplace Justice Visa pilot.

Raids deter help-seeking behaviours. This negatively impacts peer support, safety, health and wellbeing. Peer educators from decriminalised jurisdictions report that raids cause sex workers to disbelieve that sex work is lawful. Sex worker organisations observe pre-decriminalisation behaviours returning among Asian migrant sex workers and their workplaces: this includes hiding condoms, pretending not to offer sexual services, and refusing entry to peer educators for health promotion.



Stop the *racist* raids

This speech was given by Scarlet Alliance's Migration Policy Analyst Aysha Zaharin in October 2025 on Gadigal Land during the Rally for Migrant Sex Workers' Rights. Aysha is also a member of Scarlet Alliance's Asian Migrant Sex Worker Advisory Group (AMSWAG).

Scarlet Alliance is a national peak body. Since 1989 it has led sex worker voices to the Commonwealth Government. This includes migration policy and today I am speaking as the Migration Policy Analyst for Scarlet Alliance.

SWOP NT is a Scarlet Alliance member, based in the Northern Territory and representing sex worker concerns there. We have SWOP NT to thank for the successful campaign to decriminalise sex work in the NT in 2020. Northern Territory joins NSW decriminalised in 1996, Victoria in 2022 and Queensland last year. Even so, sex workers in the Northern Territory report to SWOP uniformed, armed military-style raids on their workplaces by Border Force officers.

Asian migrant sex workers ask SWOP "Why are these uniformed officers on our doorstep, forcing their way into the door? We thought the laws changed." Yes, the laws changed. The workplaces are lawful. Why and what are these uniformed officers doing there? SWOP were determined to find out. They wrote to the Department of Home Affairs in May 2024, asking for the operational guidelines used by Border Force officers. We want to know the rules and laws Border Force officers are acting under. The Department of Home Affairs directed us back to Border Force to answer this question.

Border Force did not release their guidelines. Instead on the 24 December 2024 they promised a review of their operations, and that our organisations would be consulted. Merry Christmas. But not quite. In March 2025 we wrote to them again, this time from Vixen, the sex worker organisation in Victoria.

Vixen asked Border Force: "what are Border Force doing in decriminalised workplaces?" Border Force replied saying the attention sex workers were getting from Border Force officers was normal, and the formal operation against sex workers, Operation Inglenook, finished on 31 December 2024. They said if we want the guidelines we will have to do a Freedom of Information request. Well, we did better. We got Senator Lidia Thorpe to ask for them in Parliament.

We also have Senator David Pocock ask questions in Parliament, and we have submitted FOI's. This is what we know:

Border Force has conducted over 200 activities targeting sex worker workplaces in so-called Australia since late 2022 - detaining and deporting at least 30 people that we know of.

Over two years Ingelnook racially profiled and refused entry to more than 200 people at the border just for being suspected of coming to do sex work. The average time held in detention is a week.

In the first year 98 migrants were detained at the border, 88 per cent were women, 59 per cent were 29 years old or younger and 53 per cent were travelling from Japan.

In the second year at least 165 people were refused immigration clearance. 93 per cent were women, 47 per cent were aged 29 or younger, and 52 per cent were from Japan, 10 per cent from China, 10 per cent from Taiwan, 10 per cent from Thailand, four per cent from Indonesia, and three per cent from South Korea.

Why can sex workers not access visa pathways? This is whorephobia, migrant bashing and racism. Lack of access to visas is the number one reason for exploitation of migrant workers, but the government refuses to make visas accessible. It is against all human rights conventions for the protection of all women.

If they really cared about exploitation they would fix the racist immigration system.

What we found out from this evidence is that it is specifically targeting Asian young women, by seriously profiling us, and not anyone from Europe or America.

This unfair targeted racist detention resulted in trans women sex workers being held in the male detention facility, being denied access to gender affirming healthcare, subject to sexual harassment, and having their human rights denied.

There are no guidelines or human rights in place by the Department of Home Affairs when dealing with trans women.

Not *your* rescue project

The media's depiction of a human trafficker often looks more like a cop than anything else. This is an excerpt from 'Not Your Rescue Project', published with permission from authors Chanelle Gallant and Elene Lam.

Migrant sex workers are more endangered by those who make the laws and those who enforce them (the police, immigration control, and city enforcement officers) than they are by organised crime. We use the term state violence to mean suffering and harm that is committed by state authorities. State violence includes both authorised and unauthorised forms of suffering and harm resulting from the actions of law enforcement, correctional institutions, border patrol, and other agents of the criminal legal system through surveillance, policing, immigration raids, seizure of wages and property, detention, prisons, expulsions, and travel bans. It includes the state's apprehension of sex workers' children and family separation, forced evictions, and denial of medical care, as well as the surveillance, arrest, detention, and deportations of migrant sex workers' family members and friends who are caught up in investigations. State violence includes legal and authorised processes such as criminalisation. Criminalisation is a social and political process in which society decides who and what behaviors or activities will be punished by the state. And state violence includes extralegal and unauthorised violence such as physical and sexual assault, sexual harassment, threats of violence, wage theft, and murder.

Most state violence against migrant sex workers is legal and viewed as legitimate, normal, and justified. We want to challenge the narrative that abusing, caging, and threatening migrant sex workers with death is considered human trafficking when it is committed by non-state actors, but that when the police do it, it is legitimate, helpful, and fair. In popular conceptions of migrant sex workers, they are very often imagined as victims of armed gangsters holding them hostage, withholding all their money, and forcing them to have sex under threats of violence.

But it is the police who enter the workplaces of migrant sex workers with guns pointed at their heads. It is the police who are authorised to fatally shoot people for resisting an arrest or running from a raid. It is the police who are authorised to seize a sex worker's life savings. It is the police who are authorised to kidnap migrant sex workers and put them in cages—in a prison, jail, or detention center. And it is the police who sexually extort and assault them with impunity.



BUT... WHAT'S YOUR *real* NAME?

ANONYMITY

In the context of sex work, anonymity refers to the practice of protecting our legal or 'government-known' identity through the use of pseudonyms, aliases, and privacy-enhancing measures to benefit our personal safety, privacy, and well-being.

PSEUDONYMITY

Pseudonymity involves using an alternative name or identity, often alongside other privacy measures, to represent ourselves professionally while maintaining anonymity. It enables sex workers to build a persona and/or brand, and engage with clients and communities without revealing our legal name.

WHY DOES PRIVACY MATTER?

Anonymity and pseudonymity enable sex workers to maintain a separation between our professional and personal lives, navigate legal and social challenges, and assert greater control over our interactions and relationships.

PERSONAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

Sex work often exposes us to heightened risks of violence, harassment, discrimination and stigma. By maintaining anonymity or using a pseudonym, sex workers can reduce the risk of being targeted, tracked, doxxed or identified by clients, law enforcement, and the broader community.

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Sex workers face pervasive stigma and discrimination. Anonymity and pseudonymity provide a shield against these prejudices, allowing sex workers to separate our professional identity from our personal life.

LEGAL AND REGULATORY CONCERNS

The legal landscape surrounding sex work varies widely across jurisdictions, with many maintaining punitive laws and regulations that criminalise various aspects of our work. Anonymity and pseudonymity can serve as legal safeguards that can help us avoid detection, arrest, and prosecution. They can also facilitate access to essential services, including healthcare, without fear of legal repercussions or discrimination.

AUTONOMY AND AGENCY

Beyond protection, anonymity and pseudonymity empower sex workers with control over our professional image, narrative, and interactions. By choosing how, when, and where to reveal our identity, sex workers can assert our autonomy, negotiate our boundaries, and build relationships with clients, communities, and other service providers on our own terms.



PRIVACY IS IMPORTANT IN REAL WORLD AND IN ONLINE SPACES

In an increasingly data-driven world, anonymity and pseudonymity are indispensable for sex workers navigating healthcare, financial services, online spaces, and engagement with state organisations.

Online spaces.

Sex workers online face risks of doxxing (non-consensual sharing of personal or identifying information) and harassment. In some instances, clients, law enforcement, media, and others have attempted to uncover our identity, location, or contact details to harass, blackmail, or threaten us. Digital platforms can help us connect with clients and grow our business. However, they also pose significant safety risks, particularly when legal identification is required. Sharing sensitive data with tech platforms leaves us vulnerable to data misuse, breaches and unauthorised access.

Payment platforms.

Access to discreet, non-discriminatory payment platforms is essential to our financial inclusion and autonomy. Many sex workers face exclusion from financial institutions due to stigma and misconceptions about legality. Discreet payment processors help protect our safety and wellbeing by allowing clients to pay without revealing our legal name or personal details, reducing the risk of exposure, discrimination, and harm.

Free, anonymous sexual health testing.

Sex workers need access to free sexual health testing that does not require identification or disclosure of our legal identity. Confidential services protect our health without fear of stigma, discrimination, or legal repercussions. This fosters trust with healthcare providers, and supports regular testing and early detection of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and blood-borne viruses (BBVs). Despite importance, access to these clinics remains limited, especially in criminalised jurisdictions, deepening existing barriers to healthcare and perpetuates health inequities for sex workers across the country.

Trans and gender diverse sex workers.

Trans and gender diverse sex workers have specific needs for anonymity and pseudonymity. Intersecting forms of stigma and discrimination heighten our exposure to violence, marginalisation, and barriers to healthcare, legal support, and social services. Legal name and gender marker changes are often inaccessible due to cost, bureaucracy, and discriminatory systems. The risk of being misgendered, deadnamed, or outed by clients, law enforcement, or online platforms further undermines our ability to maintain anonymity.

CTRL + ALT + RESIST

Once again, sex workers are bearing the brunt of efforts to make the internet “safer.” Discrimination by big tech is nothing new, but emerging laws in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia are intensifying the silencing of sex workers in digital spaces.

ACCESS AND EQUALITY

Sex workers need to have equal access to online tools no matter who we are and where we live.

WHAT ARE DIGITAL RIGHTS?

Digital rights are the rights people need to safely and fully participate in online spaces, and are a core part of the modern human rights framework. Yet sex workers in Australia and globally are frequently excluded from and discriminated against in these spaces.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND INFORMATION

Sex workers should have the ability to choose what information we receive and share online, without censorship or fear.

PRIVACY AND DATA PROTECTION

We need to be able to have the freedom to decide who has access to our personal data, and how it gets shared. This includes ‘the right to be forgotten.’

ANONYMITY AND ENCRYPTION

Sex workers must be able to communicate online safely and anonymously when we need. This includes the choice to use encryption technologies.

INCREASING ONLINE REGULATION

Australian and international online safety laws give regulators sweeping powers to regulate the internet, including investigating or removing online content it considers ‘harmful.’

These regulations apply to all internet technologies, including:

- search engines (e.g. Google)
- hosting services (e.g. GoDaddy)
- social media platforms (e.g. Instagram)
- messaging apps (e.g. WhatsApp)
- Internet Service Providers (e.g. Optus)
- app distribution services (e.g. Apple App Store)
- device manufacturers (e.g. Samsung).

Many of these regulations force tech providers to introduce measures to prevent people under the age of 18 from accessing adult content. These regulations create risks that online platforms will go too far when trying to comply with these requirements - and ban adult content, sexuality education and sex workers from all online spaces.

Sexual and reproductive health promotion often includes frank discussions and images, such as diagrams of anatomy, condom demonstrations, and depictions of sexual acts. Empirical studies show that automated and human moderators routinely misclassify such content as pornography. For example, algorithms have flagged innocuous health illustrations or cartoons as 'adult' content.

The Center for Intimacy Justice report, *The Digital Gag: Suppression of Sexual and Reproductive Health on Meta, TikTok, Amazon, and Google* documented systematic suppression of sexual and reproductive health information across major platforms, finding that nonprofit organisations, creators, and small businesses routinely had sexual health ads and content removed or had accounts suspended without clear explanation.

In 2025, it was reported that Google had blocked advertisements for an Australian government-funded STI campaign as 'adult content' on 12 occasions, and the organisation running the campaign had to contact Google on 10 different occasions.

When moderation undermines rights: UNESCO's review of content moderation frameworks.

At its presentation to the 27th Congress of the World Association for Sexual Health, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) explicitly warned that automated and human moderation systems 'pathologise and automatically sexualise legitimate educational content, particularly when it relates to gender, sexuality, or pleasure. UNESCO presented an analysis on content moderation policies across seven major platforms, identifying three critical absences of:

DISTINCTION:

Frameworks focus on punitive removal rather than clear guidance protecting health content.

POSITIVE AND ENABLING POLICIES:

Ambiguity leads to broad enforcement where evidence-based and educational content is treated as an anomaly.

PLEASURE:

Limited or ambiguous guidelines around healthy and positive aspects of sexuality and reproductive health.

Marginalised groups – including rural youth, Indigenous communities, people with disability, or those in abusive homes – often rely on online channels for health support and information.

When platforms face massive penalties for under-removal but no consequences for over-removal, they will always err on the side of silence. The voices lost are sex workers, sex educators, LGBTIQ+ people and advocates, harm reduction workers, and peer-led community organisations whose expertise is being erased from the digital public square.

NEW MEDIA, SAME OLD *moral* PANIC

Sexually explicit media framed as a plague on society is nothing new. Over the decades, we have seen pornography and ultimately, sex workers, blamed for any and every societal moral panic.

Much media and political discourse frames pornography as an increasing 'social problem' that disproportionately impacts young people, and requires unevidenced legislative and policy 'solutions,' like age assurance technologies. However, analysis of academically rigorous research on pornography presents a more realistic picture.

A recent meta-analysis of thousands of pieces of research on pornography shows that people who consume pornography are also more sexually adventurous - that is to say, more open to reporting casual sex, anal sex, group sex, kinky sex and a range of other sexual practices. However, research does not support common urban myths about pornography, such as pornography consumption increasing misogynistic attitudes, or leading to violence against women or non-consensual sexual practices.

While pornography is not designed to function as relationship and sexuality education, it is also not automatically harmful to healthy sexual development, and historically, has been an essential part of healthy sexual development for LGBTQI+ young people.

However, when schools and parents fail to provide comprehensive, age-appropriate relationship and sexuality education, pornography ends up functioning as de facto sex education.

Framing pornography as a 'crisis' increases shame and stigma, preventing honest conversations. Both young people and adults may be impacted by compulsive online behaviours, including gaming, gambling and shopping. Describing pornography as exceptionally harmful, or as an 'addiction,' deters help-seeking behaviour and genuine understanding of online risks and harms.



The Global Architecture of Sexual Censorship

Mish Pony, CEO of Scarlet Alliance, examines the global rise of online censorship framed as “safety” and its impacts on sex workers and marginalised communities. This piece is adapted from an article originally published in Overland Magazine, “Howard and Harradine’s vision for the Internet is finally realised” (8 December 2025).

A wave of legislation is sweeping the globe, and it is being sold to us as child protection.

In reality, it is something older and more familiar: the embedding of conservative moral judgments about sexuality into the infrastructure of the internet itself.

In the United States, FOSTA-SESTA became law in 2018, creating legal liability for online platforms that host content linked to sex work. It was framed as anti-trafficking legislation. What it actually did was drive sex workers offline and into more dangerous conditions, while stripping away the screening tools and community networks that kept people safer. Research found that FOSTA-SESTA increased economic instability and an increase in violence from clients. The platforms didn't distinguish between consensual sex work and trafficking — they simply removed everything and everyone to avoid liability.



The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), adopted in 2022 and now in force, was heralded as a rights-based framework for platform accountability. In practice, evidence gathered by organisations such as Repro Uncensored demonstrates that sex worker-led organisations, reproductive health providers, and queer groups continue to experience systemic content removal and account terminations — with no effective remedy. The DSA's conflation of sex work with human trafficking has produced over-censorship on a structural scale.

In the UK, the Online Safety Act's age verification requirements came into force in July 2025. Within weeks, BBC Verify found that content moderation filters were catching not only adult material, but also coverage of Palestine and Ukraine, parliamentary debates, trans support websites, STI information services, and abortion resources. But the Online Safety Act is only one layer of the UK's expanding sexual censorship architecture.

Laws have been introduced to ban consensual incest fantasy pornography — that is, legal fiction between adults. The same legislative environment also produced a ban on the depiction of consensual sexual choking in pornography, criminalising the representation of a sex act that adults may freely and knowingly choose to engage in. Taken together, these measures do not regulate harm — they regulate imagination, fantasy, and the depiction of consensual adult behaviour, encoding into law the judgment that certain desires are too deviant to be permitted. This is not a framework designed with bodily autonomy or sexual rights in mind. It is precisely the kind of legislation that happens when moral conservatives, rather than sex workers and health advocates, are the ones in the room when policy is written.

Australia has mandated age verification and filtering across search engines, social media, and virtually all internet services — backed by AU\$50 million penalties. The categories subject to restriction are extraordinary in their breadth: not only pornography, but "high-impact" depictions of nudity, simulated sexual activity, drug use, and what are called "high-impact themes" — defined to include suicide, racism, family breakdown, death, serious illness, and drug dependency.

In Sweden, parliament passed laws that criminalise the purchase of digital sex work services, including camming and custom erotic content, setting a dangerous precedent across the EU.

The Network Behind the Regulations

These legislative agendas do not emerge in isolation. Behind the public-facing "online safety" and "child protection" framing operates a tightly interconnected transnational network of anti-rights organisations.

The US-based National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) — a fundamentalist Christian organisation formerly known as "Morality in Media," with explicit ties to anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-abortion advocacy — works in formal partnership with groups that now hold advisory roles in government consultations across multiple countries. These groups have successfully pressured payment processors to financially deplatform adult content creators; in 2025, tens of thousands of games, including LGBTQIA+ titles, were removed from major platforms following their campaigns.

In Australia, this network takes concrete institutional form. Collective Shout — a lobby group that campaigns against the "sexualisation of women and girls" — and Women's Forum Australia, a socially conservative think tank with ties to the Catholic right, have both played active roles in shaping the online safety policy environment, despite holding views on gender and sexuality that are fundamentally at odds with feminist and sex worker-led frameworks. Daniel Principe, former educator with Collective Shout, has been among the loudest advocates for the age verification and filtering regime now embedded in Australian law. Most notably, consent educator Chanel Contos — whose Teach Us Consent campaign drew genuine and legitimate attention to sexual violence in Australian schools — has lent her platform to collaboration with Fight the New Drug, a US-based organisation that frames pornography as a public health crisis and operates with deep roots in Mormon conservatism. Contos has also actively promoted the work of Reem Alsalem, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls. Alsalem's name should be familiar: she has used her UN platform to argue that trans women are a danger to women's

rights, that prostitution must be recognised as a "system of violence," that the term "sex worker" itself masks exploitation, and that "pornography is filmed prostitution" — positions that deny the agency and expertise of sex workers at the precise institutional level where our voices most need to be heard. Collective Shout is also an open and vocal supporter of Alsalem's mandate. The pattern is consistent: Contos' promotion of both Fight the New Drug and Alsalem illustrates how genuine concerns about consent and sexual harm are recruited into a broader ideological network that is anti-sex work, anti-trans, and ultimately hostile to the rights-based frameworks.

What binds these actors is not simply distaste for pornography, but a conviction that sexuality and identity require moral regulation. Through advisory roles and institutional influence, they shape digital environments where sexual expression is treated as inherently suspect — and censorship is repackaged as duty of care.

Big Tech as the Enforcement Mechanism

Governments do not need to build the censorship architecture themselves — they outsource it to platforms. When legislation mandates that platforms filter broad, vaguely defined categories of content under threat of massive fines, the incentive is always to over-remove. Platforms err on the side of deletion.

UNESCO has warned that content moderation systems "pathologise and automatically sexualise legitimate educational content". This has produced a chilling effect documented globally: health educators avoid the word "vagina," replace "sex" with "seggs," and self-censor discussions of STIs, abortion, and LGBTQIA+ identities to avoid algorithmic suppression. Sex worker organisations cannot share harm reduction resources, safety information, or community health guidance without risking removal. This is not a bug in the system. It is the system working as designed.

Who Gets Silenced

The populations most harmed by this censorship architecture are also the populations with the greatest need for the content being removed:

Sex workers, who rely on online tools to screen clients, share safety information, organise collectively, and access health resources — particularly in contexts where criminalisation already limits their access to formal services.

LGBTQIA+ communities, whose identities and health needs are routinely conflated with "adult content" by blunt algorithmic filters.

Young people, who — as evidence consistently shows — turn to online resources to fill the gaps left by inadequate sexuality education, particularly around LGBTQIA+ identities and disability.

Health educators and harm reduction workers, who find that frank, evidence-based information about bodies, sex, drugs, mental health, and violence is categorised as content requiring restriction.

Reproductive rights advocates, whose content on abortion and sexual health is caught in filters designed to stop pornography.

The Policy Alternative

If governments and platforms genuinely want to protect young people online, the evidence points clearly in a different direction: comprehensive, non-stigmatising sexuality education that acknowledges pleasure, consent, and diversity; well-funded health services; harm reduction resources that are frank and accessible; and digital governance designed in genuine partnership with the communities affected.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

FEATURE ARTICLE BY MISH PONY

That last point is the crux. Sex workers, LGBTQIA+ advocates, health educators, and harm reduction workers are routinely excluded from the policy consultations that shape the digital environments we depend on. The organisations that dominate those processes are, in many cases, ideologically committed to our marginalisation.

The current global trajectory — FOSTA-SESTA, the DSA, the Online Safety Act, Australia's codes, Sweden's digital criminalisation — reflects not evidence of what protects people, but the outsized influence of a conservative moral agenda that has found new infrastructure in the internet age.

Unless affected communities are placed at the centre of digital policy design, the next generation of online censorship will look disturbingly like the last — just with better branding, larger fines, and more sophisticated algorithms to enforce it.

CHAPTER 02

WHORETONOMY IS JUSTICE

WHORETONOMY IS JUSTICE

Justice means that our work is valued, our rights are protected, and our voices carry weight in every room. Justice means having access to legal systems that were never built with us in mind, and the influence to change them. Justice means being heard and believed when we report harm, not dismissed or criminalised. Justice is imagining a world without borders and cages, where safety doesn't depend on surveillance or punishment. Justice is challenging ourselves to debunk carceral logic and focus on real ways to prevent harm in our communities, and address harm when it occurs. Justice means honouring the full range of our experiences. It means passing the mic and amplifying the quietest voices.

JUSTICE

067

THE QUIET VIOLENCE OF SEX WORK STIGMA

Even when sex work is decriminalised, stigma still does the work of exclusion. It shapes how sex workers are treated in healthcare, housing, policing, the workplace, and even our own relationships.

Legislation governing sex work is a visible battle sex workers constantly have in our line of sight but the other, stigma, is an invisible system that reaches into every aspect of our lives. Stigma can be understood as a social process that involves negative labelling and societal beliefs and reactions towards individuals or groups who exist or (in the case of sex workers) work in a way that sits outside of perceived “norms”. Discrimination is a result of stigma and once a group of people is stigmatised, discrimination becomes easier to justify.

Sex workers are routinely cast as victims without agency, vectors of disease, criminals or public nuisances, or as immoral, particularly in the case of women, and therefore deserving of harm.

**NO
AGENCY**

IMMORAL

CRIMINAL

VICTIM

**PUBLIC
NUISANCE**

**VECTOR OF
DISEASE**

These narratives shape the everyday systems we rely on, including healthcare, housing, banking, policing, and employment. As a result, sex workers are treated as less credible, less deserving of protection, and less entitled to safety than other workers.

STIGMA IN REAL LIFE

For most of us, stigma is not one big event but it's a series of small moments in our everyday lives that accumulate.

A sex worker may go to a GP for a routine check up. When they mention they do sex work, the doctor's tone shifts and the questions become more invasive. How many clients do you see? Are you being trafficked? Suddenly the doctor pathologises the worker rather than simply providing the care the worker came in for.

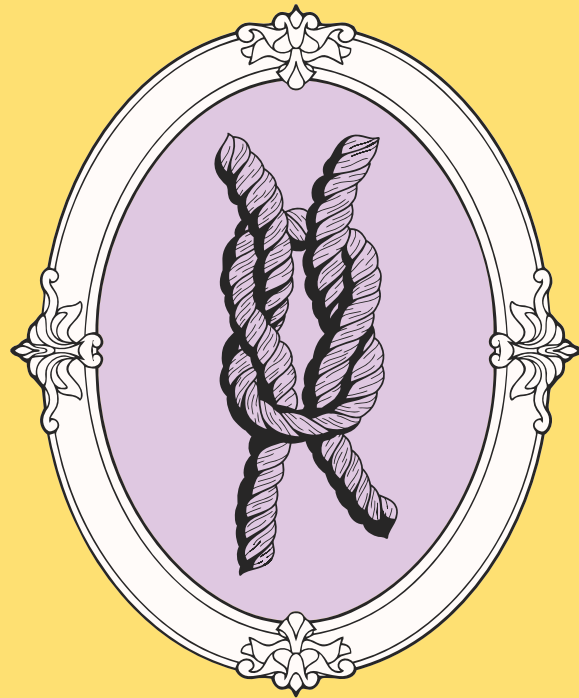
An Asian migrant worker considers reporting a violent client but decides not to. She's heard from other workers who went to the police that they were made to feel like they had done something wrong and she's seen media reports about men having serious charges dropped following the deaths and assaults of sex workers. She also doesn't want to bring attention to the brothel she works at, as she has heard a lot about police raids recently.

Stigma doesn't protect the public or discourage sex work but it does push workers further away from safety. When people fear judgement or punishment, they are less likely to report violence, access healthcare, seek legal help, or assert their workplace rights. Stigma isolates us from the very systems that are supposed to provide us with support.

Research shows that when sex workers have access to peer networks, healthcare, legal protections, and the ability to work without fear, our safety outcomes improve.

Sex workers are constantly resisting stigma, often in quiet ways. Not all of us have the privilege to be out, loud, and proud. But regardless, we support each other through peer networks, share safety information, and build collective knowledge about clients, venues, and working conditions. Sex worker organisations provide education, advocacy, and health services that we designed ourselves. Sometimes the resistance in our movement looks like political organising, and sometimes it looks like one worker telling their truth about the work. Sometimes, it simply looks like refusing the narrative that we are broken, powerless, or in need of rescue.





Intertwined: sex worker and drug user rights

One of the gaps in creating truly inclusive sex worker spaces is discrimination and judgement towards sex workers who use drugs. Accalia from SWOP NT talks through what we all need to do to silence the cop in our own heads.

Everyone's experience is their own. It's your choice how you identify and how you live your life. At the same time, consider what informs your attitudes towards sex workers who use drugs and all people who use drugs. Your own experiences of drug use is about you and is completely valid for you. Your own experiences of drug use is not about all sex workers who use drugs and the experiences of each sex worker who uses drugs is as valid for them as yours is for you.

Always avoid making assumptions

Don't assume someone doesn't use drugs and/or assume someone does use drugs.

Don't assume anything about any person's drug use but don't ask or make intrusive and unnecessary questions or comments eg "show me your arms".

Don't assume that sex work leads to drug use or that drug use leads to sex work. All sex worker experiences are unique.

Don't assume that someone's drug use is the issue and only address their drug use. Sex workers who use drugs don't need saving. You may have very good intentions and mean well, but you also might be doing more harm than good. Intention isn't the same as impact.

Do not call cops or DOCS, etc. on any sex worker who uses drugs.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Words matter

Use the language guide Words Matter by International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD) and the Asian Network of People who Use Drugs (ANPUD), which is vital documentation to abolish stigmatising language.

Facilitate inclusion

Dismantle all respectability politics, including the moral high ground of "sobriety = superiority".

Sex workers who use drugs have agency and self-determination which must be respected and sex workers who use drugs must not be pressured to stop their sex work or their drug use.

Drunk or high, the rules still apply! Sex workers who use drugs can and do decide what they consent to and determine their own boundaries. It is not for anyone else to decide whether or not someone is able to consent, simply because they choose to use drugs.

As sex work has many intersecting and overlapping communities, it's important to consider those intersecting and overlapping communities during law reform, policy reform, and submission recommendations.

Value the perspective of sex workers who use drugs. All people who use drugs are experts in their own lives. Ask our opinions and trust our advice!

Sex workers who use drugs deserve the same rights and inclusivity.

FEATURE ARTICLE BY ACCALIA

Make it clear any drug user phobia, drug shaming, sex worker phobia, and sex work shaming are unacceptable and won't be tolerated.

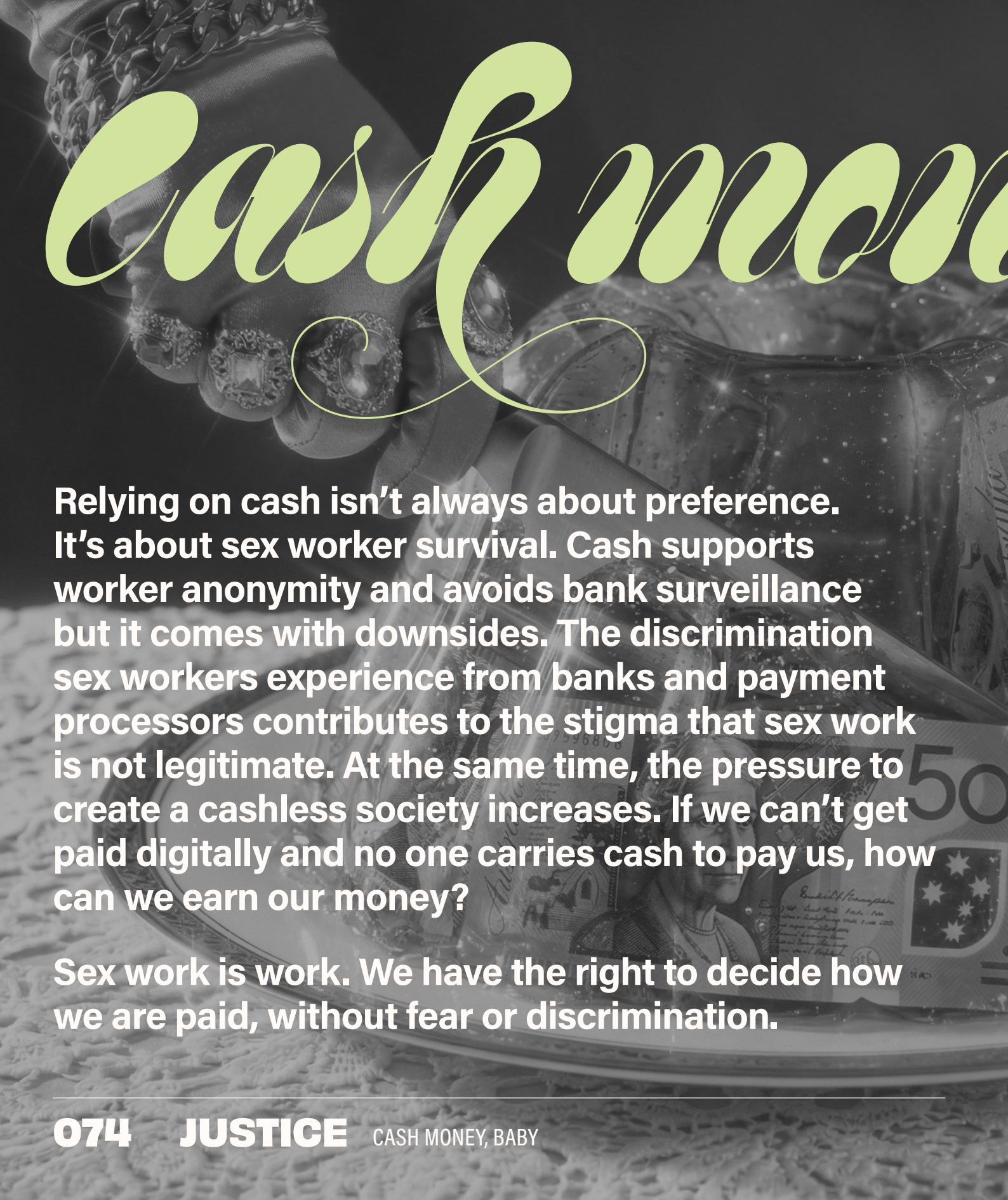
Emphasise the 'person' first (e.g. person who uses drugs).

Avoid stigmatising terms like "being clean", "has a drug habit" or "suffering from addiction".

Choose terms that are 'strength-based' and 'empowering' and emphasise agency and choice. Language should empower the person (don't speak to people like children, victims, be pathologising or treat others as incapable/without agency).

Use language that is accessible and be aware of the context of the language (some language is OK when used within a community to claim identity but stigmatising when used by others e.g. "junkie").

Communication is not just verbal — use non-verbal, tone of voice, and body language to demonstrate respect for the dignity and worth of all people!

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a large, ornate diamond ring. The hand is positioned over a pile of cash, including a 50 Euro banknote. The background is dark and textured.

Cash money, baby

Relying on cash isn't always about preference. It's about sex worker survival. Cash supports worker anonymity and avoids bank surveillance but it comes with downsides. The discrimination sex workers experience from banks and payment processors contributes to the stigma that sex work is not legitimate. At the same time, the pressure to create a cashless society increases. If we can't get paid digitally and no one carries cash to pay us, how can we earn our money?

Sex work is work. We have the right to decide how we are paid, without fear or discrimination.

F*CK YOU, PAY US

Sex workers are routinely shut out of basic financial services: denied bank accounts, payment platforms, loans and insurance. This isn't because of actual risk but because of stigma dressed up as policy.

Throughout Australia and across the world, sex workers have reported experiences of financial discrimination - from banks, card companies, lenders, payment processors and other financial institutions. This may include denial or termination of service (commonly known as 'debanking') but may also include delivering substandard services, charging more for services, or subjecting sex workers to increased 'security checks' that undermine privacy. In Australia, sex workers have reported:

- being charged additional account fees
- being refused access to merchant services (e.g. eftpos terminals), billing services and payment processing facilities,
- having applications for credit, financing and insurance services declined without explanation
- experiencing privacy and information breaches
- losing income through lack of access to financial services
- having personal and business accounts closed without being given the opportunity to resolve concerns
- having personal and business accounts closed without being provided adequate notice, reason for the discontinuation of service, or access to appeal processes
- having funds frozen and/or confiscated.



Those who drink the water *must remember* those who dug the well...

Financial discrimination against sex workers is not an aberration, but rather is a specific manifestation of the current social, political, economic, and technological environment. These quotes have been taken from “High Risk Hustling: High Risk Hustling: Payment Processors Sexual Proxies and Discrimination by Design,” authors Zahra Stardust, Danielle Blunt, Gabriella Garcia, Lorelei Lee, Kate D’Adamo and Rachel Kuo, published in City University of New York Law Review, Vol 26, Iss 1, Winter 2023

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

FEATURE ARTICLE BY ZAHRA STARDUST AND CONTRIBUTORS

“Despite the fact that adult content drives 30% of internet traffic... and companies are profiting from the traffic, ads, and services involved in the industry, the women who power that capital flow are...[deliberately excluded, criminalised, banned, censored, invisibilised, shamed, stigmatised and silenced online.]”

Bardot Smith, analyst, elite financial dominatrix and legend in her field.

"Essentially, sex workers are caught up in what Jillian York calls big tech’s “war on sex,” a war with a long history driven by colonisation and the conservative Christian right, frequently working alongside self-described feminists, involving the policing of sexuality, morality, and class."

Jillian C. York is International Activism Director at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, EFF, a founding member of the feminist collective, Deep Lab.

"The “gentrification of the internet” is where online spaces are “increasingly dictated by corporations instead of being driven by communities.” Just as in urban gentrification, it “exaggerates inequality and normalises certain social values while excluding others” through a displacement of communities that do not benefit the corporate interests."

Jessa Lingel is a feminist media studies scholar.

"The architecture of digital gentrification is a “walled garden;” a privately owned digital space acting as public commons. Walled gardens coincide with the corporatization of the “open” internet toward ad-enhanced platforms which sociologist Zeynep Tufekci states are “incentivizing the platforms to use their massive troves of data with the power of computational inference to become better spy machines, geared toward ad delivery.”

Zeynep Tufekci is a Turkish-American sociologist, and the Henry G. Bryant Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University.

LOCKED OUT



Housing discrimination locks sex workers out. Sex workers face diverse and nuanced barriers to housing, all of which are steeped in stigma and make discrimination far too easy.

The right to housing is recognised by international human rights law, and includes safeguards against discriminatory and forced eviction. Research from the Global Network of Sex Work Projects shows that globally, sex workers are particularly likely to be homeless or living in unstable housing. This is even more true for street-based sex workers, trans and gender diverse sex workers, sex workers of colour, migrant sex workers, sex workers who have been incarcerated, sex workers who use drugs, and sex workers living with HIV.

POVERTY AND FINANCIAL DISCRIMINATION

Without access to banking and financial services, many sex workers are unable to show proof of income or employment needed to pass rental background checks or access government housing assistance. Poverty also pushes some sex workers into exchanging sex directly for a place to stay, which puts them at greater risk of abuse and exploitation. Sex workers without housing may be targeted during 'sweeps' or 'crackdowns' on unhoused populations.

CRIMINALISATION

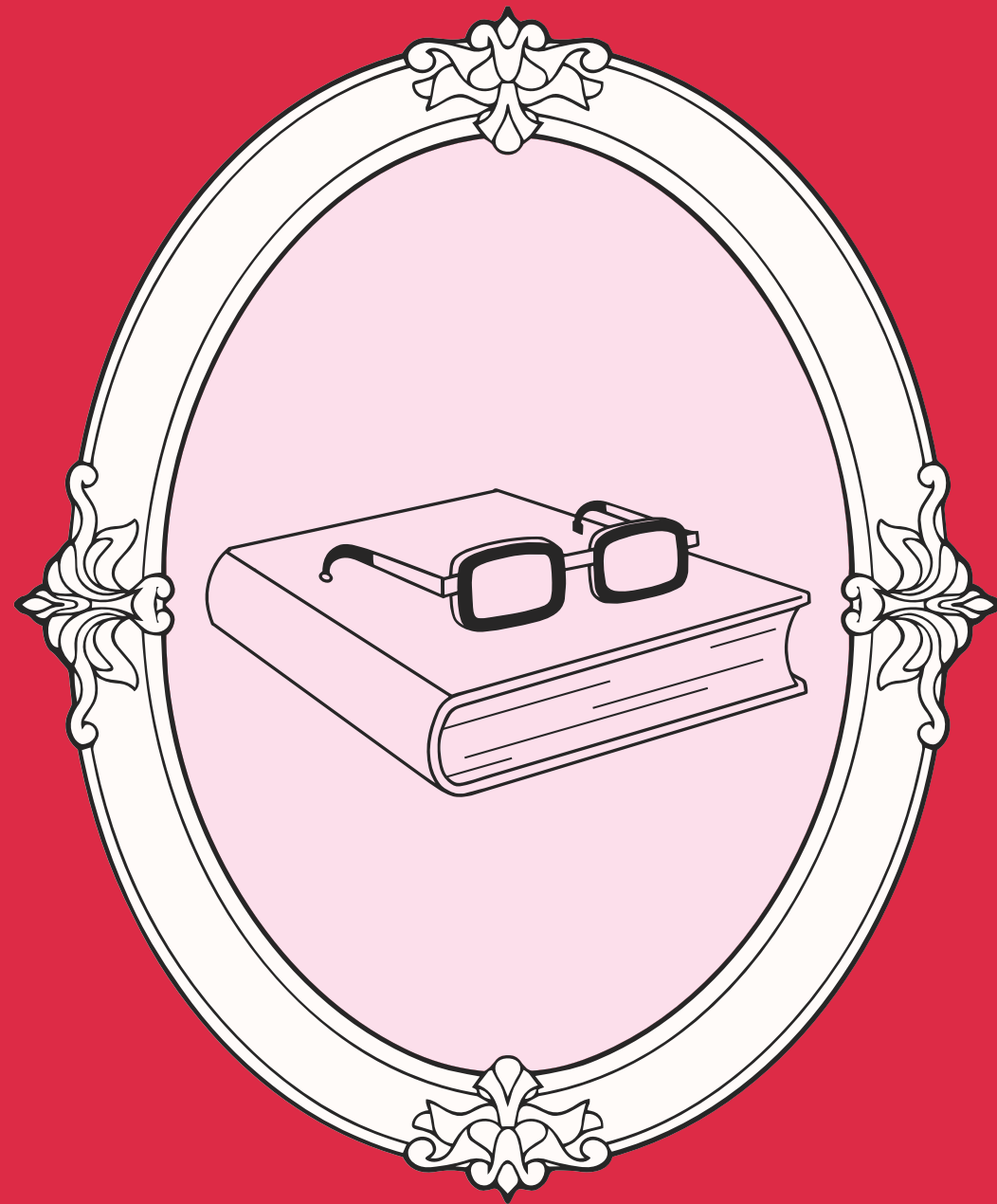
Sex workers with criminal records are often ineligible for social housing, and may be denied private rentals after background checks. In 'Nordic model' jurisdictions, laws targeting 'third parties' can be used to evict sex workers, or prevent landlords from renting to them.

ANTI-TRAFFICKING RAIDS AND 'RESCUE' OPERATIONS

Globally, police raids associated with 'anti-trafficking' and 'rescue' operations have resulted in sex workers losing both their home and their workplace at once. Global research has documented sex workers having identity documents confiscated during raids, as well as violence and extortion.

STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Even in jurisdictions where sex work has been decriminalised, a lack of comprehensive and accessible anti-discrimination protections means that sex workers may be denied housing or face unjustified eviction.



Dismantling the system

Decolonisation is a material shift in power, voice, and control. Performer, academic, and former sex worker Hayden unpacks what decolonising justice looks like and the positive impacts it would have for First Nations people and our broader community.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Tell us a bit about yourself. Who are you, what's your connection to sex work, and how do you position yourself in the world?

My name is Hayden, I'm a Blak trans masc disabled person living on Cadigal land. My connection to sex work is that I worked in brothels around Sydney before I affirmed my gender and then after that I worked privately. I'm now a performer and academic (trying very hard to finish a PhD).

FEATURE INTERVIEW | HAYDEN

Within sex worker spaces we often talk about "access to justice". What will make justice easier and how we can work within systems that are generally hostile to sex workers. What is your connection to the word "justice" and what does it mean to you?

I think justice is something that is difficult for sex workers to achieve in our society that is governed by a restrictive and harmful colonial structure. The 'justice system' that our society prescribes is one that is designed to harm those most vulnerable and protect those with the most privilege. As a result, we have devastating statistics which show most survivors of violent crime do not report as they understandably feel unsafe to approach authorities.

When reports are made, a majority of the time there is no official justice. As a survivor myself and someone who works with survivors, I have seen communities support each other in safer and more successful ways than official channels. Ideally we would decolonise and these systems would be dismantled, returning to a restorative justice framework seen in First Nations communities. However realistically we do need to find ways to work within the system we currently have. What I would say is that while navigating official channels we need appropriate advocates for sex workers, people who can step in when a worker is experiencing discrimination or stigma. Peer support is also incredibly beneficial, so providing peer led support services would also be of significant help. Additionally, education makes a huge difference, having more workshops and trainings presented by sex workers to people in these positions (eg. police, lawyers, counsellors etc.) would mean they are better placed to support the sex work community through the system.

Whoretonomy means sex workers being respected as the experts on their own lives. It means being able to be in control of your work, knowing your worth, ensuring clients respect your worth, knowing – even in the face of stigma – that your work is real work and it’s valid and bloody difficult work! And being proud of yourself.

What does restorative justice mean, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

Restorative justice is essentially a way of achieving justice within communities without the need for corporal punishment or punitive measures. It’s a form of justice that has been conducted in Indigenous communities for thousands of years, and in some remote communities it is still being practiced, which is incredible. The restorative justice framework is intricate and would take longer to explain than I have room for in this interview but in a brief explanation; it involves community coming together to support those who have been harmed and those who caused harm through healing circles and cultural care. In cases which need further intervention, a mediation is organised with the victim/s and offender/s in consultation with Elders and well-respected community members. Each community will have a different organisational structure and lore but overall this would be a good summary. I would recommend doing some further reading for those interested.

We know that sex workers are often not believed, and that stigma and discrimination means association with sex work is used against workers. How is this compounded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers?

Yes this is the unfortunate reality, that sex workers are often not believed when they do seek support. This is compounded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers due to the added intersection. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over policed, over represented in criminal justice environments and prisons and are punished more severely than white settlers due to the ongoing effects of colonisation. When you add the stigma and discrimination that sex workers face to an already marginalised population, these barriers become ten-fold. So we then see Blak sex workers experiencing these issues to a higher degree, but we also see them dealing with racism within these systems in addition, meaning it’s almost impossible for them to seek justice and it creates a justifiable deep mistrust of the justice system.

We are at a point in history of so-called Australia where there is an acknowledgement within many spaces about the ongoing harms that colonisation has caused and continues to cause. However, that acknowledgement doesn't always translate to practices. What does decolonisation mean to you?

Decolonisation in a broader sense would mean undoing all the colonial systems in place, dismantling parliament, dismantling police, abolishing prisons, abolishing the patriarchy and colonial gender binary and all other oppressive beliefs and structures. At least for me that’s what I’d like to see. Though I acknowledge that unfortunately some of what would be ideal, is just not achievable in today’s society. What I dream of and what I recognise is plausible are separate. In a realistic sense I would love to see colonial place names removed and Indigenous place names restored, I would like to see Indigenous knowledge systems in place in schools and universities, I would like to see First Nations people who are engaged with community at the forefront of movements and political decisions, I would like to see the justice system take a First Nations led approach and to engage with community care.

You work with sexual assault victim-survivors, as a victim-survivor yourself. How have you experienced peer support in this context, and what are the benefits of victim-survivors being supported in this way?

Yes I do a lot of work with victim-survivors as a victim-survivor myself and I facilitate peer support groups for LGBTQIA+ victim-survivors. What I've noticed through that work is how peer support is so much more helpful for healing after sexual assault than clinical psychology. That’s not to say that clinical psychology is useless, it certainly has its place and needs to be accessed in conjunction with peer led services but there's something very different and validating about having another survivor who is in a different stage of their healing saying "I see you, I believe you, I understand you and I really do know what you're going through because I went through it myself". I know that for myself, it was the missing piece of the puzzle for me in my healing journey, I was stuck in my healing as I was feeling like while my psychologist and medical team were validating and supportive, I couldn't connect with them and feel like they really knew what I was experiencing. But when I went to a peer support group and I met people that were going through, or had been through and healed from, the same things I was, it helped me to think “we’ll they’ve been through this, they do know what it’s like, and they’re proof that you can heal from it, so that means I can too”. There’s something very special in that.

DIAGNOSIS

For sex workers, stigma is an almost universal experience. When it occurs in healthcare, the impacts are far-reaching and harmful.

MONITORING STIGMA

The Stigma Indicators Monitoring Project is a research collaboration between the University of New South Wales Centre for Social Research in Health and several community organisations, including Scarlet Alliance. It aims to track marginalised communities' experiences of stigma, especially within the healthcare system.

In the project's 2024 survey, 98 per cent of sex workers across Australia reported experiencing stigma in relation to their sex work within the last 12 months. Much of this stigma occurred in healthcare settings, with 91 per cent of respondents reporting negative treatment from health workers. This treatment led sex workers to: not disclose sex work to health providers (85 per cent), look for different services (77 per cent), delay access to care (73 per cent) and not attend follow-up appointments (70 per cent).

These findings align with attitudes from healthcare workers. When the project surveyed healthcare workers, 37 per cent of professionals surveyed self-reported that they would behave negatively towards other people because of their sex work.

WHOREPHOBIA IN THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

98%

98% of sex workers reported experiencing sex work stigma in the past 12 months.

91%

91% of sex workers reported negative treatment from health workers.

85%

85% of sex workers did not disclose their work to health providers due to stigma.

77%

77% of sex workers looked for different healthcare services due to stigma.

73%

73% of sex workers delayed accessing healthcare due to stigma.

70%

70% of sex workers did not attend follow-up appointments due to stigma.

STIGMA IN MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health professionals and researchers often make assumptions about sex work, framing it as either a result of trauma or that it causes trauma. These perspectives pathologise sex work, overlooking sex workers' resilience and the role of social, legal, political, and economic factors in shaping stigma.

A 2020 collaboration between the University of New South Wales Centre for Social Research in Health and Scarlet Alliance examined the relationship between sex work and mental health. Participants reported that work flexibility supported their mental health, and skills like negotiation and boundary-setting were transferable to other areas of life.

The study found that practitioners frequently positioned sex workers as victims and focused on sex work as the cause of mental health issues, often disregarding other factors. This led to poorer quality care and obscured the ways sex workers actively managed their well-being.

Importantly, the research identified stigma—*not sex work itself*—as a key driver of negative mental health outcomes. This included both direct discrimination and anticipated stigma, such as managing a “double life,” selective disclosure, and heightened vigilance around privacy.

You're *too pretty* to be a...

As a Deaf, professional erotic performer and career sex worker Katia Schwartz understands all too well the unique intersection of discrimination that can occur from societal stigma.

The confusion on his face was almost impressive. He squinted and looked me up and down, as if the answer might reveal itself if he stared long enough. Tilting his head, like a dog unsure of the command, he said, 'But you don't look deaf.'

I stepped closer and pressed my chest lightly against him. I ran my fingernails slowly up his arm and over his shoulder, until my hand reached his face. My palm rested against his neck. Soft, but firm. I leaned in until my lips hovered just in front of his. I gave him a cheeky smile and felt his body relax. I locked eyes with him. Deadpan, I asked, *'And what do you think a Deaf person looks like?'*

For a moment he didn't say anything. I could feel the tension in his neck under my hand. A deep discomfort.

'Um ... well, you can speak.'

I laughed softly and let my hand fall away.

'Yes ... I can do a lot of things with my mouth. Do you want me to show you?'

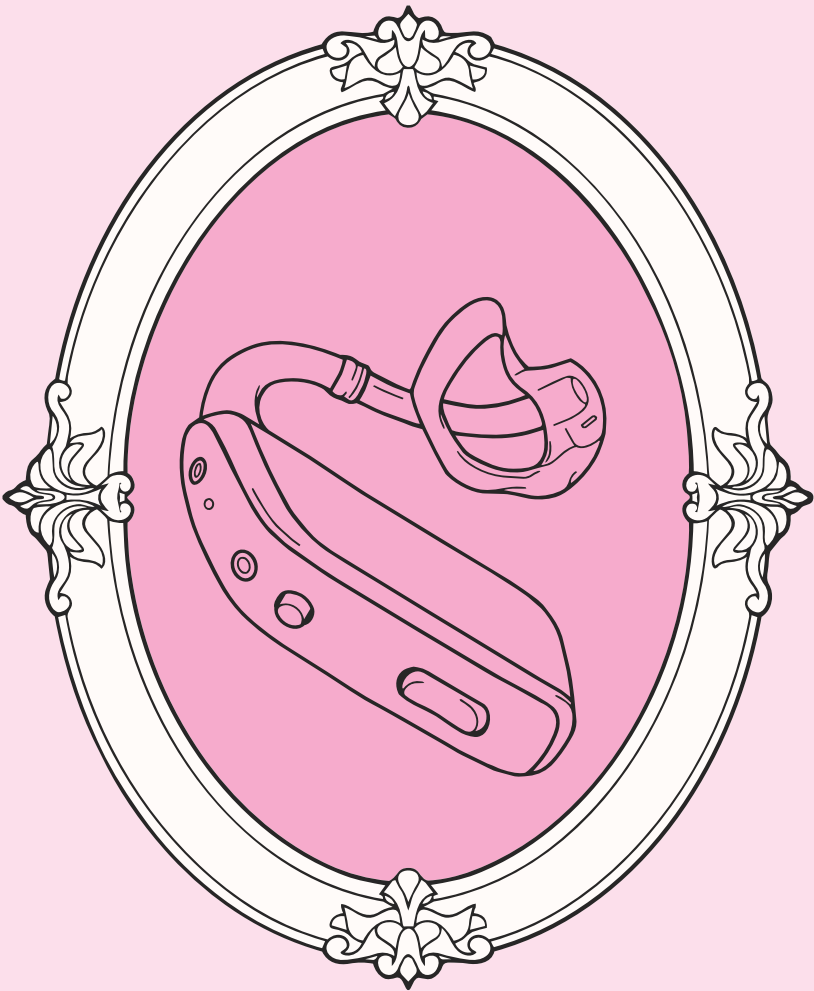
He looked like a dog waiting for a treat. I pointed to the bed. 'Sit.' I couldn't help myself.

Moments like that are not unusual. They reveal the deep discomfort many people have with the idea that disability and sexuality can coexist. This perception reflects a broader social stigma that infantilises people with disability.

Infantilisation often appears in sexual ways. Disabled people are frequently assumed to be unattractive, non-sexual or somehow undeserving of intimacy altogether. At the same time, there is a pervasive, perverted mix of entitlement and voyeuristic curiosity about disabled bodies. I will never forget the time I was at an engagement party and a woman I barely knew suddenly asked me, 'Do you make any noise during sex?' The question was completely unrelated to the conversation and entirely unsolicited.

I often wonder why able-bodied people seem so invested in knowing the details of our sex lives while simultaneously assuming we are undesirable, or unworthy of sex, love and relationships. This became particularly visible in 2024 when Bill Shorten, the former Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), proposed to exclude NDIS participants from accessing sex work services through the scheme.

The bill was eventually passed by the Senate without meaningful community consultation, despite advocacy from many disability organisations and advocates.



The proposal sparked a national conversation that placed the sex lives of disabled people in the public spotlight and reinforced the ableist assumption that able-bodied people have the right to speak on our behalf and comment on our sex lives. Suddenly, people across the country felt entitled to voice their opinion about whether public money should be spent on disabled people having sex and question how often people with disability accessed sexual services through the scheme.

As a person with a disability and a sex worker, I occupy a unique position. In many ways, I am treated as an anomaly. On one hand, society tells me that my disability makes me unsexy. On the other hand, as a sex worker I am stigmatised for being overly sexual. What becomes clear is that both sex workers and people with disability are subjected to remarkably similar forms of stigma and discrimination.

The things people have said to me as a disabled person, or that I have seen directed at other disabled people, are almost identical to the comments I have received as a sex worker.

*‘You will never have a “normal” relationship as a ...’
‘You’re too pretty to be a ...’
‘Can I pray for you?’*

Much of the public discourse around sex work and disability centres disabled clients, particularly in media coverage of the recent NDIS reforms. Disabled sex workers are rarely part of the conversation. We are often rendered invisible and denied recognition. Yet there are many of us. For people with disability or chronic illness, sex work can provide flexible working conditions that are difficult to find in other industries, making it a viable form of employment.

The intersection of whorephobia and ableism compounds the discrimination I face as a disabled sex worker. I have experienced oppression, rejection and sexual stigma as a direct result of both my disability and my work. I am judged. I am made to feel different. I am constantly forced to navigate the harmful government policies that hold power over my livelihood, with very little protection.

In New South Wales (NSW), where I live, sex work has been decriminalised since 1995. It was the first jurisdiction in the world to achieve decriminalisation. However, decriminalisation alone does not mean protection. Sex work is not recognised as a protected attribute under anti-discrimination legislation in NSW. As a result, services and individuals are legally permitted to discriminate against sex workers. Unlike in other Australian jurisdictions where sex work is decriminalised, sex workers in NSW can be de-banked, meaning our bank accounts closed and funds withheld. We can also be denied housing or removed from rental properties, and be fired from ‘mainstream’ employment, all without legal recourse.

Sex worker organisations and advocates have been pushing for anti-discrimination and anti-vilification protections, which were originally included in the Equality Legislation Amendment (LGBTIQA+) Bill, introduced to NSW parliament in 2023. However, these protections were eventually removed from the Bill, along with other reforms pertaining to sex workers and trans people. The legislation ultimately passed without anti-discrimination protections for sex workers included.

Living and working in a jurisdiction without anti-discrimination protections creates significant challenges, particularly as a sex worker with a disability. In theory, I am protected under anti-discrimination law as a disabled person. In practice, I still encounter discrimination regularly. Often my identity as a sex worker becomes a convenient explanation for the discrimination I experience as a disabled person.

It is extremely difficult to get work as a Deaf person because of the pervasive stigma that Deaf people are incapable or intellectually affected by our disability. While it has never been stated outright, I know there have been times I was turned away from jobs or contracting opportunities because of my deafness. Between ignorant questions about my capability and prospective employers expressing confusion about accessibility requirements, I can always tell when an opportunity is denied because they are unwilling to make their workplaces Deaf-friendly or because they simply assume I am not capable or good enough.

I worked as a professional aerialist for 15 years, but getting hired often meant navigating barriers related to my deafness. One performance opportunity in particular stands out. When I mentioned that Auslan interpreters would need to be provided, there was hesitation and back-and-forth about logistics and cost. I was later denied the opportunity because the producer said there would be children at the event and they believed I was not an appropriate choice due to my sex work. This was despite their initial enthusiasm and public promotion of my name, disability and image in lingerie to generate ticket sales. In the end, it was easier for them to label me inappropriate, citing my notoriety as a sex worker, than to provide the accessibility accommodations they were legally obligated to offer for my disability.

Ableism and whorephobia affect my ability to secure work with safe conditions and enforceable labour protections—not just outside the sex industry, but within it as well. I often reflect on how many times I have applied to work at establishments only to be ghosted as soon as I disclose that I am Deaf, or once they have looked me up online.

I have been public about my sex work experience for a long time. But because of criminalisation, stigma and discrimination, being ‘out’ is a privilege that many sex workers do not have. Confidentiality is central to our work, personal lives and safety.

Yet anonymity is difficult, or often impossible, for disabled sex workers. This is because we often have physical attributes or qualities that make us easily identifiable. Why do these differences stand out so much? Because of disgust, eugenics and rigid ideals of ‘perfection’ built and maintained by racist, ableist and gendered domination.

A fellow disabled erotic performer and friend, Deb Roach, once told me that anonymity was impossible for her. She said she had no choice but to be public about her experience in the sex industry because there are not many ‘one-armed strippers’.

Her story is just one example of many disabled sex workers who have been thrust into the public eye or forced to disclose their work, regardless of personal choice. This creates a unique challenge and is the basis of much discrimination we face. When the choice to be ‘out’ is taken away, so are future opportunities both in our careers and socially within our families, friends and broader communities.

Stigma and discrimination do not just affect employment, finances and housing. Being a sex worker with a disability impacts every facet of my life. Reporting crimes as a disabled sex worker is incredibly challenging, and the social isolation I face is compounded by limited access to captioned information in news, popular culture and social media.

A major issue is limited access to the healthcare services that are essential for sex workers—such as free, anonymous sexual health testing. Simple tasks like booking an appointment can be difficult because many clinics require phone contact. Some walk-in clinics in Sydney have intercom doors that lock, requiring the ability to hear and speak to gain entry. As a result, I often have to pay out of pocket to see my reliable, non-judgmental GP, or risk facing discrimination at a bulk-billed clinic. I am often anxious about visiting new doctors because I have been turned away from essential appointments when practitioners refused to provide interpreters or would not remove a mask so I could lip-read.

It is not just physical and sexual healthcare that is inaccessible. Deaf- and sex worker-friendly mental health support is also extremely limited. I was recently assaulted at work, and the only sexual assault counselling options offered to me were phone numbers, which for obvious reasons I cannot use. In-person walk-in options were available, but my previous experiences with face-to-face healthcare have been exhausting and traumatic. I did not want to put myself at further risk of discrimination while already vulnerable.

Despite the above, incidents of assault at work have been rare. Contrary to public assumptions, sex workers are often more vulnerable to gendered violence in our personal lives than at work. In my nearly 18 years as a sex worker, I have experienced violence of that level only a handful of times. At work, our interactions involve clear consent and boundary setting. Outside of work, those boundaries are a lot more difficult to define, assert and maintain. Public stigma, the lack of anti-discrimination protections and the criminalisation of sex work emboldens perpetrators, making disabled sex workers targets in our personal lives.

Research shows that Deaf women are twice as likely to experience domestic violence as hearing women. Reports of physical and sexual abuse are up to twenty times higher among Deaf people compared to hearing people. Like many Deaf people, I have experienced partners weaponising hearing privilege against me. It always starts small but eventually creeps into everyday interactions. Over time, it erodes trust and makes you question your place in the world.

One experience was a stark reminder that violence is not always loud or obvious. My long-term partner at the time had learned Auslan, and I thought of them as my biggest supporter and ally. After a series of failed relationships where my deafness was merely ‘tolerated’, I finally believed I had found someone who celebrated me and my disability. One day, believing I had my hearing aids off, they played a voicemail loudly on their phone right in front of me. Unbeknownst to them, my hearing aids were on. Although I could not hear the message clearly, I heard enough to know

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

that I was being spoken about negatively. In that moment, I felt my heart physically break. I felt completely alone. I was too scared to tell anyone what happened. Part of me felt ashamed, as if it was my fault. Another part of me was ashamed on their behalf, because they were so apologetic afterwards and I was still clouded by my love for them. The hurt was compounded by the casualness of it, as if they had done this many times before. Partners who refuse to accept my deafness or treat me differently because of it have been a recurring reality throughout my adult life. I have been prevented from accessing my language and isolated from the Deaf community. I have been ridiculed for using Auslan, had my hearing aids taken away to put me at a disadvantage during arguments, and had my deafness misrepresented as intellectual incapacity.

In public discourse, sex workers are often spoken about as if we have no autonomy or agency. Politicians, organisations and so-called gendered violence ‘advocates’ regularly frame us

FEATURE ARTICLE BY KATIA SCHWARTZ

as part of the problem rather than recognising our knowledge and lived experience. When sex workers are excluded from feminist discourse about consent, safety and gendered violence, the broader community loses access to the expertise we have to offer. Domestic violence organisations and ‘feminist’ groups often position sex work and pornography as the cause of men’s abusive behaviour, rather than addressing the structural and societal factors that enable gendered violence. When sex workers are used as scapegoats for men’s bad behaviour, it repeats the same tired trope of ‘what were you wearing’ or ‘you caused this’. Let’s be real, men have been committing acts of abuse long before the internet, and blaming sex workers does nothing to prevent violence or hold perpetrators accountable. Sex workers are rarely consulted as consent experts. This exclusion creates significant barriers when it comes to accessing essential services and justice. What happens when sex workers experience violence ourselves? Based on my experience, I would rather go without support or access to justice than risk being further harmed by organisations and systems that treat me as part of the problem.

The criminalisation of my body as a sex worker is intertwined with how my body is treated as a disabled person. Both identities are often seen as less than human, judged as unworthy, invisible or undeserving of autonomy and respect. Society tells me I am too sexual and not sexual enough, too vulnerable and too dangerous. These narratives are rooted in fear, stigma and a desire to control bodies that do not conform to patriarchal expectations of beauty and acceptability.

But being a whore is not a weakness, and my deafness is not a deficit. Being a Deaf sex worker is my power. I refuse to let the world decide what I am worth or to lay claim to my body, my voice, my life. The fight to end gendered violence must include everyone, not just the privileged. Disabled sex workers exist, and there are many of us. We must fight for a world where disability and sex work are not weaponised against us, but are recognised, respected and valued.



STOP MAKING US THE ***SCAPEGOAT***

Perspectives that portray sex work as inherently violent leave us excluded from mainstream anti-gendered violence campaigns.

As a result, sex workers are less likely to be recognised and believed as victim-survivors, and face even more barriers to accessing justice.

Gender-based violence is any behaviour directed at, or affecting a person because of their sex, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, or because they do not adhere to socially prescribed gender roles.

Sex workers may experience gender-based violence in sex work, but we are much more likely to experience this kind of violence in our personal lives or other workplaces.

Sex workers' experiences of violence take place within a context of stigma from health services, the criminal justice system and the wider community. Research shows that criminalisation, licensing, policing and stigma creates risks for sex workers at both interpersonal and systemic levels. These factors also impose significant barriers to reporting, accessing services and receiving justice for sex worker victim-survivors. Studies have also noted a correlation between anti-sex work rhetoric and an increase in violence against workers.

Sex worker victim-survivors are often disbelieved, perceived as undeserving of support or justice, and blamed or told to expect violence as a consequence of sex work. Experiences of violence and lack of access to services and justice are compounded for sex workers experiencing multiple marginalisation - such as those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, migrant or culturally and linguistically diverse, or living with a disability.

Support systems fail us. Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in focus on gender-based violence in media and political spheres.

The Australian Government has launched the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, backed by \$2.3 billion in funding. However, **sex workers remain excluded from and marginalised within anti-violence support services.**

The emergence of women’s anti-violence work and refuges in Australia during the 1970s was significantly influenced by second wave feminists who positioned sex work and pornography as both drivers and instances of violence against women and girls. This legacy has ongoing impacts on contemporary anti-violence organisations, with a number of leaders and researchers holding the view that sex work and pornography are incompatible with gender equality, and an enabler of violence.

Sex worker organisations report that, when attempting to access specialist family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) services, sex workers are often denied recognition as victims and are instead subject to a higher level of scrutiny and questioning. Sex worker victim-survivors are seen as having been responsible for their own experiences of violence, deemed not as deserving as non-sex workers, or viewed as untrustworthy or as not fitting within the service’s client criteria.

Sex workers look after our own. Sex worker organisations and projects are almost exclusively funded for sexually transmissible infection and blood borne virus prevention, yet are frequently the first and only point of contact for sex workers experiencing violence. Some organisations have been able to employ peer counsellors and have received funding for small-scale FDSV projects. However, these projects are sporadic, susceptible to funding changes, and limited in scope. Sex worker organisations are uniquely trusted and placed to respond to gendered violence. Increased funding is essential to inform gender-based violence policy reform, address systemic stigma and access barriers, provide culturally appropriate support to victim-survivors of violence and strengthen community empowerment.



SEX WORKER ORGANISATIONS PROVIDE PEER EDUCATION AND SUPPORT, INCLUDING IN RESPONSES TO INCIDENTS OF VIOLENCE. THESE RESPONSES INCLUDE:

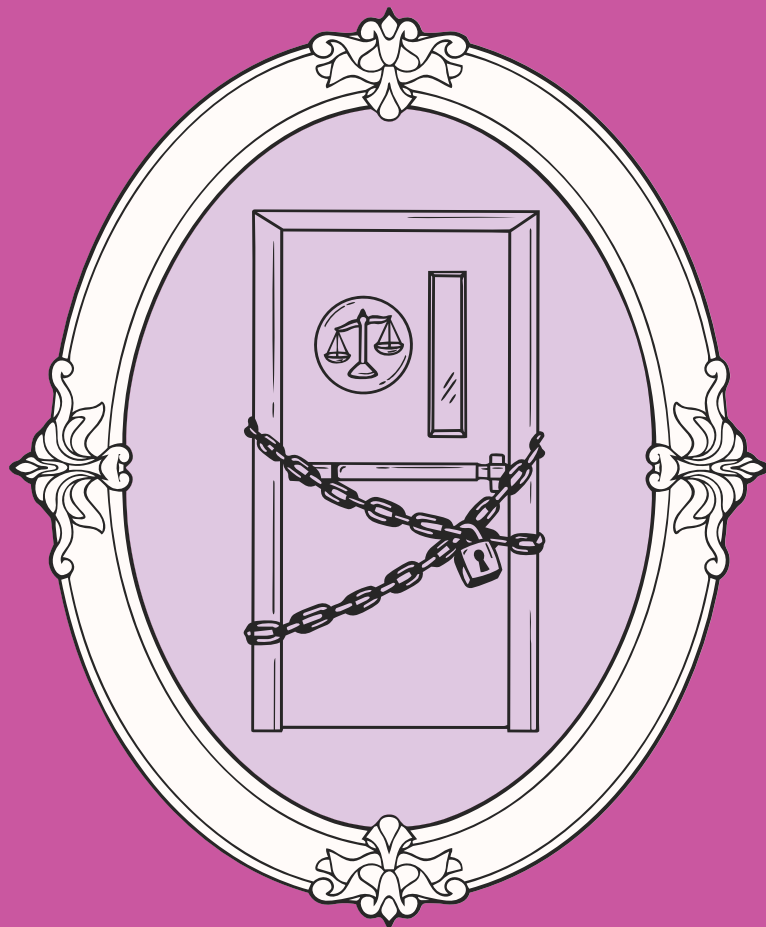
ATTENDING THE SCENE, TRANSPORT TO HOSPITAL AND REFERRAL FOR EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION.

TRAINING AND FACILITATION FOR SELF-COLLECTION OF EARLY FORENSIC SAMPLES.

WORKSHOPS AND EDUCATION ON CONSENT LAWS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROTECTIONS.

SUPPORT IN NAVIGATING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM BY ASSISTING WITH POLICE REPORTING, COURT SUPPORT, AND RELATED PROCEDURES.

PEER SUPPORT, BROKERAGE SERVICES, AND REFERRALS TO TAILORED HEALTH CARE, LEGAL ASSISTANCE, AND COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES.



Criminalisation erases our consent

The following is an excerpt from Respect Inc.'s 2022 submission to the Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce (WSJT) in response to Discussion paper 3: Women and girls' experiences across the criminal justice system as victim-survivors of sexual violence and also as accused persons and offenders.

Criminalisation intersects with broadly held stigma about sex workers and feeds into community and police attitudes about what constitutes sexual consent with a sex worker and whether it is possible to sexually assault a sex worker. Intersecting community and police attitudes incorrectly posit that 'it is not possible to rape a sex worker' and that situations involving non-payment and stealthing do not constitute sexual assault.

As a consequence police are often resistant to take reports and progress criminal charges, including sexual assault against sex workers, arguing that there has been no crime. Sex workers attempting to report are then turned away by police and are sometimes threatened with arrest or have had 'sex worker' added to their police record, thereafter referred to as a 'known sex worker.' In this way, sex workers are subject to even more police surveillance and the intersection of criminalisation and stigma comes full circle.

Criminal laws reduce sex worker ability to safeguard from crime including sexual assault. Police targeting reduces the likelihood sex workers will report sexual assault to police.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

FEATURE ARTICLE BY RESPECT INC.

Criminalisation and stigma blur the issue of sexual consent and reduce the likelihood that police will progress reports of sexual assault against sex workers. Zahra Stardust notes "sex workers occupy what Sibley called 'the liminal space between offender and victim.'" Along with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, sex workers are considered to be a "vulnerable population" at risk of sexual assault but as long as police are the regulators of the sex industry, and our work or our workplaces are criminalised, access to redress for sexual violence will be limited because sex workers will not report these crimes to police due to fear of being targeted for police surveillance or being arrested.

There is an incorrect notion within the community that 'sex workers cannot be raped.' The assertion demonstrates a lack of understanding of consent, implying that sex workers are always available for, and consent to sex. This inaccurate stereotype ignores the many ways that sex workers set boundaries and negotiate what is, or not, included in their service. What is offered by sex workers naturally varies from person to person and is negotiated ahead of a booking. This notion is perpetuated by mainstream media and is reflected back to the community constantly.

Women sex workers specifically experience intersectional issues: age, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, disability, which disadvantage us when we engage with the criminal justice system, both as victims of crime and as accused persons/offenders. Sex workers from Asian language backgrounds, and who are migrants, appear to be disproportionately targeted by police for sex work-related offences. Young sex workers, women in street-based settings, trans women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sex workers are at higher risk of police attention and therefore charges. This leads to an overrepresentation of these groups in the criminal justice system as defendants.

The criminalisation of sex workers is both the product of and driver of 'whore stigma'. Stigma both informs community attitudes and is informed by them. Decision making by police, health services and others is informed by stigma and a sense that it is acceptable to treat sex workers unfavourably even when victims of serious crime. To address the intersectionality of criminalisation with sex workers' safety and justice, the laws must change.

SEX WORKERS ARE *THE* CONSENT EXPERTS.

CONSENT DISCUSSIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS ARE A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF SEX WORK. SEX WORKERS EXPLICITLY DISCUSS CONSENT, IDENTIFY AND NEGOTIATE IMPLIED CONSENT, AND USE NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION.

WE SET AND COMMUNICATE BOUNDARIES EVERY DAY, EVERY SHIFT AND IN EVERY INTERACTION.



Sex workers recognise that consent can be influenced by various factors, such as financial agreements, or the use of protective measures like **condoms**. Sex workers understand that granting consent for one specific sexual activity does not automatically imply consent for any other activities. This intricate understanding highlights the expertise that sex workers have in navigating the complexities of consent in our work.

Alongside Australia, the Feminist Inquiry focuses on Thailand to document the experiences of the large numbers of migrant Thai sex workers for whom Australia is a destination country in the Asia Pacific region; and to aid the active sex worker-led mobilisations for decriminalisation in Thailand. At the conclusion of the Feminist Inquiry a report with a set of recommendations for law and policy transformation and advocacy which will be shared with all relevant stakeholders.

The objectives of the enquiry are to understand how sex workers experience the law and legal processes, and to generate evidence for law and policy reform. The inquiry will:

- look at how different areas of law intersect with sex workers' lives,
- investigate what kinds of everyday systemic violence is perpetrated against sex workers,
- observe what legal strategies enable these communities to survive and thrive
- ask sex workers how they define and identify forms of violence in specific contexts,
- determine what sex workers want from legal systems, and
- identify areas for improvement in legal systems.

A collection of invited testimonies submitted by various sex worker organisations in Australia and Thailand will be heard by the following inquirers, who are eminent Indigenous and non-Indigenous jurists, sex workers, academics and policy makers:

Heather Douglas

Heather is a professor at the Melbourne Law School. She is a Chief Investigator at CEVAW and a leading expert in the field of family violence.

Marcia Neave

Marcia (Inquiry Chair) is a law reformer, public policy maker, a former judge, and academic. After nine years on the Supreme Court of Victoria, Court of Appeals Division, she was appointed to the role of Commissioner of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. In 2021 she was named as President and Commissioner of the Commission of Inquiry into the Tasmanian Government's Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Institutional Settings.

Christine Robinson

Christine is a Bundjalung woman and CEO of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's community legal centre Wirringa Baiya. She is also a member of the Domestic Violence Death Review Team (NSW).

Pranom “Bee” Somwong

Bee is a Thai feminist lawyer and human rights defender with more than twenty years' experience advancing women human rights, migrant justice, and protection of community defenders. She is the Thailand Representative of Protection International and a board member of Urgent Action Fund Asia & Pacific. Her work focuses on feminist legal strategies, defender protection, and challenging criminalisation and structural violence affecting women and marginalised communities.

Fiona Patten

Fiona is a former sex worker, sex worker rights advocate and an Australian politician. She was the leader of Reason Australia and was a member of the Victorian Legislative Council between 2014 and 2022.

An online event

This is an online event over two days, 21–22 July 2026.

Inquiry partners

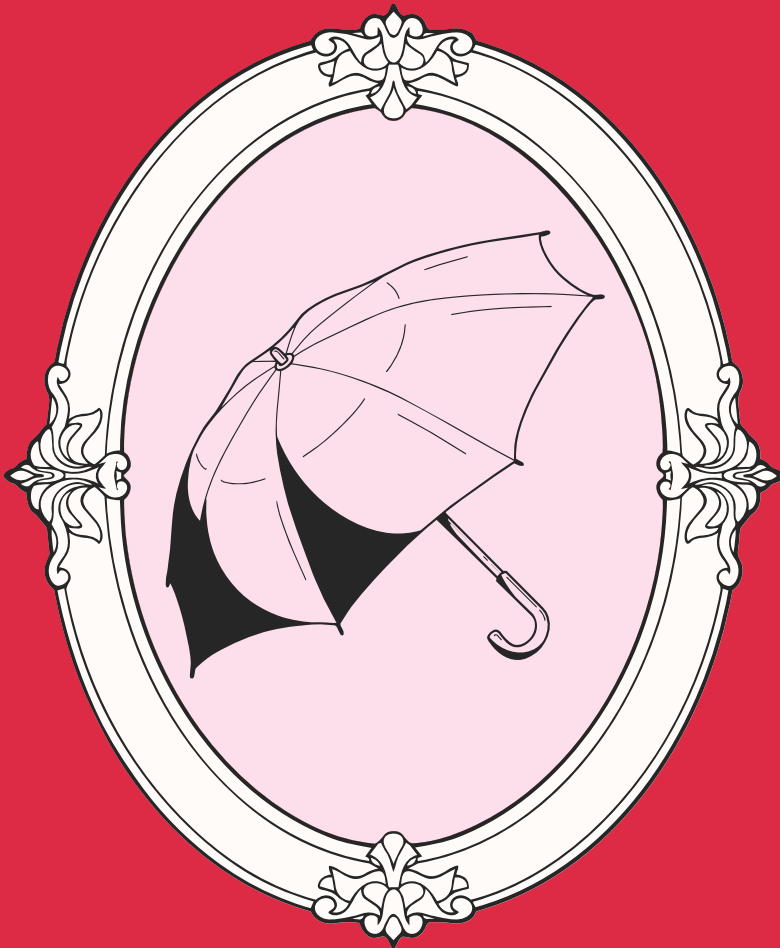
The Inquiry is held in consultation and collaboration with Scarlet Alliance (Australia), Empower Foundation, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (Thailand), and is supported by partner organisation Thammasat University.

It is co-sponsored by Urgent Action Fund (Asia and Pacific) and Women's Fund Asia.

The event is facilitated by Australian Research Council-funded Centre of Excellence for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEVAW).

Learn more

To sign up to view the Inquiry online or learn more, scan the QR code.



Feminist Inquiry into Violence Against Sex Workers in Australia and Thailand

Building on the momentum gained through decriminalisation in multiple jurisdictions in Australia, and to inform the upcoming legislative review of the decriminalisation of sex work in Victoria in late 2026/early 2027, the Feminist Inquiry will develop knowledge on the impacts, consequences and responses to violence against sex workers.

CHAPTER 03

WHORETONOMY IS KNOWLEDGE

WHORETONOMY IS KNOWLEDGE

Whoretonomy is building the skills and expertise that sex workers have developed to keep ourselves and each other safe, and the networks through which we share our knowledge and understand what is happening for and in our community. Whoretonomy is demanding recognition of this expertise, and a seat at the tables of power to share it. Throughout history, practitioners and policy-makers have framed sex workers as 'vectors of disease' and existential threats to public health, rather than as workers whose health and rights deserve protection. Failure to see sex work as work results in decision-making about the lives of sex workers being made based on stigma rather than evidence, and without or against advice from sex workers themselves.

KNOWLEDGE

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NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US

The bedrock of the sex worker rights movement is peer support and education. Community led approaches that are by sex workers, for sex workers ensure necessary health messages reach who they need to.

When the first cases of HIV were identified in Australia, communities mobilised to ensure that affected people received support, care, and access to information. LGBTQI+ people, people who use drugs and sex workers quickly organised to deliver practical information and harm reduction tools to their communities. These grassroots and informal activities have been evaluated as vital to Australia's early and effective response to the HIV crisis. This organising formed the beginnings of what sex workers now describe as peer education.

Early peer-led organisations also engaged in strategic advocacy to ensure that governments, researchers and clinicians understood community needs, and delivered evidence-based policy and equitable healthcare.

In Australia, this began a world-leading 'partnership response' to HIV, where federal and state/territory governments resourced peer-led and community organisations to deliver health promotion activities and provide advice to public health responses about the needs of the people that they represented. This model allowed for rapid consultation and genuine co-design of responses, ensuring that interventions are practical, culturally appropriate and trusted.

The 'partnership approach' has operated successfully for over 40 years, with peer organisations recognised as playing a central role in Australia's public health responses.

The effectiveness of sex worker peer organisations is not unique to Australia. International research consistently demonstrates that peer-led, community-controlled approaches produce better health outcomes than programs designed without sex worker leadership.

A significant 15-year study examining health promotion work in India and South Africa found that sex worker leadership and peer

education were the determining factors in producing strong, measurable health outcomes for sex workers. The community-controlled peer education program (Sonagachi, run by sex worker organisation Durbar in Kolkata, India) produced 'sustainable' results for sex worker health, while the two South African projects that were not run by sex workers both yielded 'disappointing' results by comparison.

In Kenya, the peer-based Pumwani Majengo project in Nairobi has been evaluated as more successful than non-peer approaches, despite facing significant political and financial constraints. In Canada, a program using community development approaches was also found to reduce internalised stigma and improve self-esteem among its participants.

In Bengaluru, India, sex workers who had contact with peer-led outreach projects were more likely to access STI testing and early treatment. The most comprehensive research on the effectiveness of sex worker health promotion, a 2015 systemic review of projects conducted in India, Brazil and the Dominican Republic, found that 'community-empowerment-based responses to HIV in sex workers were consistently associated with significant reductions in HIV and STIs, and increases in condom use.'

IF THERE'S EVER A ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE, BET ON THE HOOKERS

The early days of COVID felt strangely apocalyptic. Supermarket shelves were stripped bare, entire aisles emptied of toilet paper, and no one quite knew what was coming next. Public health crises like these emphasise gaps in the system, and reveal the vital role of peer-led organisations in shaping effective responses.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the absence of government recognition or funding, Scarlet Alliance and our national membership of sex worker organisations moved quickly to fill the gap. Together, we established a national committee to coordinate information-sharing and respond to the needs of the sex worker community.

Working directly with government health advisors and departments, the committee became a trusted bridge between public health systems and sex workers. It fast-tracked accurate information, countered harmful misinformation, and delivered practical support where it was urgently needed. Between March and early December 2020, the committee raised over \$180,000 in private donations, distributed 760 crisis payments to sex workers excluded from government assistance, and produced multilingual COVID-19 resources. The national committee also enabled state/territory sex worker organisations to liaise with local government to develop best-practice, area-specific protocols. They also sourced and distributed PPE, and provided essential wellbeing and peer support.

In the Northern Territory (NT), the state government collaborated directly with SWOP NT to develop official COVID-safe guidelines for the sex industry. With technical support from Scarlet Alliance, SWOP NT drafted directives that aligned the Chief Health Officer's advice with NT WorkSafe regulations and the practical realities of sex work.

The Government adopted these peer-developed guidelines, which were then published by the NT Department of Health. This direct partnership demonstrates the essential role of community leadership in creating trusted, evidence-based, and effective public health responses during a rapidly evolving crisis.

Other state-based responses included grassroots health promotion informed by the unique and diverse needs of criminalised sex workers in the absence of targeted formal COVID-19 guidelines in South Australia, and the provision of over 500 counselling sessions to NSW sex workers.

MORE RECENTLY, THE 2025 MPOX OUTBREAK REVEALED ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF PEER LEADERSHIP IN ACTION.

When a cluster of mpox cases emerged among sex workers during 2025 in Sydney, SWOP NSW rapidly mobilised a targeted response. Drawing on timely data from NSW Health, peer educators conducted outreach in affected workplaces and networks, while a dedicated, sex worker-only clinic provided vaccination and care in a safe, stigma-free environment. Working in partnership with public health services, they ensured fast and equitable access to vaccines for sex workers and their clients. Within weeks, vaccination rates were high and the outbreak was contained.

These responses demonstrate what works: when peer organisations are properly resourced and meaningfully included, public health strategies become more trusted, more responsive, and far more effective.

Community health expertise is distinct from clinical or academic knowledge.

It includes applied understanding of how people respond to public health issues in real-world contexts, and how to improve health behaviours and outcomes through outreach, peer-led education, and culturally responsive care. This expertise is essential to building trust, ensuring equity, and achieving effective public health outcomes.

From Scarlet Alliance, *Submission to the Community Affairs Legislation Committee on the Australian Centre for Disease Control Bill*, 3 October 2025

SEX WORKERS SHOULD BE CONSULTED



Sex workers should be consulted and provided every opportunity to be directly involved in the development and implementation of legal frameworks and public policy on sex work. **They should also be allowed to fully exercise their right to form associations, including trade unions.**

United Nations Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls, *Eliminating Discrimination Against Sex Workers and Securing their Human Rights*, January 2024

PEER

Sex worker peer outreach isn't a "nice to have", it's the core of peer education.

It's how knowledge and safety spreads through our community and how we protect ourselves when the system fails us.

Peer outreach means sex workers connecting with other sex workers by sharing information, resources, strategies, and support that is grounded in our actual lived experience, not assumptions or theory.

Peer outreach is practical and attends to our basic needs. It can be:

- Dropping off safer sex supplies
- Sharing screening tips and ways to spot red flags
- Talking through dodgy client situations
- Explaining changes in laws or policing
- Linking workers up with health care, legal support, or housing.

When advice comes from someone who knows the job, the risks, and the realities, it's credible and trustworthy and it's harm reduction in action. There's no one waiting to evaluate it for perfection or compliance because it meets people where they are at (which is different for everyone) and gives them the tools they need in the moment to stay safe. Sex workers don't have such successful sexual health outcomes from luck but because of the way we share information and collectively care for each other.

The evidence is clear that peer outreach works but we need to make sure that across Australia and the globe, it's consistently funded and valued for what it does. Sex worker peer-led programs shouldn't be an afterthought, they should be the foundation.

NOT ALL EXPERTS WEAR SCRUBS... SOME OF US WEAR NOTHING

Sex workers have always been experts in our own health and support each other through effective peer education. We negotiate terms, manage risk, and enforce boundaries, all without breaking the fantasy. It is skilled, deliberate work, yet we are denied recognition and cast as risks rather than acknowledged as experts.

SEX WORKERS KNOW WHAT WE NEED WHEN IT COMES TO OUR SEXUAL HEALTH, AND WE ALSO KNOW WHAT STANDS IN THE WAY.

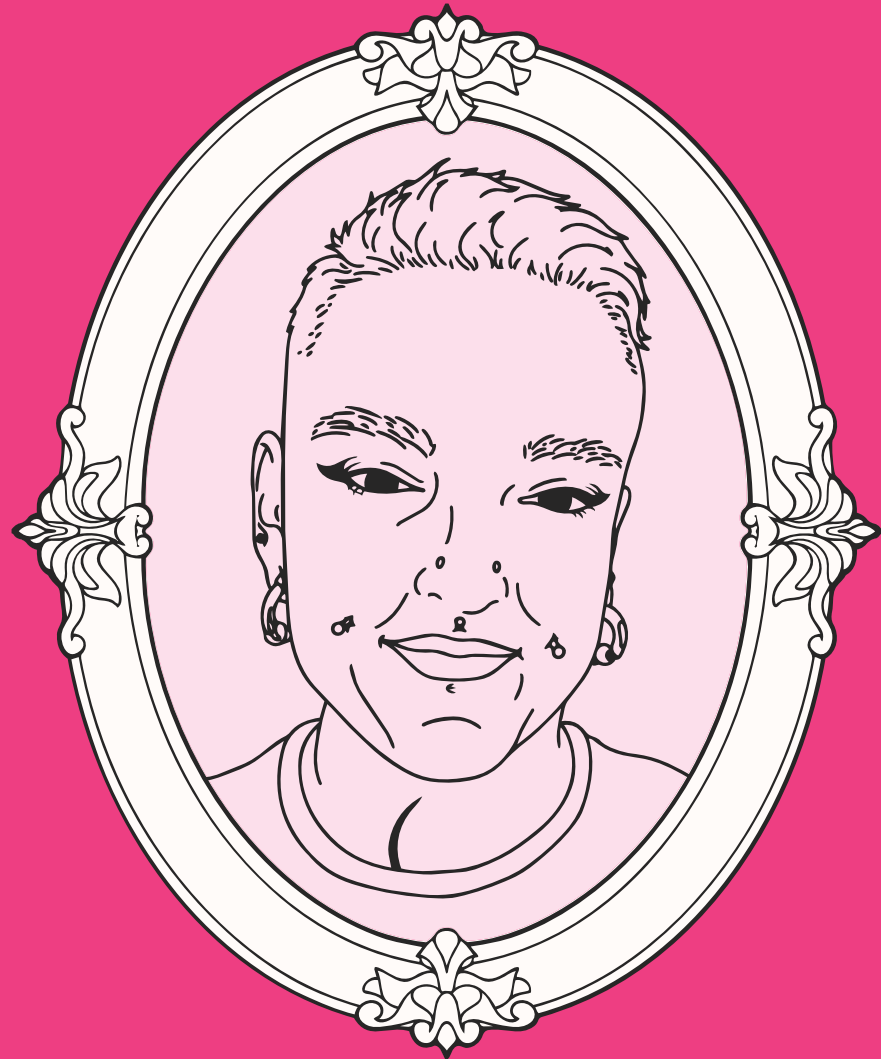
Stigma and discrimination towards sex workers is particularly prevalent in healthcare settings. Sex workers often report negative treatment or inappropriate care from healthcare professionals when disclosing our work. Many clinicians lack training in sex worker health and make inappropriate risk assumptions that pathologise sex work, resulting in poor quality advice and care, and reinforcing health inequities. These barriers are compounded by fear of police involvement, breaches of privacy, licensing systems, or laws that criminalise sex workers with a sexually transmissible infection (STI) or blood borne virus (BBV), all of which can discourage engagement with health services.

Together, these factors have serious negative health outcomes. Sex workers may delay or avoid accessing care, including STI screening and treatment, cervical screening, and contraceptive support. Those who do avoid disclosure due to stigma or privacy concerns may instead attend multiple services, leading to fragmented care, incomplete medical histories, and missed opportunities for holistic sexual and reproductive health support. Laws that criminalise sex workers with STIs and BBVs, or that mandate compulsory testing, further entrench stigma and rest on the assumption that sex workers will not care for their health without criminal sanction. A 2018 analysis of global research found that any form of repressive policing was associated with twice the odds of HIV and STI among sex workers.

AFFIRMING HEALTHCARE

Sexual health matters to sex workers because it underpins our bodily autonomy, health and safety, and economic stability. Sex worker affirming sexual and reproductive healthcare enables us to make informed decisions about our bodies and futures including access to contraception and pregnancy planning, abortion care and cervical cancer screening. Affirming care also means voluntary access to regular STI screening, condoms and other safer sex items, PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) as well as timely and non-judgemental treatment. It also requires medical professionals to provide advice that reflects the realities of sex work rather than assumptions about it.

Sub-optimal care can lead to untreated infections, unmanaged pain, limited access to contraception, and reproductive health complications, all of which can reduce our ability to work. For sex workers, affirming sexual and reproductive healthcare is therefore not only a matter of health, but a necessary condition for sustaining livelihoods and protecting financial stability.



We keep us safe

Sex workers working under criminalisation in South Australia face extraordinary challenges including entrapment being charged with criminal offences, barriers to healthcare, and little to no recourse for justice. Peer education and support is the saving grace for South Australian workers. Brass, Project Manager from SIN discusses why it is so important for sex workers to look out for each other.

VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Tell us about yourself! Who are you, where do you work and how long have you been involved in the sex worker rights movement?

My name is Brass and I'm the Project Manager at SIN, South Australia's sex worker peer organisation. I've been involved with SIN and the sex worker rights movement for going on seven years. I've been involved in the sex industry for almost 15 years, and have been a full service sex worker for 12 years.

I heard about SIN through a chance meeting with another sex worker on a night out who told me to drop by the SIN office whenever I was free. I went straight in on Monday and that first day at SIN was life changing for me – I'd never felt celebrated as a sex worker before. Straight away I felt the spark, I knew I was walking into something important. I've always been passionate about activism of different kinds throughout my life but finding sex worker advocacy was life changing.

FEATURE INTERVIEW | BRASS

Sex work is fully criminalised in South Australia. What does this look like on the ground, and how does it impact the experiences of sex workers?

How criminalisation looks on the ground can include things like:

- The policing of sex workers using various mechanisms like undercover operations and Crimestoppers reports, with street-based sex workers and migrant workers being disproportionately targeted.
- The ongoing fear of surveillance, harassment, targeting, arrests, and charges by SA police.
- Underreporting of crimes committed against us, both in our personal and professional lives, because of the barriers to reporting. We risk being charged with a crime ourselves if we disclose to the police that we are sex workers, particularly if the incident occurred while we were at work.
- Our sex worker status is used against us in situations like family court proceedings.
- Limited or NO access to justice.
- The police exist as both our 'protectors' and our prosecutors, creating an unworkable dynamic for sex workers.
- Barriers to accessing health and social services with stigma and discrimination, and no recourse available when we are faced with stigma and discrimination.
- No industrial support or formal work health and safety guidelines, and no workers' rights.

How all these things, and the many more ways criminalisation manifests, impact sex workers is immeasurable. We face ongoing terrorising from the police, and the ever-present fear that we will be entrapped. We are soft targets for ugly mugs due to the barriers we face reporting crimes committed against us. We face stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation with few places to turn for support.

Sex workers who use drugs experience compounded marginalisation, which is heightened in a criminalised setting. How can the broader sex worker community better support peers who use drugs?

I think there is a long way to go in dismantling the stigma and bias that exists within our community towards sex workers who use drugs, it can feel like an ‘us vs them’ mentality is at play.

To try and combat this I think that the broader community can do things like ensuring that sex workers who use drugs always have a seat at the table, advocate for policy that meaningfully includes us, and use and advocate for best practice language around drug use.

What are the biggest challenges facing sex worker advocates in South Australia at the moment, and what are some wins you are celebrating?

One of the biggest roadblocks that we face in South Australia is the ever-present cohort of conservative politicians that we are battling. In SA we are consistently faced with conservative, misogynist, religious politicians who seek to further criminalise our industry and ensure we gain no access to human or workers’ rights. Alongside this, we are faced with fearful politicians who are unwilling to publicly voice their support for the decriminalisation of the sex industry.

Other challenges we face include things like burnout – we have been fighting for decrim in SA for over 30 years and being knocked back repeatedly has a significant impact on our mental health and the ability to keep pushing on can feel impossible at times! It can also be difficult to keep up momentum; we are always looking for politicians who are willing to step up and work with us and keep sex work in the conversation – but that’s not always easy.

Some wins we celebrate include things like new connections with incoming politicians, union support, public support, sympathetic media, being given platforms to promote sex worker rights such as public events and media, and our dedicated allies rallying alongside us.

Peer education and support is one of the strengths and hallmarks of the sex worker rights movement. Can you explain how important peer education in a criminalised state is, and how it supports sex worker safety?

When you are in a criminalised state you have very few, if any, options to turn to for support. So, we turn to each other. Peer support fosters meaningful relationships with the community; we build trust by sharing our commonalities. Peer support can look so wildly different from engagement to engagement – sometimes it’s sharing tips and tricks, accompanying someone to court or to make a police report, attending a doctor’s appointment so they have someone in their corner, providing education and information around the laws and our rights, making referrals to other services where applicable. We keep each other safe with all this information sharing and creating spaces for each other to talk openly and honestly, particularly in a criminalised state where stigma and discrimination are rife.

Peer support is crucial and the way it occurs isn’t contained only to sex worker orgs, the way peer support occurs broadly within our community is an incredible testament to the way sex workers look out for each other and have done so throughout history.

Whoretonomy to me means agency – agency over my body and how I choose to use my body for work. Whoretonomy means I have the freedom to choose sex work, and I am deserving of human rights to protect that freedom of choice.

The nitty gritty

Living and working in Lutruwita/Tasmania brings with it unique challenges shaped by geographical isolation and close-knit communities. Distance, limited services, and a lack of anonymity can all impact how sex workers access support and stay connected. As a SWOP Outreach and Peer Support worker, Lilly spends her time travelling across the state, covering as much ground as possible to reach sex workers where they are, providing peer support, resources, and vital connections to community and care.

Tell us a bit about yourself. Who are you, how long have you been a sex worker, and how long have you worked in outreach?

I'm Lilly and I have been an independent sex worker for around five years. I live and work in lutruwita/Tasmania and have been in my outreach role with SWOP Tas for about nine months.

Can you describe a typical day/week in your role?

In my role with SWOP Tas I spend most of my time reaching out to local and touring workers to offer support and resources should they need them. I'm also involved with advocacy planning with allied orgs, as well as providing sex worker awareness training for related industries such as healthcare providers and law enforcement. Being a small community, privacy is very important for a lot of people, both workers and clients. While Tasmania is small compared to a lot of other states, our main cities are very spaced out, so delivering outreach to more rural areas can also be challenging.



VOICES FROM OUR COMMUNITY

FEATURE INTERVIEW | LILLY

What are the sex work laws in Tasmania, and how do these impact how sex workers work, and how you do outreach?

The main laws in Tasmania revolve around solicitation and group based sex work such as brothels. Independent sex work is legal, but there cannot be more than two workers under one roof.

Are there gaps in services you see again and again?

Trans health care, mental health, sexual health, minorities, awareness of places that are available. Unfortunately, Tasmania is under-resourced in pretty much every area imaginable. There seems to constantly be a disconnect between funding and work force availability. Where we might have funding available for things like trans advocacy and awareness programs, for example, we have a limited pool of people that meet the criteria for those sorts of positions. The reverse is true, also, where we might have plenty of people qualified for certain roles, but not enough funding to support them.

What kind of info and resources are workers most interested in?

Definitely basic booking supplies like condoms in every size, shape and colour, lube and menstrual sponges. We seem to constantly be running out of dams, as well, as they are one of the most popular items asked for in Tasmania. We are also frequently asked about safe work areas as there are a few establishments that aim to target sex workers in the hopes of preventing them from partaking in their legal work.

What makes outreach feel safe and useful from a worker's perspective?

100 per cent of the feedback I have received points to the fact that workers feel like outreach is both safe and useful because it is facilitated by a peer led organisation. We understand the need for confidentiality and discretion because we have those same needs. Personally, I'm always very open about the 'nitty gritty' stuff, too, which seems to put most people at ease. After all, if you can't talk to a fellow sex worker about funky discharge, who can you talk to?

To me, Whoretonomy is the place where individual empowerment and community spirit collide in a beautiful explosion of solidarity and comradery.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

As the peak body for sex workers and sex worker organisations in Australia, Scarlet Alliance supports peer education through our national programs; **Red Book and Red Learning Hub.**

RED LEARNING HUB

Red Learning Hub (formerly known as Scarlet Alliance National Training Program, or SANTP) is the Scarlet Alliance national training program which builds the skills, knowledge, and confidence of sex worker community members, advocates, and peer educators across Australia.

Designed and delivered by sex workers, for sex workers, Scarlet Alliance's Red Learning Hub is focused on community capacity building. The program successfully provides a nationally consistent, peer-led framework that strengthens knowledge sharing and supports the delivery of high-quality, peer education.

The program is a series of online, self-paced training modules for sex workers, built on the wisdom, values, and expertise of the sex worker community. Red Learning Hub equips learners with the skills and knowledge to make a difference within their own sex worker communities by increasing sex workers' ability and confidence to challenge stigma and discrimination, support community, and advocate for sex worker rights.

RED BOOK

Red Book is Scarlet Alliance's national Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) and BloodBorne Virus (BBV) resource created by sex workers, for sex workers. The program features an online hub and suite of printed resources that provide essential information on STI and BBV transmission, prevention, testing, treatment and skills sex workers can directly apply to their work.

Red Book helps sex workers make informed choices about their health while connecting the community with trusted, evidence-based and peer-led harm reduction strategies. Since its beginnings, Red Book has taken many forms and has remained a reliable resource. The first edition, published in 1998 titled STD Handbook, was a groundbreaking national guide written specifically for sex workers to prevent STI transmission. It quickly became an essential tool within the community, with every copy in high demand and accounted for as it came hot off the press with each reprint. When the resource was redesigned in 2009, the iconic red cover inspired the new name Red Book, which has remained ever since.

Each new version of the resource has built upon the last, incorporating the latest research, community knowledge, and peer expertise. Today, in its online form, Red Book continues to evolve and is a living reflection of the current needs, experience and collective knowledge of sex workers in Australia.

The *Lady Mermaids* of Uganda

The following stories come from the Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre (LMEC) in Uganda, a sex worker-led organisation supporting community health and advocacy. Sanyu Hajjara Batte, LMEC founder, and Lukwago Quraish, Community Health Strengthening Officer, share their experiences of the impact of disrupted HIV services, originally published in Real Stories from Uganda’s Sex Work Community on the Threatened HIV Services and the Consequences of Frozen U.S. Funding (April 2025).

If we lose our name, we lose our *power*

Story by Sanyu Hajjara Batte

I have been in the sex work movement for more than two decades. I’m a sex worker, a movement builder, and an advocate who has fought for the right to exist, organise, and live free from fear. I’ve seen what silence does. And I’ve seen what naming ourselves can achieve. That’s why what’s happening now frightens me deeply.

United States’ HIV funding to Uganda was temporarily frozen between 24 January-21 February 2025. The freeze was lifted, and while we await formal communication from implementing partners such as Reach Out Mbuya, the consequences of new compliance expectations are already taking shape — quietly, but powerfully. It’s not about the funding itself this time. It’s about what we’re being told to erase in order to keep it.

During a recent CDC visit to our Drop-In Centre in Bukoto, and through ongoing conversations with ROM officials, we were told that going forward, programming language must change. Words like “sex worker” and “key populations” long used in HIV policy to reflect both identity and risk — are being phased out. We are now being told to use terms like “clients,” “priority groups,” or simply “people at risk.”

And this shift is not symbolic. It’s structural. It affects who is seen, who is counted, who is prioritised and ultimately, who survives. In Uganda, the term “key population” has helped define sex workers, and other groups facing disproportionate HIV risk. While it was never perfect, it made us visible — in budgets, in policies, in service design. Replacing that visibility with vague, diluted terms doesn’t neutralise risk — it hides it.

I speak not just as an activist. I speak as someone who has been living within HIV communities for over 20 years. As someone who contributed to building Uganda’s sex work movement from the ground up. As someone who trains peer leaders, negotiates with health officials, and stands proudly as a sex worker at global advocacy tables.



To remove our name is to remove our history. Our dignity. Our access. But this is not just about identity. It is also an attack on our civic space. When sex worker-led organizations are told we cannot use our own language — the words that reflect our truth, our work, and our lived realities — we are being silenced. When we are forced to soften, hide, or erase who we are in the name of compliance, we are no longer free. This is not just a shift in programming — it is a restriction on our freedom of expression, our organising power, and our very right to exist as a movement.

Across the world, civic space is shrinking. Now, here in Uganda, we are seeing it shrink within the very systems that once helped us rise. When our identity becomes a liability, our progress becomes vulnerable.

We urge our donors, implementing partners, and allies: protect more than services — protect the spaces that allow us to speak, organise, and lead. Do not ask us to disappear in order to survive. Inclusion means naming. Respect means visibility.

To our movement-supportive donors — Red Umbrella Fund, UHAI EASHRI, Mama Cash, Global Focus, and others — we need you now more than ever.

This is not only a funding issue; it is a civic space crisis. We urge you to defend the right of sex worker-led organisations to use our own language, define our constituencies, and engage in advocacy without fear. This includes flexible funding to safeguard our ability to speak freely, sustain visibility, and resist structural erasure — even when other funding spaces become restrictive.

To our national coordination network: Uganda Network of Sex Worker-led Organizations, and strategic advocacy partnerships CISACOS, and every sister sex worker-led organisation in Uganda — we must stand firm together. We cannot afford to normalise silence. We must document these shifts, push back collectively, and use our coalitions to protect the right of sex workers to be named and organised as such. If we don't defend our civic space, no one will defend it for us.

And to our comrades across Africa and the world — from ASWA to NSWP, from regional allies to every grassroots collective — we ask you to stand with us. The language of our movement is a foundation of our organising. If we lose that, we risk losing everything. The funding may have returned. But if our freedom to define ourselves disappears, then everything we've built is in danger.

We are not risk categories. We are not invisible clients. We are sex workers. We are a movement. And we must be seen, respected and empowered.

Waiting for the *worst*

Story by Lukwago Quraish

My name is Lukwago Quraish. I'm 35 years old and have worked in HIV prevention for nine years. I currently lead the health program at Lady Mermaid Empowerment Centre (LMEC), where I support some of the most at-risk communities, including over 7,000 sex workers and their social contacts enrolled in HIV prevention services across all operational districts.

What we're facing right now is a slow, life-taking emergency. With U.S. HIV funding frozen, core prevention services including condoms, PrEP, PEP, HIV testing, and community outreach, are collapsing. That means we're no longer protecting the people who need it most.

Every day, sex workers walk into our Drop-In Centers asking for PrEP or ARV Refill. These aren't luxuries. They're protection for a community with an HIV prevalence of 33 per cent, compared to 7 per cent in the general population.

Last week (at the time of sharing this health warning), one sex worker who was just 19 years old, burst into tears when we told her we were out of PEP. She had been assaulted the night before and came to us as her only hope. But we had nothing to offer her. She cried, and I didn't know what to say. That's what it means when prevention fails.

And it doesn't stop with sex workers. The clients they serve are part of the public — boda riders, married men, boyfriends, businessmen and politicians. If prevention services for sex workers collapse, HIV won't stay in one community. It will spread fast.

U.S. support isn't just paying for ARVs. It also funds capacity building for our HIV service organisations, community HIV case finding, drug refills, and adherence support — the entire prevention cycle. Without that, even HIV testing loses meaning. What's the point of testing someone if you can't protect them when they test negative but at high risk?

Testing is not the goal. Staying negative is. Yes, other donors like UHAI, AIDSFONDET, Elton John AIDS Foundation, Global Fund, and Red Umbrella Fund comprehensively support parts of our diverse work, from movement building, peer education to stigma reduction and mental health. But even their efforts depend on one thing: a functioning HIV prevention system, that keeps the people healthy and alive, to benefit from all other programs we have for them. Right now, that system is falling apart. I've worked in this field long enough to see both breakthroughs and failures. But I've never felt this helpless. We are watching the wall of protection crumble and we know what comes next. Without prevention, we're just waiting for people to get infected. And if that happens, we won't just lose progress. We'll lose lives. U.S. support doesn't just strengthen our response. It holds it together. Please, don't let it fall.

OUR WORKPLACE, OUR SAFETY

One of the reasons why we campaign for decriminalisation is so that sex work is recognised as work. When sex workers are recognised *as workers*, we are entitled to protections under work health and safety (WHS) law. This article draws on the Vixen resource *Sex Work is Work*, developed to support both independent and venue-based workers in implementing effective WHS strategies.

In Australia, each state and territory has a government body responsible for providing guidance on workplace health and safety and enforcing WHS laws. WHS, also referred to as occupational health and safety (OHS), looks different across the sex industry, depending on the work environment and the services provided. Sex workers in establishments such as brothels or massage parlours are often engaged as independent contractors on an at-will basis. However, even in decriminalised jurisdictions where WHS protections exist, stigma and discrimination can make it difficult for workers to advocate for themselves and their colleagues or to push for safer working conditions with managers and operators. In criminalised settings, these barriers are even more pronounced, further limiting workers' ability to assert their rights and protect their health and safety.

What should effective WHS look like in sex worker workplaces?

In practice, WHS in sex work workplaces is about creating conditions where workers can operate safely, confidently, and on their own terms. That starts with a proper induction: a walkthrough of the space, from emergency exits to first aid supplies, and clear guidance on how clients move through the venue, how bookings are negotiated, and how services are managed. Workers are shown how condoms, lubricant, and other safer sex PPE are provided and how to perform visual STI checks on clients, and how to set boundaries, and navigate client interactions. This should be supported by consistent systems for laundry, cleaning, and waste disposal, alongside access to showers, handwashing facilities, and sanitiser. Safe rostering also plays a role, with clear expectations around shifts and an understanding that fatigue and burnout are real workplace risks. At its core, WHS also means making workplaces accessible, whether that is through physical adjustments or simply having quiet spaces to rest between bookings.

**WHEN WE SAY
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WORKPLACES.**

SEX WORKERS ARE IMPROVING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS PROGRAMMING GLOBALLY

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Sex Work Consortium plays an important role in amplifying sex workers’ perspectives across feminist spaces and reinforcing the solidarity across feminist movements.

From 2022-2023, NSWP and regional networks in Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Africa conducted research with 1,140 participants across 27 countries examining social protection and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services for sex workers.

Through peer-led SRHR programming models, the work of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) Sex Work Consortium provides clear evidence demonstrating the contradiction and tension between anti-sex work narratives that claim to defend bodily autonomy, while denying sex workers’ right to self-determination.

The research:

- sex workers experience alarming barriers to comprehensive, high-quality, and affordable SRH services,
- inadequate access to SRH services harms sex workers’ wellbeing and perpetuates inequities,
- meaningfully involving sex worker-led organisations in SRHR programming improves service quality and community awareness of services.

The work:

- advocacy for the decriminalisation of sex work and rights-affirming policies that improve working conditions and expand access to social protection,
- promoting respectful, accessible, and empowering health programming, led by sex workers and informed by local needs, cultures, and barriers,
- collaboration and movement-building through cross-country and -regional collaboration, capacity-building, knowledge exchange, and leadership development.

Here is a taste of what the Consortium has achieved so far:

PHILIPPINES

The Asia Pacific Sex Worker Network in 2025 provided support for Voice for Sexual Rights (VSR) for advocacy and services.

THAILAND

Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand (PPAT) is being supported to deepen cooperation with SWING (Sex Workers In Group) to better reach sex workers through nationwide sex worker-led clinics. Another goal is to repeal the “Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act” (PPA) and decriminalise sex work in Thailand.

INDONESIA

Indonesian Family Planning Association, PKBI (Perkumpulan Keluarga Berencana Indonesia) is collaborating with the sex worker organisation, OPSI (Organisasi Perubahan Sosial Indonesia), to deliver SRHR education sessions and services. OPSI also developed an SRH Training Module with the Ministry of Health and local health offices, training 101 healthcare workers and linking 59 sex worker communities to SRH services. Thirty cases of violence against sex workers were documented and addressed through the Community Legal Service. Strengthened partnerships between OPSI and city health agencies have resulted in the drafting of 2 MOUs with City Health Offices in Bogor and South Tangerang.

Advocacy is ongoing to form an alliance which will advance legal reform and the recognition of sex workers’ rights.

SRI LANKA

The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPASL) has collaborated with two sex worker-led organisations to re-design SRHR programmes to improve community reach. They also launched legal literacy sessions for sex workers which proved popular, reaching double the expected number of participants!

Trans-Equality Trust Sri Lanka (TETSL), a collaborating sex worker-led organisation, has run legal, psychological, and medical clinics for street-based sex workers, alongside monthly community kitchens which foster solidarity and collective advocacy. To address gender-based violence, TETSL presented findings from community-led research to government officials and the Human Rights Commission. They also conducted sensitisation training for lawyers and police on the benefits of decriminalisation for sex workers’ health and wellbeing.

PARAGUAY

In 2025 the first clinic addressing sex workers’ comprehensive health needs was established and continues to be led by community members. Twenty trans sex worker leaders were trained to advance legal advocacy on gender-based violence, and nationwide workshops were held to sensitise police, healthcare workers, and Ministry of Health officials to sex workers’ SRHR needs.

ARGENTINA

The sex worker-led healthcare programme has reached over 10,000 female sex workers, offering holistic services addressing physical, psychological, and social wellbeing.

COLOMBIA

Sex worker groups have secured regular dialogues with government ministries and local municipalities to support community programmes.

Profamilia has strengthened collaboration with sex worker-led organisations and drafted a strategy for implementing sensitisation training in public clinics, co-creating materials with sex worker-led organisations. They also began producing advocacy materials for policy interventions to promote sex workers’ rights and raise awareness of bodily autonomy and agency in sex work.

ECUADOR

Sex workers have participated in roundtable discussions with local governments to help shape policies impacting their communities.

This work can help strengthen intersections between movements to collectively resist anti-rights backlash in the realm of SRHR.

Looking forward, the Consortium aims to further improve sex workers’ access to SRH services while strengthening community leadership for political advocacy.

INTO THE

Future

Like all workers, sex workers are players in the world's economies. We pay for our own education, our families' groceries, our children's school fees, and our parents' medical bills. However, we remain discriminated against, excluded and ignored by the systems that are supposed to serve everyone — banks, housing providers, government and community support, and healthcare services.

While politicians, NGOs and political donors have sat across big tables and discussed how best to 'save' us, sex workers have built our own systems.

In West Bengal, India, the Durbar collective created USHA, one of the largest sex worker-led financial institutions in South Asia. It offers savings accounts, low-interest loans with flexible repayment, and self-employment support. In Poland, when COVID-19 lockdowns left sex workers with nothing, Sex Work Polska set up emergency funds almost immediately, covering rent, food, and medication. In Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, sex workers are pooling resources, forming rotating credit groups, and making collective investments in land and small businesses. In the UK, SWARM and x:talk run peer workshops where sex workers teach each other tax filing, safety strategies, business skills, and more.

While governments and private donors across the world continue to fund efforts and initiatives tied to the 'rescue industry,' sex worker-led organisations and initiatives genuinely improve lives. We have the trust of our communities and produce real outcomes. However, we receive just 0.2 per cent of global human rights funding.

FUTURE-PROOFING SEX WORKER ORGANISATIONS

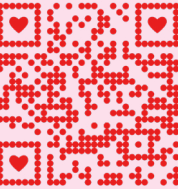
Sex worker peer organisations require sustainable and flexible funding. In Australia, most peer organisations are only funded to contribute to STI and BBV prevention. Other funding is attached to short-term grants that usually disappear after 12 months. Core organisational, multi-year and flexible funding is necessary to ensure that peer-led organisations can respond strategically to what our communities actually need.

Defund the 'rescue industry!' Conflating sex work with trafficking and exploitation continues to justify Australia's militarised border policy and investment in faith-based NGOs. This drives stigma and diverts resourcing away from impacted communities.

Resource our inclusion in policy reform. Our work goes beyond 'slinging condoms' and service delivery. Sex worker peer organisations must be recognised as key stakeholders in economic, anti-violence, human rights and healthcare policy reform, and resourced to build capacity and participate in decision-making.

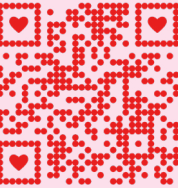
DISCOVER *more*

WHORETONOMY REFERENCES



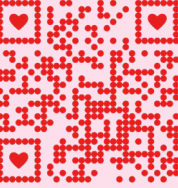
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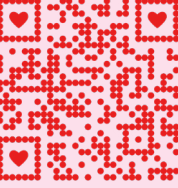
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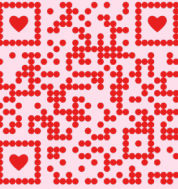
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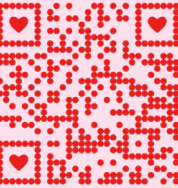
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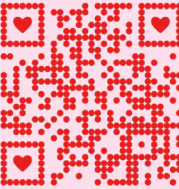


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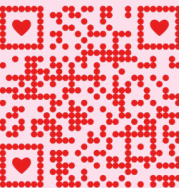


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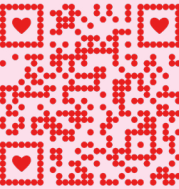
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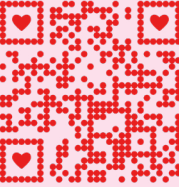
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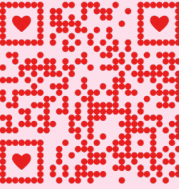


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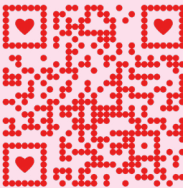
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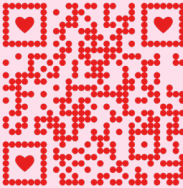
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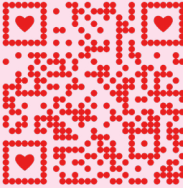


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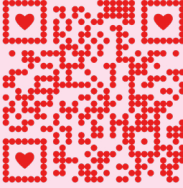
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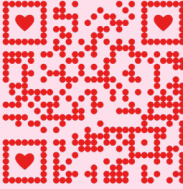


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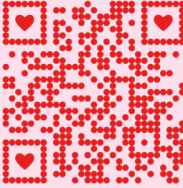
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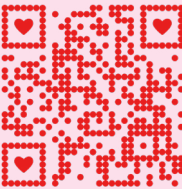


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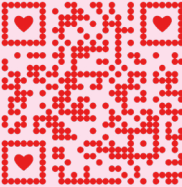


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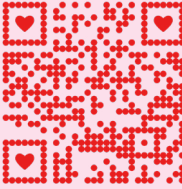


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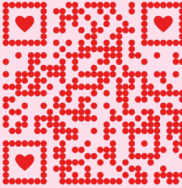
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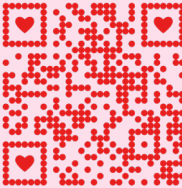


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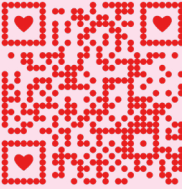
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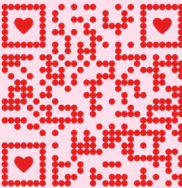
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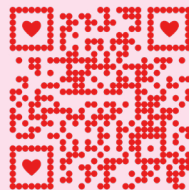


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With gratitude:

The Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW)

APNSW works to represent, mobilise, and empower sex worker communities across Asia and the Pacific, advancing human rights and advocating for the full decriminalisation of sex work. Scarlet Alliance is a proud member of APNSW.

The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)

NSWP is a global network that amplifies the voices of sex workers and connects regional advocacy efforts. Grounded in the principles that sex work is work, opposition to all forms of criminalisation, and support for sex worker self-determination, NSWP plays a key role in advancing sex worker rights worldwide. Scarlet Alliance is a proud member of NSWP.

where autonomy



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WHORETONOMY: POLICY, POWER AND SEX WORKER RESISTANCE

Whoretonomy is a collection of policy and opinion articles and peer interviews from uncensored Australia and internationally. It was produced and published by Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers' Association for the Women Deliver international conference held in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia) in April 2026.

It is the intention of Scarlet Alliance that WHORETONOMY: policy, power and sex worker resistance offers a contemporary snapshot of the sex worker rights movement in uncensored Australia, while acknowledging the rich history of the movement globally.

