

PROSTITUTION IS NOT “SEX WORK”

Prostitution is a form of **violence against women**.

WHY IS THE TERM “SEX WORK” PROBLEMATIC WHEN REFERRING TO PROSTITUTION?

The sex industry is invested in the use of such terms as “sex work” and “sex worker” when referring to prostitution. Prostitution is not “work.” It is violence against women and girls and a human rights violation. The term “sex work” completely masks the physical, psychological and sexual violence inflicted on prostituted persons.¹ A study done in Canada documented that prostituted women and girls have a mortality rate 40 times higher than the national average.²

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF VIEWING PROSTITUTION AS “SEX WORK”?

Legitimizing prostitution as work sanctions violence against women and girls as well as the inequality of women and girls. Referring to prostitution as “work” ignores the fact that so many women are trafficked into prostitution.³ In fact, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons reports that “...for the most part, prostitution as actually practiced in the world usually does satisfy the elements of trafficking.”⁴

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PROSTITUTION IS TREATED AS “SEX WORK” RATHER THAN AS A FORM OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

Promoting prostitution as a “job” normalizes and legitimizes it as an employment option. It allows for enormous “legal” profits for the sex industry and tax revenues for governments generated from the exploitation of poor women. Increased tax revenue encourages governments to turn a blind eye to the harms of prostitution and the need to provide exit programs and alternatives.⁵ For the sex industry, higher profits are an incentive to expand. Moreover, legalization of prostitution increases demand by promoting the social acceptance of sexual exploitation.⁶

ISN'T “SEX WORK” A TERM THAT WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION THEMSELVES USE AND PREFER?

While there are a small number of women who say they choose to be in prostitution, studies show that the majority of women in prostitution have been pushed into it through poverty, gender inequality and a lack of alternatives. Given that the average age of entry into prostitution is 12 to 13 years of age, many of these women are first exploited as children. Early sexual abuse compromises adult self-determination and is a human rights violation.

Prostitution is the end point to sex trafficking.

WHAT TERMS SHOULD BE USED INSTEAD OF "SEX WORKER"?

Terms should be used that are neither pejorative or that ignore the violence to women and children used in the sex industry. Rather than refer to someone as a "sex worker," it is preferable to use "sexually exploited person," "prostituted woman" or "child used in prostitution." These terms do not pretend that a human rights abuse is 'work'.

Negative terms-such as 'prostitute', 'whore' or 'hooker'-should not be used as they stigmatize victims.

INVISIBILITY

Words can conceal harms and lead to confusion about the real nature of prostitution. Some words in current usage make the harms of prostitution invisible:

"*voluntary prostitution*" implies that she consented when usually, she had no other options to survive.

"*forced trafficking*" implies that somewhere there are women who are not forced to be trafficked into prostitution.

"*sex work*" re-defines prostitution as a "job" rather than an act of violence against women.

"*migrant sex worker*" implies that together prostitution and trafficking are acceptable.

"beautiful merchandise" in China, benevolently conceals the objectification of women in prostitution.

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