

7.2: Rights not rescue: towards decent work

Last week we covered some critical debates about sex work and looked at how it became to be such a contested political terrain. Sex and work are governed by many things, including state laws that criminalise prostitution, global inequality that give only certain people access to certain kinds of jobs, limited mobility for global migrants, and also an underlying moral fabric that tell us what is right and wrong, just or unjust.

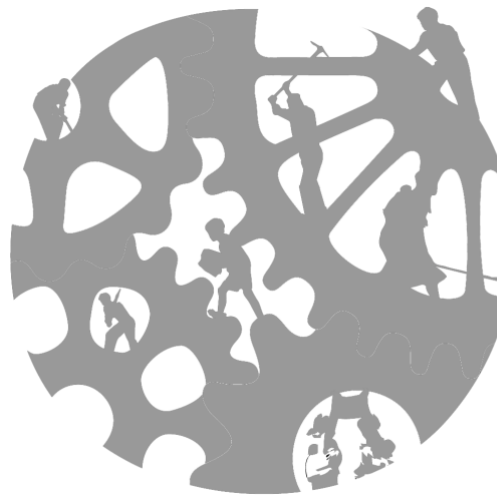
As a thought exercise, I'd like you all to reflect on last week's course content and think a little bit about where your own personal values of sex work and prostitution come from. More likely than not, they come from your personal experiences with family, friends, and faith communities, and also are informed by your identities – where you were born, your class background, race, gender identity, sexual orientation and work experiences.

If there is one simple message I would love for you to take from this class, it is this: please check in with your local sex workers' rights organisations to see how they understand human trafficking and modern day slavery. Though seemingly obvious, this is a connection that the global anti-trafficking movement has largely ignored because it prefers to speak for sex workers rather than letting them speak for themselves.

Here are two powerful slogan that sex workers have created. The first is the demand for 'Rights not Rescue', and the second is 'Solidarity not Sewing Machines'. To offer some context to these important messages I'm going to go over some key background concepts that tie together this week's course material on sex worker rights activism.

To start, I'd like to introduce the term sex worker. This was a term introduced in English, first coined by the American sex workers' rights activist Carol Leigh in 1984. Carol Leigh began using this phrase in her one-woman play 'The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot' in response to radical feminist organisations who denounced all forms of sex work as inherently exploitative.

Leigh wrote that "The usage of the term 'sex work' marks the beginning of a movement. It acknowledges the work we do rather than defines us by our status." So, in many ways, the acknowledgement of sex work as work is a smart political and activist strategy to encourage people to understand prostitution not as, illegal, immoral, dangerous, and undignified, but as a kind of job that people all over the world choose to do. This includes men, women, non-binary and transgender people. Though the demands of different groups and different kinds of sex work will be shaped by the unique constraints of each, their ability to feel safe, secure, and empowered within these jobs is not about the sex itself. It's about whether their work is criminalised, whether they have access to citizenship rights, labour rights, and health and safety. One of the greatest slogans of the sex worker rights movement is just that: Sex Work is Work.



VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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To understand this slogan, sex workers encourage us to think about how sex work encompasses many different types of what the sociologists Eileen Boris and Rhacel Parrenas call ‘intimate labour’. This category of intimate labour allows us to telescope out, to not think of sex work as the act of prostitution, but as part of a whole spectrum of work in this world that revolves around the intimacy. This includes different careers that we might never associate with sex work, including a nanny, a nurse, a therapist, and a masseuse, for example. And this diversity also reflects different kinds of sex work, including cam work, street-based sex work, escorting, acting in porn, and stripping, to name a few.

The demands for Rights not Rescue and Solidarity not Sewing Machines respond to the fact that efforts to stop sex trafficking do not take sex workers’ rights into account. In your assigned reading, ‘RIGHTS NOT RESCUE: A Report on Female, Male, and Trans Sex Workers’ Human Rights in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa’, we learn that raid and rescue attempts all over the world try to ‘rescue’ sex workers from sex work rather than offering support for how sex workers can work with more rights and safety. Just one example is the ability to complain if they are not paid, but there are many more listed in that report.

These are basic labour rights that working people all over the world demand of their jobs. If you ever encounter a friend, family member, or colleague who feels confused or uncomfortable about the idea of sex workers’ rights, just ask them to reflect on what labour rights they have at their own jobs. After sex workers are ‘rescued’ – and many sex workers say this happens against their will – they are placed in government or NGO shelters where they are often taught different skills like sewing and jewellery-making that are supposed to be dignified alternatives to sex work. Rather than teaching these crafts, sex worker rights activists ask us for solidarity, to advocate for occupational health and safety in their work, and against laws that criminalise them.

Once again we can apply this logic to all different working industries, from construction and garment production to domestic work. These, by the way, are all jobs that many sex workers have done in the past and continue to do in the present. Ultimately, more safety and protection for workers enables the sex industry to be freer from trafficking and instances of forced sex work.

One very innovative approach to advocating for sex work as work is the Empower Foundation’s *Moving Towards Decent Work*, which you have been assigned to read. In 2012, the International Labour Organisation first published a set of decent work indicators that try to map out a base set of guidelines around working conditions that can be used across a variety of industries. If you are interested, you can also find the link to this report in this week’s supplemental readings.

This transcript was prepared for the online course [Forced and Precarious Labour in the Global Economy](#) by [Beyond Trafficking and Slavery](#) (openDemocracy). It has been lightly edited for clarity. This course was originally released on the edX.org platform in 2018, where it has now been archived. As of 2021 it is available on [opendemocracy.net](#).

