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## Across the left divide over sex work.

By

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*I'm putting on my op-ed hat for this. This is prefaced at my blog with a preamble about my own experiences in sex work, and how the contrast between them informs my perspective on the issue. I won't burden readers with that here, but they're welcome to [look further](#) [6] if they want the context.*

It's important to acknowledge that neither decriminalization nor "abolition" (which is probably a misnomer, since it wouldn't completely eradicate sex work) will eliminate risk, nor will either of them completely eliminate the fact that exploitation occurs. This is important, because abolitionists will often point to the fact that a risk still exists as evidence that decriminalization fails, while erasing the fact that the same is true of abolition... and that the risk may in fact even be compounded by abolition-focused laws.

In a decriminalized environment, there are greater options, and more *unconditional* support for a person if they are wronged and seek help (although social attitudes toward sex workers can still be a barrier). Likewise, there is far less deterrent for a person to report exploitation if they are aware of it occurring. Harm is reduced through decriminalization simply by the virtue that it empowers people (well, more accurately, it eliminates much of the disempowerment that anti-prostitution laws institutionalize -- it would take more to actually empower).

And an empowered person has greater freedom to choose (or create) less exploitative circumstances.

But I think where the divide among the political left and among feminists (and womens' rights supporters under any other label) is resides in whether someone sees a sex worker's autonomy as the desirable endpoint. Is it enough to place people in a position where they can better determine their own destiny? Or does government have a responsibility to eliminate all the variables, in order to save the few who might still find themselves in miserable circumstances -- even if it increases the hardship and risk for everyone else? That is the question.

My belief is that government cannot possibly eliminate those variables, and it's far more practical to give individuals the power they need to address their own needs based on their circumstances. What is needed is the freedom to communicate, to reduce harms and stigma, and to form independent support organizations that are worker-focused and better positioned to see and address them... something people are not very free to do in the current social climate.

The debate is further confounded (possibly deliberately) by the ever-increasing conflation between sex work and human trafficking, which are actually [two very different issues](#) [7]. Equating the two is a serious derailment of the issue of actual human trafficking, by exploiting a real and urgent problem to attack a tangential population, and divert the funds that could have been used to address actual coercion, abduction and exploitation, directing them instead toward initiatives that will not provide any significant help to those who are genuinely trafficked.

This conflation occurs because the language from abolitionists deliberately equates sex workers with bought-and-sold commodities, portraying transactional sex as though it is the person themselves who is for sale, rather than the service the sex worker provides. The language that assumes that one is a traded product during commercial sex is understandably enraging. It would be natural to be infuriated about sex work if that were really the case. And this is often the way that abolitionists frame the discussion: as though prostitution sells people. In reality, sex workers sell an experience, from which they ultimately walk away, with their capacity to direct their own lives intact and their ownership still in their own hands (as much as is possible for any of us, at least).

It is through this framing that the personhood of sex workers is erased, and replaced with a kind of infantilized victimhood in which sex workers are simply helpless and in need of rescue... even from themselves, perhaps. It is by portraying the worker as the commodity that is for sale, rather than the service they provide, that people can then argue that a worker's consent is not actually valid consent. Individual will has ceased to matter.

Of course, there will always be a segment of people who view all sex work and anything that conforms to sexual stereotyping (perhaps even sexuality itself) as violence toward women. For those people, if they can't see how patriarchal and patronizing -- let alone disempowering -- criminalization (which is a regulation of mostly female bodies and mostly female choices) is, then there's probably no common ground on which we can meet. I know that there are some very painful experiences that lead people to those conclusions, and I don't mean to be insensitive to that. However, my experiences simply lead me to different conclusions.

And while criminalizing the buyer might \*sound\* like a reasonable middle ground, I really can't see how it would change the need to work and communicate out of view and in vulnerable or exploitative spaces. I also can't see how it would change the level of respect in the dialogue about women (and men, and anyone in between) in the sex trade... other than continually casting them in this two-dimensional role of helpless victim. In reality, though, criminalization of the buyer is still criminalization. There's still the need to work in secrecy, to protect one's livelihood, to take chances, and to distrust and avoid contact with the authorities at all cost. For the life of me, as someone who has done this, I cannot see how the Nordic model would be any worthwhile change from the three unreasonable laws that [were struck down](#) [8] by the Supreme Court of Canada. Rather, it is simply a more stealthy way to repackage those same harms and maintain them for the ten or more years that it will take to strike down this new face given to the status quo.

Abolition makes the classic mistake of addressing a symptom rather than the primary cause. Face it: when the choice is between \$1000 a night or \$1000 a month at McStarbuMart, that's not much of a choice. As long as this is the reality, and as long as there is no political will to address poverty and the enormous gulf that has manifested between *accessible* incomes and *life-sustaining* incomes, there will be people who feel a need to engage in commercial sex.

I find that the left-wing and feminist divides over sex work boil down to a question of whether a person believes that a person's right to personal empowerment and autonomy (including over their body and their

life decisions) should be paramount, or if the government's responsibility to actively protect women should be seen as justification to trump this, regardless of the sex worker's will and the effect on their surroundings, their lives and their future.

What is being attempted with the Nordic system of criminalizing buying is to simply try to either undermine the argument surrounding a woman's right to choose, or to allay those concerns. And for those who don't look beyond the surface, there may be the temptation to believe that. Don't you believe it.

*The Federal Government's slanted public consultation is [online until March 17th](#) [9]. Tell them in no uncertain terms that the consultation needs to consider the experiences of sex workers, particularly those who are still working and seeking to make a safe life for themselves.*

(Crossposted to [Dented Blue Mercedes](#) [10])

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