

Questioning assumptions about sex work

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A recent report by the non-governmental organisation Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia recommends the adoption of the Nordic Model in Australia.

Also known as the Swedish Model, this legislation would see the selling of sex decriminalised and the purchasing of sex criminalised. The premise is that if you curb the demand the supply will dry up.

But behind this model are various assumptions about the effects of sex work on women's mental health and physical safety.

At a base level, those assumptions are drawn from the notion that sex and sex acts are intrinsically linked to an individual's sense of self and identity – although more so for women than for men. Sex workers who speak out against this construction of their work are branded as suffering from false consciousness.

Thus having colluded with their oppressor – patriarchy – they are seen to have taken on a kind of Stockholm Syndrome (in which victims of kidnapping feel sympathy towards their captors). In this way, sex work becomes a prism for looking at the effects of restrictive gender stereotypes for many radical feminists. The 'rescue' of women from their own collusion is seen as the only way to humanely respond to sex work.

Rigid gendered stereotypes do have effects and are considered to be a social determinant of violence against women. But this is not unique to the sex industry: it's reflective of the devastating statistics that one in three women [PDF 3.14MB] world-wide will experience gendered violence in their lifetime.

But what if sex workers were seen as allies in a broader movement towards redressing community attitudes that support gendered stereotypes?

As a PhD student, I was privileged to undertake research into how women sex workers responded to various understandings about who they are as people and as sex workers. Far from simply colluding with a patriarchal model that positions their worth (and bodies) as vessels for the so-called 'male sex drive' (whether that's seen as essential or socially constructed) they saw themselves as resisting, challenging and changing how some men viewed them and other women – not despite their sex work, but through it.

Stigma

Sex work is highly stigmatised and, as I have written previously on *The Conversation* stigmatising discourses emerge from multiple places and echoes can be heard in today's debates and understandings.

For the women who spoke to me, it was the discourses emanating from radical feminism that were pertinent to them at the time and they spoke of many ways that they worked on their relationships to these understandings, including resisting seeing themselves as victims.

To give just one example, Sara – not her real name – told me about her struggles with perspectives that position her as colluding with patriarchy and contributing to the inequality of all women:

Because so many people criticise you and what you do and it's really easy to feel really down on yourself because you hear these people saying that you are contributing to, you know, this really, um, bad thing, you know you are aiding, you are colluding and all this kind of, of oppressive stuff. And that's really hard, you know, that's really hard to hear.

Redressing how women, and their sexualities, are viewed at a societal level does not necessitate the end of commercial sex. It does demand that we look closely at how women are considered in general, including in the sex industry and all other industries that suffer from gender imbalances and gender inequality.

Challenging gender stereotypes that culminate in gendered violence (including against LGBTIQ people) and gender inequality is a long, hard undertaking and treating women (and trans women) in sex work as victims is a big step in the wrong direction.

The nuances and complexity of all sites in which gender inequality and gendered stereotypes are perpetuated (i.e. everywhere) need to be examined, and sex workers have a role to play in this.

One sex worker, April – not her real name – who participated in my PhD research eloquently sums this up. Her words are worth pondering before relegating all sex workers to the oppression basket and all clients to that of perpetrator:

Sex work is not inherently reinforcing of gender inequalities, and in my experience, can actually contribute positively (both individually and socially) to redressing such equalities. It is a site, like any, in which a myriad of meanings come together and emerge in a range of ways that may either challenge or reinforce existing discriminatory views and experiences.

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