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Confronting Police Abuse of Sex Workers

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When we think of violence against sex workers, we conjure up images of dangerous clients and serial killers who target prostitutes. Indeed, the origins of the [International Day to End Violence against Sex Workers](#), observed on December 17, lay in the decades-long serial murder of sex

workers by the Green River Killer. While these are heartbreakingly real forms of violence against sex workers, one area that receives scant public attention despite its entrenched global reality is police abuse of sex workers.

The illegal status of sex work in most countries has not eradicated prostitution. Instead, criminalization has increased sex workers' vulnerability to human rights abuses and created fertile ground for police exploitation, especially of street-based sex workers.

For example, in South Africa, where sex work has been illegal since the former apartheid regime criminalized it in 1957, police officers often fine sex workers inordinate sums of money and pocket the cash, resulting in a pattern of economic extortion of sex workers by state agents. For some sex workers, the cost of a police bribe to evade arrest can equal an entire night's worth of work. In other instances, police have exhibited shameless levels of exploitation: In one reported example, a police officer in Cape Town demanded a sex worker give him money in lieu of arrest; when the sex worker told him she possessed only a meager 10 South African rand, or the equivalent of \$1.25, the police officer even pocketed that pittance.

In addition to economic abuse, police exploitation of sex workers manifests in other disturbing ways. South African sex workers report that police confiscate condoms to use as evidence of prostitution; demand sexual favors in exchange for release from jail or to avoid arrest; physically assault and rape sex workers; actively encourage or passively condone inmate sexual abuse of transgender female sex workers assigned to male prison cells; and use municipal laws to harass and arrest sex workers even when they're engaged in activities unrelated to prostitution. "When you get arrested," notes one sex worker, "they put you in the bad cells, with wet blankets, no food, no phone calls allowed. And not everything you had with you -- money, cell phones, necklace -- gets given back." Many sex workers get trapped in a cycle of arrests that only serves to drain state resources and further entrench sex workers' vulnerability.

Police abuse of sex workers is not a uniquely South African phenomenon. It is echoed in documented reports throughout the world, from [New York City](#) to [Cambodia](#) to [Papua New Guinea](#) to [Eastern Europe](#) and beyond.

Police are also often impediments to sex workers' access to justice when they are victims of violence. "To gather evidence of a crime against a sex worker, they have to first take it seriously," argues one sex worker about the lack of police attention to reports of violence. "If we go to the police to report abuse, we're made fun of, we're told 'you deserve it.' They chase you away," notes another sex worker. In addition, because of the continual police harassment they face, many sex workers don't bother to officially report abuse to police. Most sex workers' experience with criminal justice systems is not as survivors of abuse but as "perpetrators" of the "crime" of prostitution.

Of course, not all police officers abuse sex workers. There are police officers that seek to stop those who violate sex workers' rights -- whether they are clients, intimate partners, or police officers themselves. But the moral stigma that is attached to the criminalization of prostitution often leads to the deeply offensive attitude, on the part of some police, prosecutors, and others, that sex workers somehow consent to abuse. Prohibitionist legal regimes insist that all sex workers are criminals, making it almost impossible for society to view sex workers as legitimate victims of violent crime when it occurs.

Criminalization, sadly, has resulted in the invisibility of violence against sex workers to societies-at-large. Decriminalization would allow sex workers to come out of the shadows and defend their rights, ensuring that the crimes committed against them by police and others will no longer be hidden.

But even under prohibitionist regimes, much can and should be done to ensure that police cannot abuse sex workers with impunity. Police departments must train law enforcement to treat abuses against sex workers with the same attention and urgency they would give reports by any victim of violence. Police and justice departments must properly investigate and punish police officers accused of economically or physically abusing sex workers. Formal police outreach to sex workers must ensure that those who have been the victims of violence, even while committing prostitution, will be given assistance and will not themselves be prosecuted for breaking anti-prostitution laws.

Sex workers deserve the basic respect and protection from violence that each nation owes its citizens.

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