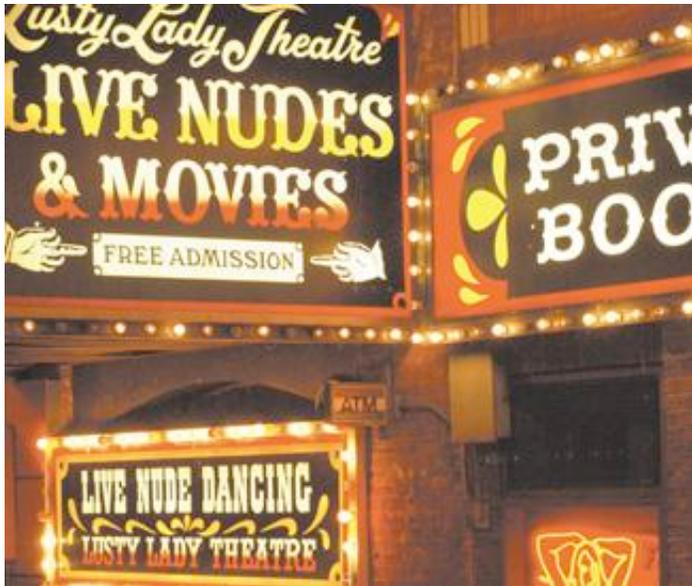


## The sex worker struggle

By *admin*

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From Google to Whorespeak: SF's activists fight a complex, uphill battle but keep the dream of decriminalization alive



The Lusty Lady in North Beach remains the nation's only unionized strip club

GUARDIAN PHOTO BY CHARLES RUSSO

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Google has come under fire in the past year for everything from privacy policies to censorship. But in December, some Bay Area residents were protesting the tech giant for a very different reason. The group that marched in front of the company's San Francisco office was angry over the company's donation to organizations fighting human trafficking.

The flyers declared, "Google: Please fund non-judgmental services for sex workers, NOT the morality crusaders that dehumanize us!"

Google had donated a whopping \$11.5 million to organizations that "fight slavery" last December, including the anti-sex trafficking groups International Justice Mission, Polaris Project, and Not For Sale.

But the activists said that these are religious organizations that ignored the rights of consensual sex workers.

According to a press release from Sex Worker Activists, Allies, and You ([SWAAY](#) [2]), "As frontline sex-worker support services struggle for funding to serve their communities, it is offensive to watch Google shower money upon a wealthy faith-based group like the International Justice Mission, which took in nearly \$22 million in 2009 alone."

"I appreciate what they're trying to do, but I wish that they had done more research," Kitty Stryker, a local performer, sex worker and activist, of Google's choice to fund the organizations.

In a society where the term "sex worker" — coined to describe those who consensually engage in commercial sex and consider it legitimate labor — is still new to most people, this sex workers rights struggle can be an uphill battle. But it rages on, and San Francisco remains one of its most important front lines.

## **FREE SEX FOR HIRE**

The heart of the struggle is, and for years has been, fighting the prohibition of prostitution, and the ultimate goal of the sex workers movement is the repeal of the laws that criminalize sex for hire. Decriminalization would be a vital safety measure for escorts, people working on the street, phone-sex operators, exotic dancers, porn actors, and other occupations that fall under the umbrella category of sex work.

Sex workers held worldwide conferences in the 1980s, meeting in Amsterdam and Brussels. Sex work was legalized and decriminalized in several countries around the world, including New Zealand, the Netherlands and Germany. The Sex Workers Outreach Project ([SWOP](#) [3]) became one of the most important organizations fighting for the cause, with chapters around the world.

Here in San Francisco, the city remains a hub for sex-workers rights advocates, who raise awareness about issues ranging from STD prevention to consent in BDSM contexts. The Saint James Infirmary supports and treats sex workers when they need medical assistance, and the Center for Sex and Culture is a resource and community center that embraces all San Franciscans with their minds in the gutter, sex industry workers included.

San Francisco's sex workers rights history includes two unions. Workers at the North Beach strip club the Lusty Lady formed the Exotic Dancers Union in 1997. The union became part of the Service Employees International Union, and the Lusty Lady remains the only collectively run, sex-worker-owned strip club in the United States.

Maxine Doogan founded the Erotic Service Providers Union (ESPU) in 2004 as an umbrella organization for sex workers in various industries. The ESPU has been active in opposing regulations of the massage industry and sponsoring Proposition K, a 2008 ballot measure that would have decriminalized sex work in San Francisco.

I spoke to a handful of Bay Area sex-workers rights activists to get a sense of the major issues

and priorities for the next year.

## **NO VISAS**

Activists are currently planning for the July, 2012 International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C.

Many international sex workers rights advocates have been denied visas to get to the conference. The U.S. typically bars convicted felons — but there's a special exception for people guilty of misdemeanor prostitution charges.

"SWOP has an idea of getting in touch with some of the people denied entrance and asking them what they were going to present on and to try and present their papers in their place, to make sure these organizers voices are heard," said SWOP-Bay Area spokesperson Shannon Williams.

But that's not where the government's weird exclusion of sex workers from its efforts to fight AIDS ends.

The Presidents Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) fund allocates \$48 billion to organizations around the world engaged in AIDS treatment and prevention. But thanks to the religious right, the law, approved in 2003, includes a stipulation that all recipient groups must make a pledge decrying prostitution. It's known as the "anti-prostitution loyalty oath."

A court ruling July 6, 2011 declared the oath a violation of the free-speech rights of organizations in the United States, but the U.S. still blocks PEPFAR funding for international organizations based on the "loyalty oath."

"Sex worker activists are going to converge in D.C. for the AIDS conference and talk about the loyalty oath. The US is exporting its ideology through this funding requirement" said Carol Leigh, a longtime activist who curates the annual San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Art Festival.

## **EMPHASIZING CONSENT**

Sex workers rights activists continue to be engaged in their complex, decades-long struggle with anti-sex trafficking organizations.

People who want safer working conditions say that decriminalization would make it easier for police to distinguish between coerced and consensual prostitution and encourage those with knowledge of crimes perpetuated against sex workers to come forward without risking prosecution for their own illegal work.

But many anti-trafficking advocates dismiss the distinction between forced and consensual prostitution in their efforts. According to a document called "Ten reasons for *not* legalizing prostitution," on the website of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, "There is no doubt that a small number of women say they choose to be in prostitution, especially in public contexts

orchestrated by the sex industry... In this situation, it is *harm* to the person, not the *consent* of the person that is the governing standard (emphasis theirs)."

It's this refusal to acknowledge the importance of consent that really pisses off advocates —and has a powerful effect on the policy that governs them.

The federal definition of sex trafficking includes consensual prostitution, and defines coerced prostitution as "severe sex trafficking." "Law enforcement agencies can use anti-trafficking funds to arrest sex workers in prostitution, on the grounds that the feds define all prostitution as trafficking, even though the government distinguishes between trafficking and severe trafficking," said one sex workers rights activist.

According to Leigh, anti-trafficking organizations are not all bad; she named the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women as an organization that "has been allied with sex workers rights movement and takes rights-based approach."

But organizations that conflate consensual and coerced commercial sex are often big-time recipients of public and private funding.

Doogan is wary of any attempt to further regulate or criminalize sex work. She says that often, laws meant to deter prostitution trap people who may want to change occupations. "Women have to continue working in the industry because no one else will take them for work when they have those convictions on their record," said Doogan.

That may be the case with Lola, an occasional Erotic Service Providers Union volunteer who was arrested on prostitution-related charges outside California earlier this year. She moved to the Bay Area and is looking for a job, but after a promising interview last week, she's nervous that a background check will reveal her arrest.

"I'm waiting to hear whether that's going to be an issue or not. They could tell my landlord, and then I could lose my house too...all I'm trying to do is get a job," Lola told the Guardian.

## THE WORK GOES ON

For most sex-workers rights activists, the long-term goal remains decriminalization. For now education, creative projects, and protest in service of that goal continue.

Members of SWOP-Bay Area have a program called Whorespeak that does outreach at colleges, and "we've also been speaking in classes for therapists about how to work with current and former sex workers and not pathologize them," said Williams.

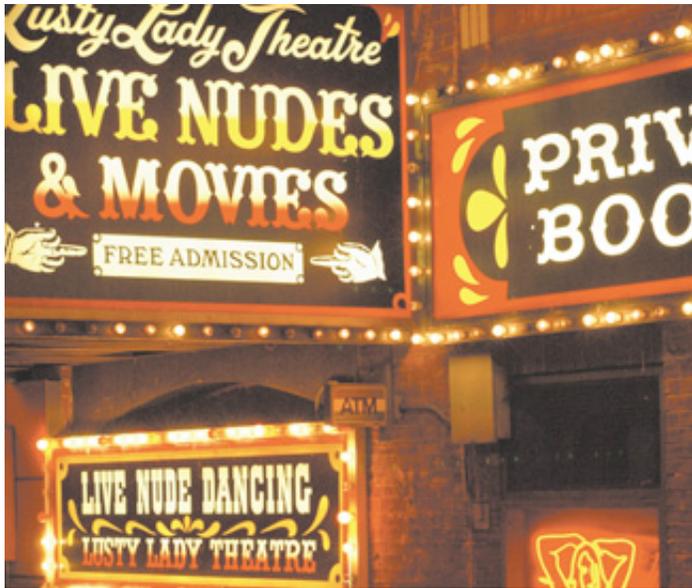
According to Stryker, one of the most exciting projects happening now is Karma Pervs. The website, run by local queer porn star Jiz Lee, sells unique sex-positive porn and donates the proceeds to organizations like the Saint James Infirmary.

Then, of course, there's the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, when sex

workers and allies gather to commemorate sex workers who have been assaulted and killed.

Sex workers often can't go to police to report crimes for fear of being locked up themselves, society retains a huge stigma surrounding sex work, and there is an insidious cultural myth that "you can't rape a prostitute." These all add up to put sex workers at high risk for assault and murder; serial killers, such as the Green River Killer in Seattle and a murdered in Long Island-area this past summer, are disproportionately likely to target prostitutes.

That's why, for Williams, "Our long-term goal is to decriminalize prostitution. But the real goal is to end violence against sex workers."



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[1] <mailto:yael@sfbg.com>

[2] <http://swaay.org/>

[3] <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sex-Workers-Outreach-Project/94010809049>