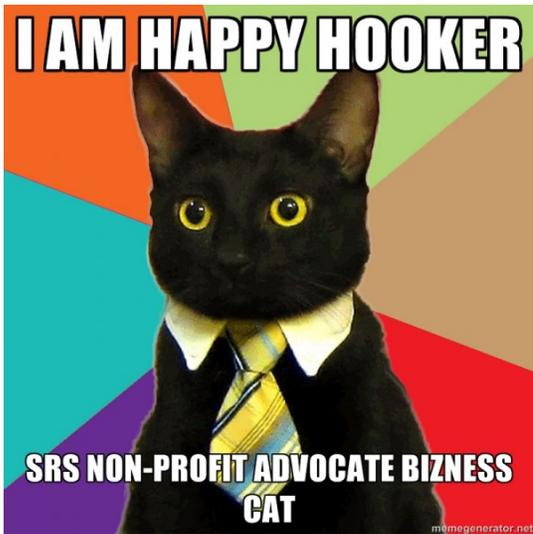


## Who Gets Left Out: Respectability Politics Round Table, Part One [titsandsass.com](http://titsandsass.com)



*“Respectability politics” has been a recurring phrase coming up lately in conversations within the sex workers’ rights movement. In discussions on and off the site we’ve had about drug using sex workers, sex workers with disabilities, survival sex workers, etc., we’ve been bumping up against this idea constantly. The Tits and Sass editorial staff decided to bring together a group of veteran sex workers’ rights activists and service providers and ask them how respectability politics ideology affected their work and how we in the movement can best counter these tropes.*

**How do you define respectability politics? How have respectability politics affected your service work in the sex workers’ rights movement?**

**Emma Caterine**<sup>1</sup>: That’s a pretty broad question and Red Umbrella Project (at this time, we have been considering expanding to this role) is not a service provider, but let’s see if I can answer:

Respectability politics is something incredibly tangible in our legislative advocacy efforts. We are effectively told time and time again, although we are on the executive committee of the No Condoms as Evidence Coalition, that we shouldn’t “make it” an issue about folks in the sex trades. Which is a bit perplexing since there are two major populations whom the practice of using condoms as evidence affects in direct regular ways: those profiled as being in the sex trades and those who are in the sex trades. The former is comprised of identities associated with the sex trades both culturally and institutionally: trans women of color, gender variant people of color, low income women, undocumented women, etc. While it is certainly a travesty that these folks are being arrested, harassed, and even physically attacked by the police over carrying condoms, it has been extremely important for us at Red Umbrella to not imply that they are the ones who “do not deserve it,” since that insinuates that those in the sex trades deserve to be subjected to this oppression. Not to mention that the two groups are hardly mutually exclusive.

And it is certainly the attitude and language the decision makers (politicians and other public figures) have adopted when they do come out to support the No Condoms as Evidence bill: it will be prefaced with a “I in no way condone prostitution”, it will be followed by pulling one of the largest stings on clients of sex workers, or any number of methods or statements to absolve themselves of being in any way in support of something that is associated with the sex trades. You do have to buy into it to a certain extent though: I mean I was a well-dressed smiling trans woman who was ever so interested in what a staffer from DA of Nassau County Rice’s office had to say to us. His advice was important to our strategy for getting the legislation passed. But as a

member of a peer-based group dedicated to empowering those in the sex trades, there needs to be a balance. Kathleen Rice and I won't be getting coffee in the near future or posing for a photo op. I didn't even give this staffer my card when he gave me his because outside of that meeting there is no utility in us interacting and I am not going to pretend there will be for the sake of respect. Because I don't respect those who throw people in jail that are not only the people I am fighting for but also friends and loved ones. And in my experience confident adherence to your principles garners respect just as often if not more than playing to some idea of respectability.

Luckily, we have a really dynamic coalition that both understands the utility of presenting our argument through a diversity of tactics and also appreciates the fact that the issue is undeniably about those in the sex trades. Certainly many members of the coalition are not pro-sex work, but most of the groups interact with those in the sex trades on a regular or semi-regular basis and certain groups like the Sex Workers' Project are completely centered on sex workers' rights. We have had a few errors, but they arose from oversight far more than intentional malice. I've never felt like we have had pressure from the other coalition members to tone down or present ourselves in a more respectable way.

**Cyd Nova2:** In terms of "respectability politics," I am thinking of it from within the sex workers' rights movement. Respectability politics dictates that there is a right way to be a sex worker—that indoor, non-drug using, never stealing or being shady, saving for their college education, white and non-threatening sex workers—deserve rights and a voice and shouldn't be dragged into the same muck that less-palatable-to-the-mainstream sex workers must tread through.

The image of "innocent victim" not only creates a dichotomy between sex workers and non sex workers, but also divides people in the industry and the movement as well. Racist and classist tropes are often used to the advantage of sex workers seeking political gain, not always with bad intentions, but the very act of idealizing yourself as an honorable, upwardly mobile escort reinforces the idea that some hookers are worthy of empathy and support while others are not.

How this plays out at the clinic is a little more nuanced—we are a free health clinic and there is no right or wrong way to be a whore to get services as long as you don't bring a gun into the clinic or something—but the ways that it plays out in staffing is a little more complicated. Many of our participants are homeless or transiently housed and work in a variety of street economies, while many of our staff could be perceived as people who would have access to doing privileged types of sex work. We aim to be as horizontal in power dynamics and as peer run as possible, but here we are. And it's complicated—people who have more access to resources are able to gain work experience, volunteer, and be a reliable employee because they aren't struggling to get their basic needs met all the time—but what it can look like at the end of the day is the people who are providing care and are the voice of the clinic are "one type of sex worker" while the people who receive services are predominantly another. This is something we are actively trying to challenge, but there isn't an easy answer.

Politically, I have seen campaigns that struggled with internal conflicts around trying to

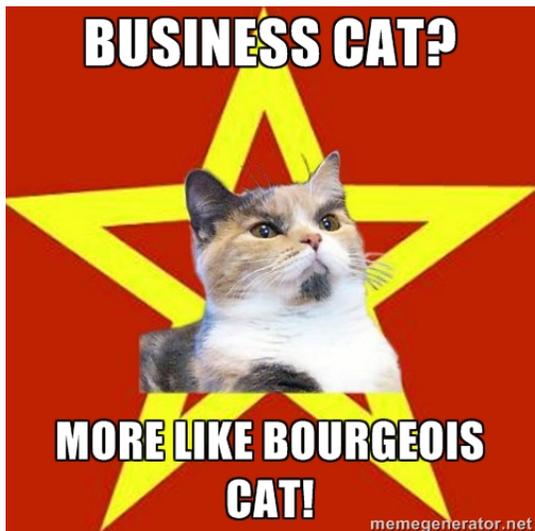
decriminalize indoor sex work while not including outdoor sex workers in their plea and it's torn people apart. Recently there was a film, 'Lot Lizards', shown in the SF Sex Worker Art and Film Festival and there were a lot of complicated feelings that came up around it. The film depicts the lives of sex workers working out of truck stops, and a lot of them not enjoying the work. Some people at the festival were really upset about this film being shown, but why? Obviously documentaries are not blank canvases and it's fair to call out biases, but also I think there was a threat to people who were scared that the narratives portrayed would impact how people thought of them. That is totally understandable. As sex workers, the stereotype is that we all are troubled, drug addicts, victims of abuse with bad self esteem and if that's not you, I get that it can feel like a real burden to be saddled with that label. But we also need to be able to talk about that without suppressing the stories of people who are doing sex work from a place of desperation or who do use drugs in a way that worsens their lives significantly—because that is equally real.

Pretending that everyone who does sex work is doing it from a place of empowerment and exemplary mental health is as violent as assuming that we are all disempowered and mentally unhinged. Because then you are pulling an HRC—leading to a path where people who are more privileged get given rights, and everyone else gets told: "Don't worry, we'll come back for you later."

**Melissa Gira Grant**<sup>3</sup>: Before I dig in, I want to point to Lori Adorable's blog post which kicked this off for me, which is also a good historic reference to how the whole idea of challenging the politics of respectability originates with black women. (Here's another good reference from Bitch.)

Where it starts for me, with sex work, is how just being people with experience in sex work is probably enough for pretty much any other progressive movement to put us on the outside of the politics of their own respectability. Some queer or women's rights or economic justice or Occupy activists might have us, but maybe only so long as we don't talk about sex work "too much," or in the "wrong" way, or at all. So we have at least two layers of respectability politics going on: inside our own movements, and then with allies and/or in other movements/communities in which we work and to which we belong.

I'm thinking how this came up in media coverage of Diamond Williams' murder (which I wrote on here). In responding to transphobic language in media reports, GLAAD described her having been involved in selling sex as something irrelevant from her past that should have been left out, even though it was someone posing as a customer (and someone who had repeatedly posed as a customer to attack trans women) who murdered her. So GLAAD is willing to step up around violence against trans women—but sex work is still inherently seen as stigmatizing, as "irrelevant," even if that's part of why and how she was murdered? It reminds me of how violence against trans women gets collapsed into "anti-GLBT violence," when we know a great deal if not the majority of that violence is against trans women. I don't want anyone to be called a "hooker" in the media, but this isn't irrelevant, not in Diamond's case, not in the case of other women targeted. We need ways to talk about sex work with humanity and dignity, not to erase it because it's somehow "disrespectful" to bring it up at all.



**Sarah Patterson**<sup>4</sup>: I think about how “respectability politics” plays out in social service provision and the idea of the “good” client/patient when you consider peer-led social and medical service provisions. Firstly, we all have a hustle we go into the doctor with, an idea of the way a good patient would behave, and then we build a picture of ourselves and our health accordingly (for many people, that hustle is a very necessary part of getting the things they need to live their lives). I also think a lot about the institutional violence that go into why people don’t seek out social and medical services and how so many people are told (or shown) how undeserving of their self-determination and autonomy they are. Good clients get affirming care, whereas bad clients get social services and medical interventions they did not ask for and enact violence against them and their communities.

Mistrust of health care systems originates in so many histories, everything from the problematic foundations of social work in the interventions of affluent white women keeping themselves busy to the sexist, classist underpinnings of the historical divide between herbal medicine and the medical model of care rooted in “science,” the origins of which still divides many healing disciplines today. These histories also have such racialized violence within them as well, particularly when considering the persistent mistreatment laden in situations such as the separation of Indigenous children from their families by social services or the forced sterilization of incarcerated women of color in prisons. These injustices are all enacted by so-called “well-intended” social workers and doctors.

Thinking about sex workers specifically, there is such a deep history of sex workers being seen as either poor victims or evil vectors of disease, particularly associations with poor sex workers as “unclean,” oversexualized and unfit in mind and body. I think part of the reason why people are just so unlikely to disclose anything about sex work with a provider is that we haven’t really gotten very far out of the victim/vector paradigm when thinking about sex worker health. Twenty four states still have mandatory HIV testing for people arrested on sex work charges and twelve of them have enhanced penalties (usually taking the charge from misdemeanor to felony) for people arrested for doing sex work while HIV positive, so there’s definitely a disavowal of bodily autonomy happening for arrested sex workers.

On the other hand, you have the “happy, healthy hooker” archetype others have spoken of, someone who has all the resources and access needed to be a “good” sex worker and a “worthy” client. I think that also comes with the ability to pass as a non-sex worker sometimes in health care, which is itself a privilege. But maintaining the appearance of being respectable has its costs as well. Anecdotally, as well as amongst my own friends, I know of sex workers who have delayed care or ignored chronic conditions out of a fear of accounting for their income or being discriminated against in care. The cult of respectability can have devastating effects in that

regard, as well.

**Melissa:** To piggyback on what Sarah added, too, I'm remembering something I heard several times at St. James Infirmary. When sex workers wanted to volunteer there who had never come to clinic themselves, staff would recommend that they come to clinic first before volunteering.

"Coming to clinic" can mean a lot: not just getting an STI or HIV test, but a massage or acupuncture, going through the clothes closet, hanging out and watching a movie, getting hormones, etc. The idea was, we wanted to close the distance even among sex workers between the people who want to help and the people who get help. We could all use services. We could all use care. There's nothing wrong in asking for that. But it could be tough, because some of us do have this self-image of being the kind of sex workers who don't "need" anything, that harm reduction or self-care is for some other sex workers. I get not wanting to take what are unfortunately all-too-scarce resources from those who you think might need them more, but there's something powerful about asking for the help you need. You can call it mutual aid, or community building, or just taking care of each other. It's so important.

The other day some anti-sex work campaigners were mocking the support line Confide that the Sex Workers' Open University had just started. "Oh look, the "sex workers" hate their jobs so much they need this special line!" It's so damaged. But to be honest, I've heard that from some sex workers, too—that to focus on supporting sex workers around sexual health or drug use reinforces stereotypes, or somehow isn't what most sex workers need (has anyone done a needs assessment this big yet?), or that talking about health and care is a distraction from "real" issues. Well, two things: 1, like I said, everyone needs care. 2., these caring projects are usually the only kinds of projects that sex workers can get support for. As a result, they form the infrastructure of our movement. Maybe some of this is some internalized judgment around care, because giving care is something that's thought of as feminine, as something that's not even really work. It's hard, because part of the reason these projects are what gets support from outside groups is that there *is* this stereotype of the sex worker as a "vector of disease," who can't take care of herself, who needs to be controlled.

So we're always working against and with that stereotype. But I think we're in a pretty good place in challenging that stereotype, and now, as Emma pointed out, we are working with taking on other issues of "inclusion," tokenization, and representation that go beyond just "we need to include a sex worker because those sex workers are so vulnerable" but to "well, what sex workers? which issues?"

**Emma:** To also build on what Sarah said about institutional sources of respectability politics, we also see this in rape shield law exceptions, such as those in New York, where normally a woman cannot have her sexual history used against her during a rape trial UNLESS she has done sex work.

LENIN CAT?



MORE LIKE SELLOUT CAT!

**Melissa:** I think the whole “we’ll come back for you later” is a good place to keep going. What all gets left out. Who gets left out, who gets to decide who’s worth fighting for.

It’s almost always street-based workers who get left out first. Even though the sex workers’ rights movement as we know it started as a street protest (and then, a church occupation) by French prostitutes, who organized on the streets against police violence. That was the early 70’s, not long after Stonewall, after the Compton Cafeteria—places where the people in the sex trade who were part of these actions have been minimized over the years as they are turned into “gay history.”

It would be a mistake to think that sex workers “got politicized” (aren’t we all, always?) by putting on pearls and blazers (though that also works, because it’s all drag) but when people who were facing really serious violence fought back. We aren’t just a movement of whatever it is people mean when they say “happy hookers”—though we are that, too. But by definition, if you are fighting back, you are engaged in political change, even if the “serious” people don’t see it that way until they can stand back with thirty years distance and decide it was history.

As an aside, I’m obsessed with the origins of the “happy hooker” character, as she becomes something held up in our communities as the “respectable” sex worker. I’d say she operates at times as sex workers’ version of assimilation, imposed in various ways upon one another, only this character is just as disreputable to people outside sex work. When anti-sex work campaigners try to discredit sex workers, that’s the character they invoke (I wrote more here on that.). As if being okay with your job sometimes or even all of the time is grounds to disregard your social exclusion. The anti’s have their own inverted “respectability” matrix—the worst pain, the saddest stories, the most perfect victims. As if being okay with your job sometimes or even all of the time is grounds to disregard your social exclusion.

I’m glad I had the idea of “passing” available to me when I was doing sex work, and also working at St. James doing fundraising, and later at Third Wave Foundation, where I was often talking about sex workers’ organizing to more conservative womens’ foundations. In one meeting I recall still, a program officer at one of the major foundations — it was like she couldn’t just come out and say “sex worker,” she would say “vulnerable populations,” which is one of those awful development code words that are supposed to make it sound like you aren’t judging poor people, and yet. I said to her something like, “you know, when you say that, ‘vulnerable populations,’ it makes it sound like you assume that none of those ‘vulnerable populations’ are here in the room with you.” I don’t know if I passed to her— I’m white, cis, spent enough time in non-profits to pick up the jargon comfortably, had some college—or if it just hadn’t occurred to her that “those

people” were in these conversations, too. I don’t know how much it actually shifted our conversation, but there’s only so long I can sit in those meetings and remain (well, what feels to me anyway) invisible.

**Emma:** I just wanted to add that I think that philosophy is starting to die out in many ways and being replaced by, at worst, tokenization, and at best, actual representation. Visibility for marginalized groups, even those as heavily marginalized as trans women of color, has been one of the definitive accomplishments of the modern left. I think the problematic aspects revolve around questions of leadership, organizational structure, and cherry-picking oppressed people who fit what you want as a respectable image of that group. For example, Original Plumbing’s selection of Diana Tourjee as a contributing editor after they were criticized for their attitudes towards trans women. Regardless of Diana’s abilities (I think she is more than qualified in terms of writing ability), they picked a normative and passing white on-hormone-therapy-for-a-year young woman. More importantly, they picked a writer who has thus far completely white-washed over the magazine’s problematic history with trans women and who makes such lovely manic-pixie borderline racist statements as ” my spirit animal is an angst-ridden teenager.”

*You can read the second part of this dialogue here.*

*1. Emma Catherine is a white trash southern trans lady who somehow has found herself in Brooklyn, New York talking to non-profit staffers, politician lackeys, and other ‘respectable’ members of society in order to advocate for the rights and safety of folks in the sex trades. She is a community organizer for Red Umbrella Project, an New York organization that works to amplify the voices of those in the sex trades through creative works, legislative advocacy, and media advocacy. She is a graduate of the College of William & Mary (much to the chagrin of the stuffed shirts in the administration, who once told her she was a “Trotskyist werewolf”), where she received B.A.s in English and African-American Cultural Studies, the latter for which she received the Middleton Award for Academic Excellence. She has written pieces for RH Reality Check and Autostraddle and spoken at the ASALAH Conference, the Lemon Project Symposium, the Desiree Alliance Conference, and at numerous American universities. ↩*

*2. Cyd Nova is a truly dedicated hooker, pornographer, and ex stripper; he also works at the St James Infirmary – a clinic for current and former sex workers. He has peddled his transsexual ass all over the United States and Australia over the past decade, collecting stories and many other things, which you can read about here: <http://cydnova.wordpress.com> ↩*

*3. Melissa Gira Grant is a freelance writer reporting on sex, politics, and technology for publications including The Nation, the Guardian, Wired, the Atlantic, In These Times, Dissent, Glamour, the Washington Post, and Jacobin, where she’s a contributing editor. She’s a former columnist at Valleywag, Gawker’s tech blog, and a former sex worker and information activist supporting sex workers’ rights projects. Melissa is the author of Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work, which will be published by Verso in 2014. ↩*

*4. Sarah Elspeth Patterson is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Persist Health Project, a*

*peer-led health project that links sex workers and other people in the sex trade with health and wellness services in NYC, while training the providers that serve us. She funds her nonprofit lifestyle by teaching health education to teenagers by day and working on other people's research. Sarah was recently published in GMHC's global HIV/AIDS publication, Achieve, which is now available online. To find out more about Persist or to donate to get sex workers better health care, go to [persisthealthproject.org](http://persisthealthproject.org) ↩*