

## Why I changed my mind about sex work

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*Prostitutes and members of the Union of Sex Workers demonstrate to claim their rights to work in dignity and respect.*

Prostitutes and members of the Union of Sex Workers demonstrate to claim their rights to work in dignity and respect. Photograph: Bertrand Langlois/AFP/Getty

I feel uneasy about sex work. I worry that it objectifies women and compounds our difficulties in carving a place for ourselves as cerebral and corporeal, as full persons. But here's the thing: it's not about me.

However sincere my concerns, however fluently I may be able to

quote Andrea Dworkin, such views tacitly align me with the slut-shamers and the conservatives who do such a good job of "othering" sex workers, of making them a thing apart – alien and aberrant.

This othering means that when a sex worker is murdered – as happened in Melbourne's St Kilda suburb last week – our outrage is muted. Yes, we think it's awful and we hope the assailant is caught, *but* she was putting herself at risk, *but* she knew the dangers, *but* she didn't "keep herself safe" – as if what Tracy Connelly experienced in the last moments of her life was any less horrifying for her than it would be for us. Or as if her family and friends grieve differently, or her partner is any less traumatised by finding her body, or her assailant will confine their violence to sex workers so the rest of us can live without fear (Adrian Ernest Bayley, anyone?).

I'm done with the buts. To (mis)quote EM Forster, in any contest between an ideology and a friend, I'm coming down on the side of the friend, on the real, flesh-and-blood reality of the person. My support and my energy must be at the service of the sex worker rather than a politics that, however well-intentioned, diminishes their personhood and allows Tracy Connelly to be reduced to a tawdry headline.

Feminism has always been conflicted on the question of sex and sexuality, inheriting as it did two such different traditions. One tradition is devoted to protecting women from the laws and customs that subjugate them to men and men's bodies; and one argues for the reclamation of the female body and its pleasures. For various reasons, my own politics tended towards the former for a long while. The problem with this position is that it so easily falls prey to the model of men's sexuality as rapacious and threatening.

A former professor of mine, the late Patricia Crawford, referred to this as the "sex or burst theory", whereby men's sex drive is an unsophisticated hydraulic system requiring periodic release, or catastrophic consequences will ensue. Sex workers and porn are socially positioned as providing this "release valve" that supposedly keep the rest of us (good) women safe.

The objections to this model are manifest, not least in that it sets up a dichotomy between men and women, where (gendered) desires are oppositional and women whose sexual experiences fall outside a fairly narrow, vanilla band are cast as aberrant. Even mad. It makes black and white what in reality is the complex, messy and contestable nature of desire. It means we agree to sacrifice "release valve" women like some kind of human shield. It reinforces sexual double standards whereby sex amplifies men but diminishes women. So the same act makes men studs or virile or magnetic, whilst rendering women sluts or needy or a bit pathetic, with sex workers the ultimate example. Throw in all our baggage around sexual competition and fears about fidelity and there's a potent recipe for women's hostility towards sex workers.

I've no claims to expertise on sex work. But I have been, and am, friends with women who are sex workers. For the most part they're white and middle-class and well-educated, like me. And pretty well-versed in feminist theory, like me. Their choices and options look similar to mine, and they've chosen sex work.

Who am I to question that choice? To tell another woman what she can and cannot do with her body? To suggest, as some feminists do, that this 'choice' is in fact Stockholm syndrome whereby the sex worker is identifying with her oppressor.

"But how would you feel if your daughter chose to be a sex worker?" my girlfriends ask. The answer is, I would feel very uneasy. But if she made that choice my first concern is for her wellbeing and human rights, not my ideological purity. Her bodily integrity is inviolable regardless of the number of sexual partners she chooses to have (or not have) and in what shape or form. I would want her to be part of, and not apart from, the greater community. Her choices respected. Her rights protected. I want that for Tracy Connelly, too. I want it for every woman.

- This piece originally appeared on Overland, republished as part of the Guardian comment network