

5.14.14

**Sex workers are somehow invisible when it comes to discerning the truth about their work. Yet clients, police, and others have no trouble finding them to pay, arrest, extort, rob, beat, or rape.**



Matthias Lehmann / mattlemonphotography.wordpress.com

“It’s very easy to hide this crime,” an official with New York’s attorney general’s office said defensively regarding the state’s discovery of only two trafficking victims in advance of the Super Bowl, an occasion during which prostitution is allegedly at its peak. Sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh wrote an entire memoir predicated on the notion that sex work has become “more efficient and more hidden.” While rejecting Melissa Gira Grant’s *Playing the Whore*, feminist Katha Pollitt declared that when it comes to sex work, “the subaltern do not get to speak.”

So it’s unsurprising that in March, when the Urban Institute released its study on the United States’ sex economy, the mainstream media promoted their self-described “landmark” findings as a triumph. The *New York Times* claimed the report could address “wide gaps in the understanding of how the underground sex trade works, especially in the Internet age.”

Journalists, policy-makers, and self-appointed experts repeatedly say that the Internet facilitated an explosion of activity for sex sellers of all stripes, yet that activity was somehow entirely covert. Similarly, the “end demand” crowd, who would like to see the sex trade eradicated but catch flack for explicitly supporting policies that criminalize those selling it, assert that sex work proliferates because of an endless male appetite for bought sex.

But very few sex workers use the “Dark Net,” and even that private corner of the web is now subject to busts. So some connecting of the dots is long overdue. If sex workers are so hard to find, how do clients responsible for making the sex industry the “fastest growing and second largest criminal industry in the world” find them? How do the cops who continue to arrest them?

The Internet eased entry and access to commercial sex by *increasing* visibility, not obscuring it. For proof, just look at ad websites like Craigslist, Backpage, Cityvibe, Slixa, Redbook, and Eros, or the slew of sex workers who tweet, blog, and maintain business websites. The police already do. They’ve begun using tools like P411 and the TER white list (which sex workers rely upon to screen out abusive or dishonest customers) to arrest independently working adult women under the guise of cracking down on trafficking.

While official police statements concerning stings repeatedly hype the idea that prostitution is actually more threatening and ominous now that it’s “hidden,” they usually simultaneously admit

they know exactly where and how to garner big busts of those buying or selling sexual services (i.e., the Internet.)

In the past, the “public nuisance” excuse used to be a favored fall back for those in favor of criminalizing consensual adult transactions: the discarded condoms, the loud late night noise, the horror of a child seeing a provocatively dressed woman. Now, the fundamentally covert nature of a transactional sex act is what justifies the involvement of law enforcement, though indoor sex work is hardly a new phenomenon. Replace “hidden” with “private,” and you come closer to an honest description.

The truth is that information about the sex industry is not suddenly harder than ever to come by. Information about the sex industry proliferates, but legislative and moralizing parties prefer to ignore those who provide it — the sex workers themselves — in favor of highly suspect accounts from arrested management figures, law enforcement, or figures of dubious credibility who create and inflate numbers with impunity.

What’s currently happening to sex workers across the world might best be described as willful erasure. At a time when sex worker voices are louder, more insistent, and more numerous than ever, many governments, pundits, and not-for-profits are determined to power ahead with their own agenda — ignoring the voices of those they claim to be concerned for.

This is not confined to sex workers in the West, though Western officials are arguably making the largest push for heedless and actively harmful actions. Though the Eastern world is regarded as home to the most abjectly exploited and “trafficked” women on the planet, activist groups run by sex workers themselves are numerous there as well.

India has SANGRAM, Thailand has EMPOWER, the Philippines have the Philippine Sex Worker Collective, Uganda has WONETHA, and South Africa has SWEAT. There are even continental groups like the African Sex Worker Alliance and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers. Many more can be found on NSWP’s (Global Network of Sex Work Projects) website, where details about each organization are catalogued by continent and region.

Those who would like to see sex work eliminated entirely often accuse the handful of visible, vocally pro-rights American or British sex workers of being a highly privileged, well-funded minority working for nefarious purposes on behalf of “pimps.” But organizations founded, run by, and/or inclusive of trans women and women of color — those least privileged and most vulnerable to abuse — are not hard to find here or abroad; they are online, and they use online spaces to release reports, start campaigns, and rally supporters.

Yet the amount of mainstream media they receive is next to nothing, and people who build careers on the conviction that sex workers are resourceless victims refuse to acknowledge the mere existence of activist collectives. It seems the harder sex workers work to make themselves heard, the more those in power insist women in the sex trade are “voiceless.”

One recent, laughable example of this was a Maryland county police department’s publicity stunt that saw officials boasting about an upcoming “live-tweeting” of a prostitution sting. Originally illustrated with a photo of a woman in handcuffs and claiming to “battle the world’s oldest

profession,” the press release that announced the sting garnered a great deal of public criticism.

In the face of the outcry, the police did what savvy figures had already learned to do from the start: mention “trafficking,” claim you’re only targeting the customers, and frame sex workers as victims.

“It’s a hidden crime,” said the department’s spokesperson, before the article quoting her went on to cite Backpage.com as a locus of sex work activity. The fact that a contingent of a very non-hidden current and former sex workers fomented most of the sting’s social opprobrium through their twitter accounts was apparently lost on the journalist covering the story.

Feminists have a phrase for this shameless denial of facts on behalf of a party with disproportionate authority: gaslighting. It’s a term to describe the willful abuse that occurs when someone insists on untruths that cause another person to become disoriented and uncertain of their own lived reality.

Anti-sex work feminists like this term when it comes to heterosexual partnerships or situations where a man wields some power over a woman, but they apparently do not see it at work in their own attempts to discredit sex workers asking for basic human rights as “not representative,” “too privileged,” and even “pimps.”

In doing so, they replicate the same dynamic they are so quick to criticize and project onto clients of sex workers — namely, that sex workers are products and not people, dumb material rather than responsive human agents.

Furthermore, access to the Internet is usually enough for anti-sex work feminists to dismiss a sex worker as unqualified to speak on the policies affecting him or her. Yet sex workers with Internet connections are increasingly those most frequently targeted in current day police stings. If these privileged, Internet-using workers are not the ones who need help in the form of police intervention — the favored form of “assistance” among antis — why do they remain a target?

These same critics of the “not representative” sex workers remain silent when women like Monica Jones speak out in favor of their rights and subsequently face harassment, arrest, and conviction. Jones is black and trans university student, a former sex worker whose jail sentence may cause her to lose financial aid; surely, she cannot be accused of being too privileged to deserve attention. (Though she does apparently have access to online spaces, Jones was accused of “manifesting intent to prostitute” while out in public.)

Sex workers and legitimate experts alike were further embittered by the aforementioned Urban Institute’s laughable conclusions, which accepted outrageous brags of arrested, grandstanding pimps as truth (one claimed to make over \$38,000 a week,) and uncritically announced that Atlanta, the United States’ fortieth most populous city and tenth wealthiest, has the largest sex economy.

For a study on sex work to include barely any feedback from sex workers, and for it be dubious on many counts yet accepted as uncontested fact, is nothing new. Desperate for any expert on

the subject except those most intimately involved, officials regularly promote sensational claims that exacerbate the stigma and confusion surrounding sex trafficking and sex work, and have no vested interest in doing otherwise. These elaborate attempts to discuss sexual labor by seeming close to a source, and therefore authoritative, without actually listening to or centering sex workers, is a form of oppression.

In another particularly cruel illustration of how claims from literally any participant in sex work economy other than a sex worker can receive public priority and attention, what started life as a crude Tumblr earlier this year became the subject of a prostitution-themed art exhibit at Glasgow's GoMA.

The Invisible Men Project is a website that pulls the most callous, violent, and disrespectful quotes from reviews of various sex workers written by men identifying themselves as clients. The site is run by a woman who maintains her anonymity.

Naturally, clients and sex workers who desire anonymity online are “hidden” and shady figures — hence the ominous “invisible” reference in the name, and the white masks that serve as backdrop for the text of the review — but the site founder's insistence on privacy is not regarded as dishonest or problematic. Nor does the “hidden” nature of the men writing the reviews call into question their veracity.

On the contrary, those outside the sex trade seem to think that anonymity on the Internet, in this context, ensures honesty. But as any sex worker can tell you, reviews are hardly the gospel truth. Reviewers, especially habitual reviewers, are notorious for inflating or outright inventing stories in order to seem more sexually skilled, impressive, and powerful. But again, anyone is given credence when they speak on prostitution, as long as the speaker is not a prostitute herself.

Coverage of the exhibition focused on its “shocking” nature and its “unique insight into the reality of prostitution and how horrendous it is for the women involved.” Why this insight could only be derived from the words of the allegedly abusive and misogynistic predators who hired sex workers, and not the sex workers themselves, remains unaddressed.

As Arundhati Roy says, “There is no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” Sex workers are “invisible” when it comes to establishing the truth about their work or creating informed laws. Yet somehow clients, law enforcement, and others who would do them harm have no trouble finding them to pay, arrest, extort, rob, beat, or rape. Maybe we can start asking why that's the case.

Charlotte Shane is a writer and prostitute. She has contributed to the *New Inquiry*, *Salon*, and *Bookforum*, and others.