

Sex Work Wars: Project ROSE, Monica Jones and the Fight for Human Rights

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Project ROSE

(Photo: T.Kiya; Edited: JR / TO) Monica Jones, an activist and student of social work at Arizona State University (ASU) in Phoenix, will be on trial March 14 for "manifesting prostitution." It's a charge made under a vague local statute that allows cops to arrest suspected sex workers for doing as little as repeatedly waving at cars, even if no money is exchanged for sex. Jones and other advocates say the law allows the police to profile and discriminately target poor people, queer people and people of color. Although she is risking missing her classes if she is found guilty and given jail time, Jones is determined to beat the charges in court.

"It's not just me fighting to prove that I'm innocent, it's me fighting against this outrageous law," Jones told Truthout.

"Who has more to lose? The state has more to lose than I do ... because this case sets a precedent."

Jones said that a white woman in the rich part of town does not have to worry about being stopped by the cops, but as an outspoken activist and a transwoman of color, she is a prime target for police surveillance and arrest. If cops decide they don't like her, she said, they target her for the way she looks. Since her arrest last year, Jones has been singled out for police harassment and has been approached or detained three times near her home or walking around town. Sex worker advocates compare the "manifesting prostitution" statute to Arizona's notorious "show me your papers law," which critics say invites the police to profile and target Latinos and anyone else who looks or sounds like they may be from another country.

"This law does not apply across the board," Jones said. "It applies to specific minorities and a specific area. If you look at this area, who's in this area? Poor people and people of color."

Protesting Project ROSE

Jones was arrested for "manifesting prostitution" in March 2013, shortly after speaking at a rally against Project ROSE (Reaching Out to the Sexually Exploited), a prostitution "rescue" program that is the result of a controversial collaboration between the School of Social Work at ASU and the Phoenix Police Department.

Operating two weekends out of the year since 2011, Project ROSE involves up to 125 police officers sweeping the streets and picking up people they suspect of "prostitution."



(Image by artist Micah Bazant)

Instead of booking the suspects in jail, the cops take them to a church, where ASU staff members and prosecutors check them in. While the suspects are referred to as "clients," many find themselves in handcuffs before they arrive. They are first interviewed by detectives before being matched with a volunteers, many of whom are former sex workers, who explain more about Project ROSE and their own "personal transitions out of prostitution," according to a fact sheet provided by Project ROSE. Prosecutors then review with the "client" a non-binding agreement with the prosecutor's office to participate in Project ROSE, which includes a 36-week diversion program through Catholic Charities that encourages them to quit sex work. If the "client" agrees, they are given a caseworker and offered medical, mental health and other services.

If the suspected sex workers choose to participate in the project and complete the time-consuming diversion programs, their charges are dropped. If they are ineligible, refuse to participate or fail to complete the program, those swept up in the stings and raids can expect to be summoned to court, where they face prison time under Arizona's harsh mandatory minimum sentencing requirements.

Jones is just one of the 366 people who have been arrested or detained by police during the Project ROSE stings. The Phoenix Police Department has told reporters in the past that those apprehended in the sweeps are not technically under arrest, but reporters and observers have documented woman entering the Project ROSE headquarters in handcuffs. Lt. Jim Gallagher, the head vice cop behind the Project ROSE collaboration, told Truthout that he was not available to comment on program.

"Project ROSE is quite a slippery entity. There's lack of clarity of what it actually does, said Penelope Saunders, a harm reduction service provider and advocate with the Best Practices Policy Project. "The program claims that it's not arresting people, but in fact, people are arrested. So it's very confusing."

After her arrest, Jones was taken to Project ROSE, where she asserted her innocence and asked to see a defense attorney, but she was told that the only lawyer she could talk to was a prosecutor. Like others taken by police to Project ROSE, Jones was ineligible for the program because she already had participated in the same Catholic diversion program, where she was asked to leave after voicing her personal views on sex work.

"I took the diversion program, and it was like the worst experience ever," Jones said last year. "It was humiliating. They treat you as like just a thing. Like [because] you're a prostitute, this is what's wrong with you. This is what you need to be doing. And like for me, I'm proud to be a sex worker. I'm not on drugs. I'm not like one of these crazy people. I just needed to make money for school."

After falling under heavy criticism, Project ROSE has since loosened its eligibility

requirements to include people who already have attempted the diversion program or have a prior record of arrest.

Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, a professor of social work at ASU and founder of Project ROSE, sent a fact sheet to Truthout that states that program "operates on the premise" that prostitution is against the law and seeks to provide services to those involved as well as a way to exit "prostitution and sex trafficking situations."

"Project ROSE is intended to address the tension between criminalizing someone's victimization through an arrest for a prostitution-related offense and the responsibility of local government to enforce applicable laws in a fair and impartial manner," the fact sheet states. "All partners involved in Project ROSE provide a service, the root of which is harm reduction to their service population."

Roe-Sepowitz did not respond to follow-up questions on the program's success rate. Roe-Sepowitz has said in the past that about 35 percent of participants eventually lead "healthy productive lives," but she also has told researchers that the success rate of the program has ranged between 24 percent and 32 percent, although it is unclear if there is any data to back up these claims.

Activists with the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), a local advocacy group organized for and by current and former sex workers, believe that the police and Project ROSE are preparing for another round of stings, but Roe-Sepowitz would not say if the project would be in operation in the coming weeks.

Jones said that, before protesting Project ROSE and then being charged with "manifesting prostitution," she had a conversation with Roe-Sepowitz. Jones explained her concerns about the diversion program and the low rate of success affiliated with forced rehabilitation programs.

"We agreed to disagree, and [I said] we are going to be protesting and I'll see you there," Jones said.

Jones and other members of SWOP, continue to protest Project ROSE and are now finding international support. On March 10, human rights activists submitted testimony on behalf of SWOP and BPPP to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which is reviewing how the United States has fared in meeting its international human rights obligations. The submission argues that the Project ROSE sweeps, along with Arizona's tough prostitution laws and notoriously harsh jails and prisons, have violated the rights of sex workers and others who are profiled by the police.

Should Social Workers Work with Cops?

Project ROSE and other "rescue" programs like it have become a flashpoint of debate among social workers concerned with prostitution. Two pictures of the modern sex worker quickly emerge from the debate: the working adult who sells consensual sex or other

sex-related activities under mutual agreements with other adults, and the battered victim who is forced into prostitution by drug addiction or pimps and human traffickers.

Both narratives play out in the real world and may not be so black and white for everyone involved in the sex trade, but law enforcement agencies across the country increasingly have been drawn to placing sex workers in the latter category. While police traditionally have arrested sex workers and booked them like any other criminal suspects, some urban police forces are testing anti-prostitution programs in which suspects are taken into custody and given a chance to be "transformed" and "correct their life course," according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Meanwhile, the cops collect evidence by asking the women they have detained or arrested to detail information on their pimps or traffickers. Much of the information provided to volunteers and prosecutors by Project ROSE clients, for example, ends up on file at the prosecutor's office.

"So if you drop out of Project ROSE, the prosecutor's office already has all of this extraneous material about you, that you thought you were giving to a social worker," Saunders said.

Saunders and other critics see an inherent danger in conducting massive police raids on sex workers based on the premise that sex work is always the result of coercion or flat out human trafficking, which involves controlling a person through force, fraud, deception or coercion to exploit them for sex or labor. People who are coerced and trafficked into selling sex, they argue, should not then be forced to choose between accepting diversion services and facing charges. Sex workers who are involved in the trade by choice need resources to stay safe on the job, not to be saved from "the life" by evangelical social workers or to end up in the criminal justice system.

"Prostitution and sex work are not the same as human trafficking," Saunders said. "Once you mix the two and say they are the same, countless studies have shown that this leads to human rights abuses, both of sex workers and of the trafficked."

Saunders said that the use of heavy policing to reach people in need of services often does more harm than good.

"The relationships between the police and communities in need are often very tense, not always, but often very tense," Saunders said. "The very idea that you would get people to services by having the police pick them up and drive them, that's not a harm reduction."

The drawbacks of using police sweeps to deliver people to social services are especially relevant in Arizona, where the length of mandatory jail sentences start at 15 days and increase each time a sex worker is convicted. A fourth charge is an automatic felony. While Project ROSE does provide an alternative to criminal prosecution, those who are ineligible or fail to complete the prescribed diversion program end up in court. Critics of Roe-Sepowitz and Project ROSE say that using police to round up clients for social work services violates the ethical standards of several social work organizations, including the National Association of Social Workers.

In a scathing academic critique of Project ROSE, Stephanie Wahab and Meg Panichelli of the social work school at Portland State University wrote that, whether social workers see every sex worker as a victim of trafficking or recognize that there is no universal sex work experience, social workers and their academics should not "be in the business of arresting people for their own good."

"If we believe that arresting people in order to coerce them into 'treatment' and services is our only option for engagement, then we need to critically examine our relationships with sex workers and sex worker groups," Wahab and Panichelli wrote in *Affilia*, a feminist social work journal.

Molly Crabapple at Vice News recently pointed out that Roe-Sepowitz has not made many public comments about Project ROSE since November 2013, when she gave this quote to Al Jazeera: "Once you've prostituted you can never not have prostituted. ... Having that many body parts in your body parts, having that many body fluids near you and doing things that are freaky and weird really messes up your ideas of what a relationship looks like, and intimacy."

Roe-Sepowitz did make a recent splash in the media during the Super Bowl, when she teamed up with Cindy McCain, wife of Republican Sen. John McCain, to release a report linking sex trafficking to America's most popular sporting event, which will be held in Phoenix next year. Researchers scoured online sex and escort ads in New York, New Jersey and Phoenix. Although the sheer number of ads "exceeded researcher expectations," the study failed to find a causal relationship between the Super Bowl and sex trafficking. Still, the study contributed to a flurry of media attention linking the Super Bowl to an uptick in trafficking and prostitution, and law enforcement in both states staged aggressive sweeps and crackdowns targeting sex workers and traffickers.

Investigators did discover 16 teenage sex trafficking victims during the Super Bowl and a large sex trafficking ring was busted, but plenty of adults in New York and New Jersey were swept up by police during the crackdown and ended up in custody. The media sensationalism - and the heavy-handed police tactics that came with it - quickly drew ire from advocates.

"These arrests are not indications of an increase in prostitution activity, but rather of an increase in policing," wrote Kate Mogulescu, founder and supervising attorney of the Trafficking Victims Advocacy Project at the Legal Aid Society, in an editorial in *The New York Times*. "This has left the criminal courts scrambling to handle the additional cases, adding a significant strain to an already overburdened criminal justice system. Those arrested face jail, potential deportation, warrants for failure to appear and lifelong criminal records."

Mogulescu wrote that many, but not all, of her clients are trafficked and have experienced abuse, violence and trauma that can be further exacerbated by ending up in the criminal justice system.

"If we continue to perpetuate fallacies like the Super Bowl sex-trafficking phenomenon, we will continue to perpetuate the harm caused by prostitution arrests in the name of helping victims," Mogulescu concluded.

Saunders agreed. Taking hundreds of prostitutes to jail as part of an anti-trafficking initiative, she said, does little to help trafficking victims or sex workers. She worries that the kinds of research touted by McCain and Roe-Sepowitz will be used to justify intense police crackdowns as Phoenix is preparing to hold the Super Bowl next year.

"People who really need a place to stay and really need drug treatment that works and people who really need education ... they are not getting it because the money and energy goes into these really harsh approaches that fill the jails and prisons, and Arizona is a place that is full of jails and prisons," Saunders said.

Fighting to Eliminate Harm

As an activist and a social work student who fights for the health and rights of transgender people and sex workers, Jones said that instead of forcing clients to come to her, she goes to them.

"[It's] going out to where your client is and going and talking to them and saying, if you ever need to get out of this, I'm here. If you need condoms, clean needles, health care, I'm here," Jones said.

"I mostly help the individual on the individual level," Jones added. "I am more of an advocate for human rights; that's the reason I got into social work."

When Jones isn't distributing condoms and speaking out for LGBT rights and the rights of sex workers and people of color, she does what most people do her at age.

"I'm just a normal transwoman. I'm a woman of color. I go out ... dates, school. That's what I do," she said. "I do normal stuff."

Jones said school is taking up most of her time. She said she's excited to be fighting Phoenix's "manifesting prostitution" law in court but worries that she might miss her classes. If she is found guilty, she could face 30 days in jail.

"I'm just kind of worried with school," Jones said. "That's my biggest concern. If I have to go to jail, and God forbid I get found guilty under this stupid law, and I have to go to jail and miss school, how will I get caught up?"

Still, Jones remains optimistic. She said she is in a unique position to understand how the law can be used to unfairly target people. She said her arrest has raised a lot of questions.

"Is this law sexist? Who is being picked up by this? Is it mostly females and trans individuals? Who is being harmed by this law?" Jones said. "I am going to eliminate the harm that is caused by this law."

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