

# Punished for Strength: Sex Worker Activism and the Anti-Trafficking Movement

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## **Abstract**

This article is a reflection on my work as a sex worker and activist amid the global concern over human trafficking. I highlight the challenges that sex workers can experience as we attempt to position ourselves within discursive frameworks that define us by our injuries. I contend that the focus on injuries risks obscuring the varied experiences of performing sexual labour, the contributions to knowledge made by sex working people, and the solidarity within sex working communities.

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## **Résumé**

Cet article est une réflexion sur mon travail comme travailleuse du sexe et militante au sein de la préoccupation internationale au sujet de la traite des personnes. Je souligne les défis que peuvent rencontrer les travailleuses du sexe lorsqu'elles tentent de se positionner au sein de cadres discursifs qui les définissent par les préjudices qu'elles subissent. Je soutiens que l'accent mis sur les préjudices risque d'obscurcir la variété des expériences du travail sexuel, les contributions aux connaissances faites par les travailleuses du sexe et la solidarité au sein des communautés du travail du sexe.

For nearly 20 years, I have worked in most of the sex industry sectors that are commonly associated with human trafficking in Canada, including at escort agencies, in exotic dance clubs, and in massage parlours. While human trafficking can take place for work in many occupations, anti-trafficking activists' concerns, historically and presently, focus on the trafficking of women for sex work or "sex trafficking" (see Doezema 1999, 2010). My aim in this article is to reflect on my experiences, as a white sex worker with citizenship status in Canada, confronting anti-human trafficking activism. I also wish to raise concerns about the consequences of the ways in which some varieties of feminism have engaged with this issue as a site for theorization and praxis, particularly their attachment to the injured body of the sex worker. I write from my position as a sex worker because I have access to knowledge and experience that many writing about prostitution and human trafficking do not have; I am positioned as a prostitute and am part of a community and occupation that is both deeply stigmatized and symbolically mapped outside of normative life. While sex workers are subjects of intense interest and concern within discussions on human trafficking, we are largely outsiders in these conversations. My interest here is to draw attention to an area that I believe has been overlooked by anti-trafficking advocates; that is, how sex workers' encounters with anti-human trafficking activism affect our subjectivity, social relations, and community-articulated knowledge about sex work.

Before going further, I would like to spend a moment explaining the concepts to which I refer below. When I speak of anti-human trafficking activism, I am referring specifically to research and activism that encourages the close linking or conflation of prostitution and human trafficking (i.e. sex trafficking) and that advances a prohibitionist stance on sex work, including "end-demand" approaches. The anti-trafficking movement has readily adopted many of these understandings (Koyama 2011, 3), which are exemplified in

the work of prominent activists and academics (see Hughes 2000; Poulin 2003; Ekberg 2004; Farley 2006). I also suggest that there has been a significant degree of institutionalization of the objectives supported by many mainstream anti-human trafficking organizations. Key political actors who have focused on human trafficking in Canada, including former Conservative Member of Parliament Joy Smith and law professor and former Special Advisor to the Office of the Prime Minister Benjamin Perrin, have advocated strongly for the creation of anti-human trafficking laws and the further criminalization of sex work as central strategies to protect women from human trafficking. In a recent report on prostitution and human trafficking, Joy Smith stated that “Canada should make the elimination of prostitution the goal of future legislation around prostitution” and proposed the so-called Swedish model of criminalizing the purchase of sexual services as a preferred option (Smith 2014, 10). Likewise, in a paper published by the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, Benjamin Perrin advocated for the abolition of prostitution as a policy objective and explained that “the most compelling model that can serve as a starting point is the approach taken by Sweden” (Perrin 2014, 15). The Canadian government’s new legislative approach to sex work, as outlined in *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (PCEPA) that came into force in December 2014, indicates its responsiveness to such articulations and to the framing of sex work as inherently violent. Insofar as much anti-trafficking activism links the criminalization of human trafficking to its prevention, the goals of anti-human trafficking activism also align comfortably with the Conservative federal government’s emphasis on the criminalization of irregular migration, including undocumented migration, human smuggling, and human trafficking (De Shalit, Heynen, and van der Meulen 2014).

“Sexual slavery” has been an integral concept in feminist theorizations of trafficking for sex work, and trafficking has been “taken to epitomize the very worst of patriarchal oppression” (Kempadoo 2005). Victorian feminists used discourses of slavery to direct the debate over prostitution to one that focused on women’s harm and victimization (Irwin 1996, n.p.) and these ideas connect to later radical feminist demands to abolish prostitution (Walkowitz 1980, 123). Kathleen Barry (1984), an American anti-prostitution activist and co-founder

of the anti-trafficking non-governmental organization Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), identified prostitution and trafficking in women as forms of female sexual slavery, which supplanted earlier understandings developed by transnational feminists who saw trafficking as a broader political economic issue (Kempadoo 2005; Suchland 2015). In contrast, Jo Doezema (2001) explains that the injured body of the trafficked woman has been a central figure in anti-human trafficking campaigns historically. Part of what concerns me about anti-human trafficking activism is that there is an interest in representing the “truths” about sex work, yet the narratives that sex workers are permitted and encouraged to speak are ones that validate and prove true the injured body of the prostitute. Sex worker and activist Emi Koyama (2011) writes that she is “deeply troubled by the cherry-picking of survivor stories and experiences that support the anti-trafficking trope equating all prostitution with trafficking and all trafficking with slavery, while other voices are dismissed as ‘exceptions’” (2).

Jo Doezema (2001) employs Wendy Brown’s (1995) concept of “injured identities” to explore anti-trafficking organizations’ discursive positioning of and attachment to the “victim.” As Doezema explains, viewed historically, feminism’s investment in the suffering body of the prostitute has been a strategy to demand women’s inclusion in the goods of liberal society, equality, and justice (20). Mid-Victorian feminists, such as Josephine Butler, understood prostitution to be the result of “constraints placed on women’s social and economic participation” (Walkowitz 1980, 125). There is an assumption here, however, that the state has the will or ability to “grant” sex workers, as women, this inclusion, an assumption that ought to be questioned in light of state criminalization of prostitution and attendant violence against sex workers. This perspective has other problems as well. Doezema draws on Brown’s concerns and maintains that an identity based on injury cannot let go of that injury without ceasing to exist (20). This insight suggests that narratives centering on the victimized sex worker cannot include sex workers who speak from positions of strength; this kind of sex worker is not intelligible in this framing and must be excluded in order for the theory to remain cogent.

## Fixed in Discourse: Resisting the Position of the Subject

It may be because the figure of the prostitute is constructed in such polarized terms in feminist theory that, in my everyday life, I experience a hyper-awareness of the discursive frameworks through which my experiences are positioned and rendered meaningful. As a writer and activist, I am often researching prostitution or speaking about human trafficking and the regulation of sex work. As I participate in these activities, I engage in a process of seeing myself and my life experiences through dominant discursive frameworks on prostitution, ideas about feminine respectability, the nature of sexual harm, as well as criminality; when I am speaking I am also keenly aware that my audience is participating in these same processes and deciding whether what I am telling them is legitimate or “true.” Narratives describing sex trafficking, sexual slavery, and sex work as sexual exploitation act as constitutive factors in how others perceive me as well as how I understand myself as a sex worker. The dominant narrative of human trafficking, which links prostitution with victimization (see Leidholdt 1999), is one that I experience as a powerful force which has the ability to define my experiences in a way that it did not when I first started in the sex industry as a youth. At the time, “human trafficking” did not exist as a concept to me; I did not think of my life in relation to ideas of trafficking or in relation to prostitution as violence. I had to be taught this way of theorizing my experiences, a process that produced profound levels of shame. Indeed, theorizing prostitution as fundamentally violent functions pedagogically by teaching sex workers to frame our experiences in a particular way. Today, discourses linking sex work and human trafficking with abjection—violence and psychological destruction of the sex worker—are ubiquitous in the field in which I have chosen to study: feminist studies. It takes effort to mitigate the effects of this linkage between sex work and symbolic death on my sense of self. I embrace discourses that support me in my desire to live with pride, rather than those that would define my experiences in terms of victimization. I also consider the effect on other sex workers who encounter these discourses, particularly sex workers who are racialized, Indigenous, or migrant (see Andrijasevic 2010). What sorts of theorizations about our lives, as sex workers, are possible within these frameworks?

The symbolic mapping of the sex sector as a location of violence and disorder outside of normative life not only shapes the creation of the sex worker subject in theory, but also in material practice. Anti-human trafficking narratives influence policing practices and policy responses to sex work that can negatively affect our lives. Anti-human trafficking enforcement measures, such as raids or “police visits” to sex workers that took place across Canada in early 2014 (Galloway 2014), are rooted in dominant understandings of human trafficking as problems of nefarious managers or other criminals (generally believed to be men<sup>1</sup>), rather than state practices that give form to women’s mobility and access to labour markets. Working-class women seeking jobs outside of their home countries have few options but informal migration channels and work in “underground” labour sectors, such as sex and domestic work. Concerns about criminal involvement in human trafficking should not proceed without consideration of state regulations that create highly exploitable groups of workers.

In addition to the many things I must consider related to my safety and security as a sex worker, sex trafficking narratives demand that I relate to my work as a proto-crime, something that is linked to crime by its very existence. When I arrange dates with clients, I wonder if they are actually police, if I will be surprised by the presence of officers when I arrive in the hotel room; I consider that my email communications are of interest to law enforcement, that they could be used to incriminate my clients, and that condoms or lingerie in my suitcase might be used to identify me as a prostitute when I travel. To be framed as a victim in these ways would humiliate me by exposing me to state scrutiny and forcing me into a position where I would have to perform the role of the rational subject (a position often denied to women and always to prostitutes) or risk further intrusion into my life. If I was to encounter law enforcement while doing sex work, it would be incumbent on me to demonstrate that I am not “out of control” of my life, that I am not being coerced, and that my intimate partner is not an “exploiter” to avoid further contact with the criminal justice or social services systems.

In the aftermath of Operation Northern Spotlight, a two-day “blitz” in January 2014 during which 330 sex workers across the country were contacted and interviewed by police (Galloway 2014), I and other sex

workers that I am in contact with have been more cautious about accepting new clients, are working less in order to avoid policing, and are experiencing heightened levels of anxiety about our work (see POWER 2014). When the enactment of PCEPA became imminent, I reduced my sex work activities and became increasingly dependent on my male partner, a compromise based in fears that sex work under a new legal regime would bring me into contact with the law. Such circumstances place additional burdens on sex workers by compromising our economic well-being, our ability to maintain financial independence, as well as our sense of legal security. Speaking openly as a sex worker, I expressed my concerns about such pre-emptive policing measures to a representative from an anti-human trafficking NGO during a consultation about municipal support services for victims of human trafficking. I was told that the suffering of numerous sex workers as a result of police “visits” was justified if just one victim could be saved. This advocate’s response suggests something about the value assigned to the suffering prostitute body in anti-trafficking discourses vis-à-vis my own, a body that resists inscription as a victim and instead demands rights for sex workers as workers. While I believe that there are many shared concerns across theoretical orientations about working conditions in the sex sector, including forced labour, it is comments like these that cause me and other sex workers to feel hurt and angry during our encounters with anti-trafficking organizations and activists. The narratives they employ and interventions they endorse, such as raids and criminalization of clients, contribute to increased stigmatization and poorer working conditions for all of us.

### **Tell Me Your Story, Show Me Your Tears**

There needs to be recognition that sex trafficking narratives have the ability both to define truths about prostitution and sex work and to determine who the most appropriate custodians of knowledge about prostitution are. Understandings from radical feminism that equate prostitution with sexual violence often form the basis of anti-trafficking activism (see Leidholdt 1999). In such theories, Doezema (2001) explains that “prostitutes’ ‘true’ stories of pain and injury serve both to demonstrate the rightness of...theory and are claimed as the empirical basis for...theory” (27). When the victimized body of the sex worker comes to represent the

truth about prostitution, the more common and mundane experiences of labour exploitation articulated by sex workers become seen as inaccurate or irrelevant. Chris Bruckert and Colette Parent’s (2004) research suggests that the “sex slave” discourse actually makes it more difficult for women migrants in the sex sector in Canada to access protection as victims of trafficking because their circumstances of labour exploitation do not reflect what is commonly associated with “sexual slavery.” The realities of sex workers’ experiences of labour exploitation often do not line up with the more exceptional situation of work in “slavery-like” conditions. When the victimized prostitute becomes equated with the truth of prostitution, the sex worker who does not speak of victimization may be seen as a fraud. The sex worker who says that she wants to continue working, albeit in better conditions, may be viewed with skepticism, which can result in a situation where sex workers’ knowledge of the varied and diverse experiences of performing sexual labour can easily become suppressed or erased. This occurs as experiences of sex work are framed in ways that are unable to account for the variety of meanings sex workers hold about their work and the wide range of experience sex workers have. The outcome of this tendency can be seen when those who are not current sex workers or have no sex work experience are installed as the proper custodians of knowledge about trafficking and prostitution (for example, Joy Smith and Benjamin Perrin), while current sex workers face barriers having our perspectives included in policy reports and consultations.

Elena Jeffreys (2011), a member of the Australian sex worker organization Scarlett Alliance, touched on number of these concerns in her personal reflection on feminists’ engagement with sex workers. She coined the term “tragedy porn” to refer to “a desire in the feminist movement to hear tragic stories of hardship from sex workers.” If we do not offer these “tragic” narratives, there is suspicion that we are being dishonest or that we are “covering up the ‘truth’ about sex work” (n.p.). This dynamic can be hurtful and, ironically, exploitative of sex workers’ experiences. It also leads to the discrediting of sex workers who speak from positions of strength as “happy hookers” who do not understand sex workers’ realities. Jeffreys is correct when she says that sex workers should not have to perform grief in order to have access to basic human rights and that we are punished

for our strength and rewarded for our pain. Consider Somaly Mam, a prominent anti-trafficking activist who fabricated a history of sexual slavery in order to bolster and provide credibility to her activism (Pollitt 2014). Recently exposed as lying about her trafficked past, Mam was named as one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in 2009 and received support from notable celebrities like Oprah Winfrey (Archive 2013). While Mam's story is exceptional, it would be highly unlikely for a current sex worker voicing concerns about poor working conditions in brothels, coercive HIV testing, or lack of access to health care to be valorized or applauded in any such way.

### **The Pro's Know Best: Sex Worker Communities and Knowledge Production**

Sex workers and sex worker-led organizations have been providing critiques about the many problems experienced by sex workers, such as police violence, poor working conditions, criminalization, and forced labour, for over twenty years and from locations across the world (Kempadoo 1998; Thorbek and Patta-naik 2002; van der Meulen, Durisin, and Love 2013). The focus on the victimized sex worker as the symbol of truth about prostitution obfuscates the knowledge and contributions of sex workers and the important relationship between experience, community, and knowledge production. Sex workers have access to and collectively create community-articulated understandings about sex work. This is not to suggest that every current or former sex worker has the same experience or has theorized their lives in the same way, but that there are shared understandings that collectively develop within sex working communities that explain the realities of our lives in ways that allow us to make sense of our lived experiences. The insight into my own experiences that has been the most powerful has arisen only through my relationships with other sex workers. Research and theoretical work based in community-articulated understandings must be prioritized over other forms of knowledge. To not acknowledge the contributions that sex workers have made to analyses of sex work, prostitution, or trafficking erases our existence as knowledge producers and fixes us in place as targets of others' sympathies and interventions.

One of the most painful things for me as a researcher and sex worker is to see that many organiza-

tions involved in anti-human trafficking activism, such as CATW and Equality Now, seem to be unaware that sex workers have community, collective, and theoretical perspectives that explain our realities. Sex worker-led organizations are critical to articulating and communicating these understandings (Jenness 1993; Gall 2012; Chateauvert 2013). While individual sex workers, former or current, may disagree on policy approaches based on their experiences and circumstances, many sex worker-led organizations globally share consensus on key issues, including the right to health, to associate and organize, to be protected by the law, to be free from violence, and to have freedom of movement (NSWP 2013). The symbolic mapping of the sex sector as an abject space and as a repository of violence and disorder only allows for certain possibilities of understanding. This discursive framing does not permit us to be knowledge producers; it also precludes our friendships, culture, ambitions, and happiness. Yet, I have found so much of this through the social relationships I have developed as a sex worker.

Being a sex worker touches nearly every aspect of my life. It has been an avenue to making friends, finding community and collaborators, and making a living. I am reminded of something a colleague of mine often mentions when she talks to people about sex work. She says that sex workers create community with each other because we cannot find it in other places due to judgment, stigma, and discrimination. It is not people in the sex sector who deny us services, discriminate against us, incarcerate us, query us with inappropriate personal questions, or desire to know the details of our personal difficulties. We are a part of a community of sex workers where it is possible to access support that many of us cannot find elsewhere. This is not to say that relationships with others in the sex sector are always positive, without conflict, or uniformly helpful—they are not—but solidarity exists among sex workers where many positive things can develop. Sex worker-led organizations are critical to giving form to and encouraging this social solidarity here and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Through social relationships, we create understandings that support and empower us, rather than shame us. It is this community and solidarity that produces positive changes for sex workers, not laws that prohibit sex work or programs that deter or exit people from the activity.

## Two Steps Forward, Three Steps Back

I am concerned that the reluctance of anti-trafficking organizations to listen to sex workers who speak from positions of strength and community-articulated understandings about sex work result in support for policies that create further oppressions for people doing sex work. I speak, in particular, about the move in many countries, including Canada, to criminalize clients, thereby inviting law enforcement into our lives and workplaces. Most sex workers experience policing as a source of fear, violence, and poorer working conditions, rather than a mechanism of protection, rescue, or liberation (Bruckert and Chabot 2010; POWER 2014). In a 2010 research report, sex workers in the Ottawa area identified police as one of their main concerns. One street-based sex worker commented that she did not “feel safe because I am scared of getting hurt or harassed by the cops” (Bruckert and Chabot 2010, 46). This warning is particularly urgent given the recent legislative changes in Canada, which have criminalized the purchase of sexual services. When I consider my own experiences as a youth sex worker in the 1990s, I am concerned that things might be worse for me today than they would have been then, before human trafficking became the central concern through which opposition to prostitution was expressed. In today’s context, I would be defined by legislation as a victim of trafficking even though my problems as a youth were the lack of opportunity to earn an income and a lack of knowledge and confidence to assert my boundaries. In reflection, the language of “victimization” and “exploitation” seems simplistic and inaccurate; my experiences as a youth engaged in sex work were far more complicated than these terms allow. Further, my experience does not reflect the narratives articulated by anti-trafficking activists nor does it find explanation in anti-sex work theorizing. Does that mean that my experiences as a youth were exceptional, that I was somehow more “empowered” than others in my situation, that my knowledge should be discounted? Or is it that the limited scope of the anti-trafficking paradigm is not capable of providing an explanation?

I also do not feel that criminalizing and prosecuting the man I worked for as a youth under trafficking or procuring legislation would have created a meaningful improvement in my life at the time. Criminalizing those purchasing my services would have certainly lim-

ited my income and added to the precarious situation in which I found myself. Contact with the criminal justice system would have certainly launched me into a difficult trajectory of conflict with the law that may have shaped my life for years to come. Neither of these approaches would have substantively addressed my circumstances of economic insecurity and lack of opportunity. This does not unilaterally negate a role for criminal law, but there must be more discussion about whether the law is the most appropriate tool for addressing complicated situations related to sex work that are deeply tied to broader questions of distribution of wealth and opportunity and where there are neither perfect victims, perfect villains, nor sufficiently injured bodies.

What would it mean for anti-trafficking activism to let go of the injured body of the sex worker? It would mean supporting current sex workers who are trying to improve labour conditions in the sex sector, rather than showcasing selective survivor stories as the exemplar in the struggle against forced labour. It would mean taking away the burden imposed on sex workers as we struggle to mitigate the linking of sex work and symbolic death in our daily lives. It would facilitate the emergence of a full range of sex workers’ subjectivities and embodied experiences and would lead to novel theorizations about sex work, migration, and forced labour. It would reduce the pain and anger many sex workers feel when we step forward to speak from heavily stigmatized positions only to be discredited by those we hope will be our allies. It would acknowledge the existence of sex worker communities and our importance to knowledge production. It would involve no longer struggling over who “owns” knowledge about prostitution. And it would involve both the meaningful inclusion of sex workers in policy discussions and the recognition that positive changes for sex workers will develop from within the community and not from without.

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## Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my gratitude to Monica Forrester, sex worker activist in Toronto, Ontario, and Joni Aikens, activist in Kingston, Ontario, for generously sharing their thoughts and insights with me.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In Bruckert and Law's (2013) study, 38 of the 50 third-party managers interviewed were female, 10 were male, and 2 were transsexual women. Out of the 50, 29 worked as sex workers while also working as third parties and 13 were former sex workers. Interestingly, 5 of the 10 male managers also had experience as sex workers.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Stella, Maggie's, SPOC, and POWER, among others, in Canada; HIPS, HOOK, SWOP, and more in the United States; APROASE in Mexico; Star-Star in Macedonia; Tais Plus in Kyrgyzstan; Silver Rose in Russia; Rose Alliance in Sweden; ASWA in South Africa; SWING and Empower Foundation in Thailand; VAMP and Durbar in India; WNU in Cambodia; and many, many more.

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