

# SWAC FIGHTING!



SEX WORK AUTONOMOUS COMMITTEE

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# Montreal, whoreganize !

Like many others, the pandemic has largely isolated many of us, sex workers (SWrs). Agencies, strip clubs and massage parlours have been mostly closed since the first lockdown; there is no physical place left that resembles a workplace. Many of us have tried our best to offer our services virtually, be it for a few minutes every now and then when our clients can take a break from everyday life. The Onlyfans platform has seen a dramatic increase in subscribers from 7.9 million in 2019 to 85 million a year later<sup>1</sup>. Many SWrs have been transitioning to other areas of work, taking advantage of the new opportunity to do accelerated beneficiary attendant training or signing up to help out in the health and social services system. After a break period (or not), many have started seeing clients again while doing their best to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission, because they had no other alternatives. Others have made exclusive arrangements with clients, but these have often ended badly; boundaries become blurred, clients start mistaking us for girlfriends, try to push our limits, take over our time, start renegotiating condom use and so on.



1. Axel Tardieu. (2020). Elles posent nues sur Internet pour payer leurs études, ICI Alberta, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1762202/etudiants-onlyfans-internet-pornographie-chomage>

As if it wasn't enough to risk one's health for a livelihood, the attacks have come from all sides; moral panic over pornography has intensified in the United States<sup>2</sup>, making it harder to advertise services online and collect payments over the Internet. Many of us have not had access to the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. In addition, the Quebec government has extended the curfew introduced on January 9, making repression ever more present in our lives, especially for those working in public spaces. Furthermore, no governmental public health policy has taken an interest in our safety and health during the pandemic, since we are not recognized as workers. One thing is certain, we are still working, but in even more precarious conditions than before and increasingly alone. In other words, the collective power acquired through organizing is being undermined, at this very moment when we need it most. Despite the presence of online communities, we have no place to gather in-person, discuss our working conditions and the ways of improving them.

4 The Sex Work Autonomous Committee (SWAC) is an autonomous political organizing project initiated by SWrs based in Montreal in the fall of 2019, just a few months before COVID-19 pandemic forced us into confinement. Obviously, everything has been turned upside down since then. During the first lockdown in March 2020, we thought we could wait it out, as it seemed impossible for us to mobilize in the short term. Now we see that we have no choice and that we're going to have to be creative. After several Zoom meetings and an in-person workshop in a corner of a park, when it was still possible, we decided to write this text to lay the foundations for our organizing, and to outline what an autonomous SWr movement would look like.

2. SESTA (*Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act*) and FOSTA (*Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act*) are two bills passed in the United States in February and March 2018, supposedly aimed at combating sex trafficking. Under these two laws, web platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Craigslist, Backpage can now be charged with sex trafficking for published content. Thus, overnight, hundreds of SWrs have seen their income and security threatened by the closure of web spaces. Several SWrs also denounce that platforms like paypal or even their bank close their accounts without warning when they discover their activities: Jesse and PJ Sage. (2020). Episode 78: Porn Performers Talk Pornhub and Payment Processing, <https://bit.ly/386D0cy>  
In December 2020, following a sensationalist article in the New York Times exposing the presence of underage videos and non-consensual acts on Pornhub, Visa and Mastercard stopped supporting payments on this platform. Several SWrs have denounced the fact that this measure will not affect the adult entertainment giant, basing its revenues exclusively on advertising, but will directly affect the revenues of those who sell their content on this platform. The links between the anti-Pornhub campaign and the American religious right wing have also been strongly denounced by journalist and ex-SWr, Mélissa Gira Grant. For more information: Melissa Gira Grant. (2020). Nick Kristoff and the Holy War on Pornhub, <https://bit.ly/3ba6w2V>

## ***Autonomous from who and why?***

Since our first calls to organize, one question has come up over and over again: “*Why create a new organization when there are already community organizations to defend our rights? Aren’t they the best ones to speak for us with many years of experience?*”. Let us first establish that the creation of autonomous committees is in no way intended to replace or eliminate any organization or to criticize particular individuals. However, we believe that discussions about the organizational models and structures that are in place in a movement can only be beneficial to the struggle. By creating an autonomous committee, we want to create a space where mobilizations and collective actions are priorities; we believe that we and our colleagues have much to gain by organizing politically.

Since their inception in the 1990s, Canadian SWr organizations, like many others, have always tried to find a balance between providing services and collective action for political change, both at a legislative and public health level. Discussions on the tension between service provision and collective action have been a recurring theme in our conversations at SWAC over the past year. Time and energy being limited resources, we believe that asking this question early in the formation of a political group is essential. “*This debate was already present at the founding of the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP) in 1983*” says Danny Cockerline, a gay activist, sex worker and founding member of CORP:

*In its early days, the CORP devoted all its energy to lobbying politicians, governments, the media, police forces, etc. in order to obtain their support for the decriminalization of prostitution. In 1985, Peggie and Chris formed a group to start a self-help project. The idea was that the CORP would only succeed if more prostitutes became involved, and only when their basic needs were met would they be able to devote time to political work.<sup>3</sup>*

This new project was called Maggie’s and is still active today in Toronto. However, the idea of creating new services divided those involved at the CORP, according to Cockerline, since “*many feared that they would end up with another social service that prostitutes would turn*

**3.** Since we couldn’t find the original version, this quote is translated from the french version of this text in Danny Cockerline, «Whores History: A Decade of Prostitutes Fighting for their Rights in Toronto», Maggie’s Zine, n 1, winter 1993-1994, Toronto, Maggie’s: The Toronto Prostitutes’ Community Service Project, p. 22-23. Translated from english by Sylvie Dupont, in *Luttes XXX, Inspirations du mouvement des travailleuses du sexe*, 2011, Les Éditions du remue-ménage.

to for help rather than join us in creating an advocacy movement”<sup>4</sup>. Since then, the CORP has ceased its activities and Maggie’s continues to offer services. However, the initial idea of being a training ground for SWrs to mobilize is less and less present in SWr organizations. Sarah Beer, a researcher on SWr rights in Canada, is critical of this model:

*Funding formalizes organizational structures but tends to bureaucratize mobilization. The outreach services [recrutement practices of these organizations] that are provided can be restricted based on funding criteria (e.g., funding might give money only to do street-based, not indoor, outreach). [...] As a consequence, sex workers need to organize on multiple fronts.*<sup>5</sup>

6 Like Sarah Beer, we believe that if political demands and collective actions are not given priority in the SWrs’ rights organizations, it is because of the requirements of these structures, starting with those of their funders, and the resulting bureaucracy: activity reports and accountability, funding requests, action plans, human resources management and all the administrative paperwork that comes with them. In short, it is not surprising that there is not much time left to mobilize those who aren’t already active!



The first SWr organizations’ funding was granted as part of the fight against HIV<sup>6</sup>. Of course, one can empathize with the fact that at the time, SWrs, like LGBTQIA+ populations and drug users, wanted to create their own health

#### 4. Idem

5. Sarah Beer. (2018). «Action, advocacy and allies: Building a movement for sex workers right», *Red light labor: sex work regulation, agency and resistance*. p.332

6. Montreal, Stella was born out of a consultation committee of the Centre d’étude sur le SIDA on which the Projet d’intervention auprès des mineurs prostitués (PIAMP) and the Association Québécoise des travailleuses et travailleurs du sexe (AQTS), among others, sat. The project was intended to be a sister organization to Maggie’s, which had received its first funding a few years earlier from the City of Toronto’s Public Health Department. Claire Thiboutot. (1994). *Allocution: appui au projet Stella*, Montréal, Association québécoise des travailleuses et travailleurs du sexe (AQTS) et Danny Cockerline, «Whores History: A Decade of Prostitutes Fighting for their Rights in Toronto», Maggie’s Zine, n 1, winter 1993-1994, Toronto, Maggie’s: The Toronto Prostitutes’ Community Service Project, p. 22-23. Translated from english by Sylvie Dupont in *Luttes XXX, Inspirations du mouvement des travailleuses du sexe*, 2011, Les Éditions du remue-ménage, p. 48 à 52

services to fight against an epidemic that was decimating their communities to the government's disregard. However, as Act-Up activist and writer Sarah Schulman points out, these organizations are often reappropriated by governments to contract out work at a lower cost:

*The distinction between service provision and activism has become elusive. Poor people are very interwoven into state agencies: there's a lot of surveillance [...]. My life has shown me that activists win policy changes, and bureaucracies implement them. In a period like the present where there is no real activism, there are only bureaucracies.<sup>7</sup>*

The bureaucracy of community organizations makes it difficult to have wide spaces to discuss solutions and to mobilize to defend our rights. This is why we believe it is time to organize on an autonomous basis.

The foundations of such an organization still need to be defined. This is what we will try to do here. Of course, this is a work in progress and these principles are bound to be updated. It should also be noted that SWAC activists have varying perspectives and work experiences. These principles therefore serve as a basis of unity, first at a theoretical and then at an organizational level.

### **Theoretical principles:**

*1- The recognition of sex work as work and the need to decriminalize it in order to obtain the same labor rights as other workers;*

We believe that sex work is work and that SWRs are workers. Furthermore, we believe that sex work belongs to a particular, undervalued category of work: reproductive work.

Theorized by feminists from the Wages for Housework movement, reproductive work is defined as all the work necessary to maintain and renew the labour force: domestic tasks, care of children and the elderly, meeting the emotional, physical and sexual needs of the wage earner. This work has traditionally been taken care of by women in the heterosexual family so that men can be fresh and willing to go to work. If these forms of work have become more complex with the entry of women into the wage labour market, they have

7. Sarah Schulman. (2012). *The gentrification of the mind: witness to a lost imagination*. p. 16

not disappeared and are increasingly taken care of by racialized women, following the international division of labour, to which we'll return later.

In the 1970s, wages for domestic work activists emphasized the contribution of this largely feminized labor to capitalism and the importance of perceiving oneself as a worker in the struggle against it. How can we go on strike and refuse this work if we can't name it as such? There were already links between SWrs and housewives struggling for wages at the time<sup>8</sup>. In 1977, Margo St James, SWr and founder of *Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics* (COYOTE), was invited by the Toronto branch of Wages for Housework to a forum on the decriminalization of sex work. In their opening speech, the collective said, "*Our poverty as women leaves us little choice. Hookers get hard cash for their sexual services while other women get a roof over their heads or a night out.*"<sup>9</sup>

8 However, in addition to being devalued, sex work is also criminalized. This criminalization is an excellent way for those who appropriate our work to control its conditions, be it through a flesh-and-blood boss or an online platform. It is impossible for us to have access to the minimal protections normally guaranteed to workers. These precarious conditions are the source of daily concerns and challenges, ranging from difficulties in getting paid to the impossibility of denouncing clients and employers' violence through legal mechanisms. Of course, we know that the decriminalization of our work alone cannot guarantee us decent working conditions, as evidenced by difficult environments of the legal sectors of the sex industry such as pornography or strip clubs. The pursuit of sex work decriminalization is therefore not an end in itself, but rather a first step in providing ourselves with the means to obtain better working conditions. We believe that by organizing now in autonomous committees for decriminalization, these committees will be able to serve as a basis for the organization of our workplace.

DECRIMINALIZATION  
DÉCRIMINALISATION

8. See Wages for Housework. (1977). «Housewives & Hookers Come Together», *Wages for Housework Campaign Bulletin*, vol. 1, no 4, in Louise Toupin. (2014) *Le salaire au travail ménager, Chronique d'une lutte féministe internationale (1972-1977)*. Les éditions du remue-ménage, p.257

9. Idem

2- The recognition that sex work takes place within a capitalist, neo-colonial and cishetero-patriarchal system; the recognition that women, racialized people, trans/queer/gender non-conforming people, migrants and people with disabilities are over-represented in sex work, due in part to the barriers to employment and good jobs in the capitalist system;

The context in which sex work takes place is often ignored by those who are outraged that women are forced to “sell their bodies”<sup>10</sup>. Instead, we start from the principle that all workers sell their bodies - this is a more interesting starting point in the struggle for better working and living conditions. In other words, starting from the point of view that work should be empowering and free from exploitation seems to be a trap to avoid.

The sex industry, along with many others, is filled with exploitation, sexist and racist violence. However, few of us are in a position to refuse this work individually, because the reality is that we have to put bread on the table and pay the rent. Most of us are SWrs because it is the best or the least bad option available to us in this context.

We have seen it throughout the pandemic; in Canada, statistics show that job losses have impacted women more severely than men<sup>11</sup>. In the United States, reports show that Black, Indigenous and Women of Colour are 1.5% more likely to lose their jobs because of COVID than white men older than 20 years old<sup>12</sup>. In Canada, BIPOC people still have a higher unemployment rate than White people, particularly Indigenous women<sup>13</sup>. This is also true if you are experiencing employment’s discrimination, whether you are a BIPOC, trans or disabled person. The job market is stratified by class, race and gender and it’s no coincidence that these people are over-represented in sex work.

**10.** The question of “selling the body” is a subject of debate even within the SWr movement. On one hand, it is defended that one does not really sell one’s body, but rather a service or one’s work force. The Girlfriend Experience is an example of this. On the other hand, it is argued that selling the body is present in every field, be it construction, professional sports or even office work, and that all of these jobs wear out the body in one way or another. This perspective also helps to understand how gender performance is expected in certain industries, such as the sex industry, catering or fashion for example. Whether one starts from one perspective or the other, sex work is not fundamentally different in this respect.

**11.** Radio-Canada. (2020). *3 millions d’emplois perdus au Canada depuis le début de la pandémie*, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1701093/coronavirus-chomage-avril-canada-perde-emplois>

**12.** Catalyst, Workplace that Work for Women. (2020). *The Detrimental Impact of COVID-19 on Gender and Racial equality: Quick Take*, <https://bit.ly/2MENOSO>

**13.** Idem

In this context, what options are available to SWrs who wish to leave the industry? Finding themselves behind the cash register of a grocery store or joining a long-term care facility to provide care? Not only do these options not reduce the risk of being exposed to the virus, but the expected decrease in income means that they'll have to work even harder and lose time flexibility. This flexibility is desired and even vital for many, including, single mothers, students, and those with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Moreover, these work alternatives, often precarious and poorly paid, are not exempt from exploitation and violence.

We also live in a time where an international division of labor prevails. The conventional definition of the international division of labour refers to the displacement of industrial production from the countries of the North to the countries of the South, where workers' wages and protections are lower. Feminist thinkers have also demonstrated the importance of the work exported from the countries of the South to the countries of the North, particularly women's reproductive work<sup>14</sup>. This can be seen by the large proportion of so-called essential work performed by migrant women, particularly in hospitals, daycare centers and long-term care facilities. These jobs are often done through employment agencies, causing a deregulation of work and allowing employers to get away with offering poor working conditions. More often than not, they are temporary jobs occupied by those with precarious immigration status, putting the people who work there at risk of deportation, as highlighted by the movement of migrant workers during the pandemic<sup>15</sup>.

Similar logic applies in the sex industry, particularly in stripclubs, where female workers are often considered self-employed rather than employees. However, it is often assumed that women who migrate and work in the sex industry are victims of sex trafficking. This discourse ignores the role that borders and migration policies play in this process. Indeed, many are forced to accept terrible working conditions because of their precarious migratory status, but this reality is not specific to the sex industry, as some anti-prostitution organizations suggest.

**14.** Sarah Farris. (2017). «Les fondements politico-économiques du fémonationalisme» dans Pour un féminisme de la totalité, Éditions Amsterdam, Période, p.189-210

**15.** Dan Spector. (2021). *Quebec Curfew making life even harder for undocumented workers doing essential jobs: Protesters* : <https://bit.ly/2NNMWAY>

## **Organizational principles:**

*1- The self-representation of SWrs and their right to talk about their own realities, and non-hierarchical self-organization that allows the implementation of direct responses and actions;*

The principle of “by and for” has shaped the ways of the SWr movements. From its beginnings, there has been a tendency to place workers at the center of their struggles in order to detach themselves from the interests of those who supposedly want to save us. However, this does not mean that each SWr can speak on behalf of their colleagues and that no power dynamic crosses our work and organizational spaces. Racial, class and gender relations are very much present, and to have only one spokesperson, especially one that is salaried, only crystallizes and emphasizes this power relationship.

Certainly speaking out when dealing with criminalization and stigma can be a challenge for many of us. But we think that there are ways to get around these barriers with a little bit of creativity. Organizing ourselves into open committees with a flexible structure will already allow us to discuss the demands that need to be put forward according to the context, and to be able to quickly reorient ourselves. In pandemic times, where the context is rapidly changing, this formula will allow those involved to put forward essential demands that would make a real difference in their lives.

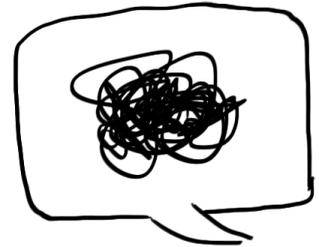
We want to create a space that is open to all SWrs in accordance with the basic principles of CATS, where we can discuss organizational methods, demands, and actions to be taken in order to achieve gains, without any of the bureaucratic red tape. We also aim to foster a space where involved people get to have more control over the struggle.

But all these principles will be nothing more than wishful thinking if they are not backed up by consistent practices. This is why the rotation of tasks within a group is an essential element both for preventing the informal concentration of power that is created by assigning one person to carry out the most attractive tasks and to avoid having the same people doing the less esteemed but nevertheless essential chores. Although it would be easier to delegate everything to a competent person, we think that in the long term, we have much more to gain by taking our own destinies in hand, and learning to do everything together, without making anyone indispensable.

2. *The mobilization of our colleagues in our workplace is the basis of organizing towards better conditions;*

In almost all sectors of the sex industry, we often hear that it is much better to be self-employed and that it is a sign of empowerment to be one's own boss. The pandemic has exacerbated the current trend to dismantle our workplaces to the disadvantage of the most precarious workers. Far from improving conditions for all, independence at work makes us insecure and, above all, distances us from our colleagues. We are then dependent on platforms that force us into competition with each other, while taking a cut in our salary.

This trend is not exclusive to the sex industry and can be referred to as a kind of *uberisation* of sex work. Last year, strippers in London celebrated the legal victory that gave them the status of employees of their club<sup>16</sup>, just like the French Deliveroo delivery persons who had managed to get the company convicted of "dissimulating work"<sup>17</sup> and the Uber drivers who won the right to unionize<sup>18</sup>.



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Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to know what our workplace is like and who our colleagues are, especially since many of us work on different platforms. That's why we think it makes more sense to have a large committee that welcomes all SWrs and doesn't divide us according to the type of work we do. This helps counter the tendency towards uberisation that isolates us. Moreover, it prevents us from falling into the trap of whorearchy, a term that refers to the hierarchisation between different forms of sex work. This hierarchy is constructed according to proximity to the client. Those who work only on the internet are therefore less stigmatised and criminalised and those who perform more intimate services are more so.



**16.** Strippers union United Voices of the World, Decrim Now. (2020). *Strippers Union United Voices Of the World (UVW) Wins Landmark Legal Victory Proving Strippers Are 'Workers', Not Independent Contractors*, <https://bit.ly/2NWX2jp>

**17.** Catherine Abou Al Kair. (2020). *Livraisons : La condamnation de Deliveroo pour travail dissimulé peut-elle faire tache d'huile ?* <https://bit.ly/2Okz5la>

**18.** CBC News. (2019). *300 GTA Uber Black drivers unionize as city mulls regulatory overhaul*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/uber-drivers-union-ufcw-toronto-1.5190766>

### 3. *Autonomy from government institutions and other institutional donors;*

As mentioned above, funding seems to be one of the elements that brings a great deal of complexity to community organizations. It also keeps us away from the activities we want to do, i.e. mobilising our colleagues and taking action to improve our working conditions. It also appears to us that this funding is contrary to the principle of “by and for” since it gives the state and private foundations a great deal of latitude to control our activities.

In this sense, we believe that detaching ourselves from these donors is essential to achieving our goals, and that we should not sacrifice our autonomy to obtain funds. We believe that the search for money should be limited to the realisation of those projects and actions aimed at furthering our political objectives.

#### ***The crisis: an opportunity to reinvent the struggle!***

The current crisis is an unavoidable moment of restructuring. The pandemic isolates us and makes us precarious, but it may also be an opportunity to reinvent our movement and organize ourselves, as it was the case with the HIV epidemic. While we recognize all of the barriers to mobilization, it’s time to be creative and to rethink our strategies.

This particular context, has led to multiple strippers’ strikes in Portland and Chicago to demand an end to racial discrimination against Black strippers in their clubs during the summer of 2020<sup>19</sup>. According to Cat Hollis, one of the strike organizers, the closure of the clubs due to COVID-19 has allowed the strike to organize itself when the establishments reopened at the end of the first wave<sup>20</sup>.



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**19.** To learn more : Haymarket Pole Collective. (2020). Press coverage, <https://www.haymarketpole.com/press>  
**20.** Tess Riski (2020). *A Labor Movement Demands Better Treatment for Portland’s Black Strippers*, <https://www.wweek.com/news/2020/06/16/a-labor-movement-demands-better-treatment-for-portlands-black-strippers/>

We, too, want to channel the anger and despair felt in face of the current circumstances into something constructive. We hope that this collective force acts as a catalyst for the creation of a strong SWr movement to achieve political gains that will have an impact on our lives. While the pandemic is exacerbating inequalities, we also want to turn it into a time of solidarity and struggles for better working and living conditions.

It is said that only the struggle pays off, and we believe that this payout is not only to come from the pockets of our clients, but also from those of the State. The same state from whom we must demand the social protections owed to us in times of crisis, and even more so, the recognition of our status as workers!



# SEX WORK, LAWS AND CRIMINALIZATION

an overview on 4 different legal models

## CRIMINALIZATION

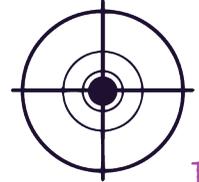
*Criminalizes every (full) or some (partial) aspects of the sex industry*

- ⊘ "procuring" or "inciting" into SW
- ⊘ managing SWrs
- ⊘ working with colleagues
- solliciting on the street ⊘
- Kerb-crawling ⊘
- promoting services online ⊘



worthless & disposable criminals

SWrs =  
a threat to peace & order -  
restrained through punishment



15

TARGET

- ⊕ Hyper visible SWrs (black, latinx, trans)
- ⊕ Migrant SWrs

Dominant belief /  
narratives

## IMPACTS ON SWrs

👉 Amplify **punitive** and **repressive** state power :  
arrests, deportations, evictions, loss of child custody, war on drugs,  
racism in policing and in the criminal justice system

👉  **Police violence & power** {  
Extortion  
Beating  
Rape...

👉 **Dangerous working conditions :**

SWrs working in + isolated & unfamiliar places

Limited to no access to { health services  
legal recourse against abusive clients,  
managers, landlords, etc.

# THE NORDIC MODEL

Aka swedish model, sex buyer law, "end demand"

*MAIN GOAL* is to criminalize men who pay for sex  
and third parties profiting from it.

*LOGIC* is NO DEMAND = NO WORKERS

**SAVE THE VICTIMS!**

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## IMPACTS ON SWrs

👉 Adds & intensifies tools to **HARASS**,  
**PROSECUTE**, **ARREST** & **HARM** SWrs

👉 ⚡ their power while negotiating

- services
- money
- condom use

"End demand" make people  
who sell sex **poorer** and  
++ **vulnerable** 👉

👉 SWrs forced into riskier  
sex with riskier clients

Targeted evictions  
of SWrs 👉

👉 Aggressive use of prostitution &  
immigration laws to **DEPORT** SWrs

# LEGALIZATION / REGULATIONISM

*REGULATES* a legal strand of the sex industry while  
*CRIMINALIZES* SWrs who cannot comply with regulation laws

Prostitutes seen as *troubled* and *infectious*  
bodies - vectors of disease or symbols of  
disorder. **MUST BE CONTROLLED FOR PUBLIC  
HEALTH!**



TARGET

Most precarious SWrs that don't fit in the bureaucratic requirements (mandatory testing of HIV/STI, registering publicly as a prostitutes, etc.)

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↳ **MUST WORK ILLEGALLY**

SWrs without a legal status  
Drug users  
HIV+ workers

IMPACTS ON SWrs

↳ HIV test results made available  
to law enforcement



Police acting as regulators =  
corruption + blocks those  
working illegally (most at risk)  
from accessing assistance  
when needed



HIV+ SWrs can be charged  
under non-disclosure law



Zoning measures - place SWrs far  
from the community



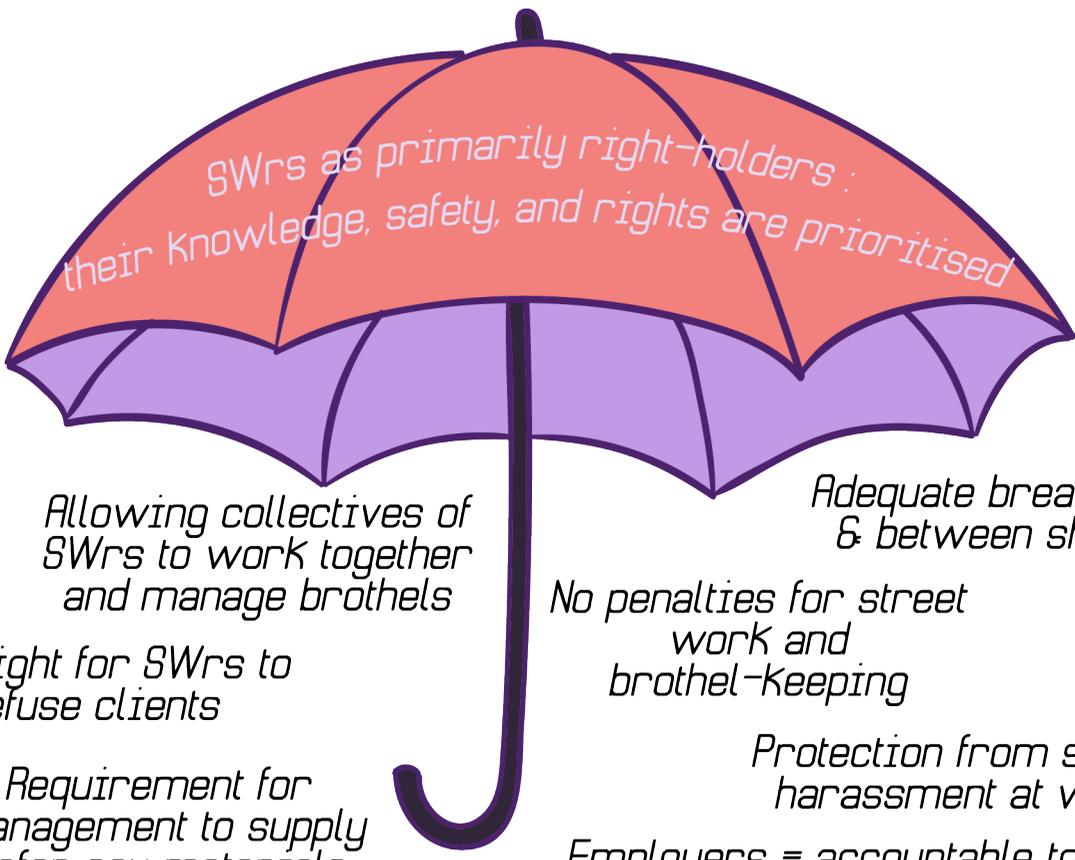
HUGE incentive for  
SWrs suspecting to  
be HIV+ to avoid  
health care services



**WHAT IT IS ABOUT**  
Taking the power from SWrs  
Giving it to police, clients & employers

# FULL DECRIMINALIZATION

*The sale, purchase, and facilitation of commercial sex shift out of the ~~criminal laws sphere~~ into the framework of labor & commercial laws*



*SWrs as primarily right-holders :  
their knowledge, safety, and rights are prioritised*

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*Allowing collectives of SWrs to work together and manage brothels*

*The right for SWrs to refuse clients*

*Requirement for management to supply safer sex materials*

*Provisions barring workplace discrimination*

*Adequate breaks on & between shifts*

*No penalties for street work and brothel-keeping*

*Protection from sexual harassment at work*

*Employers = accountable to SWrs through labour law*

***DECRIM IS NOT ENOUGH BY ITSELF***

*It must be implemented with multiple other reforms that address the vulnerabilities of over-policed populations, such as BIPOC, migrant, queer, drug users and homeless people whom continue to be harassed, surveilled and incarcerated !*

# Sex Workers Striking Against Violence!

## Interview with Cari Mitchell from the *English Collective of Prostitutes*

Cari Mitchell is a former sex worker and a member of the *English Collective of Prostitutes* (ECP), a network of sex workers in the United Kingdom working both outdoors and indoors campaigning for decriminalisation and safety.<sup>1</sup>

*In 2000, the ECP organized a sex workers' strike that was part of the Global Women's Strike on International Women's Day. The Global Women's Strike is an international network campaigning for recognition and payment for all caring work. A sex/work strike was organized again at that date in 2014 and 2019, on these occasions, with other sex workers' organizations. We asked Cari Mitchell to share her experience as one of the organizers of the strike.*

**CATS: Your collective has existed for many years and used many political strategies to obtain rights for sex workers. How did the strike come up as a tactic to obtain decriminalization of sex work?**

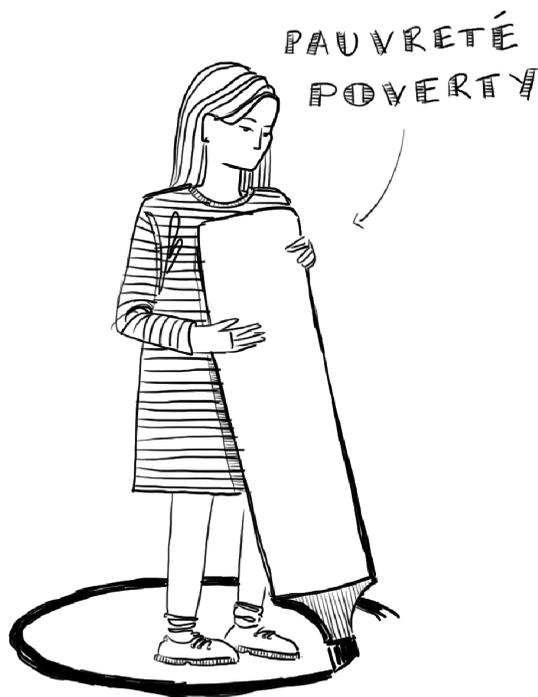
C.M.: Our collective which started in 1975 was founded by immigrant sex workers. From the beginning we demanded the abolition of the prostitution laws and for money in women's hands from governments so we can get out of sex work if and when we want. It was and still is mostly women that are doing sex work, mostly mothers, mostly single mothers, doing our best to support our families. In the ECP we also fight legal cases against criminal charges such as loitering and soliciting and brothel keeping. Whatever people come to us with, we help them. We are an organisation of different nationalities, races, ages, sexualities and all genders.

1. You can learn more about the ECP at <https://prostitutescollective.net/>

We work closely with other organizations. We are part of the Global Women's Strike and the campaign for a *Care Income Now*<sup>2</sup>. Like other women we want our work of giving birth and raising the next generation to be counted, valued and paid for. And as sex workers we know that if we had that money for the work we are already doing, most of us wouldn't have gone into prostitution in the first place. We wish that those people who complain about the number of women who have to go into sex work because of poverty and lack of economic alternatives, would instead press the government for that money.

We are based at the Crossroads Women's Centre in London and work closely with Women Against Rape, which is an anti racist, anti-violence against women organization. We also work with disability organizations - we have a number of women in our own network who have disabilities or who have children with disabilities, which is why they are working to get the money to cover the extra costs of dealing with a disability. Queer Strike which is part of the LGBTQ movement in the UK are also allies as is Support Not Separation which fights against children being taken from their mothers - which is happening here at frightening rates, the excuse being given that mothers are

not protecting children against poverty or domestic violence. This is so outrageous. We know of sex workers who only started working to support their children and then have had them taken away by social services saying they are unfit mothers!



**2.** Care Income now is an international campaign led by the Global Women Strike that advocates for a care income for all those, of every gender, who care for people, the urban and rural environment, and the natural world. For more info: <https://bit.ly/308p3qi>

We have an international network so we learn from everyone's experiences. Our sister organization in San Francisco is USPROS (The US PROStitutes Collective) and EMPOWER is our sister organisation in Thailand - who are involved at the moment in the massive struggle for justice in that country.

We campaign for decriminalisation along the lines of the law that was introduced in New Zealand in 2003 which has been shown to improve sex workers health and safety. The law removed consenting sex from the criminal law which means that the police now have to prioritise our safety rather than prosecute. Women going on strike to demand recognition for their unwaged and low waged work has quite a long history. In 1975, all the women in Iceland went on strike and the whole country ground to a halt. It was fantastic! There are photos of thousands of women out in the streets. Newscasters had to have their children with them in the studio while they were reading the news about the women being out on strike!

People have always known that withdrawing our labour is a way of bringing attention to the issues we want to raise. On International Women's Day in 2000, the Global Women's Strike was organizing a women's strike in many countries calling on governments to recognise and value all the unwaged work women are doing in the world. UN figures at the time showed that women are doing two thirds of the world's work for just 5% of the income and 1% of the assets. We were already working with sex workers in Soho, London - one of the most well known red light areas in the country. Sex workers there had been part of our network for decades and we had fought a number of campaigns with them against the local Westminster Council trying to close down flats - trying to gentrify the area. Many of the women working in Soho are migrant women and the police targeted them in particular for raids, arrest and deportation but used as an excuse the claim that women were trafficked and needed saving. When we spoke with them, sex workers from Soho said they wanted to join the International Women's Day strike. Women there work in walk-up flats - the clients come and knock on the door and wait. On the Strike day those doors were closed and Soho sex workers came together with others who worked in different places and ways. We all joined the Global Women's Strike.

So that no-one could be identified, all the people on the march wore masks. No-one could tell who was a sex worker and who wasn't, it was a fantastic success and there was a lot of publicity.

In the ECP we try to bring out the truth about sex work - about who we are and why we are doing it so people can have more of an understanding. We talk about the effects of criminalization on our safety and how we are workers just like any other workers, that most of us are supporting families both in the UK and in other countries as well. There are so many migrant sex workers sending money home to countries all over the world. These messages came across in our demands in the Strike in 2000 which was a great leap forward.

We continued to work with sex workers in Soho as Westminster Council continued to pursue them. Some flats were closed and women were driven out onto the streets. Tragically, one woman was murdered in 2000, shortly after the Strike. She was very well known within our network, we knew all about her. Her name was Lizzie and she was murdered while working on the street shortly after being forced out of a Soho flat. No sex worker has ever been murdered while working in a Soho flat. It is 10 times more dangerous to work outside than it is to work indoors with others.



The prostitution laws make it unlawful for sex workers to work together for safety, they drive the industry underground and so make us all vulnerable to violence. Under loitering and soliciting laws - just standing on the street and talking to a client, sex workers can be taken to court and convicted on the word of a single police officer. Once you have a conviction you have a criminal record under sexual offences and it's pretty much impossible to get out and get another job. So you're stuck. The police now often use civil orders which also force women to move out of areas they are familiar with and into darker side streets. If you work in a group for company and

safety your colleagues can take your client's car registration number when you get in the car and you can make sure he knows this. But that's not possible if you have to work by yourself in a dark area to avoid coming to the attention of the police. Where police continue to crackdown, violence and murder of sex workers rises.

Indoors, it's not illegal to exchange money for sexual services, but everything you have to do to work with others is against the law. More than one woman working from a premises is a brothel and arranging for people to work together, advertising, paying the rent is all unlawful under brothel keeping legislation. It is basically illegal to work safely in this country. Working together means people can look out for each other and learn from each other not only how to work more safely but also for instance to get the money first, how to deal with clients, how to do the job in the quickest time. One of the problems with continued police crackdowns is that most sex workers in this country are now having to work on their own. Things have changed though - years ago sex workers used to be described in the press as vice girls, but that doesn't happen anymore. The press is much more respectful and the public is much more aware of who sex workers are. They know that a lot of us are mothers, migrants, trans, women of color; they know that we are vulnerable women who have few alternatives to sex work. The strikes have been a really effective contribution towards this change. The more recent International Women's Day strikes were organized by other sex workers organizations but we were very prominent in them, especially in the 2014 and 2019. We did a lot of organizing to get people out and we were very much out there and they were both a great success. It doesn't always feel like it but things are moving along.

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**CATS: Your movement is in favor of decriminalisation and not legalisation.**

**Can you explain why you think this model is the best option for sex workers?**

C.M.: Decriminalisation which was won in New Zealand in 2003 has been a verifiable success. It was introduced under health and safety legislation and sex workers there say that they now have more legal and other rights and more protection from violence - they know they will not be prosecuted if they come

forward and report violence to the police and under these circumstance violent men are more aware they will not get away with it. This makes an enormous difference to sex workers safety and is a standard we think should be everywhere.

Legalisation is completely different. It's state-run prostitution. People have to register with the authorities to work legally and most people are unable to do that. Legalisation creates a two tier system where if you can afford to be known to be working you're ok and you can work in the legalised areas or premises - but most of us can't come out as sex workers. Who knows what might happen if your child's school or a social worker or health authorities find out. It's simply not something most people can do. In those countries where there is legalisation the prostitution stigma remains, most sex workers don't register with the authorities and continue to work unlawfully. In the well known areas where people work outdoors, someone just walking into the area can be identified as a sex worker. Who can afford that? Internationally, sex workers are not campaigning for legalisation, we're campaigning for decriminalisation. We want all consenting sex to be removed from the criminal law.

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**CATS: Your strike was part of a broader women strike in the UK and internationally on International Women's Day to bring attention to labor exploitation in all aspects of women's lives. How do you think being a sex worker can compare to other feminised labour or unpaid work such as caregiving and cleaning?**

C.M.: In lots of ways it's similar work. Clients come to us not only because they want sex, but also because they want someone who is sympathetic to them, who will listen to them. Maybe it's for fifteen minutes, maybe it's for half an hour, maybe it's an hour, maybe it's for longer but they want the personal contact, that they are at the center of someone's attention for that time. In fact, one of the women in our network did sex work with a client but was also working with him as a care worker. She did both jobs with the same person and said it was much more work doing the caring work then it was doing the sex work. In 2017, we did a survey which found there were many other jobs that

women describe as exploitative and dangerous<sup>3</sup>. Sex work is one of the most dangerous jobs women do purely because violent men know that they can get away with being violent to us - they know we're not going to report anything to the authorities because we don't want to get prosecuted. That's how it is.

That survey was really illuminating. We launched it in the House of Commons and it's been very useful to show there are many other jobs that are described by women as being particularly exploitative and dangerous - that sex work is not uniquely exploitative. In sex work, you can earn a bit more money in a bit less time and that's very important especially if you're a mother or you're doing another job, maybe you're working in a bank or working another way and you're doing it to top up your low wages. A lot of people are doing that. Also, if you are a migrant, you don't have access to jobs in this country in the same way at all. For instance if you're an asylum seeker you don't have the right to look for jobs. A lot of people are living in poverty and suffering discrimination - for instance trans people and women of color face racism and other discrimination all the time in the job market - that's why so many people are driven into the sex industry.

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**CATS: How is a sex work strike organized concretely? How can you make sure everyone can participate, even the more precarious ones? The whorearchy (the hierarchisation of different types of sex work as some being more respectable such as stripping or camming then full-service sex work, particularly those who work outside) is one of the factors that affects the amount of criminalization someone will experience. Was this an issue while organizing the strike and how can you address this?**

C.M.: We've been going for a long time and have a really big network around the country - as well as internationally. We're in touch with people who work outdoors and indoors in many different places and we invited everyone to come to join the 2000 Strike. The organizing meetings were with people who were not only working in Soho but in other places as well. We sat down and made sure that everybody was

<sup>3</sup>. The report of the survey - *What's A Nice Girl Doing In A Job Like This: a comparison between sex work and other jobs commonly done by women*, can be found on ECP's website: <https://prostitutescollective.net/>

able to put forward their suggestions. We were very careful to make sure everybody knew that they would not be public on the day, they would not be recognisable and would be able to take part without compromising their security in any way. That they were not going to be identified because everyone would be wearing masks.

People who worked in many different ways including strippers and people working online took part. We were really determined not to be divided. We are all affected by the laws in some way, however we work, but it was very important to us to make sure that people knew we start with the situation of people who work on the street who are most up against the law, are most stigmatised and therefore most vulnerable to the police and to other violence. So people knew we were not going to have any slagging off of anyone about the way they worked, that's just not on the agenda. We are all doing it for the money because we need that money and we choose to work in different ways, whichever way fits our lives the best. I think that's one of the reasons why we were successful in organizing the 2000 strike and the subsequent ones. Because people knew that we're not going to be divided against each other.

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**CATS: Here in Montreal and Canada, most unions and mainstream feminist organizations are still in favor of the Nordic model. How was it organizing a sex work strike within a bigger feminist movement? How did you find alliance in the left and the feminist movement?**

C.M.: Feminists who take a moral stand against prostitution have

always been around, but back in 2000, they were not really interested in coming out against us and neither were the unions. Since then Nordic model has been more of an issue and we take every opportunity we can to address it - like going to

trade union conferences, speaking out when we're interviewed with feminists in the press. When you point out that criminalizing clients is going to increase the stigma and drive everybody underground so undermining safety, it's obvious why we're against it. Every country where the Nordic model has come in has shown an increase in violence against sex workers. Those women who call themselves feminists and are pressing for the Nordic model are in fact the biggest obstacle to getting decriminalization. If they would go to the government and say *'Well, we don't think women should be in prostitution, but we think that women should have money in their hands so they don't have to do it'*, that would be great ! But they don't - they take a moral standpoint against prostitution and often make a career out of opposing it as politicians or journalists or academics. At the 2000 International Women's Strike, there were thousands and thousands of women marching. There was the odd group of feminists standing on the edges with some odd placards, but they were never in a position to counter what sex workers were saying publicly.

Women's safety is something that the government shouldn't be able to argue about. We have here a prestigious government committee which spent a year doing an enormous piece of research into prostitution and in 2016 recommended that it be decriminalized, both outdoors and indoors. Also, crucially that prostitution records be wiped clean so that sex workers can get other jobs. It also recommended prostitution not be conflated with trafficking. But their recommendations were not taken up - the government saying it needed more research which just meant more money in academic's hands. But even those academics who did do further research were not able to come up with the kind of counter report they had so wanted to produce.

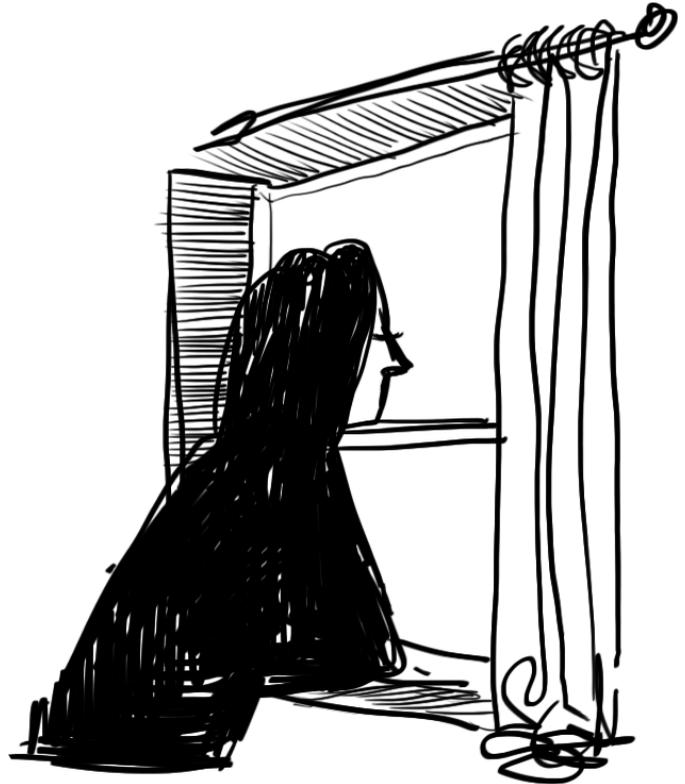
The laws have to change and they will change. A divorcee used to be called a "scarlet woman" but not nowadays - things are changed, there has been a women's movement and decriminalization will happen because sex workers are a key part of that international women's movement.

**CATS: The criticism of borders and the way they are almost always excluded in the trafficking discourse seems to be a big part of your campaign. Can you talk a little bit more about that?**

C.M.: We have a lot of immigrant women in our network and a lot of them are seeking asylum, running from other countries and trying to survive. Under UK legislation, people making claims for asylum have to live off of 37 pounds a week<sup>4</sup>, a pittance! So in order to survive and maybe to send some money home, sex work is one of the options people have.

We also know from our experience not only in Soho but also in cities around the country that the police target migrant sex workers under the guise of saving women from traffickers. We have made it a priority to counter that. For instance, in Soho, women say *'look we are not being forced, we are working here because we need to survive and to send money home to our family. Every penny we earn, we send it home to our family'*.

The only force sex workers are under is the force is not having enough money to survive without doing it. The best research has shown that less than 6% of migrant sex workers are trafficked. So when we speak publicly we make sure that we counter the publicity that police get when they raid. And it's clear that these raids don't have anything to do with saving any women from trafficking but to aid the immigration agenda of the government - which is to deport as many migrant people as possible. Women who are picked up are often sent to immigration centers and deported against their will. Terrible.



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4. Equivalent to 64\$ CAD

**CATS: Now what do you think are the next steps for the sex workers movement in the UK? How does COVID impact the way you mobilize?**

C.M.: I'm sure it is the same in your country, but COVID has exacerbated everything. At first, everybody did try to stop working. People were and still are in this horrendous dilemma of either stopping working so you're not making your family vulnerable to the virus - but then you've got no money to feed them. And you can't pay your landlord if you work indoors. Or you can decide to continue working and have a bit of money but then you have to be very very careful with clients - and the police may come after you.

People who have continued working have taken very careful precautions with clients. During the lockdown, most people have basically stopped because they feared their neighbors or the police or other authorities are going to catch up with them in some way, they will get in trouble with the law and then you have another whole story to deal with.

Some sex worker organizations were doing a great job of raising money for sex workers who were unable to continue working, and we helped distribute that money around to people in our network who needed it. But we decided that as that good work was going on, we would focus on pressing the government to recognize sex workers as workers, to demand an amnesty from arrests, and to demand that sex workers are able to easily access emergency payments. But the government hasn't done one single thing to enable sex workers to get that money. We made sure with our public campaigning that this point was very prominent and it did bring together some members of parliament. We asked everyone on our mailing list to write to their local MP and press them to raise these matters in parliament, and some MPs did do that. The government got back saying 'Well people can access a benefit called Universal Credit' which is a benefit that is very hard to access, takes ages to get to you, and isn't enough to live on. People in general are much more aware about these very low benefits - so many people in this country are having to rely on them one way or another in order to survive right now.

The pandemic has clarified a lot of issues, starting with how much caring work women are doing, making sure people in communities have enough food, that they are okay. It also clarified the brutality of the government. For example in care homes, elderly people were not protected from the virus at all. They sent people who were positive with the virus from hospitals and into care homes so then of course, hundreds and thousands of elderly people died. But the government was happy - they haven't got to pay their pension! The government recently announced that billions of pounds are going to the military, so we know that they have the money. They have had to organize a furlough system whereby people get 80% of their salaries if they are temporarily laid off. So we know that the money is there and we know that they have been lying to us when they say there is no money. It is very clear now they didn't organize to make sure hospital and care home workers had all the protection they needed. It's the same with sex workers, they don't really care if we live or die. I think people have even more scepticism about the government than before.

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Governments want to keep criminalisation of sex work because they want to keep us all divided, they want to divide us into good girls and bad girls. But we refuse that in the same way that we refuse to be divided as sex workers depending on the different ways we work. In New Zealand, decriminalization hasn't resulted in an enormous increase of people doing sex work because that depends on the financial situation in the country. It's just that you are not criminalized for earning money in that way. Governments have to contend with the international sex worker movement and based on safety and rights, we will win.

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