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## Guilty Plea in Gilgo Beach Murders Highlights How Criminalization Blocked Critical Evidence

NEW YORK, NY (April 9, 2026) – The guilty plea entered by [Rex Heuermann](#) in the Gilgo Beach murders marks a long-overdue moment of accountability in a case that has devastated families and communities for more than a decade. This development highlights the tragic and preventable [reality that critical information](#) that could have led to Heuermann’s arrest years ago and prevented further murders, went unreported for years because sex workers and survivors of trafficking were not protected when coming forward to report violence and exploitation.

Sex workers information potentially relevant to this case could not safely come forward, fearing arrest and prosecution. This inability is the direct result of criminalization, which pushes people into the shadows and creates conditions where violence and exploitation can thrive. Decriminalize Sex Work (DSW) Legal Director Melissa Sontag Broudo directly represented sex workers in New York City in 2010 at the time of the first murders.

“There were sex workers who may have had information that could have led to an arrest much sooner, but they could not come forward without risking arrest themselves,” said Broudo. “Without immunity from prostitution charges, coming forward simply wasn’t a safe option and as a result, critical information remained out of reach.”

Stigma surrounding sex work also shapes how cases like these are investigated. When victims are viewed through a lens of bias or seen as less credible, cases may not receive the urgency, resources, or attention they deserve. This dynamic can delay investigations, limit engagement with impacted communities, and contribute to a broader pattern in which violence against sex workers is deprioritized or overlooked. The investigation into the Gilgo Beach murders was delayed, and repeatedly [botched and mishandled](#) due to stigma against were sex workers.

This past year [New York enacted immunity legislation](#) to allow sex workers and survivors of trafficking to report violence and exploitation without facing prosecution for certain low-level offenses. These policies are necessary because of criminalization itself, which creates the fear and barriers that prevent people from reporting harm in the first place.

“Decriminalization of consensual adult sex work is essential to preventing violence like this,” said Ariela Moscowitz, communications director at DSW. “Right now, serial killers and abusers are able to operate with impunity because the people they target are pushed into the shadows and cannot safely come forward. If sex workers could report violence without fear of arrest or stigma, these crimes would not continue.”

[Immunity protections](#) are a critical step in addressing these systemic failures. By ensuring that sex workers and survivors of trafficking can report violence, coercion, or exploitation without fear of prosecution, these policies make it possible for law enforcement to access vital information and intervene sooner. Safe reporting laws directly protect victims and witnesses of violence and they benefit all communities by allowing law enforcement to better detect criminal activity.

The resolution of this case should not be viewed as an endpoint, but as a call to action. Policymakers must address the systemic barriers created by criminalization that prevent some of the most vulnerable individuals from reporting harm. Ensuring that sex workers and survivors of trafficking can seek help without fear is a matter of justice and a critical step in preventing future tragedies.

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### **Decriminalize Sex Work**

*Decriminalize Sex Work is a national organization pursuing a state-by-state strategy to end the prohibition of consensual, adult prostitution in the United States. We work with local organizations, advocates, and lobbyists to build community support and convince legislators to stop prostitution-related arrests. Evidence shows that decriminalizing sex work will help end human trafficking, improve public health, and promote community safety.*

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