

The logo for Decriminalize Sex Work is a dark red square containing the text "Decriminalize Sex Work" in a white, handwritten-style font. A small white heart symbol is positioned at the end of the word "Work".

Decriminalize
Sex Work ♡

END HUMAN TRAFFICKING.
PROMOTE HEALTH & SAFETY.

www.DecriminalizeSex.Work

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Queens Prosecutor Is Wrong About Human Trafficking and Arresting Johns

On Monday, May 18, Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced the creation of the Human Trafficking Bureau to “prosecute sex and labor traffickers” and purchasers of sexual services. Criminalizing clients reflects a willful refusal to distinguish between adult consensual sex work and trafficking. Human rights organizations, the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and a growing number of policy experts agree that a more effective policy would be to fully decriminalize adult prostitution and focus law-enforcement efforts on instances of criminal labor trafficking – both in and out of the sex industry.

“As someone who has spent my legal career working with survivors of trafficking and people in the sex industry, I’m continually frustrated that prosecutors like Katz conflate human trafficking and adult consensual sex work,” says Melissa Sontag Broudo, legal director at Decriminalize Sex Work, a national advocacy organization.

Prosecutors can only effectively combat real trafficking when they acknowledge that the majority of sex workers and their clients are adults engaging in negotiated, voluntary exchange. Studies confirm that criminalizing clients increases violence against sex workers. For example, Northern Ireland criminalized clients in 2015, and a 2019 review by its own Department of Justice revealed sex workers felt less safe than before the law passed because of a surge of antisocial behavior directed at them.

Katz inherited a long legacy in Queens related to this issue. In 2008, the Queens Criminal Court pioneered the first-ever “Human Trafficking Intervention Court” (HTIC) to provide services to individuals in the sex industry. While there was no dedicated trafficking unit within the DA’s office, there were numerous dedicated prosecutors who worked on this issue.

“I have practiced in the HTIC, and while the feeling is quite supportive and compassionate, the underlying problem is that my clients should not have been forced into the criminal justice system to get social services. The entire foundational principle of these courts further disempowers victims. Why are we arresting sex workers or victims of human trafficking? The conflation of prostitution and trafficking predates these courts, but the HTICs effectively institutionalized it. Now Katz is continuing to pursue rhetoric and policies that will inevitably hurt those they claim to help,” says Sontag Broudo.

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