

“My Body, My Choice”

Sex Work and Reproductive Justice

In the fight for the right to safe and legal abortions in this country, medical professionals, feminists, and health care advocates agree that criminalizing the procedure does not prevent people from terminating their pregnancies, but only makes abortion less safe. For remarkably similar reasons, the criminalization of sex work has serious public health and safety implications.

Terminating a pregnancy and choosing to sell sex are both deeply personal and often difficult decisions. People abort otherwise wanted pregnancies because of economic circumstances, unforeseen health concerns, and sometimes because they are pressured by a family member or partner. Similarly, individuals participate in commercial sex as a result of choice, circumstance, or coercion.¹

Like abortion, many of the dangers related to sex work are the direct result of criminalization.

Each year, up to 13.2 percent of maternal deaths can be attributed to complications from unsafe abortion procedures, which are a direct result of criminalization.² Abortions performed by licensed physicians in sterile environments are among the safest medical procedures. Criminalizing abortion makes it difficult to access quality care.

Criminalizing sex work pushes the industry into the black market, where criminals and predators thrive. Criminalization also makes trafficking and other violent crimes related to sex work harder to detect and prosecute, because survivors fear prosecution themselves.³

Decriminalizing prostitution is the only way to effectively reduce trafficking and violence against women. Studies have consistently demonstrated a connection between the availability of safe and legal indoor prostitution and a reduction in reported rapes, female homicide, and violence against women. New Zealand, which decriminalized consensual, adult commercial sex in 2003, has seen a marked reduction in violence against women and STI transmission.⁴

Body autonomy is crucial to both the movement to decriminalize sex work and the feminist fight for access to safe and legal abortion. Individual and community oppression, marginalization, and sexual stigma — located at the intersection of race and gender — complicate the binaries of individual choice and consent.⁵

No one should be criminalized for making choices about their own body.

Decriminalize sex work, decriminalize choice, maximize consent.

¹Non-consensual sex work is trafficking and, like forced abortions, is an unimaginable crime that should remain illegal.

²“U.S.’s Extreme Anti-Abortion Policies Put Women’s Lives at Risk – in the U.S. and Around the Globe,” Global Fund for Women, December 3, 2019, <https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/alabama-abortion-ban/>.

³Lucy Platt, Pippa Grenfell, Rebecca Meiksin, et al., “Associations Between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers’ Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies,” *PLOS Medicine* 15, no. 12 (December 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.

⁴Scott Cunningham and Manisha Shah, “Decriminalizing Indoor Prostitution: Implications for Sexual Violence and Public Health,” *Review of Economic Studies* 85, no. 3 (July 2018): 1683-1715, <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdx065>; Scott Cunningham, Gregory DeAngelo, and John Tripp, “Craigslis Reduced Violence Against Women” (February 2019, under submission), available at <http://scunning.com/craigslis110.pdf>.

⁵Loretta Ross, “Understanding Reproductive Justice: Transforming the Pro-Choice Movement,” *Off Our Backs* 36, no. 4 (2006): 14-19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20838711>.