



Breaking Down the Myths about Sex Work

Myth: Sex work is inherently violent.

The exchange of money for sexual services is not an inherently violent act. If it were inherently violent, there would be no way to make it safer. An overwhelming amount of research shows there are various ways to make sex work safer, for example by sex workers being able to work together or indoors.

Due to Canada's prostitution laws, sex work occurs in a criminalized context and this has a profound impact on sex workers' ability to keep themselves safe.

For example, street-based sex workers often have to rush negotiations with clients and frequently get into cars before they can make a proper assessment about the client. This is to avoid being seen by law enforcement. Sex workers working in an indoor environment also find it difficult to screen their clients due to laws prohibiting communication about purchasing sexual services, and they further experience difficulties in working at a business that offers sexual services since this is also criminalized. Street-based sex workers face the highest levels of violence which is related to stigma, racism, criminalization, and mental health and addiction issues, but indoor workers can face violence as well. Sex workers are often targeted for gender-based violence including by serial killers as society sees them as less worthy of protection and they therefore make an attractive target.

Nevertheless, sex work is not inherently violent. Violence is associated with the context in which sex work takes place – which can be changed if the laws are changed – and so violence and other harm varies and can be challenged.

If sex work was decriminalized, sex workers would have access to the same labour protections, supports, and services as other workers without fear of stigma or violence.

REASONS TO ENGAGE IN SEX WORK INCLUDE:

Last resort Earn a living

Autonomy Flexible schedule

Some people believe that because a client is paying a sex worker, the client holds power over the sex worker, and that since their consent was predicated on a payment, their consent is erased. In reality, most sex workers view an encounter with a client as a transaction negotiated by consenting adults. This requires seeing sex work as work.

For the most part, there are no concerns expressed about whether workers in other industries consent to their work, as that is assumed to be a normal part of a relationship between employer and employee. It should be no different for sex workers. The difference, for some people, is that sex is involved, and their objection to sex work often has more to do with their moral values about sex – who should be having it and under what circumstances – than it has to do with sexual exploitation. It should also be noted that a not-insignificant proportion of sex workers are male, transgender, non-binary, and of other genders. Speaking only about women erases these folks' experiences.

Myth: Sex work is the sexual exploitation of women.

Sex work must be seen as work.

Myth: No one chooses to be a sex worker.

Most people aren't regularly asked why they do what they do to earn a living, but this is the most common question asked of sex workers. This is usually driven by a belief that no one could possibly choose to be a sex worker, in which case they must have been forced to do so. This often has more to do with people's discomfort with sexuality and the idea that because they couldn't imagine doing sex work, they can't believe that others choose to do so.

When sex workers are asked why they do sex work, the number one answer is that they do so in order to earn a living and have found that sex work serves their needs. For some, it supports a certain lifestyle that may involve expensive clothes or travel, or education and programs for their children. Many sex workers would say that it's simply a way to make a living. For others, sex work is one of a very limited range of options in low-wage, menial jobs. For all sex workers, their choice to participate in sex work should be respected.



At our Curriculum for Change trainings, like the one in Whitehorse pictured to the left, common myths and stereotypes about sex workers are deconstructed and discussed in a safe learning environment.

Living in Community is a unique initiative that brings together diverse stakeholders to collaboratively improve the health and safety of sex workers. We undertake public education, policy advocacy, and sharing of our unique model of collaboration with the goal of creating communities that are healthy and safe for everyone.

Learn more at: www.livingincommunity.ca