

Listen to sex workers: support decriminalisation and anti-discrimination protections

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1. What does feminist strategy mean today?

Today, feminist strategy means self determination, people speaking for themselves, not being spoken for.

Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association, is the national peak body of sex workers and sex worker organisations, with membership open to all sex workers, past and present, its only \$20 a year or \$50 for three years, tax deductible, and the forms can be downloaded from the Scarlet Alliance website (Scarlet Alliance, 2011). Scarlet Alliance embodies over two decades history of formal sex worker peer organising in Australia by the funded and unfunded sex worker groups across the country (Saunders, 1999). Those groups do outreach, community development, health promotion, STI and HIV prevention, support for people affected by anti-trafficking policies, industrial relations advocacy, financial and economic justice advocacy, housing, welfare, legal and police referrals, health and human rights policy.

Over 20,000 occasions of direct, hands on service delivery to sex workers in Australia are performed in any given year and these organisations participate in their national peak body to ensure that all of this information is turned into strong messages of representation at a national level. We take our sex worker peer education, sex worker organising, activism and politics very seriously. This is not an academic indulgence. Sex worker activism is not a career path. Sex workers are not engaging in activism to further our careers, and we are not engaging in activism to try to salvage the whore stigma in our lives and professionalise our CV. Activism is not a cop out from the day to day

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discrimination we face as sex workers. Our sex worker activism could also be called labour organising, and without it we wouldn't have any rights.

Everything that sex workers have won in terms of work conditions, dignity, health and access to services, we have won because we have fought for it ourselves.

Our feminist strategy today is to run our own organisations, our own services, define our own health, human rights and political agendas, create our own political organising spaces and to respond directly to the issues that affect us, including HIV and trafficking.

2. What are the challenges and limitations of feminist strategising in the current movement?

The challenges facing the sex worker rights movement are the same as the challenges any marginalised population struggling for social and political acceptance faces. We are struggling to be heard in a landscape that not only marginalises our bodies, but also marginalises our voices.

There is nothing ostensibly "wrong" with sex work, porn, stripping, online web cam, phone sex or BD/SM that isn't wrong with any other industry or workplace under capitalism. Anti-sex work feminists who want to rescue the world from sex work, and the moving and still images that the sex industry produces, are essentially arguing that we, sex workers, should not work in this job. This is out of step with all the arguments for decriminalisation; arguments which are based on strong evidence, not morally driven advocacy (Himel 2010).

Unfortunately, increased regulation of sex work is supported by most abolitionist anti-sex work feminists. Such increased regulation includes criminalising clients (like Sweden, now a honey pot for corruption), banning porn (like Malaysia) and filtering the internet (like China). All of this increased regulation is ignoring sex work organising globally who are arguing against such policies. Abolitionist demands are in direct opposition to those articulated by sex worker advocates. Abolitionist feminists who are not supporting decriminalisation of the sex industry, that is, a *decrease* in the regulation of sex work so that it is in line with the regulation of other occupations, are also not supporting sex worker organising (Harcourt, O'Connor et al 2010).

Sex worker organising is as old as the profession. The current wave of formalised sex worker organising began thirty years ago and, in Australia is conducted by funded and unfunded member organisations of the sex worker led and run peak body Scarlet Alliance (Saunders 1999). Sex worker organisations, groups and networks in every state and territory in Australia deliver a combined annual total of over 20,000 occasions of services to sex workers in Australia. All of the staff and volunteers in these groups are sex worker peer educators; current or past sex workers who also do outreach and in-house information exchange and advocacy with members of their own community. This organising is credited for sex worker occupational health and safety, high condom use and

the lowest STI and HIV rates in the world. Sex workers are organising for decriminalisation; conservative governments prefer to install police into our (already) overregulated workplaces.

The time is right to ignite the feminist love affair with sex worker workplace organising – without political compromise or apology.

In March 1987, the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria (PCV) was the first organisation of sex workers in the world to receive government funding. Forming around the demands for decriminalisation of sex work, the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria backed onto the Marcia Neave led inquiry which had, in 1986, recommended decriminalisation of the sex industry in Victoria. Instead of decriminalisation however, regulation-heavy licensing was perceived to be more politically palatable and so was implemented rather than decriminalisation. The name of the legislation, the Prostitution Control Act, demonstrated the political compromise, at the time “controlling” sex workers was much higher a priority than protecting any of our rights.

The very active Prostitutes Collective Victoria had successfully organised criminalised sex workers; after licensing controls were introduced a key sex worker organiser moved into the Miscellaneous Workers Union intending to organise a more receptive legal sex industry. It didn't produce massive numbers of union members and within 18 months the sex worker organiser was dumped by that union. The LHMWU still has demarcation over the industry.

The problems with organising under a licensed environment were only the beginning of the problems sex worker organisers in Victoria were facing in the wake of the introduction of licensing controls.

The newly introduced licensing controls meant that sex workers in the Australian state of Victoria were, and still are, operating in a heavily criminally regulated environment. This is very different to the decriminalised environments of New South Wales or New Zealand, where regulations are attached to civil penalties, not criminal penalties. In New South Wales and New Zealand, decriminalisation means that sex workers are regulated by the same civil instruments as any other business or worker; for example, industrial relations laws, planning laws, tax laws, occupational health and safety laws and general business laws. In the decriminalised jurisdictions of New South Wales and New Zealand, sex workers experience the same human rights and industrial controls as other workers in other industries.

By contrast sex workers in Victoria are subject to specific criminally sanctioned regulations and controls that relate *only* to the sex industry, not to any other job in Victoria. *Only* sex workers face mandatory HIV and STI testing, *only* sex workers face criminal sanctions if working in a workplace that is non-compliant with brothel licensing laws, *only* sex workers have to apply for criminally sanctioned exemptions if choosing to work from home. These criminal penalties not only affect sex workers' every-day lives, they also affect the way this industry is perceived. This had a material impact on sex worker organising in Victoria in the 1990s.

Despite the massive achievements of the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria and the historic significance of this important organisation, sex workers as a community and the funds we had attracted drew an unhealthy level of interest from the health and community sector, stemming from a perception that sex workers were politically unable to run their own collective, and that the funds we had lobbied for could be better spent by people who were not sex workers. This perception was not helped by the very public failures sex workers were facing within the formal union structures in Victoria at this time, and the new complexities that the licensing system had introduced into sex workers lives generally. The collective was taken over and is now managed by a community health service. This was a political compromise that meant health services to sex workers continue to be delivered, but without the organising focus that the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria had embodied. The new project, called Resourcing for Health and Education (RhED), has elements of peer education (namely the Hustling to Health street outreach program on Friday nights, and the associated activities), but falls short of implementing affirmative action across the other staff positions.

This reflects a general positioning of professional “helpers” within sex worker health services, a trend Scarlet Alliance rails against. By employing professional “helpers” within sex worker projects we are portrayed as hapless victims in need of rescue and assistance in order to justify the government funding flowing our way. This is not how or why sex worker organisations were established in Australia, but continues to be the trend in Australia; “organising” is being replaced with “helping”.

For example, street-based sex work was almost decriminalised in 2002, with the proposed introduction of safe houses and removal of police from their workplace (AGSPAG, Attorney General’s Street Prostitution Advisory Group). The City of Port Phillip supported decriminalisation but political machinations at a parliamentary level baulked. The political compromise was to shelve all recommendations thus allowing the only policy change to affect street sex workers to be increased police powers. Attention has been directed to “help” street based sex workers leave their work, whether they want to or not, in the form of police diversionary programs that RhED is funded to deliver. This ongoing focus on criminal approaches leaves sex worker organising in a long-term policy blind spot.

Scarlet Alliance argued in 2008/09 to the then Victorian State Labor Government that regulation of sex work should leave the jurisdiction of the Justice Minister for the Health Minister, and that Victoria should decriminalise sex work. All evidence shows that decriminalisation is the best system of regulation (Abel, Fitzgerald et al; Collaery 1991; McDonald 2008; Donovan, Harcourt et al, 2010; Harcourt, O’Connor et al 2010; Himel 2010; Jeffreys, Matthews et al 2010). The Labor Government in Victoria said no. The newly elected Liberal Government in Victoria has introduced legislation into Parliament to move the portfolio from the Justice Minister to the Police

Minister (Premier of Victoria, 2011). This shows that the trend towards increased policing is getting worse in Victoria, not better.

Sex workers and allies have argued for thirty years that mandatory HIV and STI testing is discriminatory, not in the interests of public health, not cost effective and should be abolished (Scarlet Alliance 2007; Wilson, Heymer et al. 2009). In 2010 the then Labor Government suggested a political compromise of handing the responsibility of determining the frequency of testing to the health department. The now Liberal Victorian Health Minister has recently scuttled even that political compromise (Medew 2011) and, for sex workers, unfortunately nothing has changed.

Despite all evidence showing that sex workers in Australia consistently maintain lower rates of STI infection than the general population (Kirby Institute 2011, pg 8, 17, 26,) and high compliance of safe sex practices, monthly sexual health checks remain Government mandated in Victoria (see above). The perception (by the general public, media and government) and stigmatisation of sex workers as a group that risk our health and by implication risk the health of others, unfortunately supports laws that further discriminate against and stigmatise sex workers in Victoria. Victorian sex workers must, at present, spend personal time "outing" themselves in public spaces (for example a doctor's office or health clinic) to obtain documentation allowing us to work in the licensed sex industry in Victoria. For sex workers choosing to work in a brothel in Victoria, this health certificate is then turned over to a manager or owner, who, for a new worker, may also demand other identifying documents (passport, drivers license, proof of residence) before allowing us to work. This is an unnecessary, expensive, risky and invasive practice.

Private workers must either register with the BLA (Business Licensing Authority) as Exempt Escorts - supplying legal name and address, photo identification document/s and all working names & phone numbers. Or if wishing to work as an Exempt Prostitution Service Provider (a small owner-operated brothel, with up to one other person) a worker must first inform the real estate/owner and council, then register with the BLA. Their premises must be in an industrial zone, it must be 200 metres from a school or church and 100 metres from the nearest residence. Once registered, sex workers obtain a PCA number which allows them to advertise their services legally in Victoria. This is a ludicrously long winded, invasive and ultimately prohibitive process that does not have sex workers' privacy or safety needs in mind. There is no real incentive to participate in this process, yet one remains illegal until doing so.

Despite licensing of the sex industry in Victoria, advertising is restricted. Sex industry businesses and workers are not able to place advertisements either describing their services or picturing their workers or themselves, other than head & shoulders shots. This, again, is ludicrous because head and shoulder photos are the most identifying and least confidential way of representing yourself visually. In a jurisdiction where sex workers are not protected by anti-discrimination law, there is no incentive to out yourself in public via your photos. Sex industry businesses or individual workers may not advertise

through broadcasting or television and may not advertise to employ sex workers. To advertise a position vacant in a brothel is considered in criminal law the crime of "inducing a person to work." This illustrates yet again how licensing is not in any way a step towards legitimising the day to day activities of sex work. Instead licensing systems entrench the social stigma and fear of our work. And street sex work remains illegal.

Not surprisingly, although there are varying estimates of the level of compliance within the overall sex industry in Victoria - all are low.

Government and media rhetoric regarding low compliance often tend towards the extension of regulatory schemes, towards the punitive.

To treat any population as requiring of surveillance and worthy of less rights - in effect to hold sex workers separate in law from the rest of society and then to expect them to accept and comply with these laws - is unreasonable, unrealistic and ultimately discriminatory.

Sex work is work. Sex workers in Victoria know this; we are waiting and working for the law to catch up with us. In New South Wales where sex work is decriminalised, these rights have been realised, and in each state and territory the rights that sex workers have vary. We are subject to different legal environments depending on where we live and where we work; the example of Victoria however highlights particular problems when legal environments are created without sex workers' needs in mind.

The challenges and limitations of feminist strategising for sex workers are the same of any population struggling for acceptance and social justice- we must be listened to, not ignored, we must be treated as equal to any other worker, not pathologised or victimised.

3. How do contemporary feminist activists and women's movements draw on the practices and experiences of earlier movements?

Evidence-based approaches supported by sex worker organisers, such as full decriminalisation of our work, have been regularly compromised or opposed by feminist "concern" about whether sex work is a good job or not, harmful or not, a "feminist" issue or not. While sex workers *scream* for human rights, many feminists are confused, and/or support increased regulation because they support abolition of sex work. The result is that regulation of sex work is generally supported by a supposedly feminist anti-sex work abolitionist agenda. And in Victoria, Australia, they are regulations that are totally inappropriate, born from political compromise, without the voice of sex workers, with incredibly low compliance, and with devastating outcomes for sex workers.

Sex worker advocates argue that licensing promotes non-compliance resulting in this two-tiered industry. Brothel work is now (optimistically) only 50% compliant with the laws in Victoria (Chen, Donovan et al 2010). The proposed

new legislation in Victorian parliament might give Consumer Affairs Victoria (CAV) compliance officers the same powers of entry as police. Over-regulation from an enthusiastic Business Licensing Authority (BLA) and CAV has resulted in mandatory HIV and STI testing for licensed brothel workers in Victoria (see above). This is a health policy abomination and a breeding ground for corruption, including, but not limited to, corruption by doctors (Donovan, Harcourt et al. 2010).

Migrant sex workers have been the very worst hit by bad laws and barriers to sex worker organising. Victoria is a good example of anti-sex work feminist "concern" contributing to sex workers' marginalisation within the anti-trafficking laws. The anti-trafficking policy response in Victoria has seen the implied criminality of migrant sex work, through high profile media campaigns that conflate all migrant sex work with the crime of human trafficking. Instead of supporting migrant sex workers to organise, the efforts to jail one single Thai brothel owner utilised all on the ground resources in Victoria in the last decade, spending years in court and millions of tax-payers dollars. Various informants from that case were eventually tried themselves.

Everyone who was involved had their lives ruined. The sex worker witnesses became expensive objects, "helped" by welfare agencies within an inch of their sanity, waiting, for years, for justice they had never personally fought for. Having been picked up in a raid where they stood to lose their substantive work visa if they didn't become witnesses for the crown, they had every choice removed from their lives by our criminal justice system; their freedom of movement, their freedom to associate, their ability to simply be, all denied in the name of creating one single inmate. Their work conditions had not been fair. But neither was the way they were treated by the courts, nor the way that not one cent went into sex worker organising. Yet anti-sex work feminists championed those laws. And in Victoria they are about to do so again.

In 2009, organisations that claim to "rescue" sex workers in Victoria demanded forced entry to sex work workplaces, police involvement in the regulation of brothels, and the right of Consumer Affairs Victoria compliance officers to have the same right of entry into workplaces as police. The current Victorian Government legislation complies with these demands and will potentially become law by mid-2012. Anti-trafficking policies hurt sex workers; Victoria is living proof. Yet anti-sex work feminists continue to support criminal justice interventions into sex workers lives.

Support for sex worker organising has become a forgotten dream. Instead, the focus is on mobilising police and rescuers against sex industry bosses. Meanwhile corruption is rife – like paedophiles volunteering for parish childcare duties, those seeking to exploit sex workers have taken up the anti-sex work trafficking rhetoric with a vitriol that make sex workers' skin crawl. The anti-trafficking head of the Swedish police was jailed for running brothels and assaulting sex workers in his "other" life (Anthony 2010). One of Yarra Council's supporters of the "rescue industry" is now under investigation for his alleged role as a stand-over man profiting from Asian-run brothels in that area (Heard

2010). His prison sentence was reduced when he agreed to co-operate with police in order to prosecute brothel operators (Beck, 2011). The end result of this is that sex workers, whose workplaces are the ones that will be raided and their jobs lost, are the ones who will ultimately be punished, uncompensated and unsupported. Increased regulation causes increased corruption and has decreased opportunities for formal sex worker organising. Migrant sex worker issues have been ignored in the fight for higher feminist "moral" ground.

The current sex worker movement recognises the material outcomes that have arisen from the failure of the feminist movement to listen to us. We draw strength from similar situations in other historic feminist movements where the marginalised communities have refused to allow the feminist movement to speak on their behalf. For example, racism in predominantly white and academic feminist movements has been addressed in some sectors by the assertion of people of colour within feminist circles to have their voices heard. In the same way migrant sex workers in Australia demand to be heard by feminist groups that are predominantly led by people who are not migrants, and people who are not sex workers. The necessity to not only include, but to be *informed by* those directly affected by an issue, is a concern that faces all social movements; including refugee rights movements, anti-racism movements. This is a complex question that faces us all, not the least those of us who are organising in the sex worker rights movement.

4. Where do they see themselves in terms of movement achievements to date and the road still to be travelled?

Our challenge, as sex worker advocates, is to understand why, within feminist circles, the arguments we put forward for decriminalisation and sex workers rights are not *believed* to be genuinely representative of sex workers. Our challenge is to understand why our voices are not being heard.

Some within feminist movement have labelled those of us who do the advocacy in the sex worker rights movement as "privileged" and "happy hookers" who are unable to understand the hardships that sex workers who are not "us" face.

Our message to those feminist is:

Do not assume *anything* about the sex workers you are meeting in advocacy situations.

Do not assume *anything* about the sex workers you meet on Facebook, who you see in the media, who you see doing advocacy.

Do not assume we have not been victims of assault, discrimination, family breakdown, abuse, violence, bad work conditions, domestic violence, poverty, police corruption or crime.

We are people, just like you, who have faced everything in a life that any human being faces. We have a right to privacy about trauma we have experienced in our lives.

But as sex workers we also face deep-seeded stigmas which mean that if we don't disclose to you our stories of tragedy and the demeaning experiences we have faced, we run the risk of not being believed by you.

This is what we call feminist attachment to "tragedy porn": A desire in the feminist movement to hear, and enjoy hearing, tragic stories of hardship from sex workers.

When we don't tell them, we face the accusation that we are covering up the "truth" about sex work.

For example when we speak about the low prevalence of incidents of trafficking in the sex industry, we are accused of being in denial about migrant sex workers' lives.

When we present actual statistics about drug use in the sex industry, we are told that we are ignoring or lying about drug use in sex work.

We are expected to *perform* stereotypical narratives of tragedy porn for feminist audiences and when we don't we are disbelieved. Sex workers don't want to be only believed when we *perform* these normative stereotypes about sex work.

Why do you only believe a sex worker when they are telling you about a *bad* day at work, but have trouble believing a sex worker who tells you that decriminalisation and human rights will improve our workplaces, and increased regulation will not?

The goal of the sex worker rights movement is to be heard *for ourselves*, to be self determined and to be recognised as politically autonomous. Where sex workers have been listened to, such as within the HIV response in Australia, the outcome has been incredibly productive. Where sex workers have been ignored, such as the trafficking response in Australia, the outcome has been counter-productive to sex workers rights. This alone tells us an evidence based story of how to build policy and responses to sex work that can actually increase, rather than decrease, our health, dignity and human rights.

5. What barriers and possibilities for feminist struggle has neo-liberalism created?

There is no doubt that neo-liberal frameworks have given a platform to tragedy porn and provided barriers to sex worker voices that are not performing tragedy porn.

Neo-liberalism can be framed as a particular set of ideas and pressures that are identified as stemming from the private sector and being "foisted" onto Government, Community and society generally. The work of Susan Strange however identifies the neo-liberalist aspects of globalisation as being as much a product of Government as the private sector (1996). Democratically elected Governments have willingly and forcefully pushed our public institutions further and further into behaviours that mimic economic rationalist thinking, until those institutions, today, can be defined as behaving as products of neo-

liberalism, as if any other way of operating is invalid. The community sector is no different. However as sex workers we recognise that the historical underpinnings of the characteristics of feminist modes of working within the community sector pre-date neo-liberal philosophies. This next section explores those ideas.

The role of the feminist "helper" in relation to sex workers was built within welfare infrastructure in post-industrialised Western Europe and the UK (Agustin, 2007: 96-133). The goal of "rescuing" lower class sex workers literally brought feminists out of the kitchen and into esteemed "work", albeit mostly volunteer. It must be acknowledged that the work, while giving status to women who had previously been socially invisible, had catastrophic consequences for those who were "helped." For sex workers, social exclusion, discrimination, jailing, and deportation from the UK in the 1970s is the key example.

The current day examples of such approaches include the routine deportation of migrant sex workers from Australian sex industry workplaces during the Howard Government conservative era response to trafficking 2003-2007. During this time migrant sex workers who were picked up in brothel raids lost their substantive visa and were deported unless they assisted police with trafficking investigations. This led to the deportation of many sex workers, some who had been affected by trafficking, and many who had not.

This "help" was unwanted, unwarranted, cruel, and was framed as a response to trafficking issues in Australia. The road to the laws that allowed for such deportations was made easier by feminists from contemporary "helping professions" who advocated to bring in harsh anti-trafficking laws, and supported the laws when they were being discussed by Parliament (Agustin 2007: 33.). The Howard Government brought in the laws, and those laws have hurt migrant sex workers. The laws were supported by people who feel it is their life calling, and career (whether in a paid capacity or not) to "help" migrant sex workers.

Those of you who work in the helping professions need to recognise that by "helping" you gain privilege, money, employment, status and a position of power. By assisting others you gain a role in society that would not be there except for the needy other; in our case, sex workers.

The modern manifestation of the "helping" professions in relation to sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers, has a new moniker: The rescue industry. The rescue industry has money making capabilities and creates career opportunities for feminists. The term "rescue industry" is explained and explored in detail by Laura Agustin in her book *Sex at the Margins* (2007). This book is recommended reading for anyone who is endeavouring to fully understand both the history and the theoretical underpinnings of the helping professions and the rescue industry.

In Australia, sex workers have witnessed "helpers" set up organisations with the aim of "helping" sex workers within a feminist framework, and "helping" sex workers affected by trafficking. The key claim of these groups is that no one was

doing such work, and as such they formed to meet an identified demand, of sex workers who needed their “help”. This claim, made by one of the founders of a rescue industry organisation, at the Feminist Futures conference in Melbourne, May 2011, is ignorant to the decades of work already done by sex worker communities. Such “helping” groups, and their political clout, have the capacity to be quite successful in attracting funding.

These groups would have no validity and no cause to attract funding if it were known to funders that sex workers can actually help ourselves and we don't need abolitionist feminists to do it for us. The self organised work that sex workers are already doing in terms of peer education service delivery, as outlined in the first section of this article, is made invisible by the rescue industry.

A disturbing element of the rescue industry is that they demand, require, and cannot do without tragedy porn. It doesn't fit the rhetoric of the rescue industry if sex workers present to these services, or in public spaces, and *don't* tell a tragic story.

Now why would feminists be so threatened by sex workers living our lives with strength that they would *disbelieve* a sex worker's political ideas because that sex worker hasn't shared stories of negative experiences in sex work? Middle-class feminist “helpers” gain status by positioning us as victims and themselves as saviours. This is nothing new, and this phenomenon, starting in the mid 19th century, was how many middle-class white women managed to get themselves out of the house and into the realm of public life in western democracies, including Australia. Without the Damned Whores there was no need for God's Police – feminists who have claimed to be rescuing sex workers were given platforms, celebrated, they influenced policy, and found themselves a voice in Australia during the last two centuries.

Will feminists deconstruct the roles of “helper” – “victim” through a feminist lens? Or will we replicate these roles, seeing only through the lens of self interest? Sex workers recognise that it is in anti-sex work feminists' interests not to listen to sex workers when we speak from our strength. As explained by *Women's Views on News* author Lindsay Carroll, “There is currently a climate of fear amongst London sex workers due to police activity that is driven by hype and misinformation promoted by NGOs with a financial vested interest in the anti-trafficking industry, who are ideologically opposed to commercial sex” (2011). Within the neo-liberal environment anti-sex work feminists justify their claims to the moral feminist high-ground by mobilising “tragedy porn,” placing themselves in the role of the “helper” and receiving financial reward.

This is particularly current in feminist spaces, where the rhetoric is literally for sale; the worse the tragedy porn, the more funding it attracts. For example, the rescue industry in Australia are known for using tragedy porn in advocacy spaces, to the media, to politicians, even to the funders themselves, in order to convince politicians that there is an unmet need that justifies rescue industry funding. It demeans sex worker, but it makes money.

Feminists – this is your neo-liberalist problem. Sex workers – this is our neo-liberalist problem. Tragedy porn is dollars for the rescue industry. Every new trafficking case in Australia is a new tragedy for exploitation by the rescue industry. And when sex workers try to address these issues in feminist spaces we are faced with a dilemma: speak of our sex work tragedy and be believed, or speak of our strength and be dismissed. If you challenge the theoretical basis of the usefulness of tragedy porn in advocacy and social change settings, you will be branded a pimp, a trafficker, an enabler, and you run the risk of being seen as a person or group who disbelieves the negative experiences individual sex workers have had.

Sex worker shouldn't have to use feminist discussion spaces as a public counselling or debrief space for the difficulties of our lives just so that we will be believed us when we say we want human rights.

And sex workers don't want the feminist community to reward, clap, praise a person when they breakdown describing all the negative experiences they have had in their lives in relation to sex work. People who need counselling and support to work through trauma in their lives *shouldn't have to perform their grief for you* in order to access basic human rights, assistance or justice. In meetings, conferences, service delivery spaces, not-for-profit organisation environments, community development projects, within a feminist service delivery environment, in a counselling session, or any compromising situation when seeking support, political or otherwise, or in any kind of space that is outside sex worker only spaces; sex workers deserve respect and deserve to be listened to. On our terms. As empowered, organised, strong, vocal people.

If you don't believe us because we don't perform our tragedies for you then you are participating in a sick circus with sex workers as the non-consensual entertainment.

6. Does the decline of neo-liberalism create openings for feminists?

Sex worker peer education is our labour organising; a critical approach that sees sex workers supporting ourselves (Mawulisa, 2002). Peer education is the sex worker response to neo-liberalism and the sex worker contribution to the decline of neo-liberalism. In places in the world where neo-liberalism is palpably on the decline (for example some countries in South America), sex worker organising is incredibly strong. Sex worker leaders such as Elena Reynaga represent these movements. She is the General Secretary of AMMAR, the Female Sex Workers' Trade Union of Argentina and President of RedTraSex, the Latin American and Caribbean network of sex workers' organisations. In her words:

It is through our organising that we sex workers have mounted effective responses to the HIV pandemic... [Yet] a large part of the money available for HIV/AIDS is spent outsourcing management because many agencies refuse to give funds directly to community-based organisations.

Yes, it's true; most of us didn't get the chance to go to school.

But we were able to advocate for changes in laws that criminalise us...

...and we were able to stand up and face those who wish us to stay ignorant. How could we possibly not manage our own organisations?

It is time we began to be trusted.

Outsourcing the management of funds is a policy that contradicts the autonomy of sex worker organisations. Evidence shows that most effective responses to HIV are sex worker-led. Our programs combine peer outreach with advocacy for sex workers' human rights and we fight strongly for the repeal of laws that repress or criminalise sex work.

We are the experts when it comes to peer outreach within our community. Orquideas del Mar, a sex worker organisation in El Salvador reached 2,000 sex workers in the last year. Ecuador reached more than 8000 sex workers and Argentina reached 9,000.

Another successful example is the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes. They collaborated with the government on a public health and rights campaign called "No shame girl, you're a professional!" They won the inclusion of "prostitute" among the list of recognised professions of the Brazilian Ministry of Labour. They even took their fight all the way to parliament where they pushed for a law that would abolish discrimination against sex workers.

In other words, the most effective responses have been achieved in places where sex work is actually recognised as "work" and where, we, sex worker organisations, manage our own funds (Reynaga, 2008)

Janelle Fawkes of Scarlet Alliance defines peer education:

Peer education describes the sharing by one or more sex workers of information, skills, techniques, and negotiation strategies with another sex worker(s)...Peer education is supported by a community development framework using empowerment, sex-positive attitudes, and a shared interest in systemic advocacy and representation. The success of these frameworks in providing sex workers with a nonthreatening and nonjudgmental environment is illustrated by the number of sex workers who engage in peer education via their sex worker organisation. (Fawkes, 2006: 350-351)

Janelle explains the pedagogy of peer education:

A new worker entering the Australian sex industry is likely to be informed about the benefits of visiting the sex worker organisation or may experience new worker training directly delivered by a sex worker organisation. Sex worker organisations have a presence in sex industry workplaces via magazines, outreach visits, brochures, media activities, political representation, and public profiles. Some sex workers volunteer for their local sex worker organisation. Many more become advocates for sex worker peer education and occupational safety and health rights within their workplace, ensuring that new workers are mentored and that workplace conditions are improved. These peer educators draw on information from their sex worker organisation that may have been developed and added to by their peers over many years. In this way, knowledge spreads through the industry, either directly from or as a result of strong peer education strategies delivered by sex worker organisations. (2006: 351)

Fawkes goes on to warn of the elements of community organising that can hinder peer education:

Sex worker peer education is undermined when the strategy is isolated from a sex workers' rights framework or when sex worker peer educators are not housed within a sex worker community organisation. Peer education cannot exist separately from a supportive sex worker community organisation. Peer education that is not genuinely community-based is not only ineffective but results in a loss of support from sex workers. A community development frame-work requires continued participation by the sex worker community for the long term. Models that simply add a few low-paid sex workers to the bottom rungs of an organisation that is otherwise driven and directed by non-sex workers do not effectively engage sex workers. Unless sex workers feel some ownership over the organisation and can participate over the long term, an organisation will become irrelevant...

Community development in this context involves skills building, mentoring, and/or resourcing members of a community to facilitate involvement, sharing and increasing of skills, knowledge, and capacity, and community involvement and relationships with other sex workers. Sex worker organisations around the world have deployed community development activities, including sex worker community publications, organisation and participation in community events such as gay pride day, working groups and political forums addressing issues that affect sex workers, informational workshops on everything from taxation to sadomasochism, language classes and performance groups (such as Debby Doesn't Do It For Free.) All of these activities complement the usual array of safe sex, occupational safety and health, and workplace negotiation skills that are delivered through peer education by sex worker organisations. (Fawkes 2006)

This is why we support sex workers organisations. Critically organising for ourselves (Jeffreys, 2011). This is why we won't perform our tragedy for you. Because to live our lives with strength, you need to accept us at our best. We want the feminist movement to stop punishing us for our strengths, stop rewarding us for our pain, stop gaining privilege on the back of our needs, and to listen when we speak. We will continue to speak out about our rights, you need to hear us. If you deny our experience, you deny our existence. We already organise for ourselves.

7. And what movements today could be allies for a transition out of patriarchy?

The feminist movement could and should be a great ally to the sex worker movement for a transition out of patriarchy. Sex workers are already fighting bad laws, we don't need to be fighting sections of the feminist community as well. Porn workers, strip club workers, private sex workers, small businesses – all face devastatingly over-regulation that is illogical and detrimental to organising. Sex workers are organising against bad workplace practises, but while the entire industry is treated as clandestine, criminalised and undesirable, who is listening? If feminists aren't listening, who will?

We want non-sex workers to recognise sex worker organising. Don't speak for us. Don't make a career out of us. Don't write about us. Be our ally by letting us organise and speak for ourselves. We are campaigning for the full decriminalisation of all sex work. Support us on our own terms.

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Scarlet Alliance can be visited at www.scarletalliance.org.au,
www.twitter.com/scarletalliance and www.youtube.com/scarletalliancevideo