

PONY Statement on Demand

Submitted to the Beijing +10 Fourth World Conference on Women by Prostitutes of New York

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Prostitutes of New York is an organization of many kinds of workers in New York City's sex industry. PONY is a member of the international Network of Sex Work Projects, which advocates for the rights of sex workers around the world. Two keywords have arisen in anti-sex work anti-trafficking advocacy: "demand" and "dignity."

Demand

Demand is a current buzzword among some anti-trafficking activists. This phrase can, in one sense, refer to the legitimate concerns raised by migrants associations regarding the demands of rich states for unregulated labour and their reluctance to couple these demands with migrants rights. However, another usage represents a dangerous slippage into an anti-sex work, anti-male and homophobic use of the term "demand" which, under the guise of protecting sex workers, is another way of undermining sex workers' autonomy.

Proponents addressing "demand" focus on sex workers' clients as perpetrators of violence against women. However, there are a number of flaws with this approach. First, sex workers around the world point not to their clients but to the state and its agents as the prime violators of their human rights. Extending the powers of law enforcement into yet another sphere of the lives of sex workers presents a great threat to the human rights of sex workers. Client demand is not a problem for sex workers or an issue for sex workers.

This new focus on demand has serious public health consequences. Recent work around HIV has shown that effective HIV prevention must include clients of sex workers. Sex workers in developing nations bear the brunt of this epidemic not only as people with HIV but as scapegoats for civil societies' fear of HIV.

HIV is the most grave threat to women's health in the developing world. However, HIV may be inadvertently directly encouraged by the feminist initiatives to penalize clients of sex workers. Penalizing clients instead of including them in efforts to curb the spread of HIV can only lead to greater rates of transmission of HIV. This will lead to deaths of many people beyond sex workers. The recent focus on women and AIDS for World AIDS Day failed to include sex workers as a group particularly deserving of prevention, treatment and care.

Violence against sex workers is another area that is negatively affected by the current focus on demand. Efforts to penalize clients of sex workers are not the best way to combat such violence. Sex workers are most vulnerable to violence in situations where sex work is criminalized or stigmatized and they are treated as outsiders or are not encouraged to avail themselves of legal protections. This includes the criminalization of clients of sex workers.

Despite the wider stigmatization of the clients of sex workers, sex workers generally seek out and appreciate their clients. Clients are often caricatured as sad, crazed or violent. However, people in vulnerable situations in the sex industry have frequently turned to clients for assistance and been helped by these clients. The majority of clients of sex workers see them in a far more human light than most feminists.

The commercialization and regulation of heterosexual desire in the form of male client-female sex worker prostitution is recognized by sex workers as inequitable to women in a number of ways. As sex worker rights activists of all genders, we are committed to ending these inequalities through a programme of sex worker rights and empowerment. We are saddened that the efforts of sex workers themselves are not supported by many feminists who in fact prefer to see us as victims or threats rather than as allies in the fight for women's rights.

Sex workers rights advocates wholeheartedly support the crucial efforts of migrants' rights advocates and labour rights advocates to address the issues of the need for exploitable people in the global north. To trivialize this issue by sexualizing it in voyeuristic ways by appealing to male shame and female chastity is a travesty.

Dignity

Dignity is also a current buzzword among some anti-trafficking activists. As sex worker rights activists, we fully subscribe to the belief in the dignity of all human beings. Prostitution is not the purchase of a person, but of a person's services, as in other service occupations. However, the term "dignity" has never been explicitly defined by advocates who intend for commercial sex to be seen as incompatible with personal dignity. In fact, they advocate against sex workers' rights by citing sexual commerce as the sale of the person him/herself. This view of dignity as exclusive of sexual commerce is a condescending reduction of a person to his or her sex, a reduction that feminists have combated for hundreds of years. Such condescension has no place in any discussion of justice or rights. A sex worker's dignity is not determined by feminist perception of sex work. Women's Network for Unity, a Cambodian organization of 5000 sex workers with dignity, uses the slogan "Don't talk to me about sewing machines, talk to me about workers' rights!" meaning that they do not want to be turned away from sex work — they want their rights and dignity as sex workers protected and respected.