

LANGUAGE MATTERS : TALKING ABOUT SEX WORK

1. Introduction 2. Language Matters 3. Words that Matter

THIS INFOSHEET IS PART OF A SERIES OF 5 PRODUCED BY STELLA IN COLLABORATION WITH ALLIES TO EDUCATE AND MOBILIZE COMMUNITIES AROUND LEGAL ADVOCACY AND DECRIMINALIZATION OF SEX WORK.

1. The Basics: Decriminalization of Sex Work 101
2. Sex Work and the *Charter*
3. Challenging Prostitution Laws: *Bedford v. Canada*
4. Language Matters: Talking About Sex Work
5. 10 Ways to Be a Great Ally to Sex Workers

1

INTRODUCTION

The way we talk about sex work is anything but neutral – it communicates meaning and influences how people understand our work and create policy about us. The words we use when speaking about sex work – whether in media or legal arguments, with our friends or in discussion with a stranger – matter. Language used to describe sex work and sex workers varies across and within sex working communities – this speaks to differences in our histories, regional specificities and how we self-identify.

Sex work and sex workers are often framed in very simplistic and stereotypical ways that erase the complexity of our realities: good or bad, forced or chosen, glamorized or exploitative. When choosing language to talk about sex work we are trying to balance self-identification, our desire to represent our diversity and the importance of breaking through stereotypes and binary categories. When our choice of words differs from the beliefs and stereotypes that people have about us, people are quick to discredit us.

So, how and when we use language depends on who we are talking to. Within sex working communities we honour the language each of us uses to self-identify. We may, however, publicly reject or strategically choose other language to describe ourselves, because language can also divide and support public misconceptions of sex workers.

2

LANGUAGE MATTERS

This Info Sheet is a reflection on language that promotes a common goal for sex workers' rights while simultaneously representing our diversity. It is also intended to help non-sex workers – who are often contacted by media and lawmakers – think about the impact of their language.

Sex workers and allies identified the importance of such a reflection at a September 2012 convening. As such, the following is not intended to be directive but rather to encourage a conversation about language.

Language is linguistically and culturally specific and means different things when translated into other languages and used in other cultural contexts.

The following words and phrases – presented alphabetically – are just a few commonly used to talk about sex work.

ABOLITIONISTS

Some feminists refer to themselves as **abolitionists** or **neo-abolitionists**. Abolitionists believe that prostitution is inherently exploitative, violent and akin to slavery. In this framing all sex workers are victims. These feminists seek to eliminate prostitution through various regulations and prohibitions including a legislative model they call “end demand”.

The term abolition is associated with 18th and 19th century movements to abolish slavery. Not only do sex workers not see our work as akin to slavery but using this term minimizes and trivializes the experiences of those who have (and do) endure slavery.

Other terms used for the abolitionist position are: radical feminists, fundamentalist feminists or second wave feminists. These terms may be alienating for the many sex workers and sex worker allies who consider themselves feminists but reject the abolitionist position.

Many sex workers use the term **prohibitionist feminists, anti-sex work or anti-sex workers’ rights feminists** to better reflect the abolitionist position. The term prohibitionist highlights support for the use of criminal laws to prohibit behaviours seen as immoral or dangerous to society. **Anti-sex work feminists** draws attention to the agenda of this group – the abolition of prostitution rather than the promotion of human and labour rights of sex workers.

ADULT SEX WORK, YOUTH SEX WORK, AND COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF YOUTH

Some people do not distinguish between **youth sex work** and **commercial sexual exploitation of youth**. Others refer to **adult sex work** to distance it both from youth sex work and from notions of exploitation, two things that are often seen as synonymous. Specifying adult sex work, and simultaneously referring to all youth sex work as exploitation, ignores the complexity of our realities.

The decision to earn income through sex work is made along a spectrum of options, regardless of a person’s age. Some people’s spectrums are more limited than others and youth, like others, confront numerous sys-

temic factors or personal circumstances including poverty, homelessness, drug use and mental health. That being said, people exercise agency when making decisions along these spectrums. There is a difference between youth who exercise agency to earn income through sex work and the commercial sexual exploitation of youth. In other words, child sexual abuse is not the same as youth sex work.

The age at which people are comfortable with youth in the sex industry differs based on our experiences. Some view anyone under 18 working in the industry as exploitation. Some of us began sex working in our teens, while some of us started earning an income through sex work in our 20s, 30s or beyond. Regardless of our comfort level with different age groups in the sex industry, criminalization is not an effective response to youth in sex work.

Often confusion around youth in the sex industry arises because of there is no agreement on the definition of youth. There are many laws in different legal domains (e.g., labour, criminal, civil – housing and employment) that refer to people having different rights depending on their age. The rights and definitions of youth and minors vary across these laws. Social service definitions can refer to youth as anyone up to 25 years old. The ambiguity and lack of harmonization amongst these definitions can cause confusion.

Criminalization and stigma around youth sex work, and the conflation of youth and children, limit the ability of youth sex workers to access tools that are needed for safer living and working conditions.

CONSENSUAL OR FORCED SEX WORK

Similarly to **adult sex work**, people may use the phrase **consensual sex work** to distinguish it from **forced** sex work and to calm the fears of the public who are concerned about decriminalizing non-consensual activity. Where people do not consent to providing sexual services for money, this is abuse or assault, not work.

Further, the term **consensual** evokes its opposite – forced, and risks creating a division between sex workers who are categorized by the public as **consenting** or **forced**, which encourages the perspective that certain sex workers should be blamed while others should be saved.

Another unintended consequence of this phrase is that it obscures the difference be-

tween good and bad working conditions; while sex workers can consent to work we can still experience unsafe labour situations. So, we may consent to working in sex work, but not consent to the working conditions, which we try to improve with a focus on evidence based human rights advocacy. The issue of consent for people who work in sex work is around agreements for services and conditions of work.

WOMEN AND GIRLS

Merging the experiences of women and girls is a tendency in different social movements, and common when some people speak about sex workers. This has the effect of infantilizing the experiences of women. This phrase is often employed as an emotional trigger that plays on the stereotypes of young girls in prostitution. It also invisibilizes the experiences of girls by suggesting there is a shared experience with women. Similar to other words that communities have reclaimed in empowering ways, sex workers may refer to the **girls** as shorthand for **working girls**. However, used by people outside of our community this term can have negative connotations.

RACIALIZED SEX WORKERS, INCLUDING INDIGENOUS SEX WORKERS

While **sex work** refers to a large range of people doing a wide variety of work, it is sometimes important for us to set apart our different experiences to emphasize how intersecting realities position us vis-à-vis the law, clients, working conditions, etc. More specifically in a North American context, the experiences of Indigenous sex workers are important to highlight – Indigenous sex workers are at greater risk of criminalization. The disproportionate criminalization of Indigenous peoples is the outcome of multiple factors, including deep-seated racism, discrimination, over-policing, and colonization.

Some people use the phrase **Indigenous and other racialized sex workers** to describe sex workers who are racialized. Some sex workers of colour, or racialized sex workers, express concern about this phrase because it appears to create a hierarchy of oppressions. While racialized communities have different experiences of the criminalization of sex work and the sex industry in general, the term **other** tagged onto **racialized sex workers** tends to homogenize those differences. The phrase **people of colour** also maintains an incorrect belief that “race” and culture are only determined by the tone of ones skin.

The set of experiences around oppression are felt very differently across communities of racialized sex workers. We need to find ways to speak to the various realities without overshadowing others.

The phrase **racialized sex workers, including Indigenous sex workers** is used to promote solidarity while still recognizing difference. This phrase acknowledges the particular oppressions that Indigenous sex workers experience in a Canadian context, but does not minimize the experiences of racialized communities.

JOHNS AND CLIENTS

Some people call patrons of sex workers **johns**, while others call them **clients**. The term **john** is a historical term that holds meaning for sex workers but is often used pejoratively by others – it's a nameless, generic and dehumanizing word used to refer to a homogenous group of men, and does not represent the individuality and diversity of our clients. The term also makes invisible the relationships between sex workers and those who purchase our services – that of customers and service providers. By contrast the term **clients** is not only more respectful and accurate it also reinforces the labour context of sex work.

PIMPS

In the media and public discourse, the word **pimp** brings to mind very gendered, racialized and classed images. It is often used to refer to an exploitative male, most often racialized – and in particular black – and involved in street life. In anti-sex work feminist literature and government responses in *Bedford v. Canada*, the word pimp is consistently used to categorize and limit people with a diversity of personal and professional relationships. The term "pimp" does not recognize the range of third party roles, the services they provide nor the relationships they have with sex workers. See **Third Parties**.

PREDATORS, PERPETRATORS, AGGRESSORS AND BAD CLIENTS

Different terminology is used by sex working communities to distinguish the people who violate sex workers.

The words **predators** and **perpetrators** are used for individuals who may pose as a cli-

ent but whose intent is to inflict harm and who may target sex workers. The failure of police to address violence against sex workers lends to the idea that violence against sex workers will not be addressed. Sex workers are targets for such predatory violence because of the conditions of our work – namely, criminalization that limits our capacity to work safely and without being targets for law enforcement.

Bad clients are people who are disrespectful, for example timewasters or no shows. These are also clients who don't respect sex workers' limits or follow the terms of their agreement. The boundary between a bad client and an **aggressor** is crossed when there is violence. **Aggressors** are people who initially relate to a sex worker as a client but with whom situational violence occurs. At this point they are no longer merely a bad client, but an aggressor.

These distinctions are important so that people understand the contexts in which violence against sex workers happen, and the precarious legislative conditions in which we work. Although we can be subjected to violence at work, it is not our work it itself that is violent. These distinctions also highlight that not all clients are disrespectful, aggressive or violent.

PROSTITUTE, SEX WORKER AND SEX PROFESSIONAL

American sex worker and activist Carol Leigh coined the term **sex work** in the 1970s. While before this the term **working girls** was popular amongst workers, creation of the term sex work was a deliberate attempt to unite sex workers of all genders and sectors of work, and to highlight the work, or labour, that sex workers are doing. The term sex work is liberation from the deep-rooted negative and legalistic term **prostitute**.

Some of us call ourselves **prostitutes**, but recognize its negative connotations when outsiders use it. People use the word prostitute in different contexts: to refer to legislation where word prostitute is written into law; to refer to sex work that involves intercourse with clients; to refer to street prostitution; to refer to debasing oneself, not necessarily in a sexual context; and to refer to history when the word prostitute was used with pride. How and when we use these terms will differ depending on our audience. Sex workers' rejection of the term is often based

in how the public perceives prostitutes and prostitution rather than an inherent shame in the word itself.

Some sex workers also embrace the term **sex professional**. Like sex work, this term highlights and legitimizes the labour context of sex work. Other sex workers find this term alienating because the term professional can imply a level of accreditation that is not afforded to criminalized work. It can also insert a classist element to the work – some workers are seen as professional while others are not. Not all sex workers have access to the mechanisms that professionalize their work, and many work under precarious conditions.

PROSTITUTED WOMEN

The gendered term **prostituted women** is sometimes used to refer to sex workers. This term denies the agency of sex workers by suggesting that prostitution is something done to us. Many sex workers consider this framing and language around prostitution or sex work as disrespectful, alienating and invisibilizing of our realities.

SURVIVAL SEX WORK/SEX WORKERS

Some communities use **survival sex work** to refer to sex workers who – due to numerous systemic factors or personal circumstances of poverty, homelessness, drug use and mental health – have extremely restricted options and as a result work in dangerous circumstances. The term **survival sex work** has become analogous to street work and "difficult circumstances." However, some high earning sex workers on the street and those working indoors also consider themselves survival sex workers. While it is true that people do all kinds of work to survive, they are doing it to survive within the context of systemic constraints that exist on a continuum of power and privilege. Systemic issues, such as poverty and homelessness, should be contested – not sex work itself.

While it's important to recognize and honour all sex workers, dividing sex workers into categories legitimizes the decisions of some sex workers and not others. Some sex workers who are labeled as survival sex workers feel the way the term is currently used makes it seem like they are not strong or not capable of making the best decisions for themselves.

THIRD PARTIES

Third parties are anyone involved in the sex work transaction who are neither the worker nor the client. The term third party is broad in that it includes the people sex workers work for (e.g., agency owners), with (e.g., agents, bookers) and hire (e.g., drivers) as well as individuals such as receptionists and security persons.

All third parties are criminalized in Canada by procuring laws, often referred to as “pimping laws”. These laws criminalize third parties – in other words, a person who has a work-related relationship with a sex worker. Most sex workers have a working relationship with a third party – whether its for advertising, driving, booking and maintaining clients or providing security. Sex workers can be considered third parties when they work collectively with other sex workers or set up work for another worker.

.....

VICTIM

The term **victim** is highly contested in sex worker rights and Violence Against Women (VAW) communities. Sex workers and other people can be victimized or experience violence. Sex work does not make sex workers victims, which suggests helplessness and a lack of agency. Sometimes we are victims of crime and this victimization should be recognized as the crime it is. Unfortunately in a criminalized context when sex workers are victims of crime, not only is the violence against us seen as inevitable, but also our legal rights are not respected.

.....

VULNERABLE OR MARGINALIZED SEX WORKERS

Similar to the terms consensual and adult, some people use the term **vulnerable** to refer to sex workers. It is often used not as an adjective but rather to refer to a “class” of sex workers. Such a framing ignores that sex workers are vulnerable as a result of outdated prostitution laws and current socio-economic contexts. In this context, the term **marginalization** may be more appropriate language to refer to social location and disrespect for human rights, rather than branding sex workers as vulnerable. Vulnerability is situational and related to the systemic issues that many of us face.

The term **vulnerable** is also used strategically in a legal context, like in *Bedford v. Canada*. This term specifically relates to the *Charter* right to protection from discrimination and to concepts of disadvantage, marginalization and substantive inequality.

Writing and Research: Chris Bruckert (Prostitutes of Ottawa, Gatineau, Work, Educate and Resist, POWER), Anna-Aude Caouette (Stella), Jenn Clamen (Stella), Kara Gillies, Members of the Downtown Eastside Sex Workers United Against Violence (SWUAV), Sheri Kiselbach (Providing Alternatives Counselling and Education Society, PACE), Émilie Laliberté (Stella), Tara Santini (Stella), Keisha Scott (Maggie’s Toronto Sex Workers Action Project), Emily Symons (Prostitutes of Ottawa, Gatineau, Work, Educate and Resist, POWER)

Project Coordinator: Jenn Clamen

Design Marie-Claude Charlebois & Elitza Koroueva

InfoSheet is available in French and may be copied or translated into various languages upon request, but not sold. We ask that Stella be credited as the source.

This series of InfoSheets is made possible thanks to the financial support of the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the foundations.



2065 rue Parthenais, suite 404
Montréal QC
H2K 3T1
Office 514.285.1599
Drop-in 514.285.8889

Stella is a community organization created and run by and for sex workers. At Stella we provide support and information to sex workers so that we may live and work in safety and with dignity.

Copyright Stella, 2013