

Response to Jessica Neuwirth's piece in The Guardian, by Meena Seshu.

Dear Ms. Elizabeth Ford,
[elizabeth.ford@theguardian.com]

I hope you are well.

I am writing to see if The Guardian would be interested in running the attached piece on sex work and Amnesty International's proposed policy, which would advocate for Decriminalization of sex work.. I have spent my life advocating for the human rights of women and sex workers, through SANGRAM the NGO that helped start a collective of sex workers in Sangli, India. I feel strongly that Jessica Neuwirth's recent piece on sex work in the Guardian is ill informed. (<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jul/28/amnesty-international-prostitution-sex-work-human-trafficking>)

This response is from the collective of sex workers from India called Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad [VAMP]. I hope you will consider my piece- please let me know if you have questions.

As someone who has dedicated her career to fighting for the rights of sex workers, I can say without a doubt that Jessica Neuwirth's recent piece (Amnesty International says prostitution is a human right-but it's wrong) got it wrong.

In her piece, Neuwirth advocates against Amnesty International's proposed policy that calls for decriminalization as a way to empower sex workers to combat the violence and discrimination they commonly face. Yet in doing so, she fails to acknowledge how laws criminalizing sex work contribute to these outcomes, and puts forth harmful generalizations about sex workers themselves.

Punitive laws that criminalize and punish sex work act as instruments through which sex workers are harassed and regularly have their human rights violated by law enforcement agencies, health authorities and clients. In many countries, sex workers are the primary means through which the police meet arrest quotas, extort money, and extract information. Police wield power over sex workers in the form of threats of arrest and public humiliation, and use condoms as evidence of illegal activity, undoing years of effective campaigning around HIV and sexually transmitted infections. Forced testing for HIV is commonplace, along with breaches of due process and privacy. In many countries sex workers are routinely incarcerated in "rehabilitation centers" or "correctional homes" for long periods of time despite being adult consenting sex workers. Where sex work is illegal, sex workers often feel there is little they can do to address the violations perpetrated against them.

However, Neuwirth does not explore the ways in which decriminalization can help sex workers effectively mobilize and seek redress against authorities that continue to trample on their rights. Instead, she states that "if the organization endorses prostitution as a human right, it wont be supporting the women of the world who might have no choice but to have sex for money, but rather, the pimps and buyers of sex who have all the choices in the world."

This is problematic on two fronts. First, decriminalization is not an attempt to legalize "pimps" nor does it increase exploitation of sex workers. Such arguments are made with a limited

understanding of the sex trade and undermine sex workers' struggle for the right to health and justice. Rather, decriminalization will help sex workers organize and address all forms of exploitation, including abusive, sub-standard or unfair working conditions. In countries where sex work is decriminalized, there is evidence that violence directed at sex workers is reduced, relations between sex workers and the police are improved, and access to health services is increased. That's why bodies such as the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and Global Alliance Against the Trafficking have publicly supported decriminalization.

Second, Neuwirth conflates sex work with sex trafficking, failing to recognize the fact that there are women who choose to enter the sex work industry. In doing so, she discounts their agency and contradicts the feminism that supposedly drives her arguments—isn't a deep respect for the choices and autonomy of all women at the core of what it means to be a feminist?

But ultimately, what Neuwirth misses is the fact that hundreds of individuals and organizations have signed on in support of Amnesty's draft. This is an agenda that shares support from sex workers, feminists, think tanks and HIV/AIDS organizations throughout the world. And it is an agenda from which we will not retreat until the human rights, health and well-being become a reality for all sex workers. <http://sangram.org/resources/Letter-to-support-Amnesty-International.pdf>

Meena Saraswathi Seshu

General Secretary

SANGRAM.

3/8/2015.