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The Most Stigmatized

The Most Stigmatized-Sex Work

The next story may be the most stigmatized thing a person can do for work. As difficult as it is to destigmatize prostitution, Juno Mac, a sex worker and activist thinks we should for the safety and security of all sex workers. To be very clear, Juno does not think of her job of being an activist for sex worker rights in any way a defense mechanism for clients purchasing sex, prostitution, and the sex industry. She thinks it is okay to hold a negative to neutral view of these things but a person just needs to be careful not to be talking about the worth of the sex worker. Everyone has an opinion about how to legislate sex work (whether to legalize it, ban it, or even tax it) but what do workers themselves think would work best? "If you care about gender equality or poverty or migration or public health, then sex worker rights matter to you," she says. "Make space for us in your movements.

She turned to sex work almost a decade ago. The story goes she was in college and piled up a lot of debt. She started out working at a convenience store and found she could not even with the financial benefits some students had been getting; still could not keep her head above water. She ended up dropping out of college and working at a store for a few years. She absolutely hated it. Every single month payday will arrive and it always seemed to be gone before she had any time to think about it. She knew some older women who had left high school to be strippers and loads of people looked at them as worthless and a terrible downward spiral. She, however, saw stripping as highly paid work for something being remunerated for being stigmatized. It was the women's own prerogative.

She knows sex work for some may be a leap but for her it never seemed to be strange or bizarre so she decided to start working at a massage parlor in London. She worked in Brussels for a few years and now is working as an escort which is a euphemistic way of saying prostitute. Many might wonder how emotionally difficult was it working at brothel.

It was a mixture of a sense of self-stigmatization around these things and she recalls looking in the mirror thinking; am I different now or have I changed. She has bought into the idea that prostitution stains a person's identity and that aids in the stigma against prostitution that sex can tarnish a woman or man. A prostitute has those stigmas tenfold and that gives the rise to why women are called sluts and are branded when she sleeps around.

This all operates on the idea that bits of the woman are you eroding away and are becoming meaningless. This idea of prostitution is sad because no one has little girls that want to grow up to become a sex worker. There are a lot of jobs, however, parents would not want his or her little daughter doing but that is just not the world we live in. The moral stigma of sex work does not stop it from happening and actually makes the work more difficult and dangerous because it compromises the safety of the world's 42 million sex workers and 82% of whom are women (<https://prostitution.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=000095>, https://www.ted.com/talks/juno_mac_the_laws_that_sex_workers_really_want). Ms. Mack picks it up from the Ted stage:

People really get hung up on the question would you want your daughter to be a sex worker? That is the wrong question; instead, imagine she is already doing it. How safe is she at work tonight? Why is she not safer? In the years that have passed I have had a lot of time to think. She has reconsidered those ideas she once had on prostitution. She has thought about generating quality in the sexual reproduction of

women. I have experienced exploitation and violence at work and I have thought of ways to protect other sex workers from these things.

She explains in her Ted talk the four main legal approaches to sex work throughout the world and why none of the laws work. When we prohibit the sex industry it exasperates every harm sex workers are vulnerable too.

The first approach is full criminalization and about half the world (e.g., Russia, South Africa, and most of the US) regulates sex work by criminalizing everyone. Those individuals are the seller, buyer, and the third parties. Lawmakers in these places hope that the fear of getting arrested will deter people from selling sex, however, when you are forced to obey the law versus feed one's family or yourself the decision is easy and that person takes the risk. Criminalizing is a trap. It makes the person to keep selling sex which is the exact opposite of its proposed effect. In many places the person could be coursed into paying a bribe or even having sex with a police to avoid arrest.

The second approach is partial criminalization where the buying and selling of sex is legal but the surrounding activities (e.g., brothel keeping and soliciting on the streets) are banned. The definition of brothel keeping is two or more sex workers working together making it illegal and that means most workers work alone. An individual that works alone allows oneself to vulnerable to violent offenders but also susceptible when choosing to work together. Ms. Mack talks about an incident on the Ted stage:

A couple years ago a friend of hers was worried about being attacked at work so Juno let her friend use her place. During that time, the two ladies had a guy turn nasty. Juno said, "Leave or I will call the cops." The guy said you cannot call the police. You two are working together and that is illegal and he was right.

The prohibition of street prostitution also caused more harm than it is supposed to prevent. When a person works on the street to avoid getting arrested, workers take risks to avoid being detected and that means working alone or in isolated locations which is making him or her more susceptible to attack. If a sex worker gets caught selling sex outdoors she or he pays a fine. How does a person get the money to pay that fine? The fines accumulate and the worker is caught in a vicious cycle of selling more sex for the fines one got in the first place for selling sex.

Her argument is there are real world consequences when we stigmatize sex work and it endogenous nature for women and men. Criminalization and mistrust of the police is a gift to rapists and basically promotes the idea that the accuser has no recourse for justice. Criminalizing sex work in the name of keeping the workers safe is one of the biggest ironies because it helps people who try to exploit this population.

A person has every right to disagree with Juno but are we stigmatizing the right person. Sex work is dangerous and to deny that fact is absolutely ignorant. The question, however, should be, "Why is it so dangerous?" There are much more things that women do that are more life-threatening. Juno was in Cape Town, South Africa, for example, and she was told not to walk home at night alone, but why (<https://www.capetownsafety.com/safety-at-night/>)? Is it not stigmatizing thing to say but what is stigmatizing is why workers cannot feel safer.

It is when a person thinks people who are in danger or at risk as fundamentally ill. Then that is a stigma. Are we stigmatizing the right person? When a person starts to ask questions like how can a worker have sex with such appalling and grotesque man or woman; then the stigma is sliding off the buyer and onto the worker. This is the illustrating the problem with stigma.

The third approach is if criminalizing workers hurts them then why not penalize the buyers of sex. This is known as the Swedish or Nordic models. The idea behind this law is selling sex is intrinsically harmful so officials are helping the workers by removing the option. This is known as the end demand approach, despite, with growing support from countries has no evidence that it works. There is as much prostitution as before the rule then when the law was passed. Why might this be?

People selling sex often do not have other options for income. If you depend on that money and that drop in business will force you to lower your prices or offer more risky sexual services. To seek more clients, a worker might seek out a manager, instead of putting a stop to this idea of "Pimping" this kind of prostitution gives oxygen to abusive third parties.

Many might think prostitution would be fine if we made it legal or regulated it. This is the fourth approach of legalization. Countries like the Netherlands, Germany, and parts of Nevada have made prostitution legal, but, it is not a great model for human rights. Under state-controlled prostitution commercial sex can only happen in legally defined areas or venues. Sex workers are forced to comply with special regulations and monthly health checks. Regulation sounds fantastic on paper but politicians make regulation around the industry expensive and difficult to comply with and that creates a two-tiered system.

You have legal and illegal work, sometimes called backdoor criminalization, where the rich and well-connected brothel owners can comply with the regulations but more marginalized workers find it impossible. Even if it is possible in principle acquiring a license and proper locations takes time and money. It is not an option for some who need money tonight; the worker might be a refugee or fleeing domestic abuse. In this two-tiered system most moral people are forced to work illegally and still exposed to all the threats of work.

Sex workers are real people just like you and me. The workers have had complicated experiences but their demands are not complicated. Workers want decriminalization and labor rights. I do think many of you work for a living. Sex work is work too; and just like some like it some hate it, and others have mixed feelings about the job. How we feel about the work and how others feel certainly is not the point. What is important is we ALL have the right to work safely and on our own terms.

The point of June argument is not to sweep aside the things that have bothered you in this paper but to make visible politics that just do not concern her but draw attention to the most marginalized populations. The people all around the world who are doing sex work when it is someone's final straw. Why should people be social outcasts for doing this work?

https://www.ted.com/talks/juno_mac_the_laws_that_sex_workers_really_want

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