

Sex Work Is Real Work



One woman shares her own experience of sex work and the stigma she faces

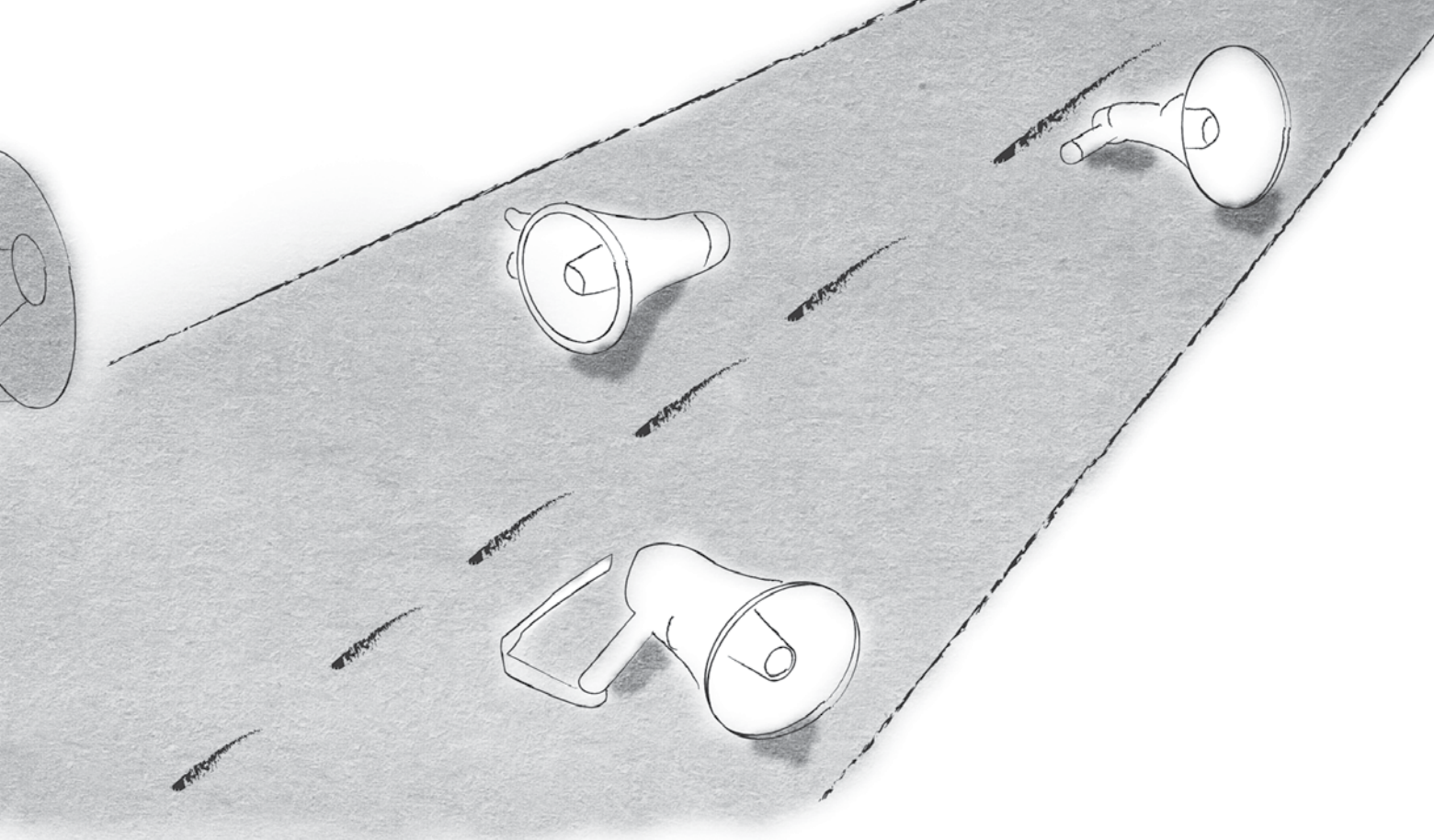
BY PHOENIX ANNE MCKEE

I am a sex worker, and I have been one for 15 years. Each sex worker has his or her own story to tell, and mine started when I was 14.

I was poor, young and had very few options. I did what I had to do, and honestly, it worked for my situation. I was already having sex with older guys and figured I should get paid for it. Sex work can be defined as trading sex or sexual performance (for example stripping or webcam broadcasting) for any kind of compensation — money, a place to stay, food, gifts or other things. As youth, our choices can be quite limited, so we have to figure out what is best for us. Choosing to do sex work can be a hard decision, but for some youth it is the only option available at the time. Either way, youth who decide to do sex work deserve to be respected and protected.

In Canada, child prostitution is illegal and the definition includes youth who are 18 or younger. The age of consent in Canada is 16. There are several laws outlined in the criminal code around child prostitution. These include Section 212 (2) — procuring (living off of or benefiting from the money obtained through child prostitution), and Section 212 (2.1) — aggravated procuring (using threat, influencing or coercing a child/youth to engage in prostitution). Canadian law considers child prostitution a form of child abuse, and the most common risk faced by youth who decide to engage in sex work is being apprehended and placed in Child Protective Services. Most provinces have granted child welfare agencies the ability to remove a youth from their home if they are perceived to be at risk of engaging in prostitution. This means that even if a youth is only considering sex work or if someone in their family is a sex worker, it is possible for Child Protective Services to remove them from their home. Youth who are 14 and 15 can only consent to having sex with individuals who are less than five years older than them. This puts an adult who is buying sexual services from a youth at risk of being charged with sexual interference or sexual assault. In this way the age of consent laws pose a risk to the safety of youth aged 14 and 15 who decide to engage in sex work. If sex work is the only option for some youth, having to be honest about their age puts them at greater risk of violence or exploitation since younger sex workers are often perceived as more vulnerable.

When I was young, I did not have anyone to talk to about doing sex work. Sex work is not easy work, and many sex workers, especially young workers, have to deal with isolation, stigmatization and discrimination. Laws that require social workers and doctors to



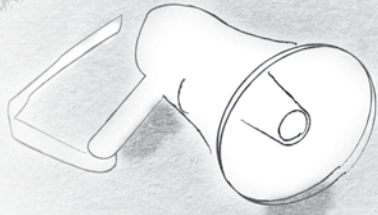
report child prostitution make it hard for youth sex workers to access services while being honest about their occupation. The inability of youth to talk openly about sex work can mean not getting sex-work-specific information or the knowledge they require to feel in control and to set healthy boundaries during a sex work call. This can lead to an uncomfortable and unsafe interaction while working. I know this because I have had some difficult experiences, which is why I believe having access to a supportive and knowledgeable network is so important. Spaces and services for young people often neglect the needs of youth doing sex work, and rarely offer support and a safe space for workers to skill-share and discuss practical ways to minimize risk.

One idea put forth in the prostitution debate is the decriminalization of sex work, but it is a subject of great controversy. Some argue that sex work is inherently exploitative and dangerous, while others, including myself, argue that criminalization hurts the most oppressed and exploited workers. Criminalizing sex workers limits our access to safety by preventing us from seeking help (if we need it) because we are in constant fear of being arrested or outed to our families.

When something is illegal, many people assume that it is bad. With sex work, people in close proximity to it — workers, managers, even family — are demonized, resulting in discriminatory attitudes towards them. Decriminalizing sex work would open the door for many workers to gain rights and to work freely; however, it may be a long time before society sees sex work as a valid or appropriate form of work. This means sex work will continue to be viewed as a degrading occupation and sex workers will continue to be portrayed as victims of exploitation, which is not necessarily the case for all sex

workers. Until these beliefs and perceptions of sex work no longer exist, youth involved in sex work will continue to struggle for workers' rights, access to services and power over their own lives. Even if it is decriminalized, the negative attitudes surrounding sex work may not be dispelled for a long time.

There are many obstacles that stand in the way of sex workers fighting for their right to safety and self-determination. This includes, but is not limited to the legal system, the state, religious groups and anti-sex-work feminists. Anti-sex-work feminists hold an extremist perspective which argues that all sex work is violence against women, and anyone who purchases sex from a woman is committing violence against her. Some feminists in the anti-sex-work movement call themselves "abolitionists," including professor and activist Donna Hughes in the United States and feminist Sheila Jeffreys in Australia. Their answer to keeping women safe is the implementation of laws that resemble the Swedish model of criminalization. The Swedish model was developed by anti-sex-work feminists who want to stop prosecuting sex workers while continuing to criminalize aspects of sex work such as the targeting of clients. They say this reduces prostitution, but in reality it doesn't. All it does is make it illegal for anyone to hire sex workers and continues to prevent us from hiring security, drivers or managers. This forces us to work even harder to find clients and work safely. Our clients are at a greater risk of being arrested, and anyone looking to purchase our services will be reluctant to negotiate with us directly. This makes it harder for sex workers to work independently, and increases the likelihood that we will need to work for someone else. Working with/for someone often means we have less control over our work and our money, putting us at a higher risk



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THINGS THAT COULD HELP A YOUTH SEX WORKER STAY SAFE:

- Safe sex-work-positive spaces
- Access to experienced and supportive sex-work networks
- Access to harm-reduction materials and practices (such as safer drug-use equipment and condoms)
- Knowledge about how to complete a sex-work call quickly and safely
- Social services that empower rather than label and disempower workers
- The right to define our own working conditions
- Solidarity and support from fellow activists and feminists
- The end of rape culture

of facing abuse or exploitation. For some sex workers, working with/ for someone (such as a manager, an agency or a pimp) can sometimes be necessary and preferred, but for those who would rather work independently it is not always an ideal situation. For street-based workers, many of their good/safe clients will stop seeking them out on the street; workers will be forced to meet clients in secluded and isolated areas, thereby putting them at greater risk of violence.

Unfortunately the anti-sex-work movement in Canada is gaining popularity. Conservative MP Joy Smith recently proposed a new bill based on the Swedish model. As sex workers and allies, it is important to resist this form of legislation. We already have laws on the books to protect women and youth from violence and exploitation. We don't need more laws that will only make our lives more dangerous. Sex workers have been speaking out against the Swedish model long before it was implemented in 1999. In a paper titled “The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Claimed Success and Documented Effects,” researchers Susanne Dodillet and Petra Östergren demonstrated how Swedish laws have made doing sex work more dangerous. They argue that many of the negative effects resulting from the Swedish model could have been avoided if sex workers had been consulted when establishing safety measures for sex workers. For years, sex workers around the world – from India and Brazil to South Africa and Hong Kong – have been working together to build a strong sex workers' rights movement that loudly expresses what we need to be safe. Yet our voices are continually silenced, our perspectives are disregarded and our experiences and struggles are dismissed, simply because of our line of work.

In Canada, youth who trade sex for the necessities of life are viewed and labelled as exploited individuals who lack the ability to make conscious choices. In most cities, sex-work-positive services and spaces for youth are minimal, if not completely absent, and most services that do exist are designed to lead youth out of sex work instead of supporting them or helping them gain access to labour and human rights protection. It is important to support sex workers, especially youth who want to leave sex work, by offering them non-judgemental support, services and education. Even if they return to sex work for various reasons (to pay for school for example), it is not practical to judge, shame and ban them from social services. Everyone wants to keep youth safe, but we might have very different ideas about how to do so. I speak from experience, and it is frustrating when that is not taken into account. Everybody changes jobs as they move through life. Some workers will leave sex work, others won't, and some will use it to pay for school. What needs to change is the condemning, controlling and shaming of youth who do sex work, whether they do it by choice or because of poverty or necessity.

In Winnipeg, Sage House is the only social service agency available to sex workers, and it holds a mandate that states that all sex workers under the age of 18 are exploited. Its definition of exploitation is the exchange of sex for money, drugs, a place to live or recognition/status. This definition implies that any involvement in sex work is exploitative and not a viable, and sometimes necessary, form of work. Its mandate is influenced by the child prostitution laws in Winnipeg, and Sage House does not offer to youth harm-reduction information or materials, such as safer drug-use equipment or condoms. Youth who are doing sex work are immediately handed over to Child Protection Services, continuing the cycle of institutionalization and criminalization. This approach prevents younger sex workers from accessing materials that make our work safer, and often leads to homelessness

from fear of returning home to family or foster care.

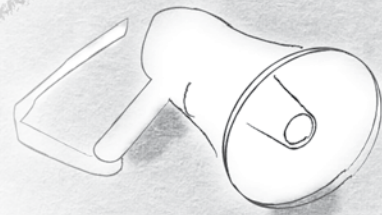
In my case, returning home or going to foster care was not an option. If youth are not in a position to return home, nor do they want to, knowing that an agency will force them to do so likely means they will not attempt to access services from that agency. This means that youth who need help will have nowhere to turn. The situation in Winnipeg is just one of many similar examples. Often youth are not included in any conversations about safety or improving the services available to sex workers. Our knowledge and struggles are almost completely absent from conversations about sex work, labour rights and safer sex-work practices. By neglecting the needs of youth sex workers, agencies and advocates are putting youth at risk.

Many non-sex-working feminists believe sex work equals violence, but they are not necessarily speaking from experience. There should be more dialogue and a willingness to listen to those with first-hand experience, instead of telling us what they think we need. Not only is such a stance insulting, it is condescending and disrespectful. Whether it is a youth who wants to stop doing sex work or someone like me, who is thankful that it helped me out in my life, critics should understand that we are the experts on sex work, our safety and our sexualities.

Youth deserve to have a say and to not be dismissed. Growing up, I believed that what I thought didn't matter and that liking sex work, or even sex, was bad. This was because my family, social workers and other women told me I was a whore for doing this line of work. After constantly being told this, I carried a lot of shame and internalized hatred for myself and my sexuality. It was not until I met other sex workers and began to access sex-worker-run organizations such as Maggie's: The Toronto Sex Workers Action Project that I was able to overcome that shame and self-hatred. Organizations such as Maggie's are extremely important because they offer services, support and harm-reduction materials, such as condoms, to everyone who needs them, including youth. Maggie's and the amazing sex workers involved helped me. I am empowered to be a sex worker, and I am proud of the life I have lived thus far. All the work I do as a sex-work activist, through sharing my experiences and helping other workers advance and stay safe, gives me strength. I am surrounded by a community of amazing sex worker friends who all feed me emotionally. This helps me fight the stigma I face and no one, especially an anti-sex-work feminist, has the right to dismiss my experience and impose her beliefs on me.

Sex work is work, and youth sex workers deserve to be protected under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. It is extremely important for youth sex workers to organize for labour and human rights and to access education so they can make the right choices for themselves. Society, anti-sex-work feminists and the government continue to tell us that our lives are not valued. The only way youth sex workers are going to improve working conditions is by fighting to have their voices heard and pushing for the regulations and resources they need to create safer working conditions. I have begun to create a youth resource guide for doing sex work and organizing for rights. Youth sex workers can contact me in order to contribute to the resource. The aim is to bring youth sex workers together to demand safer working conditions, provide access to harm-reduction materials and advocate for the full decriminalization of sex work, including the youth sector. Those interested in contributing can contact Maggie's at lipsmackin@maggiestoronto.ca. Together we can change the stigma around sex work. **S**

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AS A YOUTH SEX WORKER ALLY YOU CAN:

- Discuss sex work in ways that minimize stigma rather than create or further perpetuate it
- Provide nonjudgmental and unconditional support to sex workers, especially youth, in whatever decision they need to make (this can include making sure youth are aware of the risk without imposing your values and judgment on the situation)
- Find ways to talk about sex work and contribute to the movement that does not dismiss our struggles, silence us or appropriate our voices
- Advocate for sex workers' voices to be heard within academia
- Educate yourself with pro-sex-work materials
- Protest anti-sex-work panels/forums/conferences and challenge anti-sex-work movements
- Don't make sex work the issue if it isn't one for us. Help us with what we ask for, like finding a straight job or housing. Often it's our other life issues that need to be addressed, not our current occupation
- Most importantly, listen and learn from those who have life experience as sex workers