



RedTraSex

Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras
Sexuales de Latinoamérica
y el Caribe

SEX WORK AND SEX WORKERS: A GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS WORKERS

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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, where mass media plays a prominent role, media outlets and journalists convey messages reaching thousands or millions in a moment and also become the voice of authority on some issues, or the only ones reporting on some others. Discourses built by mass-media influence dominant social perceptions.

Communications professionals often reproduce and aggravate bias and misconceptions about our work and us, and are far from helping build a comprehensive understanding that takes into account our own voices and capacity to decide about our lives. This is why RedTraSex considers it necessary to produce this "Guide for Journalistic Approaches to Sex Work and Sex Workers" in which we invite all readers to join us in unpacking journalist practices around sex work issues, to deconstruct them and work towards forms of communication that are better in sync with the reality experienced by women sex workers, from an inclusive perspective that respects our human rights.

We invite you to read the Guide and engage in a dialogue with us. You play an essential role in influencing society to respect our choices and our work and stand by us in the struggle for the full recognition of our human rights.

ADDRESSING WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

Even though this Guide provides suggestions specifically to address sex work issues, we want to reaffirm our support and encouragement to address any news or issues related to women and girls or any event in which their rights have been violated, in public spaces or in the media, respecting a gender perspective, contributing to the creation of a favorable environment for the victims, allowing different actors to be heard, respecting the decisions of the affected or involved person, being careful in how persons are treated and named. There are several Guides addressing this issue, whose perspectives we endorse .

To give just one example, women sex workers face the same problems as any other woman when negotiating condom use (with clients and/or partners), or making domestic arrangements to take care of the children, or managing the household budget.

In this Guide we will specifically address issues around media approaches to our work without forgetting that improvement in this practice needs to always recognize a gender perspective.

1 A few examples would include "Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage", by the Chicago Taskforce on Violence against Girls and Young Women; "A Handbook to Combat Gender Stereotypes in the Media" by Women and Journalists First; "Getting the balance right. Gender equality in journalism", by the International Federation of Journalists; "Sex Workers and Sex Work in South Africa – A Guide for Journalists and Writers", by Sonke Gender Justice, Sisonke Sex Worker Movement, Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce, and Women's Legal Centre, http://www.sweat.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Final-Journalist-Guide_15-Jan-2015.pdf

HOW TO CALL US?

Organized women sex workers have a long history of struggle and resistance to put an end to the bias against us. The main aim of this effort is to achieve a full recognition of our identity as women sex workers.

Our struggle to be called "women sex workers" involves the need to free ourselves from the heavy burden that comes with words like 'sexo servidora', 'prostitute' and 'whore', among others, which are used as insults, have pejorative interpretations and concentrate a set of stigmas that play strongly against us.

We are WOMEN SEX WORKERS. We are not 'prostitutes', 'whores', 'trapos', 'jineteras', 'cueros' or 'rameras'. We do SEX WORK. We are not 'in prostitution', we do not 'prostitute' ourselves or 'sell our bodies for money'.

We are workers also because we are part of the working class and our trade allows us to attend to our needs and those of our families, like any other worker.

In recent decades, journalists have learned to name other collectives accurately (like our brothers and sisters who are lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals or LGBT, or who are Indigenous peoples, among others). But our right to decide to be women sex workers and to have that decision recognized has not found a similar positive response from the media. Isn't this a result of male-chauvinistic practices that seek to reproduce stereotyped gender roles? Isn't it related to the fact that we are women breaking certain barriers related to the moral double standards enforced by our society?

HOW TO TREAT US?

Women sex workers are "confined" to only some sections in the media: police or health news. Our issues are treated with an extra dose of morbidity and lack of respect for our privacy and our bodies: we are asked very intimate things, photographed and filmed without our prior consent. Among other myths that will be addressed in the next section, there is a strong trend to consider us as criminals, drug and alcohol users, transmission or illness vectors. Even though we are considered to be "criminals", our identity is not protected in live transmissions, exposing our faces and bodies without asking how that can affect our lives.

Journalists should not reproduce this stigmatization and should address us respecting our identity as workers. We are people, women and men engaged in sex work, adults, capable of making decisions and having our own uniqueness. By reproducing stereotypes, naming and addressing us in the wrong ways, journalists forget that we are human beings who, at this time in our lives, are engaged in this specific work.

WHAT ASSUMPTIONS ARE COMMUNICATED ABOUT US?

We will now discuss some of the myths that media professionals reproduce when communicating about us as a population or about the work we do:

a. The myth of the "vector of infection".

While it is true that women sex workers are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (because our work is done underground, we are marginalized, have difficulties accessing health services, etc.), it is also true that we have achieved a reduction in HIV prevalence amongst us as a population and conducted successful peer-led prevention campaigns. Assuming that caring for her health, and particularly her sexual health is only a woman's responsibility is a gender mandate deeply entrenched in our society.

b. The myth of "evil, addiction and criminality".

These unfounded biases are built upon the premise that we are "indecent and engage in forbidden activities". There is always a need to reiterate that sex work is not illegal or indecent, but rather it is the conditions under which it is done – the lack of regulations and laws recognizing it as work – that are indecent.

c. The myth of "exploitation".

In many jobs, labor exploitation is flagrant, as a consequence of the economic system in which we live and the conditions it creates for the working class; this is not something exclusive to sex work. In some forms of sex work (self-employed) each woman decides for how many hours she will provide services, and negotiates whom to take on as a client and how much to charge.

d. The myth of the "neighborhood nuisance".

By repeating this myth, we are presented as objects that must be "removed from" or "placed" somewhere because we create disturbances. In our experience, it is possible to have a very good coexistence in our neighborhoods, creating an environment in which we all can thrive, but these experiences don't usually get to the media.

e. The myth of "between four walls is better for them".

Our work is done in different spaces, including the "four walls" of whisky bars, other bars, pools, etc. There we usually work for a boss or businessman who makes decisions about us and our working hours, and often has the last word on how to charge and on the conditions of work. This is why the myth that "between four walls" is better for us only benefits a few who profit from our work and not us women sex workers ourselves.

f. The myth of "women in need of salvation".

Women sex workers don't want to be "saved" nor are we in need to be "reinserted into society" or "re-educated". We are not outside society and we have no inclination to sew or take care of elders or children as occupations. Many of us are already combining our (paid) work with some of those chores; others have decided to do sex work for a "boss" while many others do it as self-employed workers. As long as we are adult women who have consented to do the work we do, we do not want to be "shown" the many other things we could be doing because we have chosen this trade from among others in a rational, willing way and for reasons of our own.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **PROMOTE INTEREST AND INFORMATION RATHER THAN MORBIDITY.**

In live coverages or interviews, we are often asked about details that other kinds of workers are never asked about. There is a certain morbid fascination with our private life, the domestic and family arrangements we make to be able to go out and work, and how we negotiate rates with our clients.

- **AVOID BANALITY AND SUPERFLUOUS INFORMATION.**

On more than one occasion, our reports about abuse (not only to judicial or police authorities, but also to the media) have been trivialized because of the bias surrounding our work. Our words are not believed or the veracity of our statements is doubted, giving greater importance to irrelevant details that feed sensationalism. We ask for serious and respectful treatment of the reports we make, focusing on what is important and making room for our voices to be heard.

- **MAKE VISIBLE THOSE PROCESSES THAT ARE USUALLY IGNORED BY THE MEDIA.**

Even though there are several positive examples and good coexistence between women sex workers and broader society, as well as of regulating sex work to the benefit of all intervening parties, the media insists on highlighting those cases in which our presence leads to conflicts in a particular neighborhood, or the "consequences" resulting from our work. There is a need for journalists to also communicate positive examples and innovative initiatives that have emerged over time.

- **AVOID CONTRIBUTING TO THE CONFUSION ABOUT TRAFFICKING, SEX WORK AND EXPLOITATION.**

This confusion has been much fired up by the media and has negative implications. It DOES NOT contribute to our struggle to see our human rights respected. But it also DOES NOT help fight trafficking or dismantle the logic of exploitation or the existing networks of impunity. There is a need to differentiate between:

1. TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation" to provide services without her/his consent. Trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation is just one of the faces of this crime. Its distinctive element is being held against one's will or having one's personal documents withheld, being subjected to abuse or threats against one's life, being locked up and forced to perform activities against one's expressed will.

2. LABOR EXPLOITATION refers to the conditions of work. Like trafficking in person, "labor exploitation" does not only have a sexual connotation but is also present in other work sectors. The ILO has repeatedly condemned exploitation in the food and shoes industry, in construction work, in domestic work and in agricultural production. Labor exploitation means a payment that falls below the minimum that is necessary or legal; precarious conditions of work; lack of basic benefits in the workplace; working days that extend beyond the maximum allowed by law; lack of paid holidays or sick leave. The extreme situation is that of work done in conditions of servitude or quasi-servitude. Sex work is in a legal vacuum (it is not forbidden but it is also not legalized). That means it is done "underground", and this allows for exploitation of labor to occur. Pimps or the owners of hotels, cabarets, whisky bars or private apartments in which we provide services often force us to work longer hours or in conditions that are damaging to our health. But even in those situations, we are not victims of trafficking, as we engage in sex work out of our own choice and personal decision.

3. SEX WORK is the provision of a sexual service in exchange for money, with all involved doing it out of their personal decision and in a consensual way. Women sex workers are all of legal age and, for different reasons that vary from one person to the next, have decided to do this work so we can sustain our families and/or ourselves. Women sex workers have not been victims of trafficking and do not need to be "rescued". Every interference into our work spaces disrupts our arrangements with clients or with the owners of those spaces and often means that we will have no income to take home that day.

•TO REPORT ON THE LEGAL OR NORMATIVE SITUATION WHEN INFORMING ABOUT AN INCIDENT RELATED TO SEX WORK.

These incidents are usually covered with a degree of ignorance and often imply that sex work itself is illegal or illicit. Information needs to be accurate. In the Latin American and Caribbean region, sex work is NOT illegal or illicit: what is forbidden by law is to benefit from somebody else's prostitution, that is, procuring. By implying that the work we do is illegal, the media often feeds into existing prejudices about our "criminal" status.

•AVOID FEEDING THE MYTH ABOUT ALL WOMEN SEX WORKERS BEING CRIMINALS.

We are not criminals; because we operate in a context of lack of protection, including legal protection and guarantees for our rights, we are forced to move in social spaces in which we are often victims of illicit situations. Pushed into illegality and marginalization, we are in a disadvantaged position in which we are constantly facing dangerous or illicit situations.

•ALWAYS ASK US IF WE WANT TO BE PHOTOGRAPHED OR FILMED.

In different situations the (audiovisual and written) media come to our workplaces and film or photograph us without asking if we want to be "shown" in the media. It might happen that because of stigma, discrimination and bias, some of us don't tell our families or our neighbors that we are women sex workers, and choose to work away from the spaces to which we feel a sense of belonging in order to avoid retributions against us or our families. By exposing us on TV, people in our milieu learn about our occupation and might complicate our private lives. Our right to not have our images shown in public without our consent must be respected.

•TO INTEGRATE A GENDER PERSPECTIVE.

Women sex workers are women and, as such, we face the same challenges as any other women, in addition to those already mentioned and specifically related to the conditions under which we work (social discrimination, legal helplessness, conditions of illegality, among others). This is why, when a media outlet refers to sex work or to women sex workers, it should do so from a gender perspective, that is, letting women's voices be heard, avoiding assumptions about "specifically feminine traits or chores" and clichés like those about women's "weakness" or "physical inferiority", etc.

•TO REQUEST WOMEN SEX WORKERS TO TELL THEIR STORIES.

Women sex workers are not "unable" to speak about our work or to events related to it, so inviting us to be part of relevant media coverage and involving us in the description of a situation that is newsworthy is a practice that needs to be incorporated. Even when addressing other issues (like trafficking and exploitation, sexuality and disability, sexual pleasure, etc.) to acknowledge the voices of women sex workers and let them be heard not only makes for better news but also enriches the discussion.

•TO ASK THE OPINION OF DIFFERENT MEMBERS OF WOMEN SEX WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS.

In many countries across the region there are women sex workers-led organizations with a long trajectory in advocacy for our rights that have also developed clear documents and policy positions around different issues affecting us as a group. This is why we always recommend consulting with our organizations so they can provide accurate information and updated data.



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