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THE RESPONSIBLE
GUIDE TO TALK
ABOUT SEX WORK
IN THE MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Every second of our life we're receiving a constant flow of information. Ads on TV, flickering banners that have learned to get around *AdBlock*.

Product placement in our favorite influencers social network.

Large-scale communication plays an important role in the development of society and it's inevitable that our perception isn't conditioned by the information we receive.

Unfortunately, prejudices are all over the place where someone would expect to get information without bias.

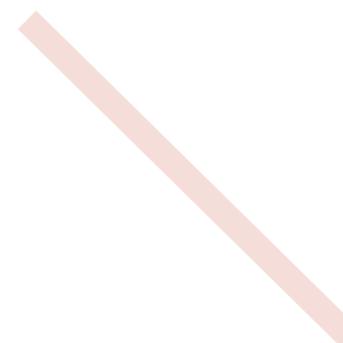
Too many times is the media itself who reproduces and intensifies stereotyped ideas, which doesn't help the discrimination that oppressed collectives already suffer.

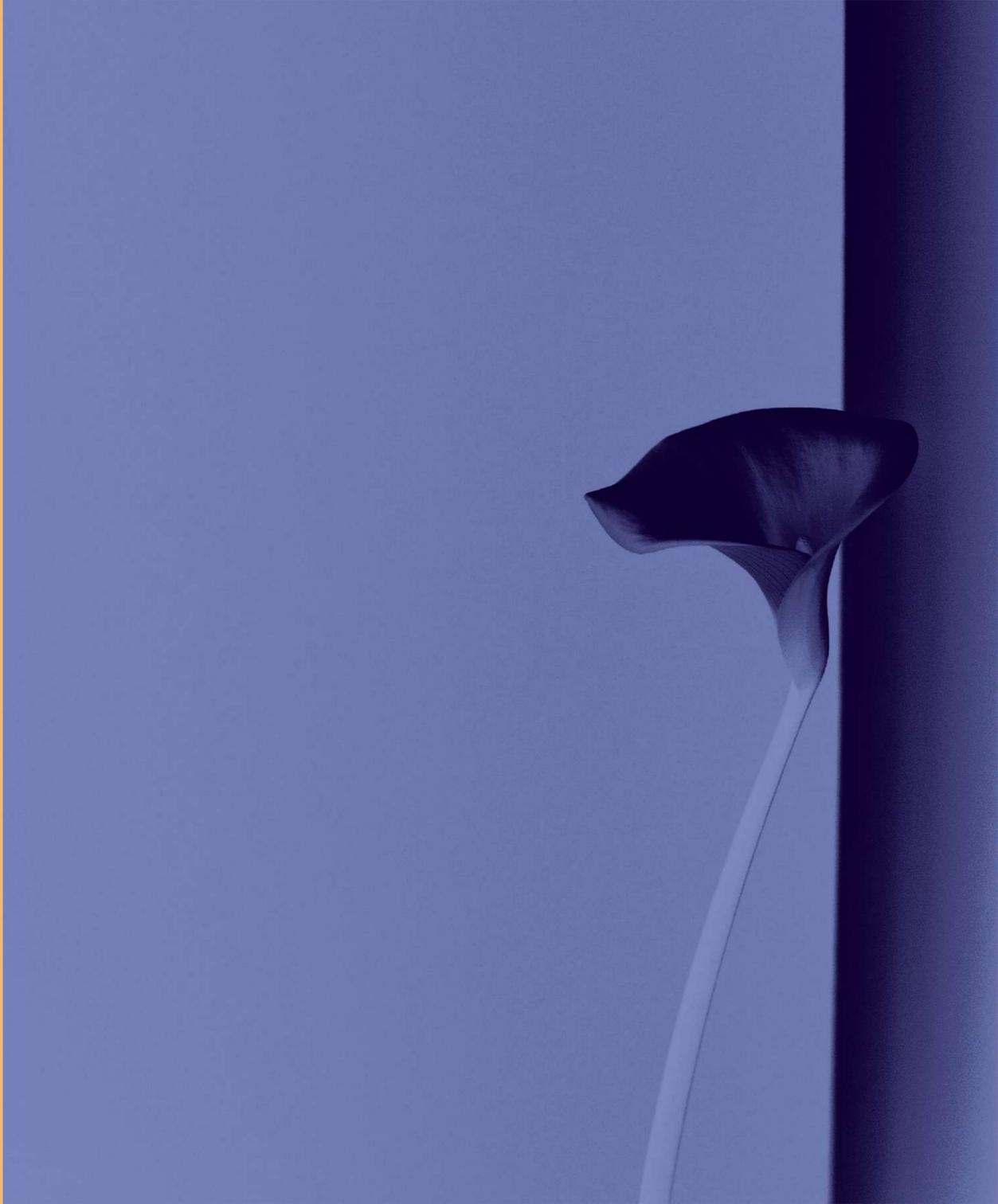
Minorities are relegated to have a voice in peripheral discourses only, and their experiences are lost in the fog like the possibility of finding their own place in the mass media.

In other words: Those who don't stand under the hegemonic gaze are relegated to oblivion.

Sex work is one of those areas where the weight of prejudices excludes the narration of objective stories. Mix a couple of tablespoons of sensationalism with a pinch of clickbait and we will have the perfect dish for any interviewer to turn into puppets at the service of an editorial line that seeks views at any cost.

This guide aims to establish a manual of good practices to discuss sex work in the media, eliminating discriminatory discourses and promoting those visions that take into account the reality of the protagonists of story from a fair, egalitarian and inclusive perspective; demonstrating that it's possible to make interesting, truthful and responsible articles that also generate views. Let's start from the beginning...





WHAT PREJUDICES DO SEX WORKERS HAVE TO DEAL WITH?¹

To be accurate when presenting objective information, first we have to understand what preconceptions inhabit the popular imagination.

Here we analyze the five most common prejudices that sex workers have to face.

1

EITHER VICTIM OR BOURGEOIS

The eternal binomial. In the eyes of the media, sex workers are divided into two distinct groups only.

Either they are deceived victims, abused and have ended up in this business against their will; or they embody the perfect rich girl who engages in sex work as an act of bourgeois rebellion. The street whore or the luxury escort. The mistreated porn actress, or the one who becomes rich at the expense of the suffering of others. *Hot Girls Wanted* vs. *The Secret Diary of a Call Girl*.

“Usually sex workers are portrayed as absolute victims of the circumstances.”

Shirley McLaren is a trans Mexican woman in her thirties, migrant in Spain, graduated in Communication and sex worker for eleven years. "This binarism is dangerous because it invisibilizes all the others that don't fall on those two shores, which are the immense majority by the way.", she says. "What causes these stereotypes is, on one hand, creating a moral panic about poor women who are abducted

from their countries of origin, a disempowering argument that takes away all the freedom to us women who decided to migrate (nobody says that men are abducted from their homes, but that they venture). And on the other hand, creating a fake image of 'privileged' to silence those of us who are visible and fight for our rights."

From Hetaira collective, founded 22 years ago by a group of cis and trans women of the feminist movement, they point out: "Usually sex workers are portrayed as absolute victims of the circumstances, paradoxically in the same articles that talk about the policies that criminalize them without making any kind of critical mention regarding it. To a lesser degree and more movie-like, we have the other extreme: the image of the glamorous prostitute who swims in money. Both dehumanize and don't talk about the concrete realities: legal discrimination, not being able to rent a flat, what entails being a migrant, the stigma, maternity in many cases, the ups and downs of work, strategies of resistance or daily life, for example."

2

THE MAJORITY OF SEX WORKERS ARE TRAFFICKING VICTIMS

"The information is there, you just have to want to see it." Says a few days ago Natalia Ferrari, a 25-year-old woman who has worked as an independent prostitute for five years.

She is talking about the report drafted by GRETA (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings) focused on the fight against human trafficking.

On September 27 of 2013, GRETA presented a text on the application of the Council of Europe's Convention against trafficking in Spain². The results are extremely critical and deconstruct many of the preconceived ideas that exist around sex work.

Among many other things, they emphasize the importance of not mistaking human trafficking with sex work and the need to protect the victims human rights.

Another recurring topic mentioned in the report is the need to separate the concept of human trafficking with forced prostitution.

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If we stick to data of the UN³, one out of seven women are in a situation of trafficking. The rest of us make our living from working on what we have chosen, simple as that" says Paula Vip, director of the Spanish association Aprosex, dedicated to defend the rights of sex workers.

"This myth about we all having a pimp on our back, that we are all being raped daily, that we are alienated and don't know what we are saying, that we are drug addicts, alcoholics, that we don't have the capability to raise our own children; has come in handy to the abolitionists to keep infantilizing the whores and speak on their behalf".

3

DELINQUENCY SPOTLIGHT

In the eyes of society, crime and sex work are inherently linked concepts. These prejudices feed a biased perception of reality.

“We are surrounded by unfavorable conditions that make us constantly face dangerous or illicit situations.”

"When a politician says 'I'm going to work to strengthen security in the country' they always talk about drugs and prostitution. As if sex work was related to crime. In the end, they reinforce a myth created by ignorance," says Elena Reynaga, founding member and current executive secretary of the Network of Sex Workers of Latin America and the Caribbean, which has been fighting since 1997 for the defense and promotion of human rights of this sector.

This same organization published seven years ago, a guide for the journalistic approach to sex work and sex workers and has become an absolute reference⁴.

As mentioned in the guide, "it's always necessary to remark that sex work is not illegal or unworthy, but the

conditions of its fulfillment are unworthy because of the lack of regulation and norms that recognize it as a job. We are no criminals, the environment of lack of protection, lack of legislation and no guarantee of our rights, "encloses" us in some sectors in which many times we are victims of illicit situations. What happens in some cases is that because of the secrecy and marginality to which we are pushed, we are surrounded by unfavorable conditions that make us constantly face dangerous or illicit situations".

4

NYMPHOMANIAC

As in the social imaginary it's incomprehensible that there are women who actually want to dedicate themselves to sex work, it tends to pathologize their decision.

“Sex work is not illegal or unworthy, but the conditions of its fulfillment are unworthy because of the lack of regulation and norms that recognize it as a job.”

Like that it's assumed that they are addicted to sex, people of insatiable sex drive who ended up in this business to satisfy their fantasies.

"People imagine sex worker as if they were 'man-eaters', without realizing that maybe in her personal life she can be a lesbian! Your privacy doesn't have to have anything to do with your work. Sometimes they forget that before being a sex worker, it's a person who dreams and feels like anyone else", Elena points out.

5

THE BODY FOR SALE

One of the most recurrent arguments when it comes to criticizing sex work is the idea of the commercialization of the body.

However, this paradigm ignores that the commercialized good is the strength of labor, not the body of the protagonists. In the same way that a salesgirl doesn't sell her hands for folding clothes, the sex worker isn't selling her genitals.

So we can affirm that the goods sold are the hours in which the worker offers a service, in this case of a sexual nature.



RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN TALKING ABOUT SEX WORK

Now that we have understood the main stigmas, stereotypes and prejudices that go through sex work, we will present eight suggestions to take into account when dealing with news related to the sector from an ethical and responsible perspective.

1

PERSONAL DECONSTRUCTION OF THE JOURNALIST

As a transmitting agent of information, it's the responsibility of the journalist to be in a constant process of deconstruction.

This will avoid impregnating the work with personal values, focusing on offering objective information.

“There's a lot of disinformation, dogmas and an irresponsible way of handling information that's false.”

The representation of sex work in popular culture (shows, films, literature ...) has created an image that in many cases isn't true.

So that these stereotypes that we have internalized are not transmitted to our work, I think it would be interesting to invite the journalist to question whether the work he is doing is biased by his ideals and beliefs as an individual or if it's a reliable representation of reality.

2

SEARCH FOR RELIABLE INFORMATION AND CONTRAST SOURCES

More media than expected copy data published in other articles without checking the sources that support them.

The result is texts full of incorrect terminology and fake numbers without a credible source.

Recurring errors are transformed into realities in the eyes of the population by the mere fact of being repeated again and again in articles, news and interviews. Instead, objective information must be promoted, without falling into sensationalism or superfluous data.

"There's a lot of disinformation, dogmas and an irresponsible way of handling information that's false", Natalia tells me. "One of the things that motivated me the most to stand up and give interviews was realizing that the popular portrait in the media had nothing to do with my experience and that the representation they were making of my profession didn't even have the voice of prostitutes. How is it

possible to discuss a topic without having the protagonists in mind? Some classic mistakes are using the expression "white slave trade" to talk about the victims of forced sexual exploitation, to suggest that prostitution is neither legal or illegal in Spain, differentiating between free whores (those who enjoy) and victim whores (those who do it for money), when we all are hard workers doing it for money and whether we enjoy it or not, is irrelevant. Also calling us regulators when we are pro rights."

“The discourse that prostitutes are bodies for sale to the use and abuse of the man who pays, not only makes us invisible but puts us in danger, implying that this is the work of a prostitute.”

3

GIVE VOICE TO THE PROTAGONISTS EXPERIENCES

We are used to the media echoing almost exclusively the negative circumstances and situations related to the sector (deaths of sex workers, abuses, problems ...), but they hardly mention any first-person experiences that don't have a stigmatizing burden.

When talking about sex workers who defend their work or have a positive perspective of it, they are treated as "exceptions", often using pejorative arguments towards their colleagues ("the prostitute who writes well", "the porn actress that quotes Nietzsche").

"It's necessary to empower the protagonists so that their voices are heard, the whores don't need guardianship."

When dealing with sex work related topics, it's necessary to highlight the testimonies of those involved with a perspective of gender, with special emphasis on showing the point of view of trans women, migrants, racialized and belonging to groups historically excluded from hegemonic discourses.

"The arguments we sex workers give are reduced to nothing because the image created over decades is stronger than our message."

"The arguments we sex workers give are reduced to nothing because the image created over decades is stronger than our message. Society still doesn't accept that sex workers can be intelligent, educated, independent, sexually liberated and feminist", says Valérie May, a 29-year-old woman who has been working in independent prostitution for just over a year.

"I would like the media to stop giving space to academic abolitionists or people who neither have nor have had a direct relationship with prostitution", says Natalia Ferrari.

"It's necessary to empower the protagonists so that their voices are heard, the whores don't need guardianship. The same applies to any journalist who thinks has a say on how the relationships with our clients are. We are able to analyse sexuality and masculinity within our work from a feminist perspective. Can you imagine cis scholars talking about the problems the trans community is facing as if trans women were unable to talk about what they have to deal with and ask for

what they need? They use their privileges to express their opinion about our work without us, but what they should do is help us out".

"When we talk about trans sex work it's assumed that it's a person without academic preparation and that if she wasn't very normative, she couldn't even work as a cashier", says Blanca, who has been working in prostitution for five years. "Many point at my culture and intelligence in a surprising way. They assume that I'm a poorly prepared woman who comes from an unstructured environment."

"We are able to analyse sexuality and masculinity within our work from a feminist perspective. Can you imagine cis scholars talking about the problems the trans community is facing as if trans women were unable to talk about what they have to deal with and ask for what they need?."

"Actually, the media rarely refers to trans women when they talk about sex work," says Shirley. "The interviews with trans women are about what it's gained in one night, the services they provide and any other situation that may be morbid without getting deeper in the structural situation that trans women, especially if they are

migrants, can find themselves at the moment of accessing the non-sexual labor market. I always got the impression that the intentionality of this type of reportage isn't to change a narrative, but to reaffirm more the belief that many people have that trans are something that you don't really want to know or have close."

4

AVOID HIERARCHIES

A good amount of the words used to refer to sex workers include a terrible burden at a social level.

"Whore" or "sex servant" are examples of denominations that carry a clear stigma, while when we speak of "porn actress", "escort" or "luxury prostitute" there seems to be almost a certain glamour in the social perception of their definitions.

"You have to be careful when using the term 'escort'", Valérie tells me. "It shouldn't be used to differentiate social positions or to create a hierarchy within sex work itself."

"We are used to the media echoing almost exclusively the negative circumstances and situations related to the sector."

Although there is a part within pro sex feminism that proposes the use of some of these historically pejorative words in order to assign them a new meaning (in the same way that the LGBTBI community reclaimed the use of "faggot" or "dyke"), it's always

necessary to ask the sex worker about who is being talked to, in what way she prefers to be named.

“It’s unnecessary to illustrate the articles with stolen photos from coworkers in the street or stock pictures of women with heels and miniskirts, always without faces; even when the interview is to whores who claim to be visible.”

“In general, unless I say it, the most accurate thing for a journalist to say would be sex worker”, says Natalia. “The purpose of this terminology is to make clear that we are working women, not differentiate between other sectors. There is a social hierarchy where it seems that being a porn actress is better than being a prostitute, and this only serves to encourage prejudice. We are in different sectors, but all of us are working women with the same stigma.”

5

DON’T USE GRAPHIC MATERIAL THAT FEEDS PREJUDICES AND RESPECT THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY OF SEX WORKERS

It’s common for the media to allow themselves publishing images of sex workers without their consent.

As a rule with no exceptions, always ask about if they are willing to be filmed or photographed. In the case of interviews, the media has to commit to use the photographs that have sent themselves and avoid getting graphic material from the internet. For example, taking screenshots of porn scenes or pictures from other interviews.

“There is a social hierarchy where it seems that being a porn actress is better than being a prostitute, and this only serves to encourage prejudice. We are in different sectors, but all of us are working women with the same stigma.”

"It’s unnecessary to illustrate the articles with stolen photos from coworkers in the street or stock pictures of women with heels and miniskirts, always without faces;

even when the interview is to whores who claim to be visible”, says Natalia.

In the same way, personal information of the workers should not be published under any circumstances without their consent (their real name, for example), even if other media have leaked this information in the past. This is a work on which many prejudices still weigh and for security reasons the right to privacy of the protagonists must be respected.

"It may happen that because of stigma, discrimination and prejudice; some of us don’t tell our families or in our neighborhood that we are sex workers and carry out our work far away from our spaces of belonging so that there is no reprisal of any kind towards us or our families", we can read in the RedTraSex guide⁴.

6

ERASE PATERNALISTIC DISCOURSES

The perception of sex workers as victims who need help encourages the use of expressions that oppress their identity as individuals, such as "women in prostitution situation".

"They talk about us as if we were things while it’s denounced that prostitution materialize us."

"They talk about us as if we were things while it’s denounced that prostitution materialize us. The discourse that prostitutes are bodies for sale to the use and abuse of the man who pays, not only makes us invisible but puts us in danger, implying that this is the work of a prostitute", Natalia tells me.

"It doesn’t matter how I say that I’m doing good, I feel like they want to rescue me" says Valérie. "Also, I constantly face the idea that this really isn’t something serious to do in life."

7

DON'T CONFUSE TRAFFICKING, EXPLOITATION AND SEX WORK

"Mixing prostitution with trafficking is a very serious mistake", adds Natalia. "Not only for whores, but also for the trafficking victims themselves, as GRETA states."

GRETA's report² isn't the only one that supports these claims.

The International Labor Organization⁵ has also insisted on pointing out that the majority of trafficking victims are actually exploited in the private economy.

Specifically, "of the total of 20.9 million forced laborers, 18.7 million (90 percent) are exploited in the private economy by individuals or companies. Of the latter, 4.5 million (22 percent) are victims of forced sexual exploitation, and 14.2 million (68 percent) are victims of forced labor exploitation in economic activities such as agriculture, construction, domestic work or the manufacture".

The UN also has a report about it³ entitled *Trafficking of people to Europe for sexual exploitation*.

According to its figures, "about one out of seven [prostitutes] would be a trafficking victim." This makes up 14 percent of prostitution in Europe, a number that nothing has to do with those normally handled in the media.

"Mixing prostitution with trafficking is a very serious mistake."

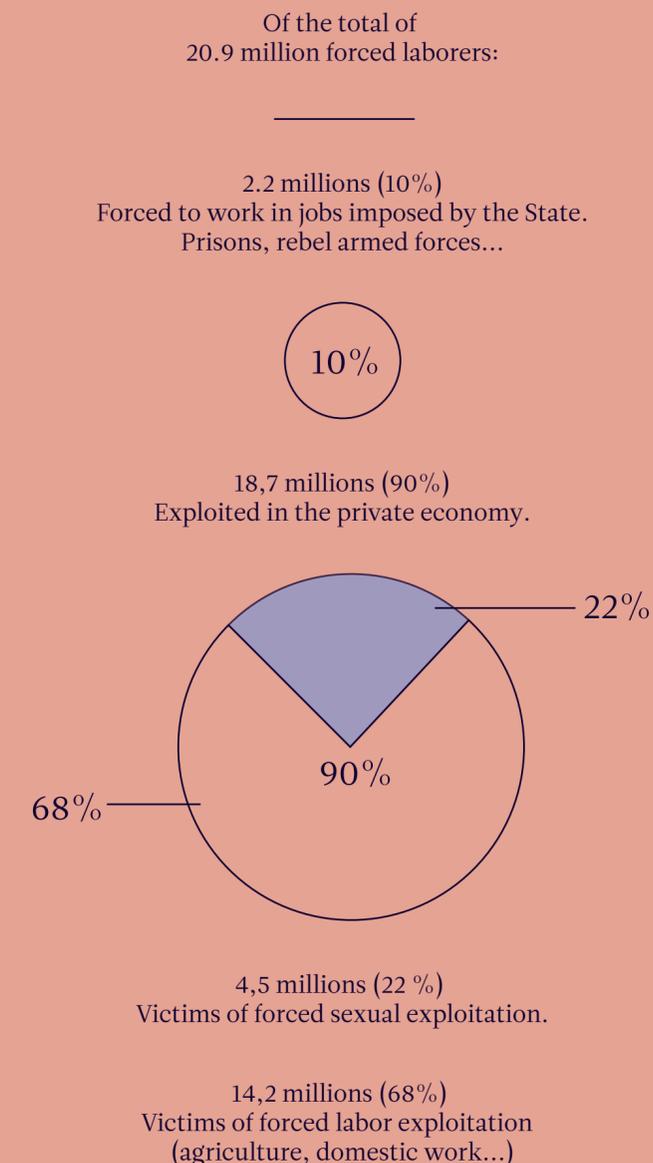
Amnesty International published in May 2016 nothing more and nothing less than four reports of research on human rights violations suffered by sex workers⁶. They focused on Norway, Argentina, Hong Kong and Papua New Guinea.

Its results are enlightening: punitive regulations of sex work must be removed "with consent among adults since they reinforce marginalization, stigma, discrimination and can deny people who engage in sex work access to justice under the protection of the law"⁷.

By the way, it's worth mentioning that Amnesty International is part of a large group of organizations that support or demand the decriminalization of sex work with consent.

These include the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, the Global Commission on HIV and Law, Human

Rights Watch, UNAIDS, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health and the World Health Organization....



8

WHEN IN DOUBT, ASK ORGANIZATIONS OF SEX WORKERS

There is a wide variety of organizations that defend sex workers rights.

Contacting these associations is the easiest way to obtain up-to-date and objective information.

Among others:

- Colectivo Hetaira⁸
- Aprosex⁹ (*Asociación de profesionales del sexo*)
- RedTraSex¹⁰ (*Red de trabajadoras sexuales de Lationamérica y el Caribe*)
- Ammar¹¹ (*Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de la Argentina*)
- APAC¹² (Adult Performer Advocacy Committee)
- SWOP- USA¹³ (Sex Workers Outreach Project US)

CONCLUSION

It's part of the journalistic ethic to offer truthful and objective information that's close to reality, so that the recipients of the message can carve out their own conclusions.

But in addition, if the topic talked about includes a stigmatized group, this maxim will support them to recover a position of authority that will help them emerge from marginality.

Yes, knowledge empowers.

The lack of objective information about sex work has filled with stereotypes the perception of this business for many years.

Finally the time has come to position ourselves as allies of those who haven't had a strong, powerful voice in their own battle so we can start to perceive this work from the perspective of its protagonists.

The Fourth Estate is a powerful weapon at the service of the people. It molds our knowledge and helps to shape our discernment.

For an intersectional and committed journalism, let's learn how to talk responsibly about sex work in the media.

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- ¹: This text has been written using most of the time feminine pronouns in a generalist way since the stigmas and prejudices that surround sex work are accentuated when it comes to women. However, this has been a decision taken by the author and the tips and suggestions mentioned here can and should be applied to all genres that exist.
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