FACT SHEET: How the Media can Prevent Harm to Sex Workers

Journalists have the duty to report on news stories with respect, accuracy and integrity. These journalistic principles are frequently foregone in reporting on sex workers, whose stories and issues are often approached with negative bias, stigma and disrespect. Here are 10 ways journalists can better represent the sex work community, and avoid harming those that choose to participate in it.

1. Avoid shaming ‘johns’ or ‘clients’, including the publishing of names and photographs. Research shows that this, along with other ‘end demand’ programs only moves sex work to isolated locations, where clients will continue to purchase sex under riskier conditions for the sex worker.¹ Consider the harms this has on the industry, as sex workers continue to strive to make a living under increased competition and fewer clients.

2. Research the harms of criminalization. Research shows that the criminalization of sex work leads sex workers to work in isolation, to avoid reporting harassment and assault to authorities and further marginalizes the community.² Reproduce this informed perspective in reporting about criminalization practices.

3. Learn the difference between sex work and human trafficking. Conflating consensual sex work with human trafficking is the wrong analytical perspective to both topics, and addresses neither successfully. Much empirical research is available on this topic.³

4. Never ‘out’ sex workers – always offer to publish their comments under pseudonyms. Outing sex workers can put them at risk of social isolation, discrimination and violence.

5. Re-consider the use of the term ‘high-risk lifestyle’ in reference to sex work – does the bias implicit in such a statement carry over to reporting on other dangerous workplace environments or activities such as mining or skydiving? Failures of the law to protect sex workers from harm and exploitation are brushed under the rug with such statements and the blame and responsibility is put on sex workers themselves.

6. Opt for the term ‘sex work’ instead of ‘prostitution’. In the same vein, use ‘sex worker’ instead of ‘prostitute’ or ‘hooker’. As these terms become outdated, they carry negative stigma, while the term ‘sex worker’ is considered more empowering and authentic to many in the industry.

7. Verify human trafficking statistics and statistics on violence against sex workers before reporting on them.

8. Rather than publish stock photos of street workers, consider portraying sex workers in a more genuine and diverse way, and using photos which are more relevant to the story.

9. Seek out the perspectives of actual sex workers, and avoid letting others speak on their behalf. In asking for their perspective, avoid intrusive or judgemental questions, and allow them to share what they feel comfortable with. Always maintain confidentiality and safety.

10. If sex workers are not available for comment, consider contacting a sex worker’s rights organization such as SafeSpace or Maggie’s. These organizations are composed of allies, and of current and former sex workers, and they have the best interests of sex workers in mind.

Sources:

Im/migrant Sex Workers, Myths and Misconceptions: Realities of the Anti-Trafficked, 2015.