

SEX WORKERS AGAINST THE LAW

Sex Work, Decriminalization, and Feminism: Selections from the Freedom Archives



Sex Workers and a Police Officer (*Connexions Spring 1984*)

The international struggle of Sex Workers organizing against laws that ensure marginalization through criminalization and violence is ongoing. I hope that this compendium of the materials in Freedom Archives' collections can work in conversation with marginal selections across other digital archives and can serve to inform other independent and institutional archives identify and preserve these important stories of struggle.

A note about language:

The language used to talk about sex work and questions of consent are constantly evolving within the Sex Worker's rights movement by Sex Workers themselves.

We acknowledge that not all of the materials in this finder's guide reflect more contemporary standards.

The term *decriminalization* was popularized by Jennifer James in 1973. The term *sex work* was coined by Sex Worker and activist Carol Leigh AKA Scarlett Harlot

Stella, a sex work organization ran by Sex Workers in Montreal Canada, has created [this helpful guide](#) to language about sex work and Sex Workers. Many of these terms come directly from Sex Workers and their communities to describe themselves and their work.

This selections guide attempts to comply with self determined language.

Introduction

The 2018 passing of SESTA/FOSTA¹ has generated an emergent public and political public discourse about sex work, law enforcement, and decriminalization in the United States. SETSTA/FOSTA was promoted as a package of laws passed to protect women from online trafficking. Testimony and studies from Sex Workers, service providers, and researchers has found over and over that expanding the surveillance and criminalization of already marginalized workers has only increased the precarity of their financial stability, health, housing, and physical safety. While legislators and NPIC anti-trafficking advocates claim to be protecting women and Sex Workers from violent civilians, Sex Workers and service providers know that *the police and abusive and/or violent clients alike* frequently target marginalized Sex Workers. This violence implicitly controls the lives of Sex Workers particularly those who may work outdoors, Black Sex Workers, other Sex Workers of color, and trans and gender nonconforming Sex Workers.

*“Sex workers and anyone believed to be to be a Sex Worker are believed to always be working, or in the cops’ view always committing a crime. People who are profiled by cops as Sex Workers include, in disproportionate numbers, trans women, women of color, and queer and gender nonconforming youth. This isn’t about policing sex this is about profiling and policing people whose sexuality and gender are considered suspect”*²

The ability to solicit clients from self determined online portals while working indoors has been proven to lower rates of violence against Sex Workers³. Sex work is a criminalized form of labor is accessible to poor women, queer, transgender, disabled, and gender non-conforming people. As such, studying the intersecting struggles of Sex Workers can support a strong critique of all labor under capitalism and imperialism. Since the early ‘70s organized Sex Workers and allies have pushed for both practical legal reforms minimizing the impact of policing on their lives and full decriminalization of the practice of selling sex and sexual services.

Decriminalization, a concept introduced by Jennifer James, a co-founder of the Sex Worker organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics), is an alternative to *legalization*. Legalization is a way of formalizing the social control of the state on Sex Workers lives and work. Decriminalization, however, seeks to reduce the state’s power in the lives of Sex Workers and their work.

¹ Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act are a package of laws targeting online content thought to be linked to Sex Trafficking that were signed into effect in 2018

² Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: the work of sex work* (Verso, 2018)

³ [Craigslisr Reduced Violence Against Women, by Scott Cunningham, Gregory DeAngelo, and John Tripp February 2019](#)

In the Prostitutes' Education Network document *Prostitution Law Reform: Defining Terms*, decriminalization is defined in part as “the abolition of laws against prostitution”. The definition explains that abolition of laws against prostitution are an essential safety measure that ensures Sex Workers ability to care for themselves, their families and communities.

“Prostitutes' rights advocates call for decriminalization of all aspects of prostitution resulting from individual decision. Asserting the right to work as a prostitute, many claim their right to freedom of choice of management. They claim that laws against pimping (living off the earnings) are often used against domestic partners and children, and these laws serve to prevent prostitutes from organizing their businesses and working together for mutual protection. They call for the repeal of current laws that interfere with their rights of freedom of travel and freedom of association. Civil rights and human rights advocates from a variety of perspectives call for enforcement of laws against fraud, abuse, violence and coercion to protect prostitutes from abusive, exploitative partners and management.”

Feminists have been talking about sex work and other kinds of gendered labor since long before the 2nd wave resurgence of Feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s. As it stands, many feminists are impacted by or aware of how laws prohibiting the social movement and economic lives of Sex Workers often only enact and encourage violence against women, trans and gender non-conforming people. The long fight for decriminalization along with Sex Workers' rights and safety is also a diverse and international struggle.

The radical legacy of Sex Workers' resistance to police surveillance, abuse, harassment and state repression is rarely tied to contemporary discussions of decriminalization. Despite the fact that these working conditions remain largely unchanged internationally. This resistance is strengthened by a material foundation of community care and mutual aid. Sex workers around the world continue to organize not just in the long term struggle for decriminalization but also for their own safety networks, freedom from imprisonment, healthcare, and other kinds of material support.

Freedom Archives materials' on sex work and Sex Worker organizing are dispersed through several collections. This guide attempts to bring together those items along with other marginalized primary sources from other archival collections with historical or cultural significance regarding the struggle of Sex Workers resisting state and intercommunal violence and organizing for mutual aid and decriminalization. My hope is to highlight the presence of Sex Workers organizing within the larger feminist movement and conversations regarding sex work happening in the larger feminist movement, with and without the participation and representation of Sex Workers themselves.

My Ass Is Mine: COYOTE and the Hooker's Convention



Flo
Kennedy leading attendants of the 1974 Hooker's Convention, including Margot St. James in a rousing rendition of, 'My Ass Is Mine' (*Marin Women's News*)

The Sex Worker led activist group COYOTE (founded by Margo St. James and Jennifer James in 1973) became one of the first public organizations pushing for decriminalization of sex work in the United States. In addition to this work for legal reform, they created a network of care for Sex Workers with programs ranging from direct financial assistance and a bail fund, to St. James Infirmary, the first occupational and safety health clinic for Sex Workers run by Sex Workers in the United States. The episode of radio program *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* titled 'We Are All Whores' takes you into the first ever Hooker's Convention hosted by COYOTE in 1974 with historical framing and analysis from prolific feminists like attorney Florence Kennedy.

*"I want the government to leave the prostitutes, to leave the Black people, to leave the Indians, and to leave the homosexuals alone....Black women, because of the low economic position we frequently occupy and because of the fact that because of the state discrimination it's harder for a Black woman to get a college education find that they can very often earn more money as prostitutes than they could in any other way and as far as I am concerned Black people have a particular interest in the decriminalization of prostitutes. I am not suggesting that people who don't want to be prostitutes should be prostitutes anymore than I'm suggesting that people who don't want to be nurses carry bed pans around should be nurses but what is so noble about the nursing profession and degrading about prostitution. I have never heard an answer that persuaded me in the slightest."*⁴

⁴ Florence Kennedy from *We Are All Whores*

When Prostitutes Win, All Women Win: Wages for Housework

When prostitutes win, all women win.

From *Money for Prostitutes is Money for Black Women* by Black Women for Wages for Housework, 1984

Wages for Housework was an international autonomous grassroots mobilization of feminists including Sex Workers who organized around a material demand to be compensated for women's unpaid labor and against "laws that punish women for refusing to be poor".

In a direct response to heightened police repression on Sex Workers in 1977 San Francisco Wages for Housework released the work-critical and prison and police abolitionist statement *An Attack on Prostitutes is an Attack on All Women*.

"Prostitution is one way of getting our wages. Although the government isolates our struggles, we refuse to be divided. All work is prostitution and we are all prostitutes. We are forced to sell our bodies—for room and board or for cash—in marriage, in the street, in typing pools or in factories. And as we win wages for all the work we do, we develop the power to refuse prostitution—in any of its forms.

*WE DEMAND AN END TO THE HARASSMENT OF PROSTITUTES. WE DEMAND AN ABOLITION OF THE LAWS AGAINST PROSTITUTION."*⁵

Statements of solidarity were made from Wages Due Lesbians Toronto, English Collective of Prostitutes, Wages Due Lesbians London, and Black Women for Wages for Housework. These statements along with coordinated direct actions and solidarity left a definitive mark on over 30 years of Sex Worker and feminist organizing.

⁵Excerpt from San Francisco Wages for Housework statement

At Home in the House of the Lord: Sex Worker Church Occupations 1975-1984



Photo from the Occupation of a church in Lyon France by Sex Workers in 1975 (*Connexions*, Spring 1984)

In 1982 the English Collective of Prostitutes, a Wages for Housework affiliated group, occupied the Holy Cross Church in London for 12 days to protest police violence and repression targeting Sex Workers, specifically Black Sex Workers and other Sex Workers of color. This occupation was modeled after a 1975 church occupation by Sex Workers in Lyon France who were protesting similar harassment, violence, and repression from the police. In both occupations Sex Workers and allies covered their faces with black masks and brought their children and families to the church to stand with them. The translated and reprinted 1978 article “Like Other Women” in the Spring 1984 issue of *Connexions* frames the political intention of the infamous Lyon church occupation by Sex Workers who were there.

“We will not go to prison for that. Some women would not have actually been incarcerated had we not hidden them from the police, and today we take refuge in the church. Otherwise the police will have to murder us to get us out of here”



English Collective of Prostitutes 12 day occupation of Holy Cross Church, 1984. (Courtesy of the English Collective of Prostitutes and the British Library)

In 1984 a group of Sex Workers and supporters Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes (ASP) in Vancouver, BC occupied Christ Church City Cathedral to protest a recent injunction on soliciting in the city's West End neighborhood and violence against Sex Workers. The occupation coincided with the feast of Mary Magdalene and was supported by US Pros (a Sex Worker organization in San Francisco) who reportedly "stormed" the Canadian embassy in San Francisco. Organized Sex Workers in Tulsa, OK, Australia, and London sent telegrams of solidarity and a rally in London was also organized by the English Collective of Prostitutes in support of the Christ Church Cathedral occupation.

"Prostitutes and supporters are occupying Christ Church Cathedral to protest the passing of the interim injunction on July fourth, 1984, declaring prostitutes a public nuisance, which in essence makes it 'open season' on prostitutes, thereby stripping us of what little human and civil rights we had. We are also protesting the violence perpetrated against the prostitutes by the police, pimps, and tricks. The harassment by the police has increased since the passing of the injunction."



Christ Church Cathedral Occupation, July 21-22 1984 (from Open Road, Issue 17, Winter 1984)

This internationally coordinated tactic of occupation and protest identified the state's work of surveillance and control of the daily life of the Sex Worker as well as their families and communities. These laws facilitate the violence of partners, pimps, police and clients alike.

Sisterhood is Problematic: Feminists and Sex Workers

Despite feminists that embraced Sex Workers and their struggles, the feminist movement's diverging paths came to a head in the late '80s and early '90s. This period is often referred to as the "Sex Wars" or "Culture Wars". This period was defined by social and political mobilization for legislative reforms to limit the depiction of sexuality and pornography. These reforms were supported and developed by Radical Feminists as well as right wing conservative politicians and activists. Notably, a model antipornography law was drafted by Radical Feminists Andrea Dworkin, a former Sex Worker, and feminist lawyer Catherine Mckinnon. This law served as the basis for several local ordinances proposed and passed around the country.

In opposition queer, trans, feminist, sex work, social, political, and artistic movements were organizing to retain freedom of expression and sexuality. This tension brought feminists organizing on both sides of this line into dialogue with each other and forced new conversations about a topic with the greater stakes and repercussions provided by legislation and state intervention.

The complicated and often fraught relationship between non-sex working feminists and Sex Workers is echoed in the Women Against Imperialism (WAI) document “WAI Prostitution Discussion, Points of Possible Disagreement”. This piece documents an organizational dialog to assess the political potential of organizing with Sex Workers for women’s liberation and against imperialism. The document contains notes of the prevailing discourse around sex work and prostitution by non-sex working anti-imperialist Radical Feminists.

Notably, the Freedom Archives also holds the correspondence between WAI and COYOTE via Carol Leigh but also correspondence between WAI and Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER) a sex work and pornography abolition non-profit. These documents are an invaluable look at the approaches to data collection and communication between feminist groups advocating for decriminalization and those advocating for the abolition of prostitution, pornography, and other kinds of sex work.

International Sex Workers: The Struggle Against State Control

The international feminist periodical *Connexions* frequently printed international coverage of sex work ranging from forced/coercive trafficking to more deliberate and consensual work. In this international conversation there is also division. Large NGO’s (many of them Christian missions) have aggressively funded a “rescue industry” while other activists have focused on the needs of the people involved in the sex trade. Narratives and organizing coming directly from poor Sex Workers in the Third World or Sex Workers of color as well as Black, transgender, and gender non-conforming Sex Workers in the United States are historically overlooked as unauthentic or else vastly under-represented.

The spring 1984 issue of *Connexions* is an early example of attempts to illuminate feminist narratives of Third World women and Sex Workers who were targeted by social and legal repression. There were contributions from every continent on the globe except Antarctica. From the introduction:

We see prostitutes as workers and, like most workers, their job is difficult and often unpleasant. We asked ourselves why women become prostitutes and looked to them for the answers. Prostitutes should not be blamed because prostitution is their means of support. Prostitution exists because of economic and sexual double standards which result in low pay for women and high unemployment. Our anger and our criticism is directed against the social systems that support abusive prostitution, and not against prostitutes. By presenting, whenever possible, the words of prostitutes, we are attempting to bridge the separation between prostitute and non-prostitute women. □

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Two articles from this issue of *Connexions* look at the ways that nations recently liberated from imperialism still enacted punitive repression against women who were or who were suspected to be Sex Workers.

"Operation Clean-Up" a Zimbabwean post-revolutionary state effort to address visual poverty, criminalized Sex Workers, as well as poor women generally. In the early '80s there was a similar effort which repressed the social lives of poor women in the country and subjected them to state violence.

“Prostitution is the evidence of the failure of the Zimbabwean economy to provide the means of earning a living in a dignified and unalienated way, particularly for women.”



Connexions, Spring 1984, Operation Clean-Up

Similarly, as another article outlines in Nicaragua post revolution, a moral decree to rid the country of vices found Sex Workers in Managua pushed out of city centers and away from vital public health resources. A 1980 revolutionary party police action called *Death to Delinquency* in Managua saw over 100 arrests of Sex Workers in addition to pimps and clients. This included leveling a section of the town market place known as Palo de Gato.

“Well you know that we do it out of necessity, I just wish that the police would leave us alone because our children suffer from hunger when we go to jail.”

A slightly more reform-minded program also began in 1980 in Corinto called Home of Social Education and Communication. This program used job training and other kinds of education for both Sex Workers and other communities on the conditions facing Nicaraguan Sex Workers.

These two articles suggest that while women were considered valuable in the struggles for national liberation they participated in, their access to resources and their livelihoods were still under some state repression and scrutiny that limited their own liberation and self determination.

Another article in this issue reports on the development of an Ecuadorian Prostitutes Union called the Associated Feminine Union. Some of the motivations to unionize from the workers themselves:

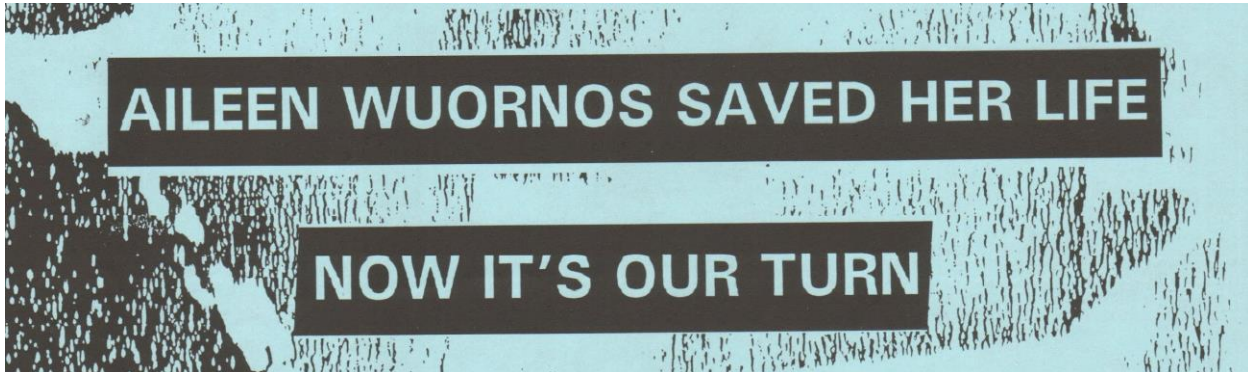
“—To have group strength with our sisters. —To be respected by the owners of the hourly rooms, the authorities, the police, and the scoundrels that abuse us.— To find ways of getting benefits for our children. — To be protected and feel more secure in our old age.”

“—The Union can also take part in the fight for bread, housing, justice, and liberty for everyone. We should take to the streets with banners like all unions do, and with our heads up high, without shame and fear of anyone.”

Throughout time and internationally Sex Workers have been disregarded by the state and ruling classes. Often the only people prioritizing the safety of Sex Workers are themselves, their families, and communities. Despite many different political terrains Sex Workers have found strength and safety through organizing around the demand to be free from violence.

Sex Workers and Community Defense

“Are work and violence mutually exclusive? Does work imply consent? If the choice we have is between working and not surviving, is that a meaningful choice?”⁶



Sex workers and allies have always supported Sex Workers impacted by violence and repression either directly from the state, or from violent clients and domestic and interpersonal violence. Both the San Francisco and Seattle chapters of COYOTE ran bail, legal, and jail support programs for Sex Workers who were arrested during work or because of ritualized surveillance and policing of their daily lives.

Janine Bertram, an organizer with COYOTE Seattle and Associated Seattle Prostitutes appeared on an interview with a feminist radio show on local Seattle radio station KRAB. In this interview Janine details the work of jail support and the intense collaboration between police and clients to enact violence against Sex Workers. Speaking of a police informant by name on air she explains:

“...the way the police dept justifies that is they say they’re trying to catch the owner on a felony. Meaning, if they find out that the woman goes through with the sexual act and gives part of the money from that trick to the owner then she can be charged with a misdemeanor while he can be charged with felony but see what they’re doing is not only entrapment. When they are just doing entrapment nobody goes through with the sexual act but they are condoning, in the case of Mike Joshua: adultery, sodomy... Ha! This is your Seattle Police Department folks!”

⁶Lorelei Lee, Sex Work as Work and Sex Work as Anti-Work, Hacking & Hustling 2021

Freedom Archives' collection also contains a few items of ephemera from the Aileen Wuornos Defense Committee. Aileen Wuornos was a Florida street based Sex Worker and lesbian who was arrested and charged with killing 6 men in self defense when they attempted to rape or otherwise assault her while she was working over the course of a year. While only tried for one murder Wuornos was convicted of all 6 by the end of the trial.

Upon her arrest Sex Workers and other feminists across the country recognized her case as a significant example of the state punishing women but especially marginalized women who fight back against institutional and interpersonal sexualized violence. Wuornos' struggle for justice became a popular lexicon in the feminist and lesbian culture of the '90s. In short documentary footage from Dyke March 1993 you can see a large purple banner from the Aileen Wuornos Defense Committee that reads: DICK JUSTICE SCREWS WOMEN FREE AILEEN WUORNOS.



Screen Grab from [SF Dyke March 1993 Part 2](#).

The Struggle Continues

This project was started in 2019 while I was working full time as a bookseller and interning part time at the Freedom Archives. It was delayed in part due to the restrictions and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, I was forced to locate research sources for this project remotely through public digital archives dispersed across the world. Because of this I began to see the international struggles for Sex Workers and decriminalization more expansively. Many of these materials are also marginalized within larger collections. Many of these materials are preserved and elevated only through the work and legacies of current or former sex working archival workers themselves.

At the time of the publication of this work barriers have been installed on Capp St. in San Francisco and East 16th Street in East Oakland along the sections of the streets where Sex Workers and their clients meet. These barriers push Sex Workers and their clients onto larger nearby streets (Mission St. and International Ave. respectively) where they are more vulnerable to police surveillance and interactions. While both progressive cities claim to serve Sex Workers they use hostile architecture to ensure their vulnerability to police violence.

In 2020 and 2022 respectively Sex Workers and organizers Margot St. James and Carol Leigh aka Scarlet Harlot left this world. Their lifelong work for the lives of Sex Workers and towards sexual liberation is an inspiration to Sex Workers organizing today.

The international struggle of Sex Workers organizing against laws that ensure marginalization through criminalization and violence is ongoing. I hope that this compendium of the materials in Freedom Archives' collections can work in conversation with marginal selections across other digital archives and can serve to inform other independent and institutional archives identify and preserve these important stories of struggle.