

**Policy Statement on Sex Work**

**New Policy Statement**

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Abstract

In 1993, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Assembly of Delegates passed a resolution directing the Assembly to adopt a policy statement on sex work. From Jane Addams to present day, social workers have worked with women in the sex industry. There is a continuum of experiences, research, and theories on sex work. From forced trafficking of children, abuse of sex workers at the hands of customers and law enforcement, to the independent sex worker expressing her own sense of agency, social workers need to be aware of the complex socio-economic-cultural surrounding this issue. Following the Code of Ethics, social workers must respect the dignity and worth of sex workers and their right to self-determination; combat racism, sexism, and classism as it intersects in the lives of sex workers; vigorously support victims of the sex industry and sex workers who have been victimized; and, provide support that meets the needs of sex workers.

### **Rationale**

In 1993, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Assembly of Delegates passed a resolution directing the Assembly to adopt a policy statement on sex work. Once the authors working on the policy statement recognized the international debate on sex work, they did not move forward in drafting a policy statement. NASW need to finish its obligation and adopt a policy statement on sex work. This policy should consider all the voices on this issue and should reflect a carefully considered policy. Despite the divergent theoretical frameworks and ideologies of the players on this issue, there is some common ground on which to develop a policy. We must acknowledge the continuum of experience within the sex trade industry and develop a policy that both eliminates victimization and exploitation, and supports the individual's right to autonomy and self-determination.

For most of this century, social workers have been involved in efforts to rescue and/or protect sex workers. Although few social service programs in the US provide services specifically to sex workers, social workers provide services to some sex workers through correctional, AFDC, domestic violence, rape crisis, public health and HIV/AIDS related programs. However, because sex workers rarely disclose their occupation to social service providers for fear of stigma and arrest (Boyer et. al, 1993; Weiner, 1996), social workers don't always know when a client is involved in the sex industry, limiting the social worker's ability to meet the needs of clients that are specific to sex work. Women who are unable to hide their sex worker status are frequently the most vulnerable because they are either homeless, addicted to drugs or perhaps have serious health conditions (Weiner, 1996). Consequently, many women who reveal their status are turned away from social service programs (like domestic violence shelters or long term alcohol and drug treatment) out of fear that they will compromise the programs by continuing to trade sex for

drugs or money (Weiner, 1996). While some cities like Seattle, Portland, Minneapolis and Buffalo had services that offered support groups, housing assistance, job training and counseling to sex workers who wanted to leave “the life,” few services exist to support sex workers who remain in the sex industry despite the fact that some of them may be in dire need of social services.

A policy statement by NASW will provide information on the background of social workers’ involvement in services to sex workers, identify the most important issues for consideration, and provide key principles to guide social workers in their work with and on behalf of sex workers.

## **Background**

Since the beginnings of our profession, social workers have worked with sex workers. A variety of ideological and theoretical orientations have ruled this involvement, from evangelical desires to rescue fallen women from the clutches of male sexual aggression to sex radical feminists' insistence that they control their own bodies and sexuality. Acknowledging the importance of this issue, in 1993 the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Assembly of Delegates passed a resolution directing the Assembly to adopt a policy statement on sex work.

Much of the early social work practice with sex workers took the form of evangelical work during the mid 1800s. In the area of sexual morality, evangelicals saw their task as controlling male sexual aggression and protecting women from male sexual aggression because society did not have a place for women who had lost their virtue (Boyer, 1978; Rothman; 1978). Reformers rejected sexual liberalism which they believed always translated into the sexual exploitation of women. The approach of the religious reformers to prostitution excluded the voices and perspectives of prostitutes and thus obscured the possibility that women were not victims and that perhaps women exercised agency in their choice to engage in sex work.

During the late 1800s the spectre of White Slavery became an image used to depict commercial sex as a form of slavery where women were "trafficked" against their will into the trade by third parties, typically foreign men, such as pimps, madams and proprietors who were increasingly organizing the business. It was in the name of protecting women, white women, that the Mann Act placed restrictions on women's bodies, to "safeguard" them from sexual slavery. While the legislature created laws such as the Mann Act to protect women from exploitation and dangerous male desire, it simultaneously created laws to protect men from the "disease carrying prostitute". American feminists who had rallied behind Josephine Butler for her crusade against

the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDA) in England, organized an opposition to such laws in the States. Like Butler, American feminists, in tandem with some purity reformers, argued that mandatory medical exams on prostitutes perpetuated a sexual double standard that held prostitutes, not their clients, responsible for the transmission of disease (Hobson, 1987). Many of the purity reformers argued like Josephine Butler that the mandatory medical exams were a form of sexual assault.

By the 1890's over 100 cities in the US had charity organization societies (COS) designed to more systematically provide relief to the poor. Unlike the Evangelical workers who saw women as victims of male aggression, COS workers regarded women as incapable of "making good decisions" therefore making themselves susceptible to sexual advances (Stadum, 1992). Consequently, COS workers and friendly visitors would solicit information about an unknown man who might visit a woman. Like their predecessors, friendly visitors were greatly disturbed by sexuality- or rumors of female immorality.

By the early 1900's despite their apparent openness to the way of life in their local communities, Settlement workers were part of the second anti-prostitution crusade . Influenced by the notion of prostitution as sexual slavery, Addams referred to prostitutes as, "victims of white slavery" who needed to be rescued from immoral people and forces (1912). American feminists agreed with Addams that prostitution was "the social evil" (Vice Commission of Chicago, 1911, cited in Addams, 1912, p. 4) that rendered women powerless to save themselves. Jane Addams, a prominent settlement worker and founder of Hull House, believed that prostitution would eventually be eliminated once society moved to the next level of moral development.

With the onset of W.W.I, the prostitute was no longer seen as a victim of White Slavery, rather she became the number one enemy on the home front. War propaganda constructed the prostitute as diseased and predatory, a woman who "could do more harm than any German fleet of airplanes" (Hobson, 1987, p. 165). Women engaged in settlement work and other types of community service were called upon to help fight the war of disease on the home front: "They initiated volunteer hostess clubs that offered wholesome entertainment near training camps; they acted as chaperones for servicemen and single women at public dances" (Hobson, 1987, p. 166).

During the 1920s as social workers began to professionalize they attempted to set themselves apart from those doing Christian and church-based work, namely the evangelical and charity workers. Despite the tensions, moral reform workers and social workers essentially performed the same kind of rehabilitative and rescue work with fallen women. Social workers tried to rehabilitate fallen women by changing their personalities through case work and therapy, while evangelicals used religion. Both groups of reformers thus used "interventions" that focused on the individual. As long as the causes of prostitution lay with the individual, then it could be eliminated if only all of the fallen women could be redeemed; every time the Magdalen Society rescued an "unhappy female," prostitution was diminished.

For 40 years after W.W.I the discourse on prostitution was largely shaped by psychiatrists who considered that the causes of prostitution could be traced back to the individual "neurotic," "frigid" and/or "masochistic" female (Hobson, 1987). Unlike the evangelical workers who believed that women "fell" into prostitution as victims, Greenwald repeatedly referred to "the personality which makes it possible for a girl to choose the prostitutes' profession" (p. 242). Hence, despite a prostitute's pathology, Greenwald acknowledged a woman's agency to choose

the profession, a controversial recognition that is still highly debated within the social work profession in the 1990s.

Not until the cultural and social protests of the 1960s and 1970s did prostitution again become an issue of sexual politics or social justice, and many of the conflicts in class and gender politics that had inhibited change in the past would work against change in the future. (Hobson, 1987, p. 199). A huge gap exists in the social work literature on prostitution from the 1960-1980s. Despite a call for more attention to diverse social issues, women's rights and prostitution included, we can perhaps assume that because psycho-therapeutic models prevailed in the 1960s (Kemp, 1994; Torgerson, 1962), social work practice with sex workers remained focused on individual weaknesses. Some information about the lives of sex workers can be found in both the feminist literature and the prostitutes' rights literature from this particular period.

The onset of the AIDS epidemic and the emergence of "John's Schools" across the country have consequently created some opportunities for social workers to work with sex workers. Despite the fact that there is no evidence that female sex workers have a higher rate of HIV infection than do non-sex working women, sex workers have again been scapegoated for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (Sacks, 1996). While several of the sex worker-focused HIV/AIDS education programs and John's Schools in the 1990s are organized and run by sex workers, some employ the services of social workers. Social workers active in needle exchange programs, HIV/AIDS outreach programs, safer sex education and public health programs for people with HIV thus come into contact with sex workers.

It is critical that social workers understand the current worldwide debate over the sex industry and, following the Social Worker's Code of Ethics, adopt practices that enable social workers to best serve sex workers without imposing personal bias on this population.

## **Issues Statement**

The current concerns about sex work takes place against a backdrop of economic injustice and social inequity for women. Given this inequitable status of women in society, some have characterized women who work in the sex trade industry as victims of exploitation and abuse. Others however, view sex workers as workers in a legitimate profession stigmatized by a sexually repressed society.

- **Sex Work as Violence and Exploitation**

Women victimized in the sex industry "reject the lie that women freely choose prostitution from a whole array of economic alternatives that exist under civil equity" (Wynter, 1987, p. 269). Rather, they note that with high rates of child abuse, wife-battering, rape, female-headed household poverty, lack of an equal rights amendment, and inequitable wages, women live with civil inequity which does not allow free choices, especially in regards to potentially life-threatening work. In addition, sex work is seen as a form of violence against women.

- **Race, class and gender**

Female sex workers of color have fewer opportunities for employment off the streets than white women and are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement for prostitution regulation. Prostitution can be seen as the intersection of race, class and gender (Collins, 1990). The rape and abuse of black women throughout American history makes certain forms of sexual objectification possible (Collins). Consequently, sex work can be conceptualized as representing the fusion of exploitation of black women's sexuality for an economic purpose.

- **Sex Worker's Rights**

In the 1970's, sex workers around the world began organizing to argue for safety and respect. The sex workers' rights movement was founded on three general tenets, all of which are based on the right to self-determination. First, members of the movement do not believe that all sex work is forced, and in fact, believe that many women freely choose this work (Jenness, 1993; Pheterson, 1989). Second, they believe that sex work should be viewed and respected as legitimate work (Jenness, 1993; Pheterson, 1989). And third, they believe it is a violation of a woman's civil rights to be denied the right to work as a sex worker (Jenness, 1993).

- **Sex as Work**

Sex workers' rights groups claim there is no difference in work in which a woman sells her hands, such as a typist, and work in which a woman sells her vagina, as in sex work (Jenness, 1990; Pheterson, 1989). The sex worker is a possessor of property who contracts out a certain form of labor power. She is not seen as selling her body, because if she was selling her body she would be a sexual slave (Bell, 1994).

- **Violence Against Sex Workers**

Almost all concerned with the issue of sex work are concerned about the violence perpetrated against sex workers. As sex workers spoke out at the World Whores Congress, many told of heinous acts of kidnapping, torture, rape, and being forced into sex work. Research has also documented the rape, assault and abuse experienced by sex workers, particularly those who work the streets (Farley). The United Nations also documented the forced trafficking of women and children for labor, including prostitution.

## **Policy Statement**

It is imperative that we hear and validate the voices of women who work, or have worked, as sex workers. The reality of all women can be validated by acknowledging that there is a continuum of experiences within the sex trade industry. This continuum is based on work venue (indoors/outdoors), legal status of worker, autonomy of worker, and other environmental factors. Many women are physically forced into sex work through kidnapping and trafficking. Many work in the sex industry because they do not have other viable options; for some women, poverty and starvation are the only alternatives to sex work. Other women choose to work as sex workers in the same way that some women choose to work as secretaries or as waiters or as field laborers. Some sex workers have other job skills and education, but freely choose to work as sex workers for a variety of reasons.

- **Decriminalize Prostitution**

We support the decriminalization of prostitution. Initiatives to prohibit sex work have resulted in the isolation, increased vulnerability, abuse and exploitation of sex work. Programs to regulate sex work have resulted in the control and further stigmatization of sex workers. We join the National Organization for Women in calling for the decriminalization of prostitution (1972).

- **Dignity and Respect**

Like all people, sex workers have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Sex workers have identified stigma as a primary difficulty preventing them from leaving the work and seeking safety from violence (Foundation for Women, 1995; Sloan, 1997). Sex workers are just like other women who are trying to survive in an inequitable world order. Sex workers want to be treated as human beings worthy of dignity and respect; they need adequate food, clothing and shelter; and, they need to feel worthwhile.

- **Self-determination**

Social workers have an obligation to remember that all people, including sex workers, have a right to self-determination. We must assist women who want to leave the sex trade industry and support those who cannot or do not. It is the individual who must choose the options that are best for them, and the social worker's job to provide the services that best protect and meet the needs of the client.

- **Prosecute Violence Against Sex Workers**

We support vigorous prosecution of laws designed to protect women from violence. Sex workers who encountered at the hands of their partners, pimps, customers or police should not be excluded from protection. It must be acknowledge that sex workers can be sexually assaulted and/or that they deserve protection. Police and prosecutors must provide equitable protection to sex workers and support them when they report abuse and violence.

- **Economic Justice, Employment and Education Opportunity**

Women must be afforded economic justice, equal employment, and educational opportunities for only in this way will women ever have an array of viable options. We must pass and enforce strong laws ensuring equal educational opportunities for girls. Affirmative Action and sexual harassment policies continue to be needed in the workplace. Poverty and illiteracy need to be eliminated through strong community based programs.

- **Research**

We encourage researchers to be cognizant of issues of social, political, economic and personal power and seek to equalize power relationships with the sex workers they study. This can be accomplished by acknowledging that sex workers are the experts on their own lives; researchers are the experts on research methods, and we all stand to learn from one another. Researchers are encouraged to collaborate with the sex workers they seek to study. Researchers must bring the

results back to the sex workers they study to ensure that the researchers' interpretation of the data is accurate.

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