

How To Be An Ally to Sex Workers

- 1) Don't Assume.** Don't assume you know why a person is in the sex industry. We're not all trafficked or victims of abuse. Some people make a choice to enter this industry because they enjoy it, others may be struggling for money and have less of a choice.
- 2) Be Discreet and Respect Personal Boundaries.** If you know a sex worker, it's OK to engage in conversation in dialogue with them in private, but respect their privacy surrounding their work in public settings. Don't ask personal questions such as "does your family know what you do?" If a sex worker is not "out" to their friends, family, or co-workers, it's not your place to tell everyone what they do.
- 3) Don't Judge.** Know your own prejudices and realize that not everyone shares the same opinions as you. Whether you think sex work is a dangerous and exploitative profession or not is irrelevant compared to the actual experiences of the person who works in the industry. It's not your place to pass judgment on how another person earns the money they need to survive.
- 4) Watch Your Language.** Cracking jokes or using derogatory terms such as "hooker", "whore", "slut", or "ho" is not acceptable. While some sex workers have "taken back" these words and use them among themselves, they are usually used to demean sex workers when spoken by outsiders.
- 5) Address Your Prejudices.** If you have a deep bias or underlying fear that all sex workers are bad people and/or full of diseases, then perhaps these are issues within yourself that you need to address. In fact, the majority of sex workers practice safer sex than their peers and get tested regularly.
- 6) Don't Play Rescuer.** Not all sex workers are trying to get out of the industry or in need of help. Ask them what they need, but not everyone is looking for "Captain Save-A-Ho" or the "Pretty Woman" ending.
- 7) If you are a client or patron of sex workers, be respectful of boundaries.** You're buying a service, not a person. Don't ask for real names, call at all hours of the day/night, or think that your favorite sex worker is going to enter into a relationship with you off the clock.
- 8) Do Your Own Research.** Most mainstream media is biased against sex workers and the statistics you read in the news about the sex industry are usually inaccurate. Be critical of what you read or hear and educate yourself on who exactly is transmitting diseases or being trafficked.
- 9) Respect that Sex Work is Real Work.** There's a set of professional skills involved and it's not necessarily an industry that everyone can enter into. Don't tell someone to get a "real job" when they already have one that suits them just fine.
- 10) Just because someone is a sex worker doesn't mean they will have sex with you. No matter what area of the sex industry that someone works in, don't assume that they are promiscuous and willing to have sex with anyone at any time.**
- 11) Be Supportive and Share Resources.** If you know of someone who is new to the industry or in an abusive situation with an employer, by all means offer advice and support without being condescending. Some people do enter into the sex industry without educating themselves about what they are getting into and may need help. Despite the situation, calling the police is usually never a good option. Try to find other organizations that are sensitive to the needs of sex workers by contacting the organizations listed below.
- 12) As you learn the above things, stand up for sex workers when conversations happen.** Share your personal stories if you so choose. Don't let the stigma, bigotry and shame around sex work continue. Remember it's important that sex workers be allowed to speak for themselves and for allies to not speak for sex workers but to speak with sex workers.

Realize that sex work transcends 'visible' notions of race, gender, class, sexuality, education, and identities; sex workers are your sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, lovers, and friends. Respect them! Get Active! Contact your local SWOP Chapter to find out what you can do or form your own in the city you live in.



Part Two: *Being an Ally as an Institution or Community Leader*

If you run a business (a coffee shop, clothing store, restaurant, etc.) or a drop-in center:

- Put up Sex-Work-Positive schwag in your window or with other sticker-fiti. You know how great walking into an establishment with a rainbow flag feels as an LGBTQ person? Sex-work-positive stickers, posters and art have the same effect on people working in the sex trade.
- Include material from harm-reduction-based organizations geared towards sex workers on your pamphlet table/in your pamphlet stack.

If you have hiring/admissions authority or the power to influence hiring/admissions:

- We believe that people have the right to remain in, and also **exit** the sex industry. Many barriers, including internalized stigma, long career gaps, and criminal records, serve as barriers for people who want to exit the sex trade. Below are some suggestions on how you can help reduce those barriers.
- Ignore prostitution convictions or arrests when they appear on applicant background checks. Work to ensure that prostitution arrests/convictions of employees remain confidential.
- Reach out to agencies and organizations that may come into contact with sex workers, and say that your organization is an equal-opportunity employer. If you don't have the capacity to hire new workers, consider creating low-stipend internships with transferable skills and credentials, and that will add to the resume of former workers.
- If you are a member of a professional association: talk about eliminating licensing and hiring bans on individuals who have prostitution arrests or convictions. (It varies from state to state, but licensing in many high-growth female-dominated service professions, like nursing, health-care, massage therapy, teaching, and social work, is not available for individuals with prostitution convictions).

If you are a direct service provider (lawyer, counselor, health-care provider)

- Include: "I provide services, regardless of current or former involvement in the sex trade" to the list of other marginalized groups you provide equal treatment to.
- Get educated, and avoid inferring or jumping to conclusions about sex workers.
- If you work in a group setting, discourage verbal violence and harassment of individuals working in the sex trade.
- Tailor your services to the individual worker. Many differences exist in the mental and physical tolls of different types of workers, different workers' goals relating to involvement in the sex trade, and services needed. (See UK Network of Sex Worker Projects for more information).

If you are an academic or a reporter:

- Recognize the diversity of voices, experiences, and reasons for involvement in the sex trade in your work. Read 'research' on the sex trade critically, and look at a variety of sources when you select material to draw from when preparing a course, presentation, journal or newspaper article.
- Refrain from generalizing the experience of being a sex worker from the narratives of one or a small group of sex workers. Recognize that while some individuals certainly have glamorous (or empowering or horrific) experiences in the sex trade, their experiences may not be representative of all individuals in the sex trade.
- Don't just 'take' the stories & experiences of the individuals you are studying — give something back in return! This can be anything from: referrals to case management, housing, drug-treatment, free or low-cost educational/professional development opportunities, academic grants; training in research methods & support on future community-participatory-action research; listing key informants as 'research assistants' in publications; and creating research that has the power to generate policies & laws that improve the lives of the individuals you are studying.

If you are a policy-maker:

- Include diverse sex-worker voices in discussion when drafting laws and policies that affect them.
- Work to eliminate policies/laws that discriminate against individuals currently or previously involved in the sex trade (including: housing discrimination, discrimination in custody cases, employment discrimination, police profiling and abuses).