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Making Sex Workers Visible in the Village Voice Media Ad Controversy

BY MICHELLE CHEN



Members of the Sex Workers Outreach Project New York City (SWOP-NYC) and Sex Workers Action New York take to the streets. (Photos courtesy swop-nyc.org)

In a perfectly “free” labor market, everyone theoretically has the right to exchange work for commensurate compensation. But a free market is not necessarily a just one. And when the commodity is sex, how free is too free?

Sex work, and its attendant culture wars, have moved over time from traditional brothels of urban lore to online marketplaces, raising new questions about private and public freedom. In the digital world, how should trust and power be negotiated between provider and client, both encircled by systemic gender and economic inequities?

On this slippery battlefield, anti-trafficking advocates are [campaigning against Village Voice Media’s Backpage](#), an ad portal featuring “adult” ads notorious for facilitating sexual services involving minors.

Village Voice Media’s editorial side has mounted a counterattack with reporting aimed at debunking popular myths (those familiar salacious tales of powerful men exploiting innocent youngsters). Reporter Kristen Hinman [cites research on underaged prostitutes](#) that undercuts the stereotype of the classic prostitution ring, writing that “the typical kid who is commercially exploited for sex in

New York City is not a tween girl, has not been sold into sexual slavery, and is not held captive by a pimp,” and that “Nearly all the boys and girls involved in the city's sex trade are going it alone.”

That doesn't mean the sex business is squeaky clean. Critics are unconvinced that Backpage can police itself (or “cover its collective arse,” as neofeminist blogger [Maggie McNeill put it](#)). Clergy and women’s rights groups dismiss the company’s free speech defense as window dressing.

“If I tried to sell crack online through Backpage,” Malika Saada Saar of the [Rebecca Project for Human Rights](#) told the *Daily Beast*, “the Village Voice would not stand up and say this is about the First Amendment... It’s convenient and politically easy for them to frame this as a free speech issue and it’s not. It’s a human rights issue.”

Sex workers agree that it’s a human rights issue. But they see the war on Backpage (and before that [Craigslist](#)) as the wrong answer to a wrong-headed question.

“Efforts to close down third-party advertisers are a shortsighted and misguided tactic to address trafficking,” said the [New York City branch](#) of the grassroots [Sex Workers Outreach Project \(SWOP\)](#), in correspondence with *In These Times*. Blanket crackdowns endanger sex workers by forcing them “further underground,” potentially pushing vulnerable people away from social services and other initiatives that could alleviate the social and economic oppression often underpinning sexual coercion.

Sienna Baskin of the legal advocacy group [Sex Workers Project](#) told ITT that the key issue is safety:

For many, the availability of these tools gives them more power and agency over their engagement in the sex trade, not less. These online advertising spaces also create a record of interactions that can be a useful tool for law enforcement to track down violent abusers and traffickers.

The criminalization dilemma isn’t confined to selling sex. Immigration enforcement takes on similar shades of gray in aggressive workplace raids targeting undocumented immigrant workers—a tactic that advocates say [fails to address fundamental labor abuses](#) by fixating just on whether workers have papers.

Moreover, the stigma of criminalization and social transgression surrounds even consensual sexual services involving adults. The intersection between Victorian virtues and evolving concepts of gender and sexual rights in the sex-work sectors chafes against a deeper vice in which we’re all complicit: the exploitation ingrained in a capitalist labor market.

Sex workers, even teenage ones, [can’t be reduced](#) to the sexual equivalent of crack. The entire idea of sex workers possessing personhood is premised on their right to control their bodies and by extension, their leverage over the services rendered.

Of course, activists should be wary of profit-making institutions conflating the individual’s freedom to work with the employer’s “freedom” from regulation or “right” to exploit. But a legal ban alone doesn’t change the forces of supply and demand. Some organizations take a [human-rights approach to sex work](#) (which can range from prostitution to exotic dancing) that focuses instead on engaging law enforcement and social agencies to protect sex workers from assault and harm—not just by pimps and johns, but by police, judges and immigration officers, too.

Globally, [pro-sex-worker movements](#) foreground the economic and political agency of people in the trade. Last year, advocates [reported to the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights](#) that heavy-handed tactics allow authorities to use sex work “crime” as a pretext for discrimination, harassment and brutality against “street-based or outdoor workers, transgender or gender non-conforming people, people of color, migrants, and youth.”

In [Red Light District Chicago's](#) video campaign, sex workers voice their conviction that that they can proudly practice their profession while working to end trafficking.

Yet the perspectives of sex workers are sidelined in the public discourse on sex ads. Of the many politically savvy voices that fill the debate, few belong to the human beings on whose bodies this culture war is being waged. Maybe the ethical clarity that moral crusaders desire requires less talking and more listening to what sex workers know, need and want. SWOP-NYC argues:

Sex work is real work, which means sex workers have the basic labor rights we all expect, including a work environment free of violence and exploitation. Targeting companies that work with people in commercial sex will only lead to more shrouded interactions. This marginalization and isolation increases violence, HIV/STI transmission and stigmatization, hinders access to basic services, and promotes a loss of autonomy over the conditions in which people engage in the industry. There is so much we can do to prevent trafficking and support people who do want to move out of the sex industry, and these tactics only pull valuable resources from those strategies.

The voice commonly missing from the media coverage on the Village Voice and Craigslist is that of sex workers. It has become too easy to forget that there are real people involved with sex work with real human and labor rights.

Even people who object to sex work on principle or support anti-trafficking crackdowns can't deny that sex work will always be a part of society, whatever the law says. In their struggle for justice and respect, sex workers don't need to be "saved" from that reality, but they do need to be heard