



**FEMINISTING** 

## Client 9 and Moral Hypocrisy: A Sex Workers' Rights Perspective on the Eliot Spitzer Documentary

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At the peak of the scandal that removed Eliot Spitzer from the Governor's mansion, sex workers remained secondary characters for the mainstream media; papers splashed sultry images across their covers just to boost sales. Alex Gibney's documentary, *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer*, continues this same marginalization, missing opportunities to shine a bright light onto legal and social questions around sex work and to delve into a real conversation on the hypocrisy and impact of Spitzer's actions.

In documenting Spitzer's downfall after he was revealed to have been patronizing an escort agency, *Client 9* focuses on the reactions of political players. For most, their feelings have nothing to do with their views on prostitution or extramarital sex and everything to do with whether they wanted to see Spitzer fall from political grace. Spitzer's ouster was long awaited justice to some, while his champions mourned the loss of a political crusader against Wall Street.

While a compelling political narrative, this focus buries another story: Spitzer prosecuted prostitution rings and supported raising the crime of patronizing a prostitute from a B to an A misdemeanor, while violating that same law as a client of the Emperor's Club. In the film's interviews, Spitzer compares himself to Greek mythological heroes and speaks proudly of his time busting Wall Street tycoons, but never once addresses the women he patronized or the consequences of his conflicting actions on sex workers. Though Spitzer briefly acknowledges that he compartmentalized these two parts of his personality, he clearly believes he has left *Client 9* behind. Perhaps this "do as I say, but not as I do" attitude is simply too familiar, but the filmmakers don't take the opportunity to investigate its consequences, or to point out the obvious parallels to right-wing politicians who speak out against gay rights but engage in same-sex sexual activity.

*Client 9* at least makes an effort to show respect to sex workers. The director portrays "Angelina," the sex worker Spitzer saw most regularly, by hiring an actress to read a transcript of her interview, a move to respect her privacy without marking her as a criminal by blocking out her face or manipulating her voice. Angelina's strong voice argues for the decriminalization of prostitution, but she carries the appeal alone, as no other sex workers or activists are interviewed in the film. Gibney could have added depth to his film with the perspective of sex workers on a high-profile official simultaneously busting and patronizing escort services, the media sensation around the scandal and its impact on sex workers' lives in New York, and what policy approaches to prostitution might work better.

Unfortunately, these attitudes still dominate in government policies that disregard their own impact on sex workers. In one horrendous example, the NYPD confiscates condoms from sex workers, wreaking havoc on public health. While New York City's Department of Health has made free condoms widely available to city residents, many sex workers fear carrying as many as they need because of police harassment and arrest. This kind of conflict makes it hard for sex workers, and others, to practice safe sex, and makes honest conversations about sex work it difficult. A bill in Albany, the

“No Condoms as Evidence Bill,” would prevent the use of condoms as evidence in cases of prostitution, removing the incentive for police to commit this type of harassment and improving public health. We should reward politicians who prioritize public health by passing such bills, instead of “tough-on-crime” politicians who can’t live up to their own flawed ideals.