

Written on March 3, 2011 at 7:15 PM by [Natasha Burge](#)

[Selling Sex: How Abolitionist Feminists Hurt Sex Workers](#)

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Today, March 3, is International Sex Worker's Rights Day. Millions of women, men, and trans people around the world choose to sell sex, and the topic of sex work is one that sharply divides feminists and women's rights activists. In this series of articles I will explore the links between globalization, migration, the 'rescue industry', the fight against HIV/AIDs, and the recent crackdown on the global sex industry via anti-trafficking policies, while sharing interviews with sex workers and leaders in the sex worker's rights movement.

"Feminists are the worst," declares Daria, a 26 year old self-described 'sex professional' from the Ukraine. As we sit in a chic bistro in the glittering capital city of an oil rich Middle Eastern Gulf state, she takes a sip of her foamy latte and continues, "You expect them to be on your side, yes? But instead all they do is tell me what I think and what I want. Even when I say to them 'I sell sex, get over it' they keep talking."

Daria grew up in a poor family in a large city in the Ukraine, and had to leave school at 16 to find work to help support her family. She says she chose to sell sex after seeing her three older sisters barely making ends meet working as maids and cooks. "I didn't want to grow old looking in toilets. I wanted to travel and I wanted to have money." She explains that a cousin who had already traveled to the Middle East to work as an escort convinced Daria to join her on her next trip.

For the past six years Daria has been selling sex in the Gulf, where she maintains a small network of what she describes as 'suitable clients', and admits she has been extremely fortunate not to have had any trouble with the authorities. She recognizes that out of the many possible scenarios for selling sex, she is fortunate to be living one of the best. "No, it has not been all easy, there have been bad things. But I think I have been lucky." She looks at me for a minute, thinking. "My life is okay." She decides, stamping out a cigarette and flashing me a wry smile.

Daria's work is at the center of one of the most raging storms in feminism, torn between feminists who support sex workers in their struggle to legitimize the selling of sex and secure their rights as workers, and abolitionist feminists who are determined to abolish the sex industry and 'free' all sex workers. Abolitionist feminists see sex work as coercive and violent and sex workers as 'prostituted victims' in need of rescue. Abolitionist feminists are frequently socially and economically privileged citizens of the global north who use their economic and political clout to support and promote the 'rescue industry'.

The rescue industry is a term coined by, [Laura Agustin](#), upcoming interviewee and author of [Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry](#), that refers to the array of people and organizations intent on rescuing and rehabilitating all sex workers, and the narratives they create and disseminate in order to justify their actions. In their support of the rescue industry, abolitionist feminists silence and disempower the many people who choose to sell sex, and in so doing actually endanger the lives of sex workers around the world.

In order to fuel the rescue industry and ensure the continued existence of their funding, anti-sex work organizations are forced to adopt [statistics](#) and [numbers](#) based on shaky research and promote them as solid, incontrovertible fact. These numbers are then adopted by politicians, repeated by journalists, and finally accepted as 'the truth' by average people, until it seems that the world is overrun by naive, powerless sex slaves in need of our benevolent rescue and rehabilitation. But the problem isn't just the inflated numbers and misleading statistics, but that the [policies enacted](#) based on them are so detrimental to the lives and well-being of sex workers around the world.

Sex work is populated primarily by low income women who are already among the most at-risk and oppressed members of society. In many circumstances, selling sex is the best economic decision a person can make in their situation, and oftentimes the sex workers vehemently [do not](#) want [to be rescued](#). While yes, we should work to create a world where people are guaranteed the freedom and dignity of having their basic needs met, and a variety of work to choose from, the reality is that we do not live in that world yet, and for now there are people whose very survival depends on them making the best choice for their individual situation. And sometimes that means selling sex. By portraying all sex work as violent and all sex workers as naive victims desperate for rescue, abolitionist feminists perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes and silence the very people they are supposedly trying to help. By refusing to support sex workers in their quest for legitimacy and recognition as workers, they are condemning sex workers to lives in the shadows.

Most sex workers agree, it is not the work itself that is inherently dangerous, but the conditions they are forced to work in. When sex work is illegal it creates a terrifying constellation of conditions for sex workers to contend with, most of which put their lives directly at risk. When sex work is illegal, or even when selling sex is legal but the purchasing of sex is not, as in [Sweden](#), sex workers remain stigmatized. They are forced to work in the most treacherous parts of town, away from safe, well-lit areas. They have no recourse to go to the police if something violent is done to them. If they do go to the police, they run the very real risk of being [arrested](#) for selling sex, or for being assaulted and [harassed](#) by the [police](#) themselves. Sex workers and sex work allies have shown that when a government cracks down on sex work it can lead directly to police brutality against sex workers, including their rape and murder. These crackdowns are promoted and funded by some abolitionist feminists looking to 'rescue prostituted women'. When sex work is illegal, people who sell sex are unable to receive medical care as they are often refused treatment. Sex workers in these situations run a high risk from violence from their clients, because they are unable to negotiate working conditions safely. Furthermore, when sex workers have gone to great lengths to leave their home country and travel at considerable risk to work in another country, anti-trafficking policies leading to their 'rescue' often end with the worker placed in jail for breaking immigration law and eventually being sent back to the country they tried so hard to leave in the first place.

No one is saying that all sex workers are selling sex by choice, or that all forms of sex work are the same in terms of risk and reward. And no one denies that there are people kidnapped, smuggled across borders, and

forced against their will to sell sex. But the frequency of this situation is greatly exaggerated and should be examined, a path I plan to take in another installment of this series as I interview Dr. Laura Agustin. Furthermore, the inflated rhetoric and moral hysteria surrounding the topic of trafficking does little to help the actual victims of sexual slavery, and it drowns out the much more commonplace experience of the women, men, and trans individuals who voluntarily choose to sell sex and simply want their rights respected and their dignity intact.

“I guess I am stupid looking because they always think I don’t know what I do or what I want. They tell me I can have a better life, but for me this is the best life.” Daria angrily recounts conversations she has had with feminist activists who tried to explain to her the many ways in which she is demeaned. She has been told that whenever she sells sex she is actually being raped, and that her very existence as a sex worker puts all women’s safety in jeopardy. “Just because they don’t want to work like this doesn’t mean it is wrong for everyone!” she says.

And with that, Daria pinpoints what seems to be abolitionists’ ultimate problem with sex work: the sex.

Sex workers around the world insist that selling sex can be a job just like any other. Whereas I choose to sell my body and my time by sitting behind a computer screen clacking away at my keyboard all day, sex workers decide to sell their body and time by providing sexual services to paying clients. So, why do we treat sex work so differently from other jobs that we personally wouldn’t want to have? For example, I might look at a woman working as a street sweeper and decide that it is a job that I personally wouldn’t want. But I would definitely support her in her fight to improve her working conditions and secure her rights as a worker, not endorse abolishing the entire field of street sweeping just because it doesn’t appeal to me.

Trafficking is a very real problem that we should clearly be working to stop, but it does not only or even predominantly pertain to sexual slavery. [Unfortunately, the plight of trafficking victims is largely ignored if the story is deemed insufficiently ‘sexy’.](#) Recently, [500 Indian workers brought to the U.S.](#) to work in shipyards after Hurricane Katrina are suing Signal International and other entities on charges of human trafficking. The workers have alleged that they were brought to the country under a false premise, subject to deplorable living conditions and threats of violence. All these allegations add up to human trafficking, and yet no one is suggesting that shipyard work be abolished.

However, when it comes to sex work, many people seem to think the only way to fix the ills of the industry, which no one denies exist, is to abolish the whole thing. With this argument, the moral paternalism implicit in the abolitionist stance becomes clear. They are simply repeating the same argument that has been used for so long to bolster the patriarchal attempt to control female sexuality. Women are seen as sexually vulnerable and sex is something done *to* them, not something they participate in, an absolute negative that is inflicted against them. A woman selling sex is seen as being exploited and in need of rescue, while a woman working in slave labor conditions in a dangerous sweatshop is to be commended for her entrepreneurial spirit. When we examine the two situations we see that they can both potentially involve low pay, dangerous working conditions, and health risks, and yet the key factor in determining which scenario abolitionists want to abolish is the sex. It always comes down to the sex.

Many abolitionists insist that the sex industry perpetuates the idea that women are commodities for men to buy and sell, and that the existence of women selling their bodies for sex creates a dangerous environment for all women. This paternalistic hysteria, which reeks of victim-blaming, is patently false. In most countries in the world prostitution is illegal, and that doesn’t stop the men living there from viewing women as pieces of meat to be bought and sold and treated like dirt. Men treat women poorly not because of the existence of the sex industry, but because of a misogyny so deeply ingrained in our society that its source is all but invisible. **When sex workers are victims of violence and exploitation and abuse, it isn’t a flaw inherent in the sex industry, but a flaw inherent in our entire society.**

The only truly feminist approach to sex work is to respect the voices and experiences of actual sex workers. When they speak we must listen. The solution to the problems within the sex industry is not to stigmatize sex workers and drive already disenfranchised people further into the margins of society, but to provide them with the space to talk, and to organize, and to demand their rights so they can work and live with dignity. The best way to fix the problems of exploitation and violence is to stand in solidarity with sex workers as they fight to transform the sex industry. When a light is shone on a problem, it becomes easier to solve. We need to bring this industry into the light, demolish the stigma that is still attached to sex workers, and insist that they be given the same rights as any other worker. I want the same thing for sex workers that I want for all workers: the right to choose the job they do; the freedom to work in an environment that is safe, dignified and protected by law; legal recourse for any injustice done; and the ability to leave whenever they want. **Sex work a labor rights issue, and sex worker's rights are human rights.**

A central aspect of feminism is the need to recognize the inherent right of a woman to make her own decisions and choose her own path in life. We always insist that 'no means no' so why don't we also recognize that their 'yes means yes'? By refusing to listen to sex workers speak their truth or deciding that we know better than they do, we are replicating and perpetuating the very patriarchal norms of womanly weakness and naivety that we have fought so desperately to overthrow. It's not as exciting to march in a protest demanding the decriminalization of sex work as it is to carry out a daring midnight raid in a brothel, and the stories of adults choosing to unionize and sell sexual services are certainly not as riveting as the story of a 12 year old child prostituted against his will, but the reality of the sex industry is often not as sensational or scandalous as it is made out to be, and it is this consciousness raising work that is so desperately needed.

Daria's wish for feminists to listen to her story and respect her decision to exchange sex for cash is one that is shared by many sex workers around the world. However, all too often the concerns of actual sex workers are drowned out by the avalanche of abolitionist feminist voices from the privileged activists of the global north. Instead of listening to the women, men, and trans people who work in the sex industry, words are put into their mouths, and others insist that they know best, even when the sex workers are desperately trying to speak for themselves. As feminists we must stand with sex workers to guarantee their rights as workers, help them defend themselves against the police and violent elements in their society, and assist them in earning their recognition as workers and valuable members of society worthy of protection and rights. **When we paint all sex workers with the same broad brush and declare them all exploited victims, we ignore their reality, and their demands, and we put very real roadblocks in their path to progress, and ultimately, we endanger their lives.**

"Not all of us need or want to be rescued." Daria speaks intensely. "What we do need is rights and dignity. We want that and we want feminists to help us get it."

For more information and some great organizations to support:

[Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers](#)

[SANGRAM](#)

[SWAN – Sex Worker's Rights Advocacy Network](#)

[Mama Cash – Exhibit on Sex Worker's Rights](#)

[International Union of Sex Workers](#)

[Global Network of Sex Work Projects](#)

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Article by **Natasha Burge**



Natasha is a 3rd generation expat, born and raised in Saudi Arabia, where she currently lives with her husband and herd of rescue animals. She considers herself a global citizen, having found the essence of home in more than 40 countries, although she never feels more comfortable than when she is on the road traveling. A political scientist educated in the United States, she returned to the Middle East 3 years ago to work on women's rights issues and create feminist empowerment workshops for young women attending university. Natasha Burge tagged this post with: [abolition](#), [Feminism](#), [feminist](#), [human trafficking](#), [labor](#), [Laura Agustin](#), [Middle East](#), [patriarchy](#), [prostitutes](#), [Prostitution](#), [sex work](#), [sex worker's rights](#), [Ukraine](#)

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1. [empower](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 3:08 AM](#)

Empower Foundation Thailand

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2. [Sylvie Cachin](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 6:21 AM](#)

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bottom of the page : <http://www.lunafilm.ch/prod.html>

CONFERENCE DE BRUXELLES un reportage de Sylvie Cachin
22' | dvcam | 2006

Au cours de la production du film "Claudette", la réalisatrice a suivi pendant quatre jours une réunion des militants internationaux pour le droit des sexworkers.

Vingt ans après le deuxième Congrès mondial des Prostitué-e-s, 120 sexworkers internationaux déposent au Parlement Européen une Déclaration revendiquant la reconnaissance de leur activité comme un travail légal.

because most of realistic persons are fed up with hypocritical patriacial system which supports clients and maintains sex workers in a fragile status...

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Insightful?:  1  0

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o [John](#) says:

[March 11, 2011 at 9:16 AM](#)

Dear all,

The following links will give you more information about sex trafficking especially the Washington post article and the Guardian and BBC links.

Washington post article:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/22/AR2007092201401.html>

News night BBC video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtaEdI3aiwg&feature=player_embedded

Newsnight video 2

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rvA60zdkD8&feature=player_embedded

<http://mensnewsdaily.com/glennsacks/2009/10/30/more-on-the-great-sex-trafficking-scam-in-the-u-k/>

Guardian newspaper:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/20/government-trafficking-enquiry-fails>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/oct/20/trafficking-numbers-women-exaggerated>

http://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/10/22/gov_proposals/print.html

Sex trafficking in sports:

<http://www.dallasobserver.com/2011-01-27/news/the-super-bowl-prostitute-myth-100-000-hookers-won-t-be-showing-up-in-dallas/>

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sports/super-bowl/local/20110302-top-fbi-agent-in-dallas-praises-super-bowl-security-effort-sees-no-evidence-of-expected-spike-in-child-sex-trafficking.ece>

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3. [Sylvie Cachin](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 6:22 AM](#)

<http://www.lunafilm.ch/Claudette/Claudette.html>

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Insightful?:  0  0

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4. [Juliet](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 6:42 AM](#)

This is an excellent analysis of the problems of the anti-trafficking industry and how it actually hampers our attempts to gain rights and freedoms as sex workers. thank you!

[\[Translate\]](#)

Insightful?:  2  0

[Reply](#)



5. [Megan](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 7:11 AM](#)

Thank you!

[\[Translate\]](#)

Insightful?:  0  0

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6. [craschworks](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Selling Sex: How Abolitionist Feminists Hurt Sex Workers | Conducive Chronicle](#) says:
[March 4, 2011 at 8:06 AM](#)

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