Support Ho(s)e
Sex Work Centered Guide for Media & Journalism Professionals
Sex work / Sex worker

A political, unifying, umbrella term for people who sell sex, or performances, materials, or services associated with sex acts, as their work. Includes, but is not limited to, exotic dancers/strippers, internet-based cam workers, adult film actor/actress/stars, pro-dommes, phone sex operators, GFE (Girl Friend Experience) workers, escorts, indoor, outdoor, full-service, and street-based workers. One of, if not the, fundamental premises of a guide such as this is that sex work is work. It’s done primarily to make a living. Because this is, for various reasons, difficult for some members of the public to comprehend, it is necessary to use the word “work” in defining the industry/trade.

This does not automatically include (nor does it de facto exclude) people who are survivors of labor/sex trafficking, who did not consent to selling/trading sex because of choice, circumstance, or coercion.

(Sex / Labor / Human) Trafficking

Trafficking is the exploitation of people in the sex trades, often conflated with sex work more broadly. Typically sex trafficking includes physical or sexual coercion, the transport of people across geographical borders for the purposes of exploitative labor, rape, deception, abuse of power and/or bondage incurred through forced debt.

Rescue Industry

The interconnected matrix of NGOs, legislators at all levels of municipal, state, and federal government, city/county/state-based diversion programs, law enforcement, non profits (501c3 and otherwise), religious organizations, and grassroots, unaffiliated organizations which have as their mission some variation on or combination of stopping trafficking/slavery, saving women/girls, and/or prosecuting traffickers. These organizations are marked by their narrative of all sex working people as victims (sometimes even labeling them “self-trafficked”), and generally feature few or no testimonials from formerly trafficked or sex working voices. These actors profit (both symbolically and financially) off of the discourse around trafficking, and their motives and tactics should be considered highly suspect as sources for stories about either sex work or sex trafficking.

Sex trade

An umbrella term for the field of sex services and labor. This can be a more inclusive term than “Commercial Sex Industry” because it expands inclusion to those not recognized as workers in criminalized fields within the trade and those engaged in survival acts that are often invisibilized. “People in the sex trade” is also the broadest term available, encompassing sex workers, those engaged in survival sex, and survivors of exploitation in the trades.

It bears mentioning that these are not discrete categories of experience, and as in all laboring sectors under capitalism there exist potential and actual violence, harassment, exploitation, and wage theft. There are sex workers who are also survivors of trafficking and/or exploitative situations and vice versa. It’s important to remember that people move in and out of the trade based upon socioeconomic need and pressures, and also that violence is very real and present especially when the work is criminalized and stigmatized.

Capitalism necessitates the labor exploitation of workers. Any job where you are unable to dictate or determine your working conditions, or compensation, is exploitative. Any job where you have to sell your labor power for a wage that you do not determine is exploitative. Working under capitalism is complicated. Working identities are complicated. Sometimes survivors of labor trafficking might also identify as sex working, or trading sex, in ways that were necessary for them. Some sex workers

1 Adapted from Schulte and Hammes, “Media Guide on Sex Work” (2017)
2 Adapted from Schulte and Hammes, “Media Guide on Sex Work” (2017)
have survived violence. Some survivors of trafficking will engage in sex work on their own terms before or after surviving trafficking. Most sex workers are confronted by whore stigma and whorephobia (a term that describes the stigma/shame that generates fear and hatred of people that sell or trade sex or are perceived to sell or trade sex); this plays out differently depending on lived experience and other systemic oppressions. Some folks need to trade or engage in survival sex to get by. We need to be able to honor and speak to the experiences of folks in the trade/industry who are most impacted and affected by criminalization if we all want safer and autonomous work places, cities, and communities.

**Client (vs. john)**

Someone who is contracting a sex worker’s time and particular services for a fee.

**Decriminalization**

Decriminalization is the sought-after relationship between the state (i.e. law enforcement, legislators, the court system) and sex workers. Decriminalization is the repealing of laws that criminalize sex work and activities associated with performing sexual labor, including selling sex, buying sex, accessing housing as a sex worker, and occupying public spaces as a sex worker. Current proposals for the decriminalization of sex work leave intact many laws against sex trafficking. Amnesty International, UNAIDS, and the ACLU all endorse the decriminalization of sex work as a human rights issue.

**Legalization**

Legalization is the vastly less desirable result of state paternalism, generally arising from the assumption of victimization (see Rescue Industry above) state perspective on sex work. Legalization of sex work introduces government regulation and oversight into sex work. Places that have adopted this model heavily regulate a legal strand of the sex industry while continuing to criminalize workers who cannot or will not comply with various bureaucratic requirements, such as mandatory health testing, employment in certain venues, having mandatory management, or registering publicly as a prostitute.4

Sometimes shorthanded as the “Nordic Model” due to its adoption in Sweden before spreading to other, predominantly European countries (most recently France). This model criminalizes clients rather than sex workers, whom it regards as victims who require rehabilitation and a means of escape. Beyond being utterly infantilizing if not wholesale dehumanizing of sex workers, which is problematic enough, it renders them vastly less safe than without such laws. When only one party in a transaction faces criminal sanction, they are vastly more likely to harm and regard sex workers as victims and less than human.

In essence, legalization makes criminals of clients which is dangerous to sex workers in its potentially altering their client base, work spaces, and professional opportunities, as well as too often acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy in committing violence against them. Advocates are most often well-meaning, shortsighted, white, cis-gendered people who rely on skewed statistics which necessarily ignore massive swaths of the sex worker population as they are, by the nature of their professions, hidden.

**End Demand**

A mantra of Nordic Model supporters, who endorse criminalization of the purchase of sex and punishment of third parties (such as managers, drivers, roommates, children, partners, and landlords) while ostensibly decriminalizing those who sell sex.5 Works under the deeply flawed premise (one needs look no further than America’s “war on drugs”) that deterrence can actually end demand for sex and sexual services.

“Sex workers also reported that the law made it harder for them to protect themselves by working together or hiring security, because those actions

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3 Adapted from Schulte and Hammes, “Media Guide on Sex Work” (2017)
4 Adapted from Smith and Mac, Revolting Prostitutes (2018)
5 Adapted from Smith and Mac, Revolting Prostitutes (2018)
could be interpreted as “promoting prostitution” or running a brothel, which are against the law. The end-demand model is also supposed to include social services to help people leave the sex trade. But in practice, the emphasis is always on law enforcement; the promised services are an afterthought. When services do exist, they are often underfunded and vulnerable to budget cuts.” - Open Society Foundations

**FOSTA / SESTA**

FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) were two bills passed in April 2018. They have expanded liability for internet platforms that “knowingly facilitate sex trafficking.” In practice, since the passage of these laws, websites that host content related to the sex trade (-stripers’ Instagram accounts, street-based workers who use Venmo, escorts that host their websites on third party platforms) are under increased surveillance and thus work to deplatform any content that might be connected to the sex trade.6

Both bills FOSTA (HR 1865) and SESTA (SB 1693) became one law on April 11th, 2018. What is popularly referred to as “SESTA/FOSTA” is actually named Public Law No: 115-164.7 This Act is actually now popularly titled: “Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017,” and it is essentially an amended culmination of FOSTA and SESTA.8 For more information on FOSTA/SESTA see Hacking/Hustling’s 2020 report, “Erased - The Impact of FOSTA/SESTA.”

**The EARN IT Act**

EARN IT (Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act) is a bill proposed in March 2020 that would expand on FOSTA/SESTA by allowing for more lawsuits against websites over user-created content and communication unless platforms comply with new government speech guidelines. EARN IT would create a 19-person commission that sets government control of online speech, which many believe is a thinly-veiled attempt to mandate encryption backdoors. This puts encryption at risk.9 For more information on EARN IT, see Hacking//Hustling’s resources here.

**Whorephobia & Whore stigma**

Though the term itself is fairly self-explanatory, the levels and effects of whorephobia are complex and varied. Whorephobia is the fear of or hatred toward sex workers, or those presumed to be sex working people. Sex workers would argue it is the result of paternalistic attitudes that deem us a public nuisance, spreaders of disease, offenders against decency, or simple-minded victims who don’t know what is good for them and need rescuing. (Definition paraphrased from Thierry Schaffauser).

Whore stigma is a specific stigma with which sex working people and those perceived to be sex working people are confronted. Though also rooted in a hatred/fear of sex working people, it is the actionable way that whorephobia manifests, and visits itself upon sex working people. Whore stigma operates through a series of assumptions regarding sex working people, their work places, and the work itself.

**Terms to (generally) avoid:** hooker, prostitute, lady of the night, streetwalker, sugar baby, whore (outside of community use in quotes or the day’s internationally recognized name), gigolo, john, trick, Vic, pimp, working girls10, sex slave/sexual slavery

**Terms to use:** sex worker, provider, client11

Note: Further, always respect self-describing, referential, or self-characterizing language. If the person you’re speaking to uses a particular term, honor that use.

6 Adapted from Hacking/Hustling, https://hackinghustling.org/what-is-sesta-fosta/
7 That exact wording can be found here: https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ164/PLAW-115publ164.pdf
8 https://survivorsagainstsesta.org
9 Adapted from Hacking/Hustling, https://hackinghustling.org/earn-it-act/
10 Adapted from Schulte and Hammes, “Media Guide on Sex Work” (2017)
11 Adapted from Schulte and Hammes, “Media Guide on Sex Work” (2017)
How to Take Photos and Quote Speakers Ethically

The press should respect event, protest, and demonstration attendees’ consent regarding photographs and reporting given names of participants. Please use only our preferred names, and gender pronouns that we share, with consent, directly to you when reporting.

Typically event organizers make an announcement regarding the above, so attendees ought to know the press are present and to cover their faces if need be. That being said, the press should also understand that attendees are sex workers, clients, activists, and organizers whose identities and bodies can be subject to criminalization, stigmatization, or discrimination when they are outed to the general public, their straight job employers, families, the police etc. We ask that the media always exercise care when documenting sex worker-led and organized events.

For instance, some best practices are:

• employing photos where faces are obscured but attendance numbers can be seen
• using intentional/deliberate soft filtering or blurring of faces
• far-away photos where attendees cannot readily be identified
• using photos of our protest posters, banners, fliers, organizer-made promotional graphics
• bringing along an illustrator to take visual notes

These are more respectful approaches to documenting our events if attendees decline your request to take their photo (headshot, full body etc).

Please remember, we are not only organizers and activists publicly asserting our rights of assembly and free speech, we are also criminalized workers which necessitates our desire for respectful, sensitive documentation.

When sourcing stock photos or images for your news stories please refrain from degrading or stereotypical images. Disembodied legs, breasts, lips, the infamous “car lean,” and images of drugs coupled with fishnet stockings or high heels do not always (or often) accurately represent sex workers. Please consider the uniqueness of the subject in question, the story’s details, and the people it involves, before selecting a header image. Clickbait photos often result in further spreading stigmatization and whorephobia. It’s always best to run any images, illustrations or graphics by anyone being featured or interviewed for the piece who might have to navigate the impact of said images long after the publication of the piece in which they appear.
General Demands and “Best Practices”
When Writing or Speaking about Sex Work

Include sex worker voices. Directly quote and cite those most affected by your reporting or included in your story. When quoting, only cite your source’s name and gender pronouns. Our famous demand: “Nothing about us, without us!” is a good rule to use.

“We highly suggest you hire a sex working author/media maker to write the piece you otherwise would. Or at a minimum, bring them on as a paid consultant for the assignment.

Never write strictly from the perspective of the State when writing about a criminalized profession, and understand that such a position is inherently biased. Do not rely on data or reporting from law enforcement. Only trust statistics that are produced by reliable sources, and where available from trusted SW research initiatives (see the Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women’s “How to Report on Rape” toolkit for examples of how to present statistics and demographics sensitively and respectfully).

Use respectful and accurate language (see our glossary of terms).

Don’t only describe us based upon our outward appearances and/or clothing. Sex workers are not props to set your story’s scene, and are no more defined by their working (or, for that matter, non-working) attire than anyone else.

Do not use the language of victimization and/or human/sex trafficking as de facto status of sex workers. Use it when and if survivors or victims of violence and exploitation use it to describe their experiences and circumstances, and even then, clearly attribute to its source.

Assume the self-determination of a sex worker as a worker unless given explicit reason not to (kidnapping/actual trafficking/rape is not sex work), and if and only if that person names violence and asks for support of some kind.

Do not compromise sex workers’ and folx in the trades’ means of safety. This includes the mentioning of our harm reduction methods and tactics (such as the websites we use to screen clients), or our shared best practices. Do not name these websites or methods explicitly, and especially do not include hyperlinks to them in your online articles. This seriously endangers us and renders our sites and methods more vulnerable to the police. We know how to best keep ourselves safe, please do not jeopardize this safety for something that adds little to a story anyway.

Ask the sex working person with whom you’re in contact if you’re worried any part of your piece/assignment would endanger and/or make life difficult for them or other sex working people.
Nowhere in this country does minimum wage reflect a living wage, nor does the income from many full-time jobs, which make medical care, health insurance, school tuition, and bills unaffordable unless supplemented by or replaced with income from sex work. Regardless of earning a subsistence wage, maximizing one’s income in order to make it through the week, month, or year without starving or losing shelter, paying off student loans or other forms of debt, or avoiding being sent to collections is motivation for extra work at higher pay than many jobs provide. For many sex workers, flexible hours, the ability to set one’s own rates, options to choose one’s clientele, and having time for other obligations without compromising financial responsibilities means that sex work is ideal. This represents forms of control that many sex workers (and workers in general) do not experience in their day jobs or other avenues of their lives. Sex workers, like all workers, have to provide for themselves and their families in order to survive in this world. We do what we have to, just as do you. Our boundaries and choices of work may look different, but we still want respect, dignity, safety on the job and fair pay for our work.

Examples of ill-written, disrespectful, misleading, or generally bad journalism

There exist myriad bad journalistic tropes and practices’ around sex work. Some of the most common examples feature the following:

- Publishing the legal names, known locations/addresses, and mugshots of people arrested on the suspicion of prostitution-related “offenses” and “crimes.”
- An overemphasis on the background (in the guise of context) or irrelevant details of the working subject. This could look like citing childhood violence/trauma when writing about an adult sex working person many years later, emphasizing work attire when writing about a criminalized survivor’s experiences, and employing “poverty porn” descriptions of people’s homes, neighborhoods and friends/family members.
- An overgeneralization and/or abstraction of the sex work experience.
- An overemphasis on the motivation of the subject to engage in the sex trades and/or commerical sex industry.
- A reliance on expectations and/or assumptions regarding sex workers and their work instead of citing the subject’s own characterizations and reasoning authentically and accurately.
- An overreliance on skewed statistics and state (law enforcement/carceral/anti-sex work NGO) approved sources.
- The “Gloria Steinem” approach, i.e. the covert, infiltration-motivated writing that seeks to offer a tired “Aha!” moment to readers at the expense of working people.

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1 See also: “Six Problems With Media Coverage on the Sex Trade” https://www.huffpost.com/entry/six-problems-with-media-c_b_8163954
Here are excerpts from notable examples of bad journalism around the sex trades, with accompanying bibliographic info:

“The new normal: why television has chosen to humanize sex workers,”

“The fact that this seems to be a new trend in television speaks to our collective desire to understand the new normalcy that has been affixed to the world’s oldest profession. It’s more widely accepted, yes, but why is it? And what does it do to the people whose job it is to treat it like another day at the office?”

“By humanizing these characters, by providing them with a rich inner life – and, therefore, a backstory to and a reason for all the fucking – we can justify watching them fuck. To merely objectify them, to ignore their personhood, would be construed as a form of sex shaming, opening us up as the potential subjects of scathing think pieces.”

“She kisses her johns, fucks them, with her eyes open. Not looking at them, but staring into the middle distance. She tries to convince herself of the normalcy of her actions. Ultimately she succeeds, abandoning the reason why she took the side job in the first place for the monetary and power-fulfilling position she fell into. If she’s ultimately OK with it, I suppose we are as well. We are relieved by this. The new normal becomes even more so.”


“The dangers of rebranding prostitution as ‘sex work,’”

“In an extract from her new book, Pimp State, activist Kat Banyard argues that prostitution is sexual exploitation. Decriminalising this industry only legitimises the abuse of women.”

“The whole point of the sex industry is that it offers men the chance to buy sexual access to women who do not want to have sex with them – otherwise they wouldn’t have to pay. Masking its fundamental purpose thus becomes the primary PR challenge for the prostitution, pornography and strip club trades if they are to survive – maybe even thrive – in a society that has decided, at least in principle, that women are not subordinate sex objects and rape is a bad thing.”

“If, while having sex with someone, you feel repulsed by them touching you, afraid of what they might do, degraded and humiliated by the sexual acts, hurt by the hateful words they’re whispering in your ear, sore because he’s the fifth man you’ve had sex with today, exhausted from it all, traumatised, abused – the fact that you’ll get a bit of cash at the end does not change anything. There is no invisible hand in the prostitution market that magically disappears the lived experience of sexual abuse.”


Example of sensationalized titling (after a pressure campaign against the Sun Times for this title and the article’s contents, the word “Hooker” was eventually changed to “prostitute.”): http://chicago.suntimes.com/news/hoooker-gets-15-years-for-stabbing-brother-rice-teacher-to-death/
Further examples of dehumanizing, sensationalized titles:

March 17, 2012
Where Pimps Peddle Their Goods
Backpage.com and similar Web sites help find buyers for enslaved young girls.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Oct. 12, 2011
From the Streets to the ‘World’s Best Mom’
The fight against sex trafficking isn’t hopeless. Just look at some of this good work being done in Nashville.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

April 23, 2011
What About American Girls Sold on the Streets?
Teenage prostitution is grossly misunderstood in the United States, with the victims treated like criminals.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

July 14, 2010
Seduction, Slavery and Sex
A trio of best-selling Swedish novels, along with legislation, are shining a light on human trafficking and prostitution.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

March 18, 2008
Do as He Said
The New York prostitution law that Governor Spitzer pushed should be enforced firmly, by cracking down on pimps and customers.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

March 16, 2008
The Pimps’ Slaves
If the Spitzer affair causes us to lose sight of the broader reality of prostitution, then the biggest loser will be the girls for whom selling sex isn’t a choice but a nightmare.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Feb. 16, 2014
Targeting the Johns in Sex Trade
Police are beginning to realize that fighting sex trafficking and prostitution means arresting the men who sustain it. Pimps and Johns.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Nov. 27, 2010
The odyssey of a Chinese-Korean woman shows how human trafficking survives, even in Midtown Manhattan.
By NICHOLAS KRISTOF

Extended Breakdown of a Problematic Article

Parsing a Miserable But All-Too-Typical Article Concerning Sex Work Which Ostensibly Is Not Attempting To Be Whorephobic But In Fact Is

What follows, in un-bolded text, is an article from a major city news source in New Orleans, written without any particularly vested perspective on the matters discussed. What we’ll quickly discover is an under-researched, uncritical rehearsal of law enforcement diatribe and baseless putting words in the mouths of those whom they purport to serve and protect. SxHx author’s analysis is represented in bolded text.

Published in: NOLA.com / The Times-Picayune / Posted on February 1, 2017 / By Kevin Litten

“Law enforcement takes new tactic in prostitution enforcement operation”

A terse little title which at once serves to hint at just how stentorian and backwards policing sex work has been in this country, and at the same time acknowledges the continued militarization of police. A “new tactic” certainly sounds like one or more tactical maneuvers have been attempted in the past. “Prostitution enforcement” reminds us that all enforcement is selective and that bad laws only work insofar as bad enforcement is willing to prioritize them, badly. “Operation” puts the icing on the cake: this is either surgery to extract the undesirable underbelly of the city, or else it’s a full-fledged war against one of the most at-risk sets of populations in any given area.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Jeff Sallet speaks during a news conference held at New Orleans City Hall to announce what they called the rescue of 11 potential human trafficking victims.

4 https://sxhxcollective.org/2017/02/09/parsing-a-miserable-but-all-too-typical-article-concerning-sex-work-which-ostensibly-is-not-attempting-to-be-whorephobic-but-in-fact-is/
Oh, good, the Feds are involved. They did so right by New Orleans last time their services were required.

Authorities on Wednesday (Feb. 1) announced they had made contact with 11 women who were engaging in prostitution, some of whom are suspected of being coerced into the trade by pimps. FBI officials described the operation as a “rescue,” saying that none of the women were arrested as part of the effort.

“Made contact” is a nice neologism for picked up, detained, likely interrogated, all without charges. What’s most misleading and nefarious about using this phrase rather than anything more specific is that it wholly obscures the relationship between city police and, especially, street-based or outdoor sex workers. Did these women call a troubled prostitute hotline? Voluntarily meet in a mutually safe space? Or, as the phrase “made contact” seems to imply, did they answer a coded signal beamed into space, a la an alien race? “Engaging in prostitution” expertly sidesteps the simplest of our concepts, that sex work is work. Teachers don’t engage in educating, politicians don’t engage in legislating, police don’t engage in law enforcement, though they might engage in rights-suppression, selective enforcement, murder, rape, etc. The artful qualification of the next statement is a feat of plausible deniability: “some of whom are suspected” sounds like a very strong case for the epidemic of forced labor from which these rescuers seek to save the women of New Orleans. What follows is an important touch of Hollywood: “coerced into the trade by pimps.” Without opening a discussion about what labor under capitalism is not in large part coerced, this completely speculative and sensationalist claim is wholly without nuance or justification. When any semblance of probable cause is left in doubt, why not defer to the most antique, hackneyed cliché about working conditions for sex workers?

The decision not to arrest the women is rooted in a new approach authorities are taking in dealing with the human trafficking problem. Women who are engaging in prostitution are increasingly being seen as potential human trafficking victims under the control of a pimp, and the FBI acknowledged that police are using the contacts to catch perpetrators who are seeking to recruit women and force them to have sex for money.

And the bombshell. What was “some” of eleven workers “suspected” of being coerced in their labor is now the oldest, easiest, grossest conflation in the book: trafficking. How difficult is it for a reporter to decouple sex work (or any kind of work) from trafficking (or forced labor, or slavery, or rape)? Show us where any direct intervention into sex work resulted in a reduction in human trafficking, or vice versa. The next sentence actually stands as a rather elegant syllogism referring to precisely this fallacy. Rather than challenge Kevin Litten with being inexact with his words, I’ll take them at face value as the conceptual knot they represent. “Women,” because obviously they’re the only ones, “engaging in prostitution,” again, a phrase which makes clear that it is not work, or at least not legitimate work, are seen as “potential human trafficking victims,” which more than implies that they are not currently, but remain somehow susceptible to being trafficked, as if they would be whisked into a back alley, mid-stroll, and a price tag affixed to their foreheads, “under the control of a pimp,” as though that were a strictly non-voluntary, never mutually beneficial or protective relationship due to the omnipresence of the threat of just such law enforcement and its officers, and instead could only be a gag and shackles on their labor and income. As is the case with all such “operations” and the writing thereabout, conflating all sex work as forced prostitution and trafficking completely obscures the latter whilst giving enforcement carte blanche to selectively enforce and punish in whatever manner they see fit.
“We have a priority to rescue victims, but I also want to make clear to the people that are coming in here, that are victimizing them and victimizing different people, we will arrest you,” said FBI Special Agent in Charge Jeff Sallet. Asked whether the FBI developed information from making contact with the victims and will use it to arrest human traffickers, Sallet said, “in this case, any information we collected in the future could certainly be used for prosecutions. We’re not looking to prosecute the victims. We’re looking to prosecute the victimizers.”

By the time the cops actually get to speak, the bullshit is so thick that they have to work to float to the top (or is it sink to the bottom?). The second clearest concept from which any writing about sex work which gives a damn about what sex workers have to say—rights not rescue—is immediately cast aside by agent Sallet: every “prostituted woman” is a victim, and Mr. Tough FBI man is gonna arrest all the victimizers, out there “victimizing different people.” The one direct question asked of Sallet is answered with a vague deflection, though he does make clear again that it’s the victimizers who will be the object of his prosecution. And for all those who aren’t being trafficked? Self-victimizing, one supposes?

The operation was a multi-agency effort, with State Police, New Orleans Police, Homeland Security and the FBI participating as the lead agency. Authorities declined to say how they made contact with the women, but said it was a two-day, “large-scale operation” that included connecting women to services, health care and, in some cases, returning them to friends and family.

Just the sort of big happy family collaboration we’ve been waiting for. The reporter’s due diligence made sure to avoid giving away all the FBI’s best secrets for the mysterious “making contact,” but it’s nice to know that “in some cases” they were returned to friends (obviously not those who were also sex workers, just the acceptable ones) and family, like lost puppies. But should they not have friends and families willing to shelter them, there’s always the ubiquitous “services,” in the US’s proud tradition of serving purported trafficking victims.

Backpage website a major factor in New Orleans human trafficking, rescue group Covenant House says just over half of human trafficking victims they help had ads on Backpage.com.

(The above is the text of a link for another article. That should tell us all we need to know about the paper’s angle on sex work issues, as well as the next “service” to be cited.)

Sheri Lochridge, a caseworker at the youth homeless shelter Covenant House, participated in the operation last week, and described it as an effort to identify potential human trafficking victims. She said the women were interviewed by both police and social workers, and many of the women were released and likely returned to their previous work.

Covenant House is, as the name implies, a Christian endeavor which services children (and young adults) ages 16-22 years old. As such, the age ranges of their target demographic includes both children and adults, which in this instance further threatens to blur the line between workers and child laborers. Their mission is to “serve suffering children of the street,” though in this case that suffering is far from assured and the participation of those targeted entirely non-voluntary. One wonders if Christ forced “assistance” onto the wanting. The phrase “potential” trafficking victims again rears its head, reminding us that all outdoor sex workers are either current or
future victims, with no agency or decision-making capacities of their own, so unthinkable is it that these workers might want simply to be left alone to work. “Likely returned to their previous work” is at least a little better than their previous “engagement” with sex work, and is about the most obvious statement in the entire piece. Did they expect the workers to be “scared straight” by a tactic with which they are undoubtedly entirely familiar already?

“I would go in and talk to them about Covenant House and try to relax them. All of them were scared they were going to jail,” Lochridge said. She said victims were told that “none of them were going to jail that night. So it was easy to calm them down.”

In the least surprising revelation of the piece, the workers were scared. Perhaps their fear arose from the fact that they had been picked up and detained, likely without any charges, and on their way to jail, none of which was likely in the least bit novel for them. Just another needless roundup to remind people already marginalized and stigmatized that they can be dragged in for “contact” at any time. What would be harassment in any other line of work is supposed to be rescue in this one.

Lochridge said she made contact with seven of the 11 women, and said several exhibited signs of human trafficking. One of the women was what Lochridge considered “independent” and told authorities she simply “enjoyed sex work.” One of the women exhibited signs of mental illness and a third had a heroin addiction. These mysterious “signs” are interesting. Did they have a tattoo, or perhaps a wallet-sized card reading “potential trafficking victim?” Do “trafficked” sex workers look different from—and here we lack as pithy a term—“independent” ones? Naturally, the only time the instance of the term “sex work” actually being used is the one direct, if partial, quote from an actual worker. I also appreciate Sheri Lochridge’s credentials in identifying mental illness and drug addiction.

“There were a few that kept denying they had pimps,” Lochridge said. “But you could tell they weren’t telling the truth and you could tell by their stories that someone at some point had forced them into doing this. These girls are trying not to get their pimps in trouble.”

Denying abuse is not unusual, it is true, but the wild speculation that even such a keen observer of the human condition as Sherri Lochridge might be able to discern that these workers were trafficked even as they directly contradict said assertion seems hard to believe. Miss Lochridge’s vested interest in her evangelical shelter may make it impossible to believe that most or all of these women are “independent” in the sense of choosing their employ because it is in fact the safest, most lucrative, most empowering or, frankly, only viable option available, but that doesn’t make it any less possible that one or more of these reasons is accurate. Without delving back into the Hollywood concept of pimp, is it so difficult to believe that one might not want to jeopardize a mutually beneficial relationship, seeing it as the potential end of one’s already tenuous means of income? And that’s assuming that these mysterious, unspoken-of “pimps” even exist in the first place. But why trust their testimony. They’re just confused potential trafficking victims.

Lochridge said that while none of the women she spoke with agreed to be sheltered at Covenant House, that doesn’t mean the women won’t make contact in the future. She said that “in this case, you’re hoping the girls reach out to you. You’re giving them a choice and a different option.”

Stunning. How could these workers possibly reject this kind of generosity? Could it be that they neither asked for nor want it? I’m sure the “girls” would appreciate Covenant House worrying about Christ’s mission and values where they are in any way desired.
“You’re planting the idea in their head because a lot of them feel like there are no options,” Lochridge said. “Maybe they think this is the greatest thing, but now they have an idea in their head that there is someone they can reach out to.”

Because, in myth number three, sex work could only be employment of absolute last resort. There are no shades, there could be no nuance to the reasons and varieties of work. It is either the cry for help of the “trafficked girl,” or else, in an equally reductionist concept “the greatest thing.” That someone who has clearly encountered sex workers in her work could retain such unitary, simplistic, and generally counterfactual views ought to be stunning, but is all too common, particularly when enabled and promoted by both church and state at once.

Backpage is still posting prostitution ads, experts say. The ads have been a major factor in human trafficking cases in New Orleans.

A link for another article on this site is cited. At least they are consistent. The experts are, you guessed it, missionaries from Covenant House.

James Kelly, the executive director of Covenant House, praised the work of law enforcement, saying he was pleased that officials did not decide to use arrests as part of the operation. It is a departure from a similar operation last year, Kelly said, that involved arrests that raised concerns that the victims were being treated as criminals.

Well of course he did! Jimmy sees the good officers at services every Sunday. In what possible world does this “operation” not treat the “victims” as “criminals”? They are being brought in against their will, possibly directly off of their strolls, and “returned” without any charges filed; how is this any different from shaking down “potential” or actual drug dealers, gang members, etc., knowing damn well none of them have the financial wherewithal to sue the state for unlawful arrest?

“This is a best practice model. We weren’t here a year ago,” Kelly said. “There are many venues for human trafficking in our city: There is Backpage, there are strip clubs, there are massage parlors, there are hotels, motels. Human traffickers go after the youngest and the most vulnerable. They find the youngest and the most vulnerable the most valuable.”

Just reading him talk about it is gross. James Kelly: inside the mind and economy of the trafficker. We remain waiting for any evidence that this sort of raid has resulted in the cessation of any sort of trafficking whatsoever. If irritating, inconveniencing, and frightening sex workers can be linked to stopping trafficking, the workers would be the first to welcome it. No sex worker wants to aid or harbor actual traffickers.

He described the victims that Covenant House provides services to as “good,” “beautiful” and “brave.” But he said 90 percent of those victims also have suffered trauma in their past, including sexual violence, physical violence and domestic violence, and are often using drugs to “self-medicate the years of pain, the wounds and the actual acts that take place in sex trafficking.”

We should here remember that none of the women picked up in this broad sting are “victims that Covenant House provides services to.” They did not ask for this sort of asylum, and even after being made aware of it, wanted nothing to do with it. Kelly’s offhand statistics on trauma and abuse sound like they could apply to any economically disadvantaged community, and to claim that sex workers are automatically subject to more abuse and drug use is
demonstrably untrue and perpetuating of stereotypes which only serve his evangelical, hubristic fantasies of saviorism.

“I must emphasize how good they are and how much they want our help,” Kelly added.

So much so that none of the eleven agreed to it after your intervention.

Law enforcement on human trafficking has proven to be an extremely challenging crime to attack, mostly because victims often see their pimps as loved ones. Because many trafficking victims are estranged from families or friends, or start out as runaways, pimps are often viewed as a caretaker who slowly takes over their lives.

The structure of the first sentence above is priceless: indeed, it sounds as if law enforcement is pretty criminal here, and it does seem “extremely challenging” to attack it when it is so embedded in a puritanism which does not only allow but necessitates the cooperation of religious and law enforcement agencies. This oversimplified account of the relationships between workers and pimps once again includes zero actual accounts of said relationships from actual workers.

Kelly said that the most obvious signs of someone being human trafficked is a lack of access to identification. Pimps often take control of bank accounts, credit cards, transportation and phones, and in many cases, the women are not allowed to keep the money they earn when they have sex for payment.

Well, if James Kelly says it, it must be so.

Because many of the victims that have passed through Covenant House have experience dancing in New Orleans strip clubs, Kelly has advocated a holistic approach to stopping human trafficking. He called on area residents to help shut off the “spigot” of demand for human trafficking by rejecting paying for sexual labor.

The classic “demand side” reduction effort. What is it called when we “reject paying” someone for their labor, be it physical, therapeutic, emotional, or a combination thereof? Sounds a lot like encouraging theft, which has particularly awful implications when it comes to sex work and the lack of protections for the workers. Though one imagines his influence on the sexual appetites and needs of New Orleanians is vast and powerful, it still seems somewhat unlikely that the head of a Christian shelter advocating not paying for sex will have much effect on those who either buy or sell these services. The “spigot” of the oldest profession might have a stickier valve than Mr. Kelly and his ilk can operate, no matter how compelling their arguments.

Covenant House has provided services to 70 victims in this year alone. And he said those numbers are on the rise.

Of which apparently none are the victims of any kind of trafficking, lest James Kelley neglected to mention them.

“This is about greed. … We need to say no more,” Kelly said. “Whether it be Backpage or sleazy strip clubs or massage parlors or motels or hotels who are not cooperating with us, we need to say no more.”

The greed of whom, exactly? Faceless pimps and traffickers? Or women (and men, and trans* folks) trying to get by? Must someone joyfully participate in their job in order for it not to be exploitative?
And why the hell would backpage, an advertising site not unlike craigslist, “cooperate” with an evangelical teen shelter in New Orleans? Kelly has apparently redefined greed as “those who do not share our narrow mission of ending the desire for sex work.”

The FBI said that the operation was timed to coincide with the upcoming NBA All Star Weekend, which starts on Feb. 17, and as Mardi Gras parades begin. Both events draw hundreds of thousands of people to New Orleans, and pimps often bring women to town to meet the surge in demand for prostitutes.

Another classic myth: that large events somehow create spikes in trafficking. Is heightened demand for sex work the greatest crime during an event like Mardi Gras? Is there no other need for public safety which eclipses people paying for sex?

“We are going to be relentless in our pursuit of this so it will be ongoing on a regular basis,” Sallet said. “This is not a safe haven. This is not a place to come and human traffic.”

It certainly is not safe for some, Agent Sallet. You have managed to commit what sounds like enormous resources on an operation which yielded zero “victims,” in that none of those rounded up wanted anything to do with your help, you have further conflated sex work with human trafficking, and you’ve arrested no evil pimps who were extorting their brood of drug-addicted, mentally ill, abused prostitutes. Instead, you’ve struck fear into members of an already marginalized industry who just lost their safest, most trusted advertising and vetting resource, and attempted to shame them out of their profession with the aid of an at best misguided evangelical halfway house.

Examples of Well-written, Respectful, and Well-Researched Journalism

“Junkie Whore’ — What it’s really like for sex workers on heroin,”

“The viewpoint that sex work and opioid use are inherently degrading, turning their practitioners into amoral community members, is contextless. It is the criminalization of our lives that forces us against a wall—the high cost of scheduled drugs, the vulnerability of working in an illicit trade, and the danger of arrest.”

“Countless women—your sister on Paxil, your mother on Xanax—are physically dependent on a substance, but most of them don’t in consequence have to raise hundreds of dollars a week. Many people work in trades which are loathed—from professional gamblers to parking meter readers—but not all of them have to worry daily about arrest and violence.”

“Lime Jello, a 30-year-old graduate student and escort who uses heroin, says that her colleagues often don’t allow her to be anything more than a Junkie Whore. “When you go back to school, no matter what your skills and interests are, if you’re out as a sex worker, it’s assumed you will research sex work or go through a social work-type program so you can work with sex workers,” she tells me.”


“The NYPD Arrests Women for Who They Are and Where They Go — Now They’re Fighting Back,”

“These targeted and repeated arrests are part of a much larger pattern within the NYPD. From 2012 through 2015, nearly 1,300 individuals were arrested in New York City and charged with loitering for the purposes of prostitution. The vast majority are women. Such arrests are not the result of stings, in which undercover officers attempt to solicit sex for money. Neither are they the result of investigations that produce evidence — emails, text messages, online ads — that the women had intended to sell sex. With a loitering arrest, a woman’s crime need only exist in the arresting officer’s head.”

“Whether or not she was engaging in prostitution in that moment, or in the past, Marchando still has constitutional rights. So she, along with seven other plaintiffs backed by the Legal Aid Society of New York (which has represented them in loitering cases), filed a class-action civil rights suit this past September, challenging the constitutionality of New York’s law on loitering for the purposes of prostitution. Enforcement of the statute, they state, is “based solely on a police officer’s subjective determination that the activity was ‘for the purpose’ of prostitution.” That is, if police believe a woman’s “purpose” is to sell sex, they will arrest her.”

“Women targeted under these laws have tried to challenge them before. When transgender activist Monica Jones was arrested under a similar law in Phoenix against “manifesting prostitution” after accepting a ride one night from a man who turned out to be an undercover cop, she launched a national campaign against the law. She and her supporters described it as making a crime out of “walking while trans” — very similar to how women describe the NYPD’s enforcement of the loitering law. Jones’s conviction was overturned on appeal, but the law in Phoenix still stands.”

- Melissa Gira Grant, “The NYPD Arrests Women for Who They Are and Where They Go — Now They’re Fighting Back,” The Village Voice, 2016

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“‘We’ve Always Taken Care Of Each Other’: How Sex Workers Are Coping During COVID-19”

“On March 27, Congress passed The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, a $2 trillion economic relief package intended to help workers, families, and small businesses with the economic impacts of COVID-19. But federal regulation dating back to the ‘70s bars anyone whose work is of a “prurient sexual nature” from receiving relief funds and loans from the Small Business Administration (SBA). In other words, strip clubs, sex shops, and sex workers can be excluded from receiving government assistance during the pandemic.”

“When Rucifer grew concerned that Coronavirus relief funds would be difficult for her to access, she quickly shifted her classes, workshops, and sessions online. But while performers and independent contractors, like Rucifer, can shift some of their work onto digital platforms, brick-and-mortar businesses and venues, like strip clubs, sex toy shops, and sex education organizations, are struggling to stay afloat.”

“While these restrictive policies continue to make it difficult for businesses and workers in the sex economy to receive loans or funding, Joiner says that individuals filing for aid can change their language to work the system to their advantage.”

- Griffin Wynne, “‘We’ve Always Taken Care Of Each Other’: How Sex Workers Are Coping During COVID-19,” Bustle, 2020

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For Writers:

- Terms to avoid: hooker, prostitute, lady of the night, streetwalker, sugar baby, whore, gigolo, john
- Terms to use: sex worker, provider, client
- Sources: An article about sex work should never be published without speaking to a sex worker. Misinformation and deliberate obfuscation is vast and consistent. State and municipal authorities, including but not limited to police, judges, state attorneys, public defenders, politicians, and state social workers more often than not have specific agendas which may not even represent their own experience, let alone one informed by facts. Combating poor, one-sided reporting on the subject means recognizing that the narrative promoted by authorities routinely contradicts that of the worker, and often the facts as well.
- Research: There are a variety of misleading and slanted sources which conflate all instances of trafficking with all sex work, or have clear policy initiatives in mind. There is plenty of good research, both academic and popular, over the past decade on most varieties of sex work and sex work issues.

For Art Directors:

- Stock images to avoid: stock pictures or illustrations of fishnet stockings, condoms, handcuffs, caricatures of sex workers from film or television. These sort of images are considered offensive and misleading, and would unlikely be tolerated in writing about any other profession.
- Images of sex workers to avoid: mug shots or any other photographs offered by the state. Family members, friends, and support organizations can generally locate photographs for articles which are less automatically incriminating.
- Images to use: professional images, images that are sanctioned by the subject of the story

For Editors:

- In assigning stories about a criminalized profession, it is all too easy to slip into crime narratives. Sex workers are neither, by virtue of their profession alone, criminals nor victims. Stories which de facto frame them as such are lazy journalism.
- Sex worker rights and advocacy are phenomenally underreported in both mainstream and indie media. As with any subject, there ought to be balance in reporting.