



Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to SlutWalk

By Melinda Chateauvert

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A provocative history that reveals how sex workers have been at the vanguard of social justice movements for the past fifty years while building a movement of their own that challenges our ideas about labor, sexuality, feminism, and freedom

Documenting five decades of sex-worker activism, *Sex Workers Unite* is a fresh history that places prostitutes, hustlers, escorts, call girls, strippers, and porn stars in the center of America's major civil rights struggles. Although their presence has largely been ignored and obscured, in this provocative history Melinda Chateauvert recasts sex workers as savvy political organizers—not as helpless victims in need of rescue.

Even before transgender sex worker Sylvia Rivera threw a brick and sparked the Stonewall Riot in 1969, these trailblazing activists and allies challenged criminal sex laws and “whorephobia,” and were active in struggles for gay liberation, women's rights, reproductive justice, union organizing, and prison abolition.

Although the multibillion-dollar international sex industry thrives, the United States remains one of the few industrialized nations that continues to criminalize prostitution, and these discriminatory laws put workers at risk. In response, sex workers have organized to improve their working conditions and to challenge police and structural violence. Through individual confrontations and collective campaigns, they have pushed the boundaries of conventional organizing, called for decriminalization, and have reframed sex workers' rights as human rights.

Telling stories of sex workers, from the frontlines of the 1970s sex wars to the modern-day streets of SlutWalk, Chateauvert illuminates an underrepresented movement, introducing skilled activists who have organized a global campaign for self-determination and sexual freedom that is as multifaceted as the sex industry and as diverse as human sexuality.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Sex Workers Unite* does the invaluable work of showing us what a responsible and effective movement might look like, centering the voices and strategies of sex workers themselves in order to restore our best future to the realm of the possible.”

—*Feministing*

“[Chateauvert's] portraits of individual activists and advocacy groups are well drawn, proving that humanization through story, not philosophical debates about personhood and privacy, will win this campaign... Chateauvert makes a strong case that 'engaging in sexual commerce should not be grounds for disenfranchisement.'”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“The breadth of the material impressively commemorates the movement’s decades long struggle.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"*Sex Workers Unite* is path-breaking in its claims about the expansive legacy of sex worker activism, and one hopes it will serve as a starting point for an even more expansive analysis."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“[T]he book makes important contributions to histories of feminism, lgbtq politics, and social movements and clears a path for further studies of these important topics.”

—*The Journal of American History*

“The sheer depth and breadth of study evident in the book ensures its usefulness as a resource. But *Sex Workers Unite* is much more than a collection of facts and figures, however comprehensive. Chateauvert displays a deft hand with subtle ideas.”

—*Tits and Sass*

“Readers will learn a great deal about contemporary sex workers rights organizing in the United States (and a little bit about Canada) by exploring this book.”

—*A Kiss for Gabriela*

“Chateauvert’s writing is blunt, honest and overwhelmingly liberal. Her dry but positive discussion of sex work and its employees aims to educate the reader. Her mission is to prove that those in the sex work industry are not deviants, addicts or victims. They are people making conscious choices who deserve equal civil rights and legal representation. She wants their stories told, their histories documented, and their allies counted.”

—*Edge*

"This is an important book—not only for understanding the history of the movement but also for debunking myths about sex workers."

—Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former US surgeon general

“From the movement's beginning with street-walking cop-fighting trans women at Stonewall at Compton's

Cafeteria through feminist betrayal and the AIDs crisis all the way to today's sex work activists and artists who make this labor visible, *Sex Workers Unite* is a fact-driven, street-smart history. This book is crucial.”
—Michelle Tea, author of *Valencia*

“In this definitive history, Chateauvert recounts the many challenges and successes of the sex workers’ rights movement, and shows us how much farther we have to go to guarantee everyone’s fundamental rights to sexual privacy and self-determination.”

—Anthony D. Romero, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union

“With a historian’s eye for the illuminating detail and the street fighter’s passion for her cause, Melinda Chateauvert offers a sassy journey through the worlds of ‘Working Girls and Boys,’ black, brown, and white, trans, gay, and straight. Against rescuers and abolitionists, *Sex Workers Unite* recovers the collective action and labor organizing of sex workers for better conditions, living wages, cultural freedom, and social justice.”

—Eileen Boris, Hull Professor of Feminist Studies, University of California Santa Barbara and co-editor of *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*

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About the Author

Melinda Chateauvert is an activist who has been involved in many grassroots campaigns to change policies and attitudes about sex and sexuality, gender and antiviolenace, and race and rights. As a university professor she has taught courses on social justice organizing, the civil rights movement, and gender and sexuality. She is a fellow at the Center for Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

From the Hardcover edition.

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INTRODUCTION

SEX WORKERS ARE FIGHTERS. They aren’t young girls begging in a freezing Dickensian fog; they aren’t “Pretty Women” looking for Prince Charming; they aren’t victimized teenage runaways exploited by savage (read: black) pimps; they don’t have golden hearts; and they aren’t crack hos neglecting their babies to find a fix. They aren’t American or Jamaican gigolos looking to fleece middle-aged women or gay hustlers cruising for sugar daddies. And some sex workers may look like these stereotypes, yet they are fighters too.

Sex workers have been fighting for their right to work, for respect and justice, for a very long time. It would be extraordinary if members of the oldest profession had never complained, had never organized, or had never fought back. They have a lot to fight. Many wonder, “Why do they hate us?” Reverend Howard Moody of New York’s Judson Memorial Church heard a Times Square streetwalker complain about her confrontation with a passerby in the 1970s:

We ain’t doin’ nothin’ to them. Yesterday I’m just standin’ on the corner, not doin’ nothin,’ and this bitch come by and says, “Get off the street, you dirty slut.” If she hadn’t been so fast I’d have kicked her ass. I wasn’t hurtin’ her. Where does she get off, callin’ me names? You mean she ain’t never fucked for favors?

We just tryin' to make a livin' like everybody else.

Moral judgments about prostitutes embolden people to throw stones and insults. Politicians pander to the “women’s vote” by introducing legislation to punish sex workers and everyone near them. Police target street-based sex workers to show they’re “cleaning up” the city; FBI and immigration officials arrest female sex workers as trafficked, and claim their associates held them in sexual slavery. In the face of such disempowerment, it’s no wonder that sex workers fight. Their survival depends on it.

Sex workers must fight for their lives. Serial murderers and rapists target prostitutes, and police compound the violence with sloppy or scant investigations of their deaths. In 2001, Gary Leon Ridgway admitted to killing forty-nine street-based workers in the Green River area of Seattle because he knew they were vulnerable. For twenty years, police did not pay attention as his victims disappeared. Ridgway is only one of some five hundred serial murderers convicted since 1970 who have preyed on female sex workers and women perceived to be sex workers; more than three thousand women have died in the last four decades.

This pattern of violence, combined with police neglect, is why sex workers lobbied the US government for years to acknowledge that these crimes are human rights violations. In 2011, the Department of Justice acknowledged the pattern of crimes committed against “persons in prostitution,” but has been slow to provide law enforcement officials with best practice guidelines for handling victims in the sex trades with respect.

Sex workers are laborers who earn money to perform sexual services or who provide erotic entertainment to clients individually or collectively. Their participation in the sex industry may be the result of choice, circumstance, or coercion. Carol Leigh—the Scarlet Harlot—coined the gender-neutral term “sex work” in 1978 to describe the many diverse occupations of the sex industry. Sex workers are escorts, exotic dancers, porn stars, peep-show workers, professional dominants, rent boys, phone-sex operators, strippers, webcam performers, erotic priestesses, prostitutes, and providers of a vast array of niche adult services. Additionally, the sex sector employs tens of thousands of service workers—security personnel, film and technical crews, and behind-the-scenes workers—who are not sex workers.

Reliable statistics on the number of people working in the sex industry at any given time are difficult to calculate because of the illegality of some occupations and the stigma associated with even legal forms of sex work. Most calculations are based on arrests, skewing estimates toward street-based populations, but failing to capture sex workers arrested on charges other than prostitution. In 1990, health researchers estimated that one in one hundred US women had done some form of sex work during her lifetime. Perhaps the public education campaign of St. James Infirmary says it best: “Someone you know is a sex worker.”⁴

Many occupations in the US sex industry are legal, and the duties, skills, and responsibilities required to perform these jobs are described in international trade agreements and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, a federal guidebook for job seekers. Employment in legal commercial sex businesses, including the pornography industry, may account for half of all sex workers today. In California, there are over five hundred “escort” companies providing “all other personal services” in the state’s Economic Development Department database. Because many are escorts and exotic dancers by choice and may have college degrees and possess other forms of human capital and privilege, many consider these workers the most empowered. Nonetheless, they too have reason to fear harassment and discrimination because of the work they do.

Escorts are paid for spending time with clients as “dates,” as “girlfriends” or “boyfriends,” not for sexual services per se. Out of public view, independent sex workers are less likely to be arrested, in part because they tend to heavily screen prospective customers. The occasional newspaper headline about a high-profile

bust, whether of New York Governor Elliot Spitzer or Deborah Jean Palfrey, “The DC Madam,” does more to restore the reputation of a scandal-rife police department than to shut down the escort industry. When public pressure to do something about crime mounts, police sweep up street-based workers. Neighborhood residents take false comfort in the belief that empty sidewalks discourage crime.

Some people engage in transactional sex casually or temporarily to supplement low-wage work, to cover extraordinary or emergency expenses, or to survive until the next meager social security check or food stamps arrive. “Girls do what they have to do to survive,” as do homeless boys, undocumented immigrants, transgender people of color, and other marginalized and social undesirables. They hustle, using sex—the one form of labor capital they possess—to obtain food, shelter, clothing, medicine, physical protection, and other necessities. Such trades are survival strategies for a population shut out of other forms of work, in a nation that does not affirm a human right to shelter, food, or health care.

Sex workers are fierce fighters because their jobs demand perspicacity, persistence, and a kind of emotional ruthlessness in order to succeed. These skills have also made them canny political activists, contrary to the stereotype of disempowered victims in need of moral rescue. *Sex Workers Unite!* tells stories about sex workers who have fought for dignity and human rights from the 1960s to today, documenting a global movement for self-determination that is as multifaceted as the sex industry and as diverse as human sexuality.

“No bad women, just bad laws” captures the movement’s longstanding demand to abolish laws criminalizing erotic services and sexual labor. There are dozens of reasons for decriminalization, and sex workers don’t all agree whether other laws prohibiting street solicitation, pandering, pimping, brothel-keeping, and moving across state borders should be repealed. Yet, based on the experiences of sex workers in other countries, US activists are skeptical that government regulation of the industry will enhance their rights as workers or as citizens.

“Decriminalization is the beginning of the solution, it’s not the solution itself,” argued Robyn Few, founder of the Sex Workers Organizing Project-USA (SWOP-USA). Contemporary activists believe that criminalizing sex work and related activities perpetuates structural and interpersonal violence, and thus endangers the lives and limits the choices of people in the sex trades.

Movement activists generally do not support legalization that allows state oversight and licensing of sex workers. Regulation, they believe, would not benefit workers and could harshly punish those who refused to be “pimped” by the state. Historically, official supervision has imposed mandatory health inspections on workers (but not clients) and usually designated prostitution zones controlled by the police. Registration as a prostitute becomes a public record, limiting the ability of sex workers to seek other forms of work when they want to leave the commercial sex industry.

Contemporary “deregulation” in the commercial sex industry has led to too little oversight, some say, pointing out that owners don’t comply with labor laws and health and safety regulations while workers are diligently policed. Activists think sex businesses should be regulated by the same government agencies that oversee non-sex businesses. If special rules are needed, then sex workers should participate in writing and enforcing them because, Carol Leigh suggests, self-regulation promotes human rights and political empowerment.

The time has come to talk about sex work. The issues are critical and contemporary. The United States is one of the few industrialized nations to criminalize prostitution. Sex work is legal in fifty nations, including Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Macau, the Netherlands, Austria, New Zealand, Israel, Germany, France, and

England; it is legal with limitations in another eleven nations, including Australia, India, Norway, Japan, and Spain. In 1949, the United States voted against a United Nations convention calling for the decriminalization of prostitution; forty-eight countries endorsed it.

The uneven enforcement of prostitution laws across the United States, even within municipal boundaries, is the result of political pressure and police whims. This variation results in a suspect pattern of selective enforcement punishing women and transwomen of color on the street more than any other group. To activists and advocates, racism is blatantly apparent in the arrest and sentencing statistics. The disparate racial impact of prostitution laws on people of color, especially those who are gender-nonconforming, is one rationale for decriminalization.

The growth of the multibillion-dollar international commercial sex industry has altered the meaning of decriminalization, particularly since many activists have legal jobs in the industry or pursue careers outside it. Although providing intimate, erotic *services* is a crime in most states and territories, it is not a crime to offer erotic *entertainment*, as long as community decency standards are observed. Working in the pornography industry, sex chat rooms, peep shows; serving beer at Hooters; and doing other sex work for commercial establishments (brick and mortar as well as virtual) are perfectly legitimate.

This form of legalization has not eliminated discrimination. Though legal commercial sex workers pay income taxes, state officials often dismiss complaints about labor, civil, and human rights violations. Lackadaisical enforcement shows that neither decriminalization nor legalization will bring rainbows and unicorns. People in the sex trades will continue to confront stigmas and public policies that penalize their work choices, their personal freedoms, and even their families, lovers, and friends.

Sex workers want to stop trafficking and end sexual coercion too, and they have assisted people trapped by criminals into unlawful labor contracts in the sex industry. Trafficking, they agree, is a human rights concern that exemplifies the ills of neoliberal globalization and anti-immigration policies. Trafficking occurs when labor contractors or smugglers exploit the undocumented immigrant's status: refusing to return a passport, forcing them to work without pay, threatening to report their "illegal" status to authorities. Coerced and undocumented workers labor in every low-wage industry in the United States, and are far more numerous in agriculture, food processing, and food service sectors than the sex industry. Though international conventions already prohibit forced labor, the United States categorizes trafficked sex workers as special victims, subjecting them to interrogation before (perhaps) issuing special-category visas. Lawyers with the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center (SWP), one of the first US programs to assist survivors of human trafficking, believe that decriminalizing prostitution would allow immigrants to more easily seek protection from criminals who have abused them.

"Stop shaming us to death!" sex workers chant. Activists believe decriminalizing prostitution would empower workers to organize on their terms. Sex workers want respect and human rights, the basic necessities for democratic participation. Activists want a voice in the political process; they believe that engaging in sexual commerce should not be grounds for disenfranchisement. Rescue, rehabilitation, and prostitution diversion programs reinforce stigma and victimization.

Around the world, sex workers have organized Red Umbrella campaigns to resist violence and discrimination, and to symbolize their collective strength. Activists want the human rights expressed in the landmark Declaration of the Rights of Sex Workers adopted in Brussels in 2005. Human rights for sex workers means recognizing them as people fully capable of making decisions about their lives, to move freely in cities and to migrate to other nations, to defend themselves against violence and threats to their health, to enjoy the respect of fellow citizens and the public servants who are supposed to protect them. They

want access to public resources and meaningful participation in the body politic. Criminalization is a human rights issue because it disregards the fundamental principles of self-determination, bodily integrity, and sexual freedom.

This history of the sex workers' movement is a collection of stories about activists and their allies who confronted moralistic politicians, paternalistic feminists, and fraternizing business owners who sought to make their careers and pimp their livelihoods off workers in the sex industry. People have fought back in many different ways, as this book attests. Their stories are varied in time, intent, and locale; and the people in them relied on different tactics, strategies, and goals. Some talked to me about politics wearing hooker heels; other activists preferred their bunny slippers or Doc Martens. In some stories, sex workers win, sometimes they lose, and sometimes they just discover new movement allies.

Readers who are sex workers or activists—or both—may find the stories here will help them become better activists. For readers who are neither, I hope these stories lay to rest the old, tired stereotypes about prostitutes, and recognize sex workers' long fight for rights, respect, and justice.

Users Review

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