How to Bust Whorephobia While Embracing LGBTQ Pride

Respect sex workers' place in the HIV movement and LGBTQ Pride—and decriminalize sex work.

June 11, 2021 By AIDS United

Millions of people across the globe are in the midst of celebrating Pride month. Though most people associate the month of June with Pride parades, few are aware that LGBTQ+ people owe much of their liberation to the tireless efforts of sex workers.

Pride began when transgender women of color who engaged in sex work took a stand against the rampant police violence toward their communities. To this day, the criminalization and stigma of sex work are major obstacles to ending the HIV epidemic.

On June 2, the second day of Pride Month, we celebrated International Whores Day. We recognize the role that sex workers have played in queer liberation and in ending the HIV epidemic. We also support sex workers in our community by calling for sex work decriminalization. We know that sex work is not only an LGBTQ+ issue but also an HIV issue.

When LGBTQ+ people are still denied the housing, education, health care and employment opportunities that their straight and cisgender counterparts receive, they are made more vulnerable. Many will turn to informal economies such as sex trade to support themselves. This is especially true for those who are the most marginalized among these communities, specifically for transgender women of color.

Sex workers are not an at-risk group for HIV, but rather they are people placed at risk for HIV due to structural factors such as homophobia, transphobia and the criminalization of those who live outside of society's patriarchal, white, cisgender and heteronormative standards. This criminalization prevents people who are engaged in sex work from from utilizing the resources they need to stay safe, such as going to law enforcement if assaulted. It also prevents people from practicing HIV risk-mitigation behaviors, like using condoms, for fear of being arrested while carrying them.

Additionally, the criminalization of sex work is intertwined with the criminalization of HIV. Between 2012 and 2017, 95% of those arrested in California on HIV-related charges were identified as allegedly having engaged in sex work. Similarly, Georgia residents were three times more likely to be convicted on HIV transmission charges if they had a concurrent arrest for alleged sex work. Criminalization of sex workers, particularly those living with HIV, is becoming more prevalent.

Those of us living with or impacted by HIV know that criminalization does little to mitigate harms done to our communities, and must actively oppose the criminalization of consensual sexual engagement.

As a step towards decriminalization, Congress must introduce and pass the SAFE SEX Workers Study Act, which would allow for research on the negative health impacts of recent legislation on sex workers. These recent bills intended to address human trafficking are called the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, also known as FOSTA-SESTA. FOSTA-SESTA passed in April 2018 with the intention of curbing online sex trafficking by making internet platforms responsible for censoring users and content.

However, what FOSTA-SESTA reestablishes is the federal government's false and dangerous conflation of sex work, a consensual activity, with sex trafficking —a coercive, criminal act. FOSTA-SESTA has cut off sex workers' ability to use technology to screen clients, negotiate prices and meeting places, check in with colleagues to share safety information, and find accepting and affirming health care. This not only increases the stigma of sex work but also makes participating in sex work more dangerous. Without access to an online community, sex workers are less able to protect themselves from those intending to harm them.

Having Congress take action to look into the impact of FOSTA-SESTA through the SAFE SEX Study Act will allow for research to guide how we move to decriminalize sex work in order to allow sex workers to engage in their consensual work more safely.

For more information on how we can work together to support sex workers, we suggest following the work of some of our partners: Red Canary Song, Sex Workers Outreach Project, HIPS DC, Desiree Alliance, No Justice No Pride, Hacking Hustling and Survivors Against SESTA.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/bust-whorephobia-embracing-lgbtq-pride-hiv