

Sex Workers Union conference notes – 4 March, 2024

Summary of key speaker topics:

- **Criminalizing the Sex Buyer, Experiences from the Nordic Region - Dr Niina Vuolajärvi**
 - In 1999, Sweden was the first country to use the criminalization of sex buyers as the central policy in a broader approach aiming to end demand for commercial sex. This presentation outlines the effects of this policy approach on sex workers and examines the intersections of sex buyer criminalization with immigration controls in the Nordic region. Its conclusions are based on ethnographic research undertaken over a three-year period in Sweden, Norway, and Finland which included 210 formal interviews with sex workers, police, social workers, and policymakers, and in-depth policy and legal analysis.
- **The impact of malicious flagging on content creators at the margins - Dr Carolina Are**
 - This presentation focuses on malicious flagging and the impacts of subsequent de-platforming on Instagram and TikTok content creators at the margins. Essential towards maintaining networks, promoting work, expressing oneself, organising and earning a livelihood, both platforms are largely free to use and provide significant opportunities towards creative and flexible work. However, they are also subject to governance procedures that can severely disrupt certain forms of content creation, particularly for users who post online sex work and nude content. Similarly to liking, commenting and sharing, flagging is a reaction social media platforms allow users, for them to highlight content that potentially violates community guidelines. However, flagging's influence on moderation remains opaque: users are largely unaware about the success of their reports; others do not know why their content has been reported, making them feel targeted not just by platforms' processes, but by the retaliation of audiences themselves. Sharing the combined findings of a qualitative survey and ethnographic interviews, I share the experiences of 135 de-platformed Instagram and TikTok users who posted nude or sex work related content. I found that the precarity of creator labour and platforms' reliance on automated content moderation have negatively impacted their wellbeing, particularly following instances of malicious flagging by their followers. The creators surveyed face adverse psychological impacts resulting from a range of factors including job and income uncertainty, with associated feelings of powerlessness, combined with a loss of digital identity and enforced isolation from a previously established social network. I conclude by providing platform governance recommendations based on these experiences.
- **Hardcore: How porn censorship harms women Artists - Alba Jato**
 - Some proponents of pro-censorship feminism, together with sex-worker exclusionary and trans-exclusionary feminism, suggest that limiting what aspects of erotica and pornography are legally acceptable will be a victory for women's liberation. However, I have a different proposal: censoring pornography and advocating for the rescuing of people in the sex-working class may be a guarantee that less of women's creative and artistic voices are heard - which is hardly the path to liberation. By looking at the intersection of financial discrimination faced by sex-workers during the last ten years, the consequences of

FOSTA/SESTA in content moderation on social media and media sharing platforms, and public health and order laws in Britain since the 19th century, a very

different picture appears: every time that pornography is censored queer folk, women, and those of poor economic means end up not gaining safety, but losing money, connections and social standing.

- **Reversing progress: The dangers of going offline - Ed Cotton**
- The impact of FOSTA/SESTA on sex workers in the US and around the world is clear. It has made it more difficult for SWs to work, advertise, vet clients and stay safe, with little to no clear benefit in the fight against human trafficking. With the closure of Back Page and other online platforms, more SWs have had to return to working in established brothels, parlors and other indoor premises, taking away the flexibility, independence and agency that they had whilst able to advertise online. Others have had to return, or in some cases for the first time, turn to street-based sex work, and face the additional risks of violence and exploitation that this brings. As a sex worker outreach service, we see first hand the consequences of SWs having to ply their trade on the street, with sexual and physical violence, robbery and harassment a routine experience for many of our clients. Adult Services Websites (ASWs) have given SWs the power to protect themselves and work independently. If ASWs are not protected from closure with the implementation of the Online Safety Act, we will face the same devastating consequences in UK that have been felt in the US and beyond.
- **The invisibility of sex workers in digital Policy - Dr Helen Rand**
- Despite global calls from sex work activists and allies to decriminalise sex work, we face an uncertain future in the UK in regards to the implementation of the Online Safety Act. By listing s.52 of the Sexual Offences Act as a priority offence, we have witnessed further criminalisation of sex work. The main concern is sex workers, like those in the US following FOSTA/SESTA, will find the internet an increasingly hostile and criminalised space. However, unlike FOSTA/SESTA the case law of s.52 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 has (so far) not criminalised agencies and directories brokering sex services. It is yet to be seen what the impact of this legislation will be so it's critical that we collectively begin to monitor and resist further criminalisation of sex work in the UK.
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- **Fighting for sex worker rights and protections – Dr Laura Connelly**
- Sex workers have warned that the Online Safety Act 2023 negatively impacts their safety, impinges rights and freedoms, and reduces sex workers' ability to make a living. Whilst the act purports to protect internet users and hold technology companies to greater account, it will in practice drive sex work underground. As sex workers have consistently explained, when their online advertisements are removed, they are compelled to move into (less safe) offline spaces where they are less able to screen clients and thus at greater risk of violence. In this short presentation, I will reflect on the burgeoning research evidence that documents the harms arising across the globe as a result of the criminalisation of sex work. The presentation is a call to action for academics and others to use the platforms and resources at their disposal to bolster sex workers in their fight for rights and protections.
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- **Increasing Online Safety with Sex Worker Ownership: Ending Violence with Platform Cooperativism - Josie West**
- The neoliberal sexual agenda, formed by a coalition of religious anti-trafficking organisations, politicians, and feminists, significantly impacts sex workers' freedom and visibility globally. Legislation like the Online Safety Act heightens commercial risks for businesses associated

with sex workers, while technological advancements make the algorithmic gaze a key policing mechanism. This grants social media and financial tech platforms unprecedented power to monitor and blacklist sex workers. This means it's increasingly difficult to sell sexual services independently of exploitative adult services websites. Worker-owned platform cooperatives (PC) could shift gig economy power back into sex workers' hands. With government support, the PC could build protective mechanisms against trafficking. Without action, criminalisation will increase dangers both online and offline.

- **Violence, criminalisation and impacts on online sex workers – Dr Raven Bowen**

- This talk will contribute to the mobilisation and dialogue about the protection of sex workers, who are severely impacted by the Online Safety Act and similar legislation. I will draw on National Ugly Mug's 2023 victimisation data to highlight online harms experienced by sex workers, including barriers to reporting, alongside challenges to recourse and remedy. This context will be located within the regime of state violence established by policies which eradicate online platforms and the security to sell sexual services online. The talk will conclude with necessary system changes and ways forward.

- **Improving the working rights of sex workers through digital platforms – Robbie Warin, Fairwork**

- Sex work is increasingly mediated through digital platforms, with workers using a range of different technologies to improve their working conditions. Alongside the use of social media platforms and messaging apps, we have seen the rise of tailored platforms built to mediate the exchange of a variety of forms of sexual labour. These digital labour platforms are now of central importance to many workers and their ability to earn a living, with the decisions the companies who run these platforms make having a huge impact on the lives of workers. In the wake of the online safety bill, this talk will outline the need for strategies to improve the practices employed by sex work platforms. It will outline one approach currently being undertaken by the Fairwork Project at the University of Oxford, involving independent research and the public scoring of different platforms working within this sector. It will ask questions surrounding how this could work in parallel with unionisation and campaigns for decriminalisation to improve the working rights of sex workers.

- **Violence, criminalisation and impacts on online sex workers – English Collective of Prostitutes**

- The Online Safety Act puts an obligation on tech companies to remove any content from their platform that could be construed as committing offences like "inciting or controlling prostitution for gain". This is already having an impact as sex workers, particularly migrant sex workers who are routinely falsely labelled as victims of trafficking and exploitation, change or remove adverts that suggest collective working. The ECP's public campaign against these offences being included was informed by our experience of how "controlling prostitution" is used against sex workers in the criminal courts who assist each other – for example a migrant woman who helped others with their advertising because she had better language skills. Online advertising has enabled sex workers to work more safely and independently from exploitative bosses, to screen clients and have more control over our working conditions. The Online Safety Act is already causing harm as sex workers look for other ways to contact clients placing ourselves at greater risk of exploitation and danger.

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