

UNCATEGORIZED

# Sex work is work

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The term 'sex work' was first employed by sex worker, feminist and artist Carol Leigh at the end of the 80s in defence of sex workers' rights, to campaign for better working conditions and for all of them to organise themselves in the defence of their interests as workers. To talk of sex work in terms of work means, first and foremost, that it is always a voluntary exchange of sexual services for money. It entails acknowledging that prostitution is not a synonym for trafficking, because it is not one single phenomenon, much less a uniform one, and its heterogeneity is made more complex by the different forms it takes on not only in different contexts and markets, but also in historical and cultural terms. The fact is that the trafficking of women is a highly complex issue and that it is the duty of feminism to fight to put an end to it. And, whilst it is true that sex work features practices that mirror those of the capitalist system, this mirroring does not occur in the sex work itself, but rather in the labour exploitation system within which it is framed.

## Pro-rights feminism vs abolitionist feminism

The goal of the struggle of all feminist sex workers—and of all pro-prostitution feminists—is to secure the recognition of sex work as work. According to their viewpoint, this would mark the first step in destroying the stigma to value the decision-making capacity of all those carrying out such work and to put an end to their classification as 'victims' by abolitionist feminists. Indeed, as Osborne notes: "Prostitutes raise the same issues as feminists (and women as a whole): they aspire to the right to work, to receive protection against violence, to a sex life in the form preferred by each individual, all of which are important issues for feminism, so the struggle is the same" (Osborne, 1991: 89).

Although sex workers make fundamental points in the feminist debate, contributing their wisdom and experiences, feminism continues to be home and witness attempts to impose—albeit unsuccessfully—the abolitionist position. This position is based on the premise that prostitution is incompatible with human dignity, and that sex workers are women prostituted by the sexist capitalist system. It sees no difference between prostitution and trafficking, does not believe that voluntary prostitution exists and holds that under no circumstances can prostitution be regarded as sex work. According to abolitionists, prostitution does not involve the purchase of a sexual service, but rather of the woman herself, providing the opportunity to play a game of male domination.

Resisting bylaws which punish the provision of sexual services on the streets with fines, defying the prejudices of a moralistic, hypocritical society, and providing a dignified response to the threats of abolitionists, sex workers are an example of struggle and empowerment. In Barcelona, for example: under the name *Prostitutas Indignadas* (Indignant Prostitutes) formerly, and currently *Putas Libertarias* (Libertarian Whores) they organise, demonstrate, fight without fear and support their neighbours—men and women—who suffer from a hidden violence that affects the entire Raval neighbourhood of the Catalan capital. Present at all the actions demanding justice for Juan Andrés Benitez, a Raval resident beaten to death by police batons on 5 October outside his front door; present at the mobilisations organised to stop countless eviction orders issued to improve, clean up or redevelop the neighbourhood and that, in practice, dump whole families on the streets; present at the demonstration of 8 March under the slogan ‘Without whores there is no feminism’, Barcelona’s sex workers never give up the fight. They walk, with anger and indignation, the same streets where María Llopis, la Bilbania, la Valenciana and other sex workers raised barricades and burnt down churches in the ‘Tragic Week’ insurrection of July 1909.

Over 100 years later, these rebellious, insubordinate witches are still defending their neighbourhood, their dignity and their work. From a feminist standpoint, of course. Let’s listen to what some of these warriors have to tell us.

Because, contrary to the cliché promoted by the abolitionist discourse, which regards sex workers as ‘victims who need saving’, sex workers are, first and foremost, caregivers. They have no need for care from the medical or religious establishment but are subjects capable of constructing forms of care in and outside of their work

## Janet, Kali and Paula

Janet is the spokeswoman for Putas Libertarias, a benchmark in the struggle for Barcelona's sex workers. Latin American, whore and defender of sex workers' rights, her dissidence is destroying certain discourses much as a hurricane destroys a house of cards. She began at a brothel, moved on to a topless bar, then to an apartment to later discover what she liked best: streetwalking.

Although young, she is clear on the fact that sex workers need to stand in the front line of the feminist struggle. Her *nom de guerre*, Kali, is a clear reference to her Indian origins. Webcam girl, escort, porn actress and performer, she joined the sex for pay industry three years ago and wants to continue fighting for her work and for the rights of her colleagues.

Paula is a feminist activist. She has worked on the street, in cabarets brothels and saunas, and has been in charge of apartments, both high and low-class. She was a city councillor for the CUP party for the Ciutat Vella district, the first sex worker to become a municipal politician, due to her activism as a feminist whore. She is part of the Putas Indignadas collective and the sex worker union official of the IAC (Intersindical Alternativa de Catalunya).

## What is the current situation of sex work in Barcelona?

JANET: Our reality is one of complete institutional violence, legal violence and social violence. We, as sex workers, really enjoy none of the guarantees of normal citizens, we are not acknowledged as part of the working class. At the current time, we have a municipal bylaw dating from 2006 designed as a public health measure that criminalises us. We are the victims of sexist attacks, night and day, by people passing through here who, thinking they have the right to insult us, spit at us, rob us and beat us up and do so with impunity. We have no credibility before the legal system. Because we are sex workers, the word of a criminal has more weight than ours. I've just come back from a trial at which the judge decided to acquit a guy with a police record who attacked, violated, robbed and threatened five colleagues with a knife. They were brave enough to file a report with the Mossos d'Esquadra (the Catalan police). Five municipal police officers testified on our behalf at the trial. I would imagine that the person acting as judge was prejudiced against us simply because we were sex workers.

KALI: I've been a sex worker for three years now and my situation as a whore is quite insecure, since I started working just as they passed the Fosta/Sesta Act, a law designed to combat trafficking but which has turned into a real witch hunt for all sex workers. They have removed a number of escort service pages, and that has meant that many girls have had to resort to streetwalking. I went on Twitter to advertise my services but they banned me. They also closed down my Instagram page, which was the only way I could promote myself a bit. I feel really frustrated and angry. Why are websites promoting porn allowed to stay open? Why haven't they closed Playboy down if they closed me down? Really famous white women are promoting their account but they shut mine down, perhaps because I

spoke out about porn, about being a whore, because I spoke out about rights, maybe too much about rights... anyway... as far as Barcelona is concerned, I can talk to you about Otras, a sex worker union of which I am co-founder. Abolitionists want to do away with our union and we want to enter into negotiations with the government for it to recognise us. The union remains alive, legally speaking, as a union, but we ourselves have no status, which means we have little power in this regard.

PAULA: For me, the current situation in Barcelona in terms of work is one of insecurity, as the sex work economy has a domino effect on the city's economic situation. In my case, I have had to emigrate from Spain and go to a country where there's a bit more money. That's why I'm currently in Paris. However, politically speaking, Barcelona is the birthplace of the sex work movement and has been an inspiration for other countries because, as of today, no other grouping has had such a political impact at a community or countrywide level as the sex workers of Prostitutas Indignadas or Putas Libertarias. Our sisters in AMMAR in Argentina are also strong in this regard, but there's nothing else. We at Putas Libertarias are working class survivors, we have impressive political power and we are continuing to create political relationships and spaces for the struggle. We have been able to make ourselves heard as political interlocutors and I myself have been able to participate in the Ciutat Vella district political programme.

## How can whores contribute to feminism?

JANET: We could contribute a great deal if feminism really accepted us and acknowledged us as political subjects, but this is not the case. We could bring a lot more to feminism with what we've experienced, with real experience of what it is to live every day as empowered women, as working-class women, as women who fight every day. The value of whores is in demanding the right to decide about our own bodies without restrictions, deciding when, where and how. Regarding my body as my territory, my battleground, as something that I have the right to use as I wish. If we give birth and we decide, we also have to accept that we can fuck free of charge or for money. Feminism would have to be reborn from the ashes, because nowadays feminism is more prostituted than we whores ourselves. I think there's a need for feminism to open up its viewpoint to embrace other realities so that all women, including transsexuals, can progress together.

KALI: We whores are mothers, sisters, friends, we're people who take great care of those around us. We help people enjoy their sexuality, we help people achieve orgasms, like those who are differently abled, for example. We help people live out their fantasies and desires. We bring a lot to feminism because we take care of something that's very important: sexuality, for women, men and trans people. People who perform sex work have a very intelligent perspective on feminism, on inclusion, on care work. Feminism should not simply include those of us performing sex work, but put us at the forefront, because we know very well how to fight, how to include people, how to create spaces, how to demand things. The feminist struggle should include everyone. We are fighting for queer people, for trans people, for non-binary people, for differently-abled people, cis women, radicalised

people, girls, the young, the old... we are fighting for all women, so it's ridiculous that feminism doesn't include sex workers. Because, if someone within feminism has no rights, nobody does. So abolitionist feminism makes no sense. I think whores should be at the vanguard of the feminist struggle. White, bourgeois feminists have acted as gatekeepers, deciding who is admitted and who is not. That's not feminism, that's white cis supremacy.

PAULA: One of the commandments of feminism is that we listen to one another, respect one another and learn from our experiences. What we can share with other women is how the myth of the patriarchy is shattered into little pieces before a whore. That powerful man, laying bare all his fragility before a whore, those lies about male sexuality, *this* is what we can share. We can contribute a great deal, for example, stressing what empowerment with regard to our own bodies means. We decide, we have the power.

## What would you ask to governments?

JANET: Firstly, decriminalisation, then recognition in legal, social and political terms, acknowledging us as members of the working class. In a capitalist system, we are all forced to work to cover our basic needs, and so sex work should be recognised just like other kinds of care work.

KALI: First of all, I would ask politicians to sit down with us and stop making laws and speeches without us. I think it's unbelievable that they can make laws about sex work without talking to whores. Second, we ask that we be provided a safe space where abolitionists cannot come to violate our discourse. Third, that they come to us having read up a bit about sex work. We're not asking them to get a doctorate on sex work, but that they have a basic grasp of the matter. We are fighting on a global level to ensure that there is more debate about discrimination against sex work and I think there are more and more of us on the pro-prostitution side.

PAULA: First, decriminalisation of sex work, so that there is no punishment, fining or persecution of sex workers and their clients. Second, that they don't copy any other example from around the world on sex work, but rather adopt a local vision that takes account of the social and cultural realities of local sex workers, asking them how they want to be regulated or how sex work should be recognised. More than regulated, we want sex work to be recognised as work. Third, we ask for socio-political support in the destigmatising of sex workers and that there be different kinds of work programmes for those seeking to leave sex work. Four, to facilitate the regulation of migrant sex workers and, in general, all migrant persons.

## Pleasurable flesh that wages war against the patriarchy

In 1972, Simone de Beauvoir claimed that she became a feminist when she acknowledged her solidarity with other women instead of her separation from them. Indeed, feminism should be constructed as a space that welcomes and brings together the voices of many

women, and one that is, at the same time, structured as a political philosophy and a collective social movement. In the face of institutional violence, sexist attacks, laws designed as witch hunts, judges finding criminals more credible than whores and all those cases of violation against the basic rights of sex workers, feminists ought to offer solidarity—or rather sisterhood—to their sisters providing sexual services.

Janet, Kali and Paula express this well in their own words: all we want, from feminists and governments, is that they recognise us as subjects with rights, that they speak with us rather than about us, that sex work be recognised in the same way as any other kind of care work. Because, contrary to the cliché promoted by the abolitionist discourse, which regards sex workers as ‘victims who need saving’, sex workers are, first and foremost, caregivers. They have no need for care from the medical or religious establishment but are subjects capable of constructing forms of care in and outside of their work as they care for their clients, their friends and their loved ones.

It is therefore the job of feminists, more than that of governments, to acknowledge sex workers as political subjects, as allies, as caregivers. It is the job of feminism not only to support their struggle but also to learn from it. Because sex workers—those who carry out their profession without depending upon anyone else—are waging war against the patriarchy and against the hypocrisy of those who think that all sex workers are weak victims. They are raising barricades made of their own skin, their own flesh: a desiring and desired flesh, a flesh that recognises the urgency of fighting against trafficking but that is well aware that equating prostitution with trafficking means discriminating still more against the former, because it denies that any sex worker has the capacity for agency and for freely making decisions about her own body. A flesh that demands the right to do whatever it wants with its own body. The right to abortion. The right to fuck for free or for money. The right to be in the street without suffering harassment or on a web page free of censorship. A flesh that, in short, becomes a trench on the battlefield and that enjoys, revels, loves, that calls on other fleshs to join in this feminist cartography of dissidence.



#### **Livia Motterle**

Livia Motterle holds a degree in Philosophy from the University of Bologna. She studied a Master in Anthropology and Ethnography at the University of Barcelona, with a thesis about *Hidden cures. Corporating practices of sexual attention and institutional neglect in Barcelona*, where she analyzes the dynamics of construction, manipulation and dissemination of sociocultural imaginaries about sex workers, as well as the practices of care, cure and affectivity that can be brought in between sex workers and clients. She is currently a PhD student in the Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology program at the UB with a thesis that relates topics of urban anthropology and gender anthropology.



#### **Janet**

Janet is a prostitute, a dissident and a defender of sexual workers' rights. She works in the streets and is the spokesperson for Putas Libertarias, a sexual workers alliance in the Raval area of Barcelona fighting institutional and police persecution against their collective. The organization has become a symbol of the struggle

**Kali Sudhra**

Kali Sudhra is the cofounder of Otras, a sex workers' union organization. Despite her youth, she is positive about sexual workers being at the forefront of the feminist struggle. Her battle name alias, Kali, refers to her Indian background. *Webcamer*, escort, porn actress and *performer*, she entered the sex industry three years ago

**Paula Ezkerra**

Paula is a feminist activist. She has worked in the streets, in cabarets, clubs, saunas and also managing apartments. She has been a city councilwoman for the CUP party in the district of Ciutat Vella. She is the first sexual worker to enter City Council's politics, coming from her feminist activism. She is part of the collective *Putes Indignades* and an union delegate representing sexual workers at the IAC (Alternative Union of Catalunya)