

Sex Workers and Self Advocacy

Grace E. Harvey

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, gharv03@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/ramifications>

Recommended Citation

Harvey, Grace E. () "Sex Workers and Self Advocacy," *Ramifications*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/ramifications/vol2/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ramifications by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcrestler@wcupa.edu.

Sex Workers and Self Advocacy

Introduction

Sex work has been around for centuries and like any other form of labor, is faced with unfair practices and conditions. While labor unions are not uncommon or unheard of, labor unions for sex workers are hard to come by. This paper will explore why sex workers' unions and other forms of advocacy are uncommon among sex workers and why they are highly needed. It will further demonstrate how activism in sex work is beneficial and how it has allowed sex workers in history to advocate for themselves in ways that are beneficial to them as individuals and as a collective.

This area of study is important because sex workers are invisible when it comes to activism and unionism. Writing about sex work helps chip away at the stigma surrounding this form of labor. It is significant to highlight the experiences of unfair working conditions to better convey the importance of activism within sex work. Studying the impact that activism has had on sex workers demonstrates its successes, attempting to make the idea more mainstream.

This paper will be exploring questions of what pushes sex workers to advocate through activism, why activism in sex work is uncommon, how sex workers advocate for themselves through activism, and how activism has successfully impacted the working conditions of sex workers. It will explore the different conditions that have situated sex workers in a position of needing activism and unions. It will demonstrate examples of successful activism and unionism within sex work and set up a framework for how the audience can advocate for the equal access to fair labor.

Framework

Both intersectionality and standpoint theory will be used as the framework for this paper. Intersectionality is a term coined by lawyer and critical race scholar Kimberle Crenshaw to describe the ways in which Crenshaw saw black women having unique forms of oppression in court rooms. Crenshaw (1991) states that she used intersectionality “to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (1254). Intersectionality is now used as a larger term and framework to explain how multiple identities join to create new and different oppressions for different individuals.

As a framework for research, intersectionality aims to highlight different experiences and make all voices heard, instead of just one. Intersectionality challenges the idea that there is one single experience of oppression. Through this framework, the ways in which self-advocacy in sex work looks different for different identities will be highlighted. It will account for the different conditions within which sex workers must advocate for themselves and the different resources that are available to sex workers who want to advocate for themselves depending on their multiple identities.

The second framework, standpoint epistemology, will be used in order to center the experiences of those closest to the oppression, in this case sex workers, when conducting research on them. Through standpoint theory, feminist theorist Sandra Harding conveys that experiential knowledge is as valuable as scientific knowledge, and therefore encourages others to use personal experiences as apart their research. Standpoint theory states that knowledge that comes from those closest to the oppression is most conclusive. As stated by Harding (2004),

“Standpoint theory was presented as a way of empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences, and of pointing towards a way to develop “oppositional consciousness” (2).

As a framework, standpoint theory will function to center the stories and experiences of sex workers. In order to understand why sex workers need activism and how they advocate for themselves, standpoint theory will guide this research through the use of testimonies from sex workers themselves. Standpoint theory challenges the idea that only objective, scientific knowledge is viable; instead, it counts personal experiences as viable knowledge as well. This not only empowers sex workers but makes the research more conclusive because it uses knowledge coming from those who do the labor and activism.

These two theories will guide this research to highlight the truths of sex workers who have experienced the need for self-advocacy and activism and to recognize the differences in experiences depending on the multiple identities of the sex workers. This paper will use research that takes into account how sex workers of different identities navigate advocacy and activism differently. The research specifically looks at not only white sex workers but women of color, queer women, and feminine identifying people. It will specifically use knowledge from sex workers themselves in order to frame the research.

Need for Advocacy

Sex work presents a range of different issues which push workers into activism; some of these issues are described by Kooy (2019) when stating that dancers “realized that there were many other serious problems in the workplace; racial discrimination, favoritism, at-will employee status, pay cuts as a form of discipline, inconsistently applied disciplinary procedures,

and lack of sick policy” (114). The issues previously mentioned are only those raised by strippers, leaving different problems for sex workers who work on the streets or at home.

Issues of racism, unfair scheduling and employment, unfair access to wages, safety from customers, and lack of basic labor policy are some of the factors that push sex workers into activism and unionism. Many of these issues involve another level of depth when bringing race and identity in as a factor; one of the workers from the Lusty Lady strip club stated from her personal experience stripping that “A dancer could get away with coming in late if she was blond and had big tits or if management just happened to like her; whereas other dancers they didn’t like would be fired for the most minuscule offenses” (116). Many sex workers in Kooy’s research reported issues of racism, stating the Lusty Lady used race in a fetishized way to classify dancers (118). Dancers spoke about differences in the amount of money dancers made and the opportunities they were given based on race. These issues push sex workers of all races to act and to form a union.

Another workplace issue that pushes sex workers into activism is the lack of access to sexual healthcare and wellbeing. Past examples of this is the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power where sex workers advocated to provide communities with safer sex education, disease prevention, and safe drug use. Writer and activist Chateauvert (2014) states “sex workers of all genders organized politically to fight laws that singled them out for punishment as vectors disease” (Chapter 1); this is just one example of sex workers being pushed into activism for issues on sexual health and the wellbeing of their community.

Lack of Activism

Although many problems exist around the labor of sex workers, activism within sex work is uncommon; one reason being the gender biases that exist around unions. With sex work primarily being made up of women, gender biases against women are hyper present within sex work.

Labor unions have been around for decades yet have skipped sex work entirely. Union scholar Yates (2006) explains this when she states “women have a greater need for unionization due to the systemic differences in their treatment by employer. But women’s opportunities for joining unions are fewer due to their unequal access to union representation” (566). The unequal access to representation that Yates speaks of is a product of biases against women; one being that women are passive and don’t like conflict. This misconception affects women’s access to union representation because it tells the false narrative that women would rather not face the problems in their workplaces and therefore don’t need unions.

Since unionization largely involves raising issues with those in power and having hard conversations that result in conflict, unions are seen as something women are not interested in. Yates states that “In the field of industrial relations, these assumptions about women often surface in explanations about why women are less likely to join unions or cannot withstand the heat of industrial disputes” (575). This misconception bars women from having equal access to advocating for themselves. With sex work employing primarily women, gender biases against women and unionizing affects the unionizing of sex workers directly. With avoidance of conflict being just one of the many misconceptions that bars women from unionizing, these biases hold great power over sex workers and their equal access to advocacy.

Activism is sparse in sex work not only because of biases but because of the invisibility of the work. The invisibility of sex work is a product of multiple forces, three of them being

described by scholars Hardy & Cruz (2019) when they state, “Sex work is both informal and sometimes illegal work, and finally in that it faces a unique social stigma” (247). Together, and separately, these three forces make access to unions difficult for sex workers.

Firstly, the informal nature of sex work contributes to its invisibility. Many strippers are considered “private contractors”, cam girls work from their own home and their own computer, and prostitutes mainly report to themselves only. The theme of self-employment is present throughout sex work giving the workers no shared employer to direct demands to. This makes activism and unionism difficult because there is a lack of a collective, something that is necessary for group activism and unionism. Hardy & Cruz state “This creates specific problems for collectivism and collective action not only because it dislocates workers from proximity to one another, but also-for self- employed informal workers-because there is not employer who they can direct their demands” (2019, 247). The self-employed nature of sex work presents unique challenges in that there isn't always someone to hold accountable for issues in the workplace. This leaves sex workers lost in how to advocate for themselves.

The second contributing factor to the invisibility of sex work and further the lack of activism in sex work is the social stigma that surrounds the work. In our society, expressing sexuality freely and making money while doing it is far from the norm. Society represses sexual freedom, especially for women, so sex work is considered taboo. The social stigma that sex workers are dirty, whores, and drug addicts means that most people turn a blind eye to the issues sex workers face, and those who choose to look do so through a judgmental lens.

Due to this social stigma, sex work is ignored and not seen as a real, viable form of work. When labor isn't considered real work, the issues its workers face are not taken seriously. According to testimonies in *Stripped* by sociologist Bernadette Barton (2017), workers express

the challenges they face due to the stigma of sex work; some of these challenges include being judged when applying for loans, housing, and jobs, and lying about what you do in order to avoid being judged by peers. One woman stated that it took her six months to find housing after being denied apartments on the basis of her occupations (104-105). These women describe how the stigma of stripping holds great amounts of power over them.

The social stigma attached to sex work makes it extremely difficult for sex workers to disclose the problems they face in their place of work; one reason being because sex workers don't always share their form of work with those closest to them. The judgment that comes from sex workers disclosing their professional choices pushes many of them to keep their career hidden from friends, family, and others. When faced with workplace inequalities, many sex workers have no support system outside of their job to help them advocate for themselves. Speaking up about problems at work is difficult when your job is shamed by many. This leads sex workers to refrain from expressing their troubles and exploitation to dodge harmful judgement.

Lastly, as Hardy and Cruz make clear, the illegality of some forms of sex work bars the sex work profession from being recognized as legitimate labor. With some forms of sex work being illegal in different states, sex workers are caught in a bind; advocating for themselves almost becomes impossible when the work they're doing could put them in trouble with the law. As stated by Krüsi, Kerr, Taylor, Rhodes, and Shannon (2016) "The negative effects of the stigmatization and criminalization of sex work are amplified for sex workers who live in poverty, or members of visible minorities and for those who use illicit substance" (1139). With sex workers in poverty being more likely to work in illegal forms of sex work, they are disproportionately held from accessing means to advocate for themselves.

Both the stigma of sex work and the criminality of sex work come together to create a unique experience for some. The unequal access to advocacy that sex workers face in this situation is best described by their ability to receive help from police enforcement. Obtaining support and help from police is a form of advocacy for sex workers because it enables them to request safety and to better their conditions immediately when working in a dangerous situation. Many sex workers are reluctant to advocate for themselves through the police because of the stigma and criminality of their work, giving them unequal access to safety during their work.

Many sex workers refrain from reporting wrong doings to the police due to fear of the police officers' reaction. Sex workers are stigmatized by law enforcement as troublemakers, and therefore, they are less likely to receive help from them. This is conveyed when Krüsi et al. (2016) state the following:

This practice highlights how discourses of sex workers as deviants who threaten the moral and social order coexisted and intersected with police enforcement that purports to prioritize the safety of sex workers and profoundly shaped the working condition of street based sex workers. (1144)

For women of color and minorities in sex work, it is even harder and potentially more dangerous for them to use the police as a way to advocate for themselves. The stigma of stripping takes away the power of using the police as a resource, furthering the unequal access to workplace advocacy for sex workers.

Success in Activism

Due to the lack of advocacy around sex work, examples of successful activism prove to be extremely beneficial. Through history, there are examples of people coming together to

advocate for sex workers in multiple ways, all demonstrating the possibility for positive change for sex workers' working conditions.

One of the examples of positive change and advocacy for sex workers is AMMAR, an Argentinean sex workers' union which stands for Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina. AMMAR demonstrates activism that advocates for sex workers as individuals, meeting their personal needs while on the job. This includes offering “condoms, lubricant, and the latest leaflet of information about legal issues and campaigns” (Hardy & Cruz, 2019, 250). AMMAR invites women to workshops and events which educate them on their rights as workers, as well as educates them on health services, HIV testing, and other sexual health resources. They also create a space for sex workers, primarily those who work on the streets, to congregate and form relationships with one another. In this space, they are able to bring sex workers in, offer them information and resources, and generate solidarity (251). Through the example of AMMAR, it is evident that organizing for sex workers is possible, and more so, it is extremely beneficial for individual sex workers.

Sex workers' unions and advocacy groups have also proven to help change workplaces and management. In the case of the Lusty Lady, unionizing brought about real change in how their managers ran the strip clubs; they were able to get rid of exploitative practices, change policies, and have their conditions met. Alongside the Lusty Lady union, the EDA has “successful class action lawsuits against the Market Street Cinema [for not paying their workers]. ... employers were required to pay at least minimum wage for hours worked; and that requiring dancers to pay stage fees was illegal” (Kooy, 2001, 121). These two cases demonstrate the change that unions and activist groups can bring to management and policy to improve the conditions of their workplaces for all employees.

Activism that advocates for sex workers not only has been seen to help individual workers experiences and to change practices of workplaces but also has brought a heightened visibility to sex workers' needs. This is demonstrated through COYOTE advocacy group that started in 1973 which stands for Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics. One of the many things COYOTE does is host "Hookers's Balls" which expose the community to the realities of sex work and its workers. These balls raise money for gay rights funds while also increasing the visibility of sex workers and actively diminishing the stigma of sex work. This is explained by Chateauvert (2014) when they say that Hookers's Balls were "tactics in a large movement seeking "respect for sexual freedom as a fundamental civil liberty" (Chapter 1). By increasing the visibility of sex work, COYOTE is also able to humanize sex workers and allow the community to validate their struggles as worthy of advocacy. Chateauvert states "Its services and programs for "loose women" rejected the idea that sex was evil. It encouraged women to be angry about the whore stigma and slut shaming for pursuing sexual pleasure or trading sex for money" (Chapter 1). COYOTE directly advocates for sex workers by making their labor visible, allowing it to be seen as valid and worthy of advocacy from others.

Moving Forward

The significance and need for activism in sex work is undeniable. While activism allows sex workers to advocate for themselves in ways that produce concrete change, Barton (2017), a prominent researcher of sex workers, states "I have found no other examples of dancers successfully organizing to improve working conditions" (171) after giving just one example. The apparent need for activism raises the question of how this can become more common moving forward.

The most important thing society, communities, and individuals can do to increase the ability for sex workers to advocate for themselves through activism is to recognize sex work as legitimate work. Unions and workplace activism can only happen in places of work. With sex work not being recognized as work, it is nearly impossible for them to gain equal access to labor activism. As gender and sexuality scholar Berg (2014) argues, sex workers will never have access to labor rights until their work is considered labor. She raises questions of how sex work is seen within labor policy and states “These questions are not simply semantic, but determine access to worker protection, benefits, and the right and ability to organize” (698). Until society recognizes sex work as labor, there will be no measures taken to ensure their labor is not exploitative.

As individuals outside of sex work looking in, our main job in supporting sex workers’ self-advocacy is to believe that sex work is labor and to share that belief with others. By normalizing sex work, we are slowly erasing the stigma that perpetuates harm to these workers. Speaking about sex workers as normal, valid workers who contribute to the economy and hold meaning is one of the largest ways to support sex workers.

Sharing knowledge and resources on workers' rights, sexual health, and safer sex to those who are sex workers is another way of supporting workers on an individual level. Further, outsiders can also contribute by supporting existing groups who advocate for sex workers through volunteerism or monetary support.

For those inside sex work, one of the most beneficial ways to advocate for one’s self is by joining or forming a collective. By coming together as a group, sex workers are far more powerful and able to create change. This is expressed by sociologist Price-Glynn (2010) when she states:

Sex workers cannot rely on sex industry operators to either represent their interests or provide a means of doing so. Rather, sex workers require independent means of interest representation- namely by sex workers, of sex workers, and for sex workers. (262)

As conveyed by Price-Glynn, forming a collective is the best way for sex workers to advocate for themselves. In the examples above, the Lusty Lady, AMMAR, and COYOTE demonstrate power in numbers. For anyone who supports workers' rights, sex workers cannot go unnoticed. We must support those doing the work, erase the stigma of sex work, recognize it as labor, and help sex workers advocate for themselves.