

How to Be an Ally to Those Who Do Sex Work

- 1) **Don't diminish or make assumptions about their agency.** It's important to let individuals make this distinction themselves, rather than automatically assigning them a label that indicates lack of agency. For instance, referring to all sex workers as "prostituted" or "used" can be violating in and of itself when a person identifies their work as a free choice.
- 2) **Be Discreet and Respect Personal Boundaries.** If you know a person who does sex work, it's OK to engage in conversation with them in private, but respect their privacy surrounding their work in public settings. Don't ask personal questions such as "does your family know what you do?" If a person who does sex work is not "out" to their friends, family, or co-workers, it's not your place to tell everyone what they do.
- 3) **Don't Judge.** Know your own prejudices and realize that not everyone shares the same opinions as you. Whether you think sex work is a dangerous and exploitative profession or not is irrelevant compared to the actual experiences of the person who works in the industry. It's not your place to pass judgment.
- 4) **Watch Your Language.** Some people in the sex industry have reclaimed words such as "whore" and "hooker" and may use them among themselves, but these terms demean sex workers when spoken by someone outside of the industry. "Sex worker" was conceived as a judgment-neutral term and is usually a safe bet if you're unsure of what phrase would be most respectful. Using person-first language such as, "person who does sex work" serves to challenge dehumanization and the notion that individuals should be defined by what they do.
- 5) **Address Your Prejudices.** If you have an internal bias or underlying fear that all people who do sex work are bad people and/or diseased, then perhaps these are issues within yourself that you need to address. In fact, the majority of people who do sex work practice safer sex than their peers and get tested more regularly.
- 6) **Don't Play Rescuer.** Not all people who do sex work are trying to get out of the industry or are in need of help. Ask them what they need, but not everyone is looking for "Captain Save-A-Ho" or the "Pretty Woman" ending.
- 7) **Don't assume your problems with the sex industry are the industry's only problems.** Some of the most time-honored criticisms of the sex industry—it solidifies patriarchy or commodifies female sexuality—are significant considerations. But they may not be top concerns among people who do sex work themselves, who are usually more interested in avoiding harassment or abuse at the hands of law enforcement, finding the safest possible workplace and earning a livelihood.
- 8) **Do Your Own Research.** Most mainstream media is biased against people who do sex work and the statistics you read in the news about the sex industry are usually inaccurate. Be critical of

what you read or hear and educate yourself on who exactly is transmitting diseases or being trafficked.

9) Respect that Sex Work is Real Work. There's a set of professional skills involved and it's not necessarily an industry that everyone can enter into. Don't tell someone to get a "real job" when they already have one that suits them just fine.

10) Be Supportive and Share Resources. If you know of someone who is new to the industry or in an abusive situation with an employer, offer advice and support without being condescending. Some people do enter into the sex industry without educating themselves about what they are getting into and may need help. Despite the situation, calling the police is usually never a good option. Try to find organizations that are sensitive to the needs of people who do sex work.

12) Advocate. As you learn the above things, stand up for people who do sex work when conversations happen. Share your personal stories if you so choose. Don't let the stigma, bigotry and shame around sex work continue. Remember it's important that people who do sex work are allowed to speak for themselves. It is not for allies to speak for people who do sex work but to speak with people who do sex work.

13) Recognize and Respect. Realize that sex work transcends 'visible' notions of race, gender, class, sexuality, education, and identities; people who do sex work are your sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, lovers, and friends. Respect them!