

In this persuasive essay, Stanley-Coughlan reveals how attitudes in the social work field punish rather than empower sex workers. Using evidence from personal narratives, academic research, and historical accounts, he exposes how New York social services have failed sex workers and argues for a more sex-positive view of their profession.
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SEX WORK AND SOCIAL WELFARE: ANTI-OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Jenna Torres started selling sex at the age of fifteen to pay for books and school supplies. In August 2013, on the same day she was supposed to pick up her college schedule, she was arrested for prostitution (Torres). Torres's case was heard in New York's newly-created Human Trafficking Intervention Courts (HTICs), which were instituted to offer "vital services instead of punishment to these defendants" (Crabapple). After taking a guilty plea, however, she found herself in a much worse position than she had previously been in. She was mandated to attend ten therapy sessions at a "prostitution diversion program," missing registration day for her classes and putting her only true shot at upward mobility in serious jeopardy (Torres). Like so many of our clients in social work, Torres had difficulties attempting to balance all the social service involvement in her life. Rushing to Child Services aftercare meetings in Brooklyn, or the prostitution diversion program in Harlem, all the while caring for three young children and trying to get her education at the College of Staten Island quickly became overwhelming and unsustainable (Torres). Eventually, she was forced to drop out of school, and, instead of going to classes, she had to face the same fate that so many of our clients do—to spend every day bouncing back and forth between court-mandated appointments, seeing no progress in her situation, and feeling completely and utterly powerless.

Jenna Torres represents a significant and divisive controversy in the field of social welfare. And while her situation seems like a com-

plete failure of New York social service agencies, the majority of social workers have embraced the school of thought that produced HTICs (Torres). New York state law designates social work clients who are involved in the sex industry as ‘prostituted peoples’—people who have been manipulated, pimped out, or trafficked into performing sex for money. This mindset has been advocated extensively by feminist groups who are pushing for a shift towards the client-criminalization model, and continues to be the most influential in shaping New York City services (Torres). Since the seventies, however, significant opposition to this long-held belief has grown quickly. A new stream of sex-positive feminists advocate full legalization of prostitution and rebranding prostitution as legitimate and potentially empowering “sex work” (Torres). As the times have progressed and prostitution courts have become increasingly more service-oriented, social workers have become increasingly more involved in the lives of women and LGBTQ people involved in the sex industry, mainly as facilitators in government-mandated anti-prostitution programs and ‘rescue’ agencies. The growing presence of social workers within agencies that work with sex workers necessitates a deeper consideration of how this cultural debate influences the services we provide to our clients.

The way New York social services approach their work with sex workers has changed slightly throughout history but, at its core, has remained rather stagnant in its determination that all women involved in sex work are victims. It is clear in its assumption that Jenna Torres, and all other women and LGBTQ people like her, are not capable of deciding for themselves to enter sex work, completely overlooking Jenna’s thought-out plan to use prostitution as a way to economically further her educational goals. To them, Jenna Torres is a slave to her circumstances and to the clients who solicit sex from her. Speaking to the origins of this ideology, historian Erin Gallagher-Cohon describes how “during the Progressive Era in the United States of America, there were fears that not only was prostitution a growing industry of sin, but that women were being coerced into becoming prostitutes” (36). The media at the time dubbed the growing prevalence of prostitutes in cities “white slavery” (36). In this understanding, prostitutes had no agency in their position. The women, specifically white women, for whom the public expressed concern were said

to be completely helpless, caught up in the deviant hypersexuality of the urban, ill-intentioned man. The “white slavery” model, problematic as it may be, has continued to shape the discourse around prostitution in the social welfare and legal communities, as well as in the public lexicon.

Prominent sex-positive organizations and sex worker advocacy unions have taken a radically different approach, casting off the white slavery model, itself, as a form of oppression. They argue that when groups like the National Organization of Women express concern over the exploitation and subjugation of women in the sex industry, they actually end up disempowering the workers themselves. Often anti-prostitution feminists and ‘advocates’ even go as far to say that there is no such thing as voluntary sex work. While this assertion seems radical, it has had a powerful impact. In New York state, there is no legal distinction made between human trafficking and voluntary sex work. In her *VICE* article, “Special Prostitution Courts and the Myth of ‘Rescuing’ Sex Workers,” Molly Crabapple discusses how the advent of New York State’s HTICs have blurred this line even further. She describes how the 2013 creation of “these courts [legally] redefined prostitutes as trafficking victims rather than criminals” (Crabapple). Operating under the assumption “that the vast majority of individuals charged with prostitution offenses are commercially exploited or at risk of exploitation,” they completely overlook the conscious, consenting, and entirely voluntary participation of the overwhelming majority of sex workers (Crabapple).

Crabapple, in one of her visits to one of the largest HTICs in Queens, asked the presiding judge about how these cases are handled differently than *actual* international sex trafficking. She responded, “no little girl dreams of being a sex worker,” and, loud enough for the defendants in the courtroom to overhear, she presumed the majority of sex workers had been molested (Crabapple). Even though these courts supposedly handle ‘trafficking’ cases more compassionately and are centered around *helping* sex workers, Crabapple argues that they assume that “anyone who’s been arrested for sex work is raw material, incapable of making his or her own choices.” For Jenna Torres, and all of our clients who made conscientious, albeit economically-driven,

choices to participate in the sex industry, this assumption is deeply degrading, disempowering, and oppressive.

Too often, social workers have engineered, or at least participated in, the disempowerment of voluntary commercial sex workers, acting as a cog in the machine that systematically removes agency from our clients. This participation, however, is well-intentioned. As the people on the front lines, social workers are very familiar with the senseless acts of violence and traumatic experiences that are indelibly associated with the industry of prostitution. In a New York City-based study, it was found that “80% of street-based sex workers reported experiencing violence or threats in the course of their work,” and “60% reported being violently forced into doing something they didn’t want to do” (Thukral and Ditmore 10). Seeing this data, it makes sense that social workers have a hard time recognizing the assertions of sex worker advocacy organizations like the Red Umbrella Project—that sex work is nearly always voluntary, and empowering. In fact, opposition to this mindset is very common among social workers, who, unlike policy-makers, have uniquely intimate experiences working with women and LGBTQ people in the sex industry. In the prominent *Journal of Trauma Practice*, for instance, psychologist Melissa Farley and her colleagues were very clear in their assertion that:

prostitution dehumanizes, commodifies and fetishizes women, in contrast to non-commercial casual sex where both people act on the basis of sexual desire and both people are free to retract without economic consequence. In prostitution, there is always a power imbalance, where the john has the social and economic power to hire her/him to act like a sexualized puppet. Prostitution excludes any mutuality of privilege or pleasure: its goal is to ensure that one person does not use her personal desire to determine which sexual acts do and do not occur—while the other person acts on the basis of his personal desire. (Farley et al. 34)

Conceptualizing prostitution in this way, especially in a publication that informs our practice with traumatized clients, is impactful, but it frames the way we deliver services incorrectly. It primes us to immediately step into a place of judgment, succumbing to stigmas around sex work; not to respect the choices our clients make; or even to think

that our clients are unable to make decisions about their own lives. Following this mindset, social workers who work with sex workers are not supportive facilitators, but 'saviors.'

Unfortunately these 'saviors' are all too common within our profession. Even though social work is perhaps one of the most introspective and self-evaluating professions, many come into social work without recognizing power imbalances in their relationships with clients. Project ROSE, a famous diversion program engineered by a group of social workers, is a good example of this 'savior' ideology making its way into the services we provide sex workers. Dr. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, a professor at the Arizona State University School of Social Work and distinguished social worker, worked with the Phoenix Police Department to create the program, which aims to rescue women, especially transwomen, from their dangerous and illegal lifestyle ("Free Monica Jones"). Over the course of two days, police, to accommodate the "social service program," ramped up prostitution raids, bringing in over 100 women and LGBTQ people and giving them a choice between participating in the program and gaining access to services aimed at removing them from the sex industry or going to jail ("Free Monica Jones"). Roe-Sepowitz believes her service "provides a life-saving choice for her clients," but in the end what she is doing is rounding up prostitutes and making them choose between therapy and a cold cell. That is not a choice; that is a social worker dictating the clients' lives with no respect for their situation or feelings ("Free Monica Jones"). Roe-Sepowitz, like her many contemporaries in the social welfare community, is not the savior she imagines herself to be—she is an extortionist with a Master of Social Work.

The way social workers talk about and provide services to sex workers must change. We, more so than any other profession, must employ critical consciousness to reflect on how we affect our clients. While the social welfare community has made a lot of progress advancing beyond the savior mentality in racial justice work and in international development, there is a long way to go in advancing our theories of practice with sex workers. The goal can no longer be 'diversion' or exit from the sex industry, as it has been in New York City; it has to be empowerment and actualization. In her entry in

Social Work with Groups, Margot Breton describes the rather newly introduced empowerment-driven model of social work practice. She writes “for those in the ‘helping professions’ following the principle of collegiality,” meeting the client where they’re at, and abandoning the position of savior, “may involve significant shifts in . . . perception” (28-29). This problem runs deeper than a few rogue social workers with inflated egos: it is cemented deep in the ideological roots of our profession. Breton points out that the majority of “social work models are imbued with medical thought and language, creating the iatrogenic effect whereby we disqualify people’s ability to handle their problems-in-living in the absence of expert advice” (29). In this way, social workers have asserted power over their clients, especially those involved in commercial sex work, replicating the very systems of hierarchical oppression that our profession was born to dismantle.

In a press release on the matter, the National Association of Social Workers, the governing organization of American social work, affirmed that “social workers must hear and validate the voices of adult women and men who work, or have worked, as commercial sex workers” (3). They insisted, “we must acknowledge that there is a continuum of experiences within the commercial sex trade industry, and by doing so we validate the reality of all people engaged in this work rather than circumscribe their experiences within a specific moral code” (National Association of Social Workers 3). The sentiment is good, but it does not mention the lack of action accompanying this assertion; it is conservative about the scope of the work that must be done to transform the landscape of services in New York and throughout the country.

Social work, at least when done well, is radical. We, upon taking our oath, commit to acknowledge the lives and experiences of the many people who have been beaten, bruised, and left to starve by a vicious and perpetually unequal socioeconomic structure. Sex workers lie at the dangerous intersection of capitalism and the cisheteropatriarchy, making them particularly vulnerable. Through our empowerment-based work, we cannot stick our heads in the sand as many sex-positive groups have done and claim that sex work, in itself, is empowering. It may be for a privileged few, but the majority of commercial sex workers, like Jenna Torres, use their bodies to make

money. Besides the socially-constructed patriarchal and heteronormative rules which form the 'whore stigma' that isolates sex workers, their experience is by no means a foreign one. When sex worker advocacy organizations insist that 'sex work is work,' they don't even realize how accurate their assertion is. Indeed, there must be a recognition of prostitution as a form of legitimate labor, but in the Marxist sense. Under capitalism, people's bodies are used to accrue profit for those at the top of the economic food chain. Work is inherently exploitative. While some people manage to sneak into a job they actually enjoy, the majority do not feel empowered in their day to day lives, but they continue on because that is how they survive.

Sex workers are no different, and they deserve all the protections we grant to those laboring in more traditional industries. While capitalism and the patriarchy are big systems for social workers to grapple with, our job is to address their ills. The services that are available for sex workers, especially those that sex workers are mandated to attend, are unacceptable. While we may disagree on the symbolic political implications, or even the legality of sex work, we cannot in good conscience allow these services to continue to fail women and LGBTQ people like they failed Jenna Torres. The only way we can address this problem, as service providers, is to change the way we gear services for clients involved in the sex industry. The code of ethics mandates us to treat sex workers, and all our clients, with dignity and respect, and to fight for their economic advancement and health equity. But we need to accept that the most impactful way to do this is to involve our clients themselves—empowering and giving them the tools to take control of their own lives and positions within society.

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