



Decriminalization of Sex Work is an Anti-Trafficking Policy

Vermont can fight trafficking by ending the criminalization of consensual adult sex work.

Human trafficking and consensual adult sex work are not the same thing. Trafficking involves force, fraud, or coercion to compel an adult into labor or commercial sex. Consensual adult sex work involves adults choosing to exchange sexual services for payment. Treating all commercial sex as inherently exploitative directs attention toward consensual activity instead of the force, fraud, coercion, violence, and exploitation that define trafficking.

Trafficking is not caused by sex work. It happens wherever people are vulnerable to exploitation, including in agriculture, restaurants, hospitality, domestic work, factories, and the sex trade. Traffickers exploit poverty, economic instability, discrimination, immigration-related vulnerability, unsafe workplaces, weak labor protections, and lack of access to housing, healthcare, and other resources.

Trafficking grows out of vulnerability. Criminalization compounds that vulnerability.

The Evidence Supports Decriminalization

A 2018 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health meta-analysis reviewed more than 130 studies conducted over 30 years. The review found that repressive policing is associated with increased risks of physical and sexual violence, HIV and other STIs, and condomless sex. It also found that decriminalization improves sex workers' ability to negotiate safer sex and access justice and other services.

Criminalization creates barriers to safety, healthcare, and reporting. Decriminalization removes those barriers.

Freedom Network USA, the national leading anti-trafficking coalition, specifically supports decriminalization as an anti-trafficking policy. It has found that criminalization makes sex workers and trafficking survivors more vulnerable, makes it harder to report violence and trafficking, and interferes with safety strategies such as screening clients and working together.

Organizations supporting decriminalization of consensual adult sex work include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Health Organization (WHO), UNAIDS, United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women, La Strada International, and Global Network of Sex Work Projects.

Criminalization Makes People Less Safe

Criminalizing consensual adult sex work does not eliminate exploitation. It makes people more vulnerable and makes trafficking harder for law enforcement to detect.

When people fear arrest, they are less likely to report violence, exploitation, and trafficking. Criminalization pushes sex work into more hidden conditions, increases stigma, makes it harder for people to work together to increase their safety, and creates barriers to healthcare and other services. It can also criminalize trafficking survivors. Prostitution-related charges and other criminal records can make it harder to find housing, employment, healthcare, and other resources needed to leave exploitation and sustain life.

Criminalization misdirects law enforcement resources toward consensual adult activity rather than trafficking, violence, force, fraud, coercion, and exploitation.

When people are afraid to seek help, traffickers benefit.

Decriminalization Makes People Safer

Decriminalization removes criminal penalties for consensual adult sex work while maintaining full criminal penalties for trafficking, violence, threats, force, fraud, and coercion. Vermont already has strong anti-trafficking laws in place.

When people do not fear arrest or prosecution for consensual sex work, they are more able to report crimes, seek healthcare and other services, share safety information, work together, and communicate with law enforcement. Decriminalization also allows law enforcement to focus its resources on trafficking and other conduct that causes harm.

What Vermont Can Do: Support Legislation that Decriminalizes Sex Work

Decriminalization strengthens Vermont's response to trafficking by making it easier for people experiencing exploitation to come forward and get help. Removing the threat of criminal penalties can reduce barriers to housing, healthcare, legal assistance, and other services, while making it safer to report violence, coercion, and trafficking to law enforcement.

Vermont does not have to choose between decriminalization and fighting trafficking. Decriminalization helps create the conditions for people to seek help, report exploitation, and work with law enforcement to stop trafficking.

Decriminalization strengthens the fight against trafficking by reducing vulnerability, making it safer to report exploitation, and allowing law enforcement to focus on traffickers and other threats to public safety.

Safe Sex Work VT is a group of individuals and organizations deeply concerned about the health and safety of sex workers, survivors of trafficking, and Vermont communities.