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Sex Workers Project Responds to Amnesty International Policy on Decriminalizing Sex Work

New York, NY – In response to Amnesty International’s release of its full policy and corresponding research in support of the decriminalization of sex work, “*Amnesty International Policy on State Obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfill the Human Rights of Sex Workers*,” the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center released the following statement:

“By recommending the adoption of laws that promote the rights of sex workers and the removal of laws meant to abolish the sex trade, Amnesty’s policy is a bold step toward the realization of rights and the promotion of safety for all those who trade sex, including trafficking victims..

The two years of extensive outreach to a variety of organizations and impacted individuals with myriad experiences demonstrates a commitment to prioritizing the voices of those impacted and supporting the full realization of rights for the most marginalized. In story after story, this report comes to a resounding conclusion that decriminalization of sex work is foundational to fighting the abuse, stigma and harm faced by those in the sex trade.

The Sex Workers Project is a legal and counseling service provider that has been serving sex workers and victims of human trafficking for fifteen years. Every day we see the damage that criminalization inflicts on those trading sex. Our clients carry the heavy burden of criminalization, from the fear and trauma of arrest and policing to the long-lasting consequences of a criminal record for acts that meant basic survival. Decriminalization would mean, for many, freedom.

When a community fears law enforcement instead of seeing them as a resource, this makes them more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. In places like New Zealand, the only country where sex work is decriminalized, sex workers report positive relationships with law enforcement in a way that sex workers in the United States can only dream of. Under decriminalization, law enforcement could be focused on responding to violence against sex workers instead of focused on their arrest and prosecution.

Decriminalization can also be a powerful tool to improve anti-trafficking responses. Sex workers, as the people closest to trafficking victims, could provide a valuable resource for those conducting thoughtful anti-trafficking work – the kind that preserves the autonomy and dignity of victims. Criminalization cuts off this opportunity for collaborating and supporting victims.

We hope that Amnesty’s policy spurs more conversations about how states can promote the rights and safety of sex workers and address the barriers created by criminalization. We celebrate Amnesty International’s commitment to the full realization of human rights for sex workers.

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