

## **Column: Sex-trafficking victims need help to get - Honolulu Star-Advertiser (HI) - March 7, 2019**

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Exactly which sex workers should we listen to? As a member of AF3IRM, an organization whose membership includes women who have lived experience in the sex industry, I write to ask the public to consider and include sex workers who do not find prostitution empowering or worth legalizing.

The lobbying group of sex workers who have been featured recently in the Star-Advertiser are those who speak only for the most empowered segment. They support decriminalization of sex buyers, not just the women.

The girls from our communities need people who assert that their value does not come from their ability to pleasure men. They do not need to be told that men objectifying and buying women is normal, healthy and inevitable — just a neutral activity. We have a whole pop culture doing that.

We also need to train the groups of people who often have more contact with sex-trafficking victims than other people in the sex industry to intervene. These groups include medical professionals, school employees, state social workers, court and law enforcement personnel.

The Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) is part of the national lobby that seeks to decriminalize the entire sex trade, including buyers and pimps. This group advocates for men buying women. They try to conceal the core issue of sex trafficking: male sexual entitlement to our bodies. They only represent sex workers who support the sex industry, and aggressively attempt to silence sex workers who want this harmful system to end.

The Phoenix chapter of SWOP, which SWOP Hawaii recently flew to Hawaii to sway our politicians, openly advocates for child prostitution. They fight sex-trafficking laws that protect children by claiming that children should be able to prostitute because they have "agency."

The prostitution lobby uses its members' relative privilege against the interests of more marginalized sex workers who can't be public. Only a very, very few number of people can be public about their involvement in the sex industry. Those who can't be public are more representative of the majority.

Think about it. Imagine your Asian immigrant parent finding out that you had prostituted out of desperation to cover rent. Imagine what would happen to your job prospects and professional reputation if your boss found out. Imagine the heartbreak if your child found out. Imagine your partner having to think about someone he or she loves and respect being treated like a piece of meat, spat upon, and called slave names.

The disgrace and material consequences are too high for most to speak out "as sex workers" — but their voices still matter.

If Hawaii is committed to social justice, then we need to include those who are the most hurt and vulnerable, even if their message goes against the popular narrative."

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