



March 25, 2014

TO: Amnesty International Priorities Subcommittee, and the AI USA Board of Directors

FR: Autumn Burris, Founder and Director, Survivors for Solutions; Amnesty International USA member  
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RE: Human Rights Policy: Consultation on the Decriminalization of “Sex Work”—Debunking the Myths

I write as a member of Amnesty International USA in response to the human rights policy consultation scheduled for discussion on Friday, April 4, 2014 in Chicago, IL. More important, I am writing as a Survivor of prostitution and on behalf of the Survivors I have had the opportunity to work alongside for the past 17 years. Today, I celebrate 17 years exited from a life of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. I mention this to let you know that the harms I experienced in prostitution are real and the recovery journey to healing is a lifelong process. If the harms, and frequent physical and psychological violence, of prostitution are kept right before our faces, this policy and your use of sanitizing terminology would be absent from the conference discussion. If you ever lived prostitution as I did, and millions like me have, you would be ashamed to entertain this proposed policy, which directly contradicts the human rights mission of Amnesty International.

In my lived and professional experience, I vehemently reject the above policy because prostitution is a violation of human rights. I am perplexed and deeply concerned about the proposed policy concerning the decriminalization of “sex work” due to the inherent harms in prostitution from both sex buyers and profiteers. Last, the use of terminology describing survivors of prostitution as “sex workers” and the institution of prostitution as “sex work” is troubling due to the fact that the majority of survivors do not utilize this term; because it misrepresents the real harms and human rights violations of the institution of prostitution. I request that you listen to Survivors who have exited sexual exploitation in order to formulate the policy that represents the majority of us.

### **Harms of Prostitution**

As a survivor of prostitution, I am personally and painfully aware of the inherent harms in sexual exploitation. The level of danger and murder rate far exceeds any type of work as evidenced by a study illustrating that prostituted women are 200 times more likely to be murdered than other women their age and race.<sup>1</sup> As a survivor of both indoor and outdoor exploitation, I can assure you that both are equally harmful. Prostitution is routinely violent on several levels, psychologically and physically. On the most basic level of what the transaction entails, repeatedly, having someone you are repulsed by touch you and/or enter your body causes psychological damage. For example, I wouldn’t accept overnight appointments as I couldn’t disassociate long enough to get through the night. Disassociation is necessary in prostitution to survive it. One can simply not stay present while an intruder enters your body. Physically, when a sex buyer rents your body, he often demands more from you and if you reject



him, more often than not, violence ensues. It is common for sex buyers to act out violently on prostituted women and it is immediately clear that there is no such thing as respect for your human rights or physical boundaries as soon as a client buys his power over you.

Prostitution is repeated paid rape by buyers of sex. In my many years, I can honestly say the act of having my body purchased for a price was always about vulnerabilities and the need for survival. The buyers of sex utilized my vulnerabilities for their personal gratification presenting an imbalance of power between my exploited self and the purchaser. The sex buyers' demeanor, attitude, amount of money did not make the act any less painful or damaging than the next purchaser who may have had expectations of acting out violence against me.

### **Human Rights Denied**

From negotiation to completion of the purchased sex act, dignity and equality guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are violated. Equality is violated by the unequal power dynamic between the oppressor and the exploited. For example, the buyer of sex rented my body for a period of time with the expectation that I had no right to reject other acts requested of me—a very common scenario. Dignity is denied to the exploited from negotiation to the completion of the act. For example, the feelings of degradation that arise when verbalizing the sex acts and placing a price on what is intended to be priceless, to knowledge of the personal violations that would soon take place, and then, while enduring all this harm, realizing it might happen again, you'll be bought and sold again, within an hour or so. There is no equality, dignity, autonomy, or physical security: This is no life for a human being.

Security is denied as the exploited person essentially has no control over the actions of the buyer. For example, one evening, I got into a late model truck with a male sex purchaser. A few miles down the road, it became clear I needed to exit the situation in order to survive. Jumping from the moving vehicle was the safest option for escape. I reached for the door handle only to realize I was locked in. The panic I felt, knowing what was sure to come, was unbearable. Prior to being discarded like a piece of garbage onto the road, I was raped and beaten beyond recognition. This incident was not an isolated one, rather a common occurrence in my life while involved in prostitution. Over the past 17 years, the dialogue and honest conversations I have had with other Survivors has assured me that I am not alone—yet, my knowledge makes it especially shocking to witness a great organization like Amnesty International being misled by willful ignorance about the lives of the exploited. In fact, many prostituted women are not here to share their struggles and stories because they are dead: the death rate due to suicide, drug overdose, and murder are extremely high within this population of exploited individuals.



## Language Usage

In terms of linguistics and language use, the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” should be eliminated because the majority of individuals in prostitution and those who have exited from prostitution do not refer to themselves with these terms. Sex is not work as the above example from my former life illustrates; it is exploitation and denial of human rights based on vulnerabilities and power imbalances between the oppressor and the oppressed. These erroneous terms imply choice, and attempt to sanitize the brutality at the heart of the prostitution experience, while de-linking prostitution from sex trafficking. Choice is absent in prostitution as evidenced by Dr. Melissa Farley’s study of nine countries which found 89% of women in prostitution wanted to escape immediately but had no other means for survival. <sup>ii</sup>(Farley, 2003)

I strongly urge you to listen to the vast majority of Survivors of prostitution worldwide who reject the decriminalization of sex buyers and profiteers. Instead, we favor increased accountability for the harm these men are causing by criminalizing the demand for commercial sex. As an AI member and Survivor, my expectation is that a human rights organization should protect the human rights of vulnerable and marginalized people including those exploited in systems of prostitution.

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<sup>i</sup> John J. Potterat, Devon D. Brewer, Stephen Q. Muth<sup>1</sup>, Richard B. Rothenberg<sup>3</sup>, Donald E. Woodhouse, John B. Muth, Heather K. Stite<sup>1</sup>, and Stuart Brody, “Mortality in a Long-term Open Cohort of Prostitute Women,” *Am J Epidemiol* 159:778–785, 2004.

<sup>ii</sup> Farley, et al, *Prostitution, Trafficking & Traumatic Stress*, Haworth Press, Inc., Binghamton, NY, 2003