

Sex workers sing, dance for legalisation of oldest profession

July 26 2018, by Mari ette Le Roux



Experts say anti-prostitution laws are helping fuel the spread of HIV among sex workers

Sex workers took centre stage at the International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam Thursday, using music and dance to press home a serious

message: "We are people too, and we have rights".

The cast of a show entitled "Sex Worker's Opera" performed to a full house at the meeting venue, with songs and recitals advocating that "sex work is work", and "there are no bad whores, just bad laws".

"We're all human beings at the end of the day and nobody should judge us for what we do for a living," performer Charlie Rose, a 37-year-old sex worker from London, told AFP after the show.

"Human rights state that we are entitled to earn a living and provide for our families, and that's exactly what I'm doing," she said.

To loud cheers, performers pranced on stage in fishnet stockings, racy underwear and sky-high heels, singing in unison: "Whatever the job, it's survival that we choose."

Decriminalisation, the cast insisted, is the only way to end stigma and protect the rights and health of sex workers.

"There's still so much stigma that means it's harder for sex workers to access health care," another performer, 31-year-old Londonite Siobhan Knox told AFP.

"It's harder for sex workers to adopt for example, they might face having their children taken away, they might face being kicked out of university because people find out they're a sex worker."

Knox would not say what line of work she was in herself.

Just 'normal people'

In countries where prostitution is legal, as in the Netherlands, sex

workers find it easier to report violence to the police "because they don't fear... being criminalised themselves, they don't fear being arrested," she added.

"What we're saying is maybe bring things more out in the open... We need to start viewing sex workers as normal people, like anyone—mothers, brothers, daughters, lovers," said Knox.

"People always say: 'Oh I've never met a sex [worker](#)', and we say: 'Well, you probably have, they just haven't told you because of stigma'."

Experts say anti-prostitution laws are helping fuel the spread of HIV, the immune system-wrecking virus that causes AIDS, among sex workers.

According to the International AIDS Society, so-called "key populations"—including sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender people and intravenous drug users—accounted for 44 percent of new HIV infections in 2016.

The World Health Organization says female sex workers are 13.5 percent more likely to be infected with HIV than other women of reproductive age.

Decriminalising sex work could nearly halve new HIV infections in sex workers in just 10 years, according to the UN agency.

Changing laws to prosecute clients rather than sex providers—ostensibly to protect prostitutes—is also not a solution, advocacy groups insist.

Research presented at the conference showed that in Canada and France, this approach—known as the "Nordic model"—does not reduce stigmatisation or persecution.

"It is still the sex workers who are more often arrested, more often controlled by the police, and pay more fines than the clients," said researcher Helene Lebail of France's CNRS research institute.

"It doesn't matter if you criminalise the [sex workers](#)' practices or if you criminalise the clients, the stigma is still there."

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