

Dicionário Alice

Destaque Semanal

Refugiado

“Los refugiados son personas como las demás, como tú y como yo. Antes de ser desplazados llevaban una vida normal, y su mayor sueño es recuperarla”. Ban Ki-moon

Bahia Mahmud Awah

Mário Vitória (2015) Num cruzamento é sempre necessária uma passadeira [tinta da china e acrílico s/papel, 50x65cm]

Sex Work

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Sex work refers to the negotiation and exchange of sexual services or performances for material compensation. It involves activities of a sexual nature entailing direct and/or indirect sexual stimulation which may take place in a variety of different sites, including commercial premises, private and public spaces, online and on the phone.

The term sex work was first introduced in the US as part of a larger political project aimed at recognizing the social and economic value of what had traditionally been expected to be a natural expression of ‘love’, or an informal exchange of favors, on the part of women. By not being gendered female in English, the word *sex worker* retains a semantic inclusivity that reflects the heterogeneous composition of sex workers who can be cis and trans women and men, people who identify as non-binary or with none or any other gender.

Collectives, associations, less formalized groups and many individuals involved in the sex industry have adopted the term, adapting it linguistically and applying it to the diverse local struggles that developed in Latin and North America and Europe in the 1980s, followed by Asia in the 1990s and in part of Africa in the

2000s. Across these contexts, using the language of sex work entails making a political statement about the need to recognize and treat sexual labor as work with adequate labor rights, as opposed to a deviant and criminal activity. The term sex work also marks an ideological shift away from the 'whore stigma' attached to the word prostitute and the gendered, racialized and classed assumption that a prostitute is a 'bad woman' whose identity is exclusively predicated upon her involvement in prostitution. This does not preclude acknowledging that the sex industry, like other socio-economic structures, reflects and reinforces unequal power relationships (Smith and Mac 2018).

Not all those who negotiate and exchange sexual services identify as sex workers, and they may reject or not even contemplate ascribing to this political identity. This reflects the diversity and complexity of experiences of those who, whether temporarily, occasionally, or on a more stable basis, sell sexual services for economic gain, survival, pleasure and/or many other motivations. In this respect, the terms transactional and tactical sex are used to denote affective-sexual-economic relations and exchanges that are understood and experienced as distinct from sexual labor, for example the so-called romance tourism, sugar dating, and hustling. Also definitionally controversial is whether sexual assistance provided to people with disabilities should count as sex work or not, an identification which has direct implications for how these services are treated in laws and policies. Finally, for those who approach prostitution as a form of sexual slavery, the term sex work is an aberration. In its stead, the use of prostitution and prostituted women is advocated to emphasize what is considered to be the always exploitative sex industry which needs to be eliminated through criminal law.

The latter view has been gaining force internationally, strengthened by a foreign-aid supported trafficking discourse which collapses sexual labor and forced sexual exploitation, leading to an expansion of punitive measures, including the criminalization of clients and the closing down of toleration zones. Sex worker movements across the globe have campaigned against this approach, showing that it contributes to further marginalizing and criminalizing an already socially excluded population. They have also been critical of the more pragmatic approach to commercial sex which informs restrictive policy regimes aimed at strictly regulating how, when and where sex workers can operate (Östergren 2017). These measures, they claim, afford some protection and recognition, but contribute both to reinforce the idea that prostitution is a social problem and to limit the human rights of sex workers, especially undocumented migrants, ultimately promoting large businesses instead of workers' rights. In the last twenty years, the increasingly internationally connected sex workers' rights movement has been advancing claims and demands for the treatment of sex work as work, and therefore its decriminalization, i.e. its complete removal from criminal law and integration into existing labor laws. There is also awareness that this is not enough, and that interventions need to target the multitude of laws, policies and practices that combine to stigmatize and criminalize those who engage in the sex industry.

References and further readings:

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