

Speech by SWOP Executive Committee Member Kate DeMaere At the 2019 Sydney Reclaim the Night March

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to dedicate SWOP's contribution to this day to all the sex workers who are present and pay our respects to the sex workers whose lives have been lost due to violence, and my offer condolences to their families and friends.

I am a current board member of SWOP the sex workers outreach project in NSW. For those of you who may not know the work of SWOP we are largest and oldest peer-based sex worker organisation in Australia. SWOP is focused on HIV, STIs & hepatitis C prevention, education and health promotion for sex workers. Our services are completely free and confidential for all people who engage in sex work in NSW; transgender, non-binary, female and male sex workers.

Last night I was thinking over the three points of this year's Reclaim the Night; Rebuild. Resist. Revolt and how this relates to sex workers in Sydney, in Australia and Internationally.

Rebuild

From SWOP's perspective much of our work involves advocating for fair work conditions for sex workers. Unfortunately, these conditions are often eroded by the poor implementation of decriminalisation in NSW, a law reform model, when operating as it should, can go a long way to protecting the health, safety and human rights of sex workers. In preparation for today I listened to the Honourable Tanya Plibersek's speech from last year, Tanya spoke about how women time and time again the fight have to maintain ground that's already been won, such as fighting against the defunding of critical programs for women and those vulnerable to gender based violence. For sex workers this means we are often just fighting to keep decriminalisation alive in Australia, as we take steps forward, we are forced to return to old ground and rebuild policies that should have stayed in place.

Sex workers and their allies know that legal frameworks have a significant impact on the health and safety of sex workers. In Australia, sex work was first decriminalised in NSW in 1995 (an outcome from the Wood Royal Commission into Police corruption). Decriminalisation 24 years on this evidenced-based model not only supports sex workers, by reducing exploitation and violence, but also supports wider public health strategies.

A massive congratulations at this point to those who have fought the good fight in Northern Territories who have seen decriminalisation finally brought to the NT! The NT decriminalisation bill was passed but sex workers lost out as they did not also receive important protection from anti-discrimination laws that were proposed as part of this bill.

Despite these past and recent achievements only sporadic credit and support from lawmakers and governments has occurred in Australia. As we can see in South Australia with the recent failure of that state government to pass their proposed decriminalisation bill.

Where sex work activities are criminalised, sex workers are exposed to harassment and exploitation. Sex workers are less likely to report crimes and their rights are often not recognised. Prohibition of sex work means that police, legal and health services can discriminate against sex workers, creating an environment where sex workers are compromised by institutionalised prejudices. Add to that harassment and intimidation by state and federal police and their collusion with local government officials - sex workers can affectively go unprotected. Criminalisation promotes negative stereotypes of sex workers and stigma, which can severely affect the professional and personal lives of sex workers. Improved laws mean that sex workers who have experienced violence inside the work place or within a personal relationship are better able to seek help.

Internationally anti-sex work reformists and lawmakers undermine and deny sex workers a voice in their own policy making. The negative effects of laws being proposed such FOSTA-SESTA in the USA or the expansion of Nordic model in Europe, a model that seeks to criminalise parts of the industry - our clients, but only drives a highly stigmatized population further underground. If governments truly wish to address human trafficking, instead of rescuing sex workers, why don't they consider expanding protective measures such as decreased deportation, genuinely commit to international aid programs, improve anti-discrimination laws, and examine ways to assist those in countries who are limited in their capacity to work in the legal economy.

Resist

Another important aspect of decriminalisation is that it removes significant barriers and enables sex workers communities to mobilise. This bringing together of community allows sex workers to collectively voice their needs. It also plays an important role in empowering those who work in the sex industry. Through various mediums sex workers, and sex worker communities challenge the dominant, hetero-normative narratives of sex work through self-expression and creative outlets. In this context sex workers are not 'healing' their problems, rather these are acts of resistance, as sex workers move away from a problematising narrative - we look critically and expressively at the world we are in and the 'socio cultural realities' that surround our work. It makes us better advocates for ourselves as we lead and develop important partnerships with allies. This can elevate our role in areas such as research, where we should be recognised for our academic skills and not just as a cohort.

Revolt

We gather here today to reject and revolt against the mainstream views that our lives are not equal to other lives because of our work. Sex workers are mothers, fathers, sisters, a friend, a son, a daughter. We speak the name of Michaela Dunn today who was murdered in Sydney earlier this year. We speak against the sensationalising and blaming of victims of violence in the media. We demand an end to the stigma associated with sex work that enables discrimination and abuse against sex workers. We mourn for the sex workers who go virtually nameless, who were alienated from the services who were suppose to protect them; transgender sex workers, sex workers of colour and migrant sex workers. We revolt against the bad laws and public policies that restrict the safety of sex workers and influence how media portray or ignore them. Sex work is work! Violence and murder are not part of the job.