

# Book review

## Sex Work, Health, and Human Rights: Global Inequities, Challenges, and Opportunities for Action

**Shira M. Goldenberg, Ruth Morgan Thomas, Anna Forbes and Stefan Baral (Eds) (2021).**  
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**S**ex work is controversial in many cultures but attracts cross-disciplinary study in the field of academics. The edited volume, *Sex Work, Health, and Human Rights: Global Inequities, Challenges, and Opportunities for Action*, pays close attention to this industry, with a focus on the global sex workers' rights movement through which the authors continuously demonstrate advocacy for sex workers' human rights, dignity, health, well-being and occupational safety. The book mainly discusses three areas: first, the lived experiences of this marginalised group who suffer from health inequity and social injustice; second, the structural attributes to their suffering; and lastly, recommendations on evidence-based, multi-dimensional, multi-level, interdisciplinary and integrated interventions, along with best practices for figuring out their predicaments.

Covering this issue across Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America, Oceania, and the Middle East through epidemiological studies, case studies and systematic reviews, the book analyses the problems of sex workers both in physical venues (indoors and street-based) and online environments associated with service providers who have heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, cisgendered and transgendered preferences. Sex workers are threatened by various

causes, including health (physical, reproductive and mental health, sexually transmitted infections/diseases), psycho-social factors (prejudice, bias, stigmatisation, discrimination, bullying, homophobia, transphobia, social and human rights inequalities), behavioural pitfalls (alcoholism, substance abuse), educational inferiority (poor education level, insufficient sex education), economic burdens (poverty), crimes (violence, coercion, gang rape, police harassment), institutional disturbances (detention, forced confinement, mandatory rehabilitation) and death (homicide, suicidal ideation). In addition, this compilation strongly calls for discarding institutional violence and punitive laws; that is, criminalisation, which exerts a disproportionate burden of social, physical and psychological harms.

Since sex work is not only a biomedical-behavioural concern, but is also connected with legislation, policy-making, discrimination, labour and structural determinants in global, diverse contexts, the book promotes individual and community empowerment related to the decriminalisation of sex work, improved working conditions and protection from violence and prejudice. Hence, it proposes a series of initiatives to serve this disadvantaged group, pertaining to legal status, accessibility of healthcare services, available resources, empowerment and rapport with organisations which fight for social justice for unprivileged people, resulting in forming better social cohesion and inclusiveness.

Although this collection displays an empathetic analysis of the troubles

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sex workers encounter, it discusses little about sex work, *per se*. It articulates the fact that sex workers always struggle with poverty. However, poverty is both a root and consequence: poverty induces the poor to participate in commercial sex work, but sex workers do not necessarily break away from poverty and may become broke, especially during an economic turndown. Poverty itself is a social problem; sex work probably worsens other social problems; and vice versa. If the book could have deeply investigated the interaction between them, it could have developed more constructive solutions to achieve justice.

Admittedly, there are cultural and religious barriers that resist the sex industry in many countries, exacerbating the fact that sex workers face overwhelming practical and psychological perils, as illuminated earlier. The book seemingly evades these factors, thus exhibiting an incomplete picture of sex work and service providers. Ethnographic research may be an approach to understanding sex work and sex workers more deeply and broadly, through which policy makers can stipulate strategies and tactics to relax those obstacles.

Sex trafficking, together with sexual exploitation, has become a major domestic and international crime but is typically hidden within society. In particular, sex trafficking of LGBTQ individuals is commonly under-reported. Similarly, child prostitution and child-sex tourism aggravates health and societal wellness, mostly in underdeveloped countries. This book neglects these themes and therefore examining them is recommended so as to increase its readability by

providing a formative view of social justice and health equity.

In spite of offering suggestions to ameliorate health and human rights, as addressed previously, a re-training scheme for sex workers is scarcely on the agenda. Re-training would be an effective method to enhance the employability of sex workers once they acquire updated know-how and work skills, thereby strengthening self-efficacy. This book review suggests that an achievable re-training project for relevant practitioners be explored to undertake this important change.

This edited volume offers a discourse of sex workers through their lived experiences, and presents research outcomes through which to voice their difficulties and how they endure various risks. It also gives an overview of the progress and challenges of serving this vulnerable group, together with diverse topics regarding legislative reforms, occupational health, safety protections, political commitment, anti-discrimination programmes, social services, and community empowerment. It criticises criminalisation, and repressive measures, and advocates the adoption of decriminalisation in restrictive regulatory legislation, or even the removal of the laws governing the sex industry. Thus, this book serves as a comprehensive and resourceful reference for social activists, sex worker-led organisations, helping professionals, public health practitioners, policy-makers, academic leaders, researchers, and individuals who are willing to contribute to providing social justice for sex workers.

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