

# What You Can and Cannot Do When Reporting on Sex Workers

Any journalist reporting on politics, health or society may encounter a story related to sex workers. What rules should be followed to prepare a quality and ethical material about sex industry workers?

**Be prepared that a main character will be difficult to seek out and talk to.**

The first-hand material is very valuable. Every journalist dreams of getting such material but it might be a difficult task.

In Central Asian states, sex work is not criminalised, yet not legalised. Therefore, people working in this sphere are vulnerable, including to persecution by law-enforcement bodies. Moreover, this method of earning money is condemned by the society. Such a hostile attitude towards sex workers may prevent a journalist seeking out a main character who would want to speak honestly.

**Always tell your main character about the material you are going to write.**

Be honest: sex workers who agree to cooperate with you should be fully briefed on the format of the piece, the angle, and where it will be published and/or distributed and reproduced.

This should happen before the interview. Consent must be fully informed, and can be withdrawn at any time.

**Cliché visuals perpetuate stereotypes – do not use them.**

Do not choose images objectifying sex workers. Frequent images such as pictures of a pair of legs in heels standing in front

of a car at night are the examples of poor work of journalists as they associate sex industry with street sex workers.

Ask your photos from organisations and interviewers or ask for an advice on which pictures may be rather used. When using stock photos, do not forget about objectification and polarisation.

If you take stock images, choose neutral images relevant to the topic. It may be a dressed person of any sex, photos of money or tools for work, for example, means of safe sex.

### **Identity of sex workers you write about must be protected.**

Sex workers are often reluctant to have their faces photographed or filmed as it may expose them to a range of risks. There are a number of well-established journalist techniques that could disguise the identity of sex workers, such as blurring their faces or distorting their voices if they are being filmed. These options should be discussed with the interviewee to establish what s/he would prefer. Proper consent should then be obtained, preferably in the form of a written agreement, with signed copies to both the interviewer and the interviewee.

### **Avoid describing sex work as “prostitution”.**

When referring to someone who engages in sex work, avoid terms like “victim” or “prostitute.”

Despite its common use, the word “prostitution” is not neutral. It reinforces the centuries-old stigma.

If you’re unsure which term to use, you can shift the attention on to the person with expressions like “people who sell sexual services” or “people who engage in sex work.”

### **Feature sex workers’ voices in your materials.**

Journalists are taught to regularly include quotes from interviewees in their reporting. However, when it comes to sex work, reporters tend to talk to authorities before reaching out to sex workers – if they reach out at all. This often results in people who sell sexual services being completely silenced in the news.

When reporting about the sex industry, don't consider the story complete without an interview or comment by an actual worker.

**Give preference to balance over sensationalism and clickbait.**

Journalists should avoid polarising reporting about sex workers. The media often depicts sex work either as a tragic reality made of victims or an empowering activity chosen by people who just enjoy sex. The reality, however, is much more nuanced.

**Interrogate the data.**

In many countries, sex work is illegal and stigmatised. For this reason, data collection proves to be quite difficult. Sometimes it happens that some of the statistics and facts widely used by the media are incorrect or biased. It's incredibly important to fact-check the data included in news packages, making sure that the cited reports, polls or surveys included the voices of sex workers.

If in doubt, contact local charities and organisations supporting sex workers, which are likely to have their own experience-led reports.

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