



Dear Survivor's Agenda Steering Committee members:

We at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) applaud your work in creating the Survivor's Agenda. We are excited by the ways you are standing with, and as, survivors of sexual harm, to bring us together to advocate for public policy that recognizes and respects the power survivors have always had, while simultaneously fighting the overlapping systems of bigotry and inequality that fuel sexual violence. We're thrilled with the vast majority of your policy recommendations, and we are particularly grateful for your deep commitment to intersectionality. Recognizing the leadership and amplifying the voices of women of color, LGBTQ people, and folks experiencing poverty, is work that must be central in all social justice efforts.

However, we are writing to share our deep concern that the Survivor's Agenda has endorsed the decriminalization of sex buying. The violence by buyers against those in prostitution is manifest, and their money fuels a sex trade that is massively harmful to the majority of those in its 'supply side' - individuals who are disproportionately women and girls, people of color, LGBTQ, and living without meaningful access to safe housing or sufficient money to meet basic needs. ***The endorsement of "full decriminalization" of prostitution is inconsistent with a commitment to walking side by side with and serving people who have lived through prostitution and identify as survivors of the harms that are endemic to it.***

Since 2010, CAASE has been working to shift the criminal legal system's attention away from those who sell sex to those who exploit and harm them, while increasing social and economic support for community-based services that provide resources for people who want out of the sex trade. In Illinois, we have led successful statewide legislative campaigns to:

- Prohibit the arrest or prosecution of anyone under age 18 selling sex, making Illinois the first state in the country to do so
- Prohibit the state from leveling felony charges against people selling sex
- Create a mechanism for survivors to have their prostitution convictions vacated, expunged and sealed
- Create a new state fund for community-based services for survivors by incentivizing financial penalties (rather than incarceration) for men convicted of buying sex

Most recently, we published a report¹ on how police and prosecutorial enforcement of prostitution laws are inappropriately focused on people selling sex, and are not living up to the broad consensus that people in prostitution do not deserve penalties, but instead, access to social support and services. This report included the voices of five survivors, many of whom expressed frustration about their lack of opportunities to a life outside the sex trade, or any recourse for the harms perpetrated against them by buyers and police.

Research overwhelmingly confirms people in sex trade experience trauma

CAASE recognizes that some people freely choose to engage in sex for money, and we respect those who want to engage in prostitution and be afforded the same dignities and rights that America (rhetorically) grants to all workers. CAASE also recognizes that sex trafficking is different from prostitution. ***However, research shows that the majority of people who have been or are in the sex trade did not enter it as adults, want or wanted out of it, and either are being or were harmed by it.*** Research centered on people with lived experiences in prostitution confirms that few get meaning or pleasure out of performing intimate acts of sex on men they have little ability to reject². Research also shows that prostitution involves so much repetitive exposure to serious trauma that post traumatic stress disorder is experienced by a higher percentage of people who've lived through it than have lived through military combat³. Research suggests that substance abuse is a more common *response* to prostitution than cause of it, because of the ways in which people enduring sex with men they do not desire seek to dissociate from reality in order to survive their days⁴.

We object to policies and rhetoric that infantilize people in prostitution or treat all people engaged in commercial sex as victims. The autonomy and power of people who are engaged in prostitution is awesome, but it does little to prevent buyers, pimps, or police from treating those in the sex trade as disposable objects of sexual degradation. Neither do policies that legitimize the buying of sex. This power possessed by buyers actually leads to increased sex trafficking, as market forces created by buyers push vulnerable people into doing “work” that only a small fraction of people want to engage in. For these reasons, and with no disrespect intended to the minority of people whose experience of prostitution is positive, CAASE believes that any agenda that prioritizes the wellbeing of those with a lived experience of sexual violation ought to promote policies aimed at *reducing* the size of the sex industry, not at further legitimizing its inherent harm.

¹ “Policing & Enforcement of Prostitution Laws,” (2020). Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation <https://www.caase.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-PEOPL-Jan20-v1.3-WithAppx.pdf>

² “Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago,” (2002). Center for Impact Research. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/351/351.pdf>

³ “Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart: Prostitution Harms Women Even When Legalized or Decriminalized,” (2004). Prostitution Research & Education. <http://media.virbcdn.com/files/89/FileItem-149912-Badforthebody.pdf>

⁴ “Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago,” (2002). Center for Impact Research. <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/351/351.pdf>

To those who argue that the trauma of prostitution will magically disappear with the adoption of policies that rename it as a form of “work,” CAASE encourages more understanding of the evidence of the harm in places in which it is legal. There is no evidence that legalizing prostitution reduces its harms. But there is much evidence that violence against those in the sex trade is inflicted at higher rates compared to those outside the sex trade, mostly by those doing the buying or “managing,” as well as from police⁵. Whether or not bought sex happens on the street, in a legal brothel, in upscale hotel rooms or in the backrooms of strip clubs, those who buy sex are also much more likely to harbor misogynistic views and embrace toxic masculinity, and harm people in the sex trade because of it⁶. ***The only way to improve the lives of those in prostitution is to shift the power dynamic between bought and buyer, by decriminalizing the actions of the seller, while maintaining the illegality of buying or pimping. This, instead of full decriminalization, would actually help advance the laudable goals of the Survivor’s Agenda.***

Supporting full decriminalization is antithetical to workers’ rights platform

The workplace policies endorsed by the Survivor’s Agenda are ones that CAASE wholeheartedly supports because they are all necessary elements of ensuring that all people in America have meaningful access to work that enables them to earn a living without having to put up with sexual or gender-based violation. But endorsing the decriminalization of sex buying and pimping runs counter to all these goals because it is not a structural policy reform that would curtail the violence, sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia that is endemic to the sex trade.

Fundamentally, the “work” of prostitution mostly involves people (who are disproportionately women of color, LGBTQ folks, and/or immigrants) “putting their heads down” and engaging in unwanted sex for extremely low pay - the exact circumstances the Survivor’s Agenda intends to combat with its workers’ rights agenda: “Women of color and immigrants, especially low-paid workers and women in male-dominated industries, are among those who are often preyed upon by bosses, coworkers, customers and other people who wield power over them. Many workers find themselves in positions where they have to endure sexual harassment or abuse to be able to make a living. Workplace policies and practices often favor those who have positional and social power, not those who are expected to put their heads down and do the work no matter what.”

In addition, under current American law, workers have a federally guaranteed civil right to be *protected* from pressure to engage in sex as a condition of their employment. This was only recognized by the Supreme Court in 1986 after litigation that was largely fought for and won by Black women. By promoting the decriminalization of the solicitation of sex by men, the Survivor’s Agenda turns its backs on those who are surviving in prostitution, and effectively distinguishes between people whose rights and dignity are *harmed* by requests for blowjobs or

⁵*Id.*

⁶ “Who Buys Sex?” (2019). Demand Abolition.

<https://www.demandabolition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Demand-Buyer-Report-July-2019.pdf>

unwanted hands groping their genitals, and those in prostitution for whom “work” is exactly what others have a right to bring suit over.

Survivor’s Agenda should modify its platform to recognize those surviving in prostitution

Again, we applaud the work of the Survivor’s Agenda to collectively advance an agenda that speaks to the complex forms of harm and discrimination faced by survivors of all forms of sexual harm, in a world in which sexual harm is both symptom and cause of multiple and often overlapping forms of systemic and structural inequality, including specifically white supremacy and misogynist patriarchy. We are thrilled by the ways that the Survivor’s Agenda is frank about power dynamics and structural racism, homophobia and transphobia, and the demeaning and degrading cruelties of economic inequality. But we cannot support the prong of your platform that would decriminalize the actions of sex buyers and pimps. The harms they engage in are simply too great, and there’s too much evidence that supporting the sex industry comes at the expense of the majority of the girls and women and boys and men, both cis and trans, whose mouths and orifices are sacrificed daily to serve the transient needs of mostly uncaring men whose disposable income is fueling a trade that is deadly to those who serve as its supply⁷.

We ask that the Survivors Agenda modify its’ policy platform to recognize that those who are surviving through prostitution deserve much better than changes which are aimed at ‘normalizing’ prostitution rather than diminishing it. Only policies that recognize the abusive realities of the sex trade, that decriminalize those in the supply side but not those in the demand and profit side, and that support systemic changes which provide better access to “off-ramps” for those wanting to leave prostitution, have a hope of lessening the harms and brutality people in prostitution face every day in our community⁸. We hope you might be willing to talk with us about this issue, and we’d be happy to share more about the work we do supporting survivors in Chicago. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts.

In solidarity,

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⁷ “Comparing Sex Buyers With Men Who Don’t Buy Sex,” (2011). Prostitution Research & Education. <http://media.virbcdn.com/files/db/FileItem-149919-ComparingSexBuyers.pdf>

⁸ “Equality Not Exploitation: An overview of the global sex trade and trafficking crisis, and the case for the Equality Model,” (2019). World Without Exploitation. <https://www.equalitymodelus.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Equality-Not-Exploitation-white-paper-November-2019.pdf>