

Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

Brief 43 | February 2024

Beneath the Red Umbrella: Comic Strips as Expressions of Solidarity with Sex Workers

Guest Authored by: Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Kerry Porth, Addison Finch, Natasha Mhuriro, Beatrice Omboga, and Kerry Waters

Sex workers face stigma and discrimination that contributes to experiences of gender-based violence and produces barriers to support-seeking for survivors of gender-based violence. As such, there is a need to advance nuanced and accurate knowledge about sex work to counter false narratives that stigmatize sex workers and criminalize the sex industry. In this Brief, we examine expressions of solidarity in work to end gender-based violence against sex workers through comic strips.

To share accurate knowledge about sex work and dismantle myths, we – members of the [Political Solidarity Team](#), including activists, artists, and academics – are developing a series of comic strips. In the past, team leads Genevieve and Kerry, who have been collaborating on sex worker rights and sex work governance projects for about a decade, would translate their academic work into language more accessible to the sex worker communities, service providers, and members of the broader public. We then decided that a mode of communication, much more compelling, was necessary to break down the deeply rooted stigma around sex work and sex workers. Comics, we think, are an effective communication mode for this topic because they enable us to tell a story about what sex work is, who does it, why they might do it, and the harms of stigmatization and criminalization.

By telling this story, we hope to encourage readers to shift their attitudes toward sex work and sex workers and to learn more about the industry and the sellers of sexual services. We hope to show readers that the harms associated with sex work are exacerbated by criminal laws around the industry and by anti-trafficking campaigns that conflate sex work with trafficking.

Our comic strips feature the main characters, Selina, Jaz, and Julie, who are university students, as they have conversations about the nature of sex work, the harms of criminalization, and how sex work is not trafficking. Through their relationships, they deepen their understanding of different levels of injustice against sex workers. They also learn more about themselves and each other.



Exploring the different levels of injustice against sex workers

Distinguishing between levels of injustice enables an understanding of how root causes of injustice against sex workers manifest.¹

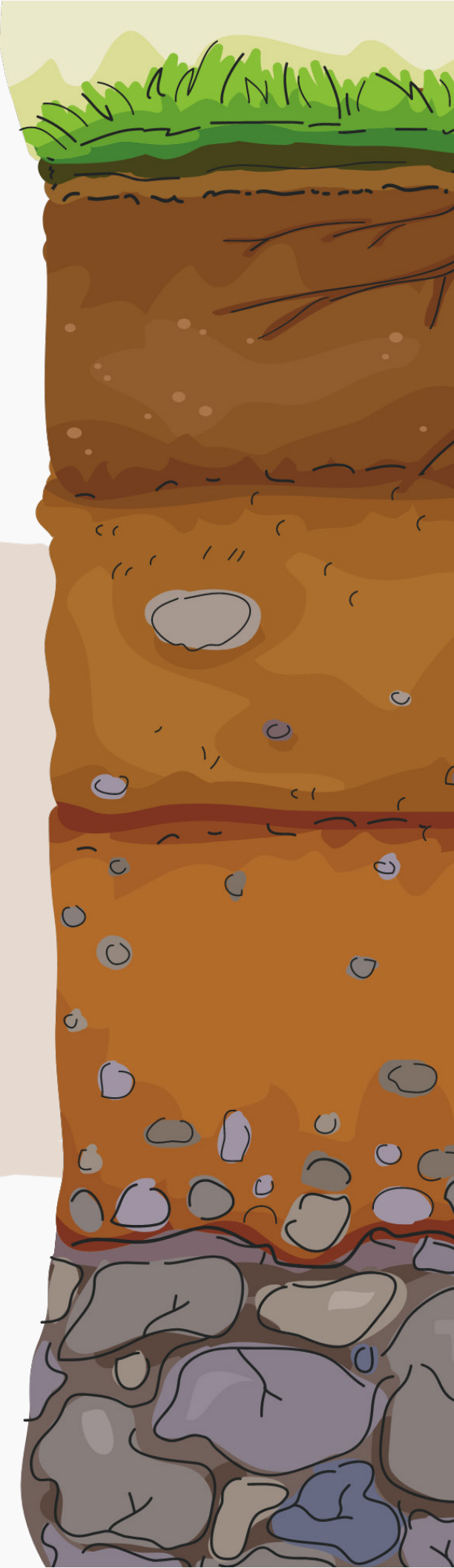
At the **surface level** are harms against sex workers that are so common and so frequent that they exist openly. For example, the physical assault of sex workers is enabled and invisibilized by criminalization of sex work because sex workers are reluctant to report crimes at the risk of further harm by the justice system. Perpetrators and potential perpetrators are aware of this reluctance and are thus more likely to prey on sex workers.

At the **substratum level** are prior or deeper forms of injustice. At this level, there exists both ontological and epistemological injustices:

Ontology is the study of how persons and groups are conceptualized – it involves asking “how are sex workers viewed in society?” Ontological injustice occurs when derogatory stereotypes of sex workers position them as less than fully human. In particular, the autonomy of sex workers is often questioned as it is taken that sex workers are only victims of human trafficking as opposed to part of a chosen profession. The result is that sex workers are denied their human and labour rights.

Epistemology studies the theory of knowledge – it involves asking “who holds knowledge about sex work?” Epistemological injustice occurs when knowledge and experiences that individuals and groups share are excluded, distorted, and unfairly discredited. Sex workers are frequently dismissed in discussions (e.g., policy, research) as their knowledge and concerns are not taken seriously – instead it is believed that they need protection and don’t understand their own experiences and interests. Through epistemological injustice, sex workers lose the opportunity to share their knowledge to inform policies, laws, and public conceptions of sex work.

At the **bedrock level** is stigma. Stigma is the very foundation of unjust laws and law enforcement campaigns around sex work. Responding to the injustice and harms that sex workers face requires addressing the stigma that upholds these systems.



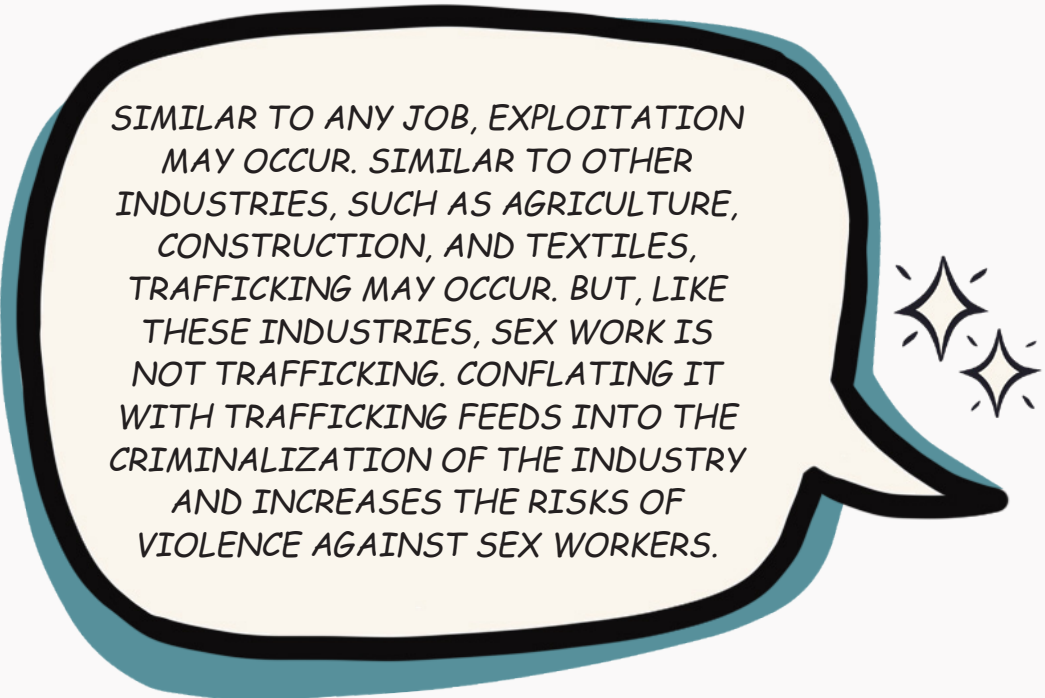
Dismantling the myths and identifying harms

Common myths include sex work being understood as necessarily exploitative, coercive, and dangerous, and sex workers as necessarily not consenting to their participation in the industry. This feeds another dominant myth, which is that sellers of sexual services are in fact sex trafficking victims. The overarching myth is that sex work and sex workers do not exist; what exists are sex trafficking and sex trafficking victims.

These are myths because they are not supported by robust research literature by academics, activists, or service providers.

MYTH: SEX WORK IS ALWAYS AND NECESSARILY EXPLOITATIVE

One of the ways that sex work is conflated with trafficking is through portrayals of sex work as exploitive. This viewpoint fails to recognize that sex work is an option that people pursue for various reasons.



SIMILAR TO ANY JOB, EXPLOITATION MAY OCCUR. SIMILAR TO OTHER INDUSTRIES, SUCH AS AGRICULTURE, CONSTRUCTION, AND TEXTILES, TRAFFICKING MAY OCCUR. BUT, LIKE THESE INDUSTRIES, SEX WORK IS NOT TRAFFICKING. CONFLATING IT WITH TRAFFICKING FEEDS INTO THE CRIMINALIZATION OF THE INDUSTRY AND INCREASES THE RISKS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS.

Assumptions that all sex work is exploitative contributes to the criminalization of sex work. In sex work, like all other forms of work, there are instances and situations of exploitation. However, singling out sex work is a kind of moral panic that falsely exaggerates exploitation due to the stigma against sex work.

As with all forms of exploitation, it is important to provide ways out. Ironically, conflating sex work with trafficking makes it more difficult for sex workers who maybe being exploited to report their experiences and get the help that they may need to end their exploitation.

MYTH: CRIMINALIZATION HELPS SEX WORKERS

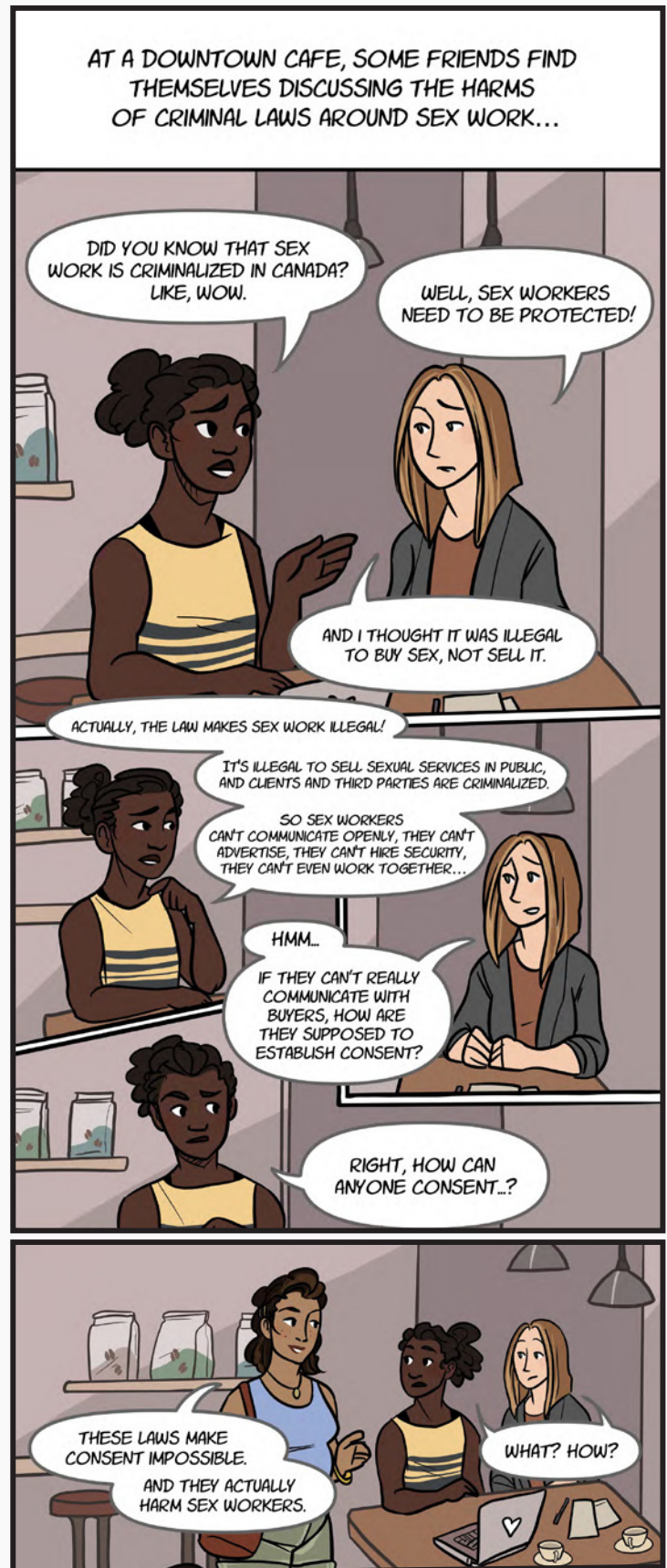
There is a consensus in the international academic and civil society literature focusing on sex work and sex workers that the criminalization of the industry, including law enforcement campaigns that conflate sex work with trafficking, increase the risks of violence against sex workers.²

Kate Shannon observes that the growing peer-reviewed research confirms that the “enforcement of criminal sanctions targeting sex work, including communicating in public spaces, displaces sex workers to isolated alleys and industrial settings” and “away from health and support services.”³ As Shannon and her team note, the enforced “displacement and lack of access to safer indoor work environments independently increase sex workers’ risk of physical violence and rape, and reduces their ability to safely negotiate condom use with clients...”⁴ In addition, they observe how “criminal sanctions limiting sex workers’ ability to regulate safer industry practices (e.g., create unions, safer indoor workspaces. etc.) compound health-related risks.”⁵

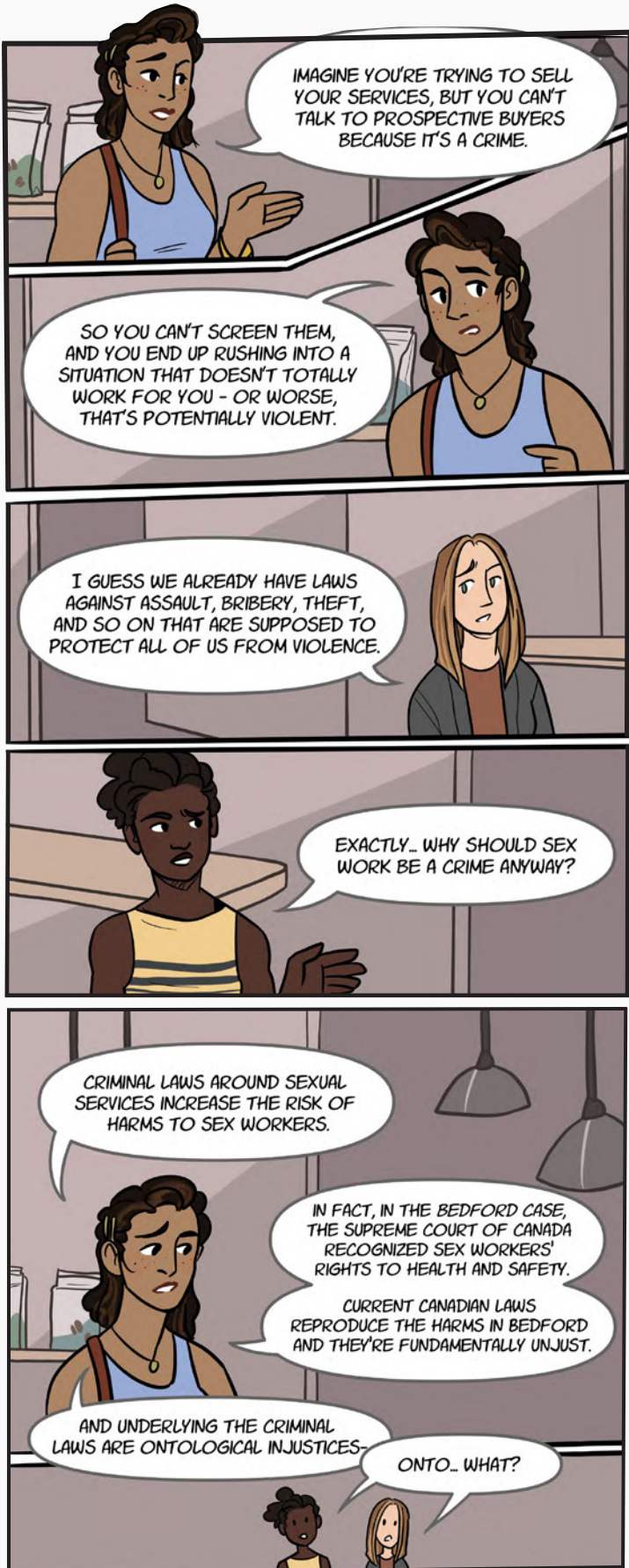
According to an open letter signed by 300 researchers, a “large body of scientific evidence from Canada, Sweden and Norway (where clients and third parties are criminalized), and globally clearly demonstrates that criminal laws targeting the sex industry have overwhelmingly negative social, health, and human rights consequences to sex workers, including increased violence and abuse, stigma, HIV and inability to access critical social, health and legal protections.”⁶

Furthermore, the harms “disproportionately impact marginalized sex workers including female, Indigenous and street-involved sex workers, who face the highest rates of violence and murder in our country [Canada].”⁷ And yet the governance regime of criminalization, which rests on the conflation of sex work with trafficking, persists in its dominance world-wide.

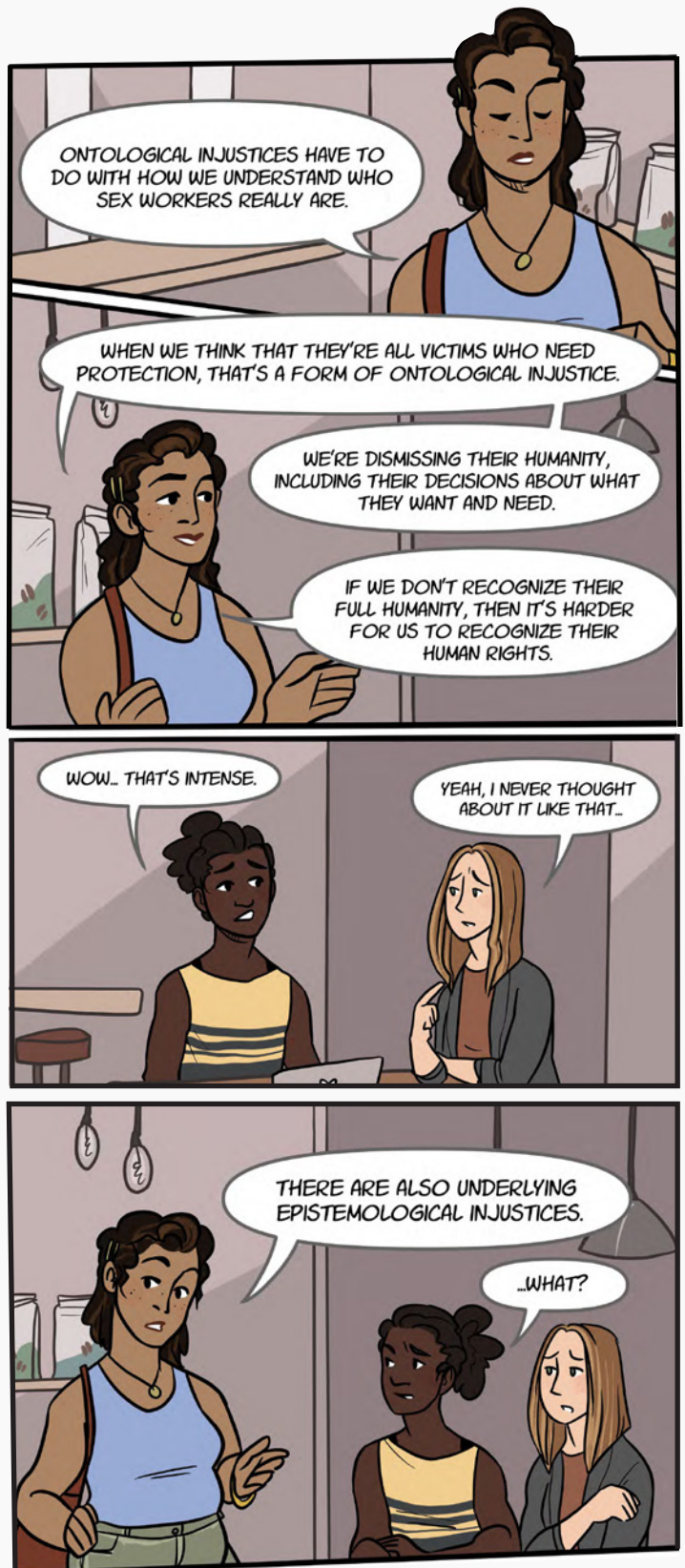
The following comic strip details more about the harms of criminalization:



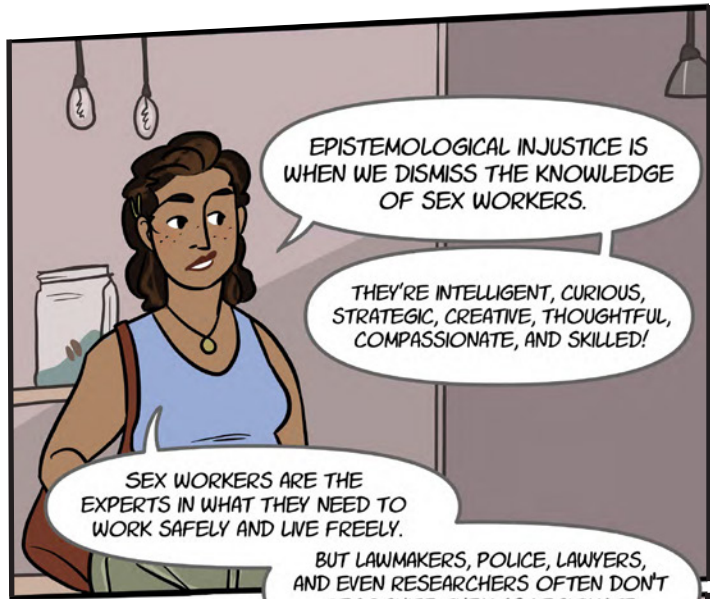
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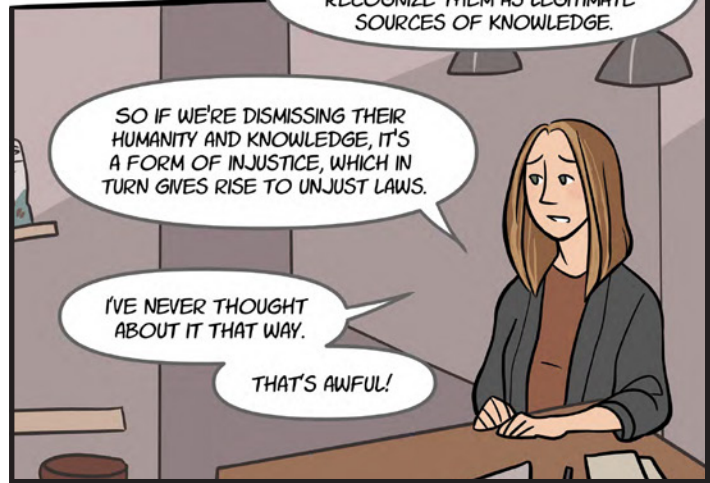


EPISTEMOLOGICAL INJUSTICE IS WHEN WE DISMISS THE KNOWLEDGE OF SEX WORKERS.

THEY'RE INTELLIGENT, CURIOUS, STRATEGIC, CREATIVE, THOUGHTFUL, COMPASSIONATE, AND SKILLED!

SEX WORKERS ARE THE EXPERTS IN WHAT THEY NEED TO WORK SAFELY AND LIVE FREELY.

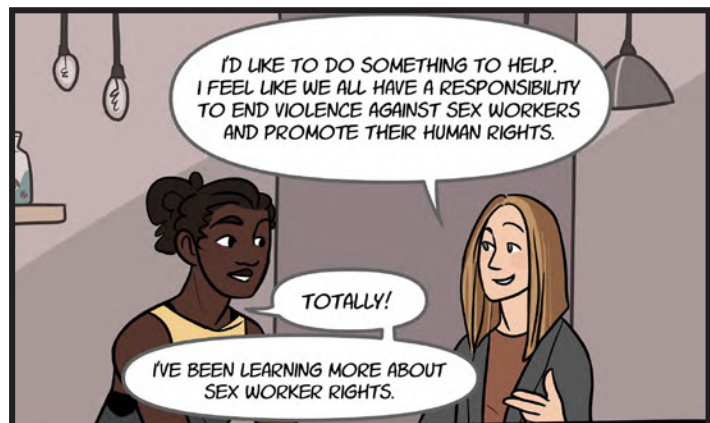
BUT LAWMAKERS, POLICE, LAWYERS, AND EVEN RESEARCHERS OFTEN DON'T RECOGNIZE THEM AS LEGITIMATE SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE.



SO IF WE'RE DISMISSING THEIR HUMANITY AND KNOWLEDGE, IT'S A FORM OF INJUSTICE, WHICH IN TURN GIVES RISE TO UNJUST LAWS.

I'VE NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT IT THAT WAY.

THAT'S AWFUL!



I'D LIKE TO DO SOMETHING TO HELP. I FEEL LIKE WE ALL HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS AND PROMOTE THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS.

TOTALLY!

I'VE BEEN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SEX WORKER RIGHTS.

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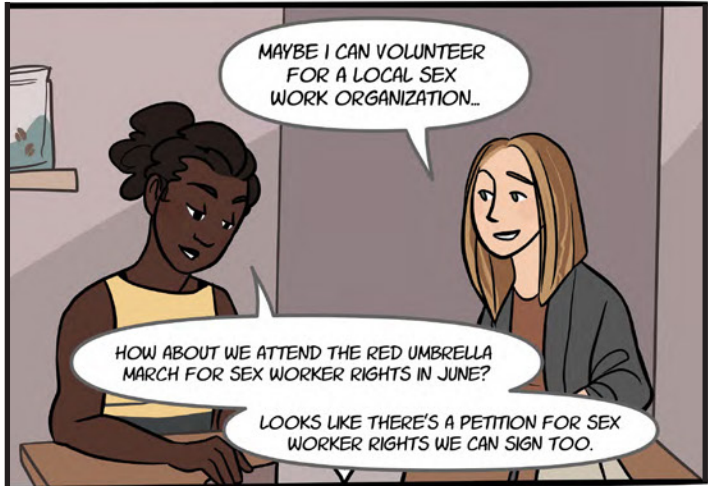
[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE COMIC IN FULL SIZE](#)



SEX WORKERS ARE REALLY SMART AND POLITICALLY ORGANIZED! AND THERE ARE SO MANY ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE "BY, WITH AND FOR" SEX WORKERS.

THEY HAVE SO MUCH TO TELL US ABOUT SEX WORK AS WORK, HOW IT'S NOT HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND ABOUT A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO EMPOWERING SEX WORKERS.

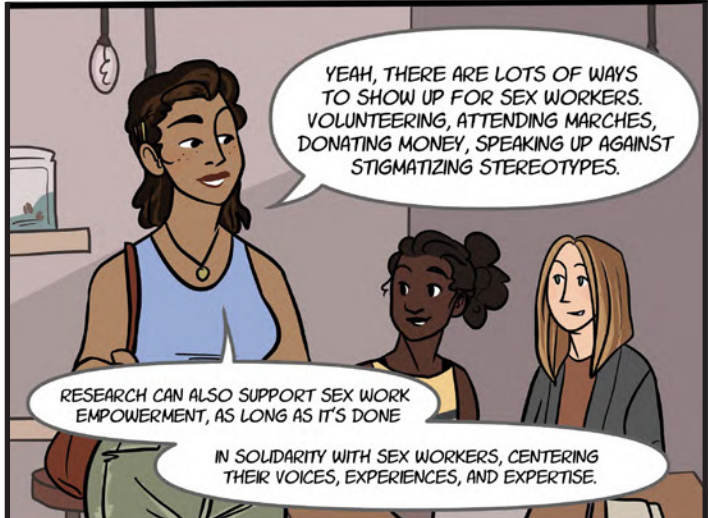
YOU SHOULD CHECK OUT THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF SEX WORK PROJECTS.



MAYBE I CAN VOLUNTEER FOR A LOCAL SEX WORK ORGANIZATION.

HOW ABOUT WE ATTEND THE RED UMBRELLA MARCH FOR SEX WORKER RIGHTS IN JUNE?

LOOKS LIKE THERE'S A PETITION FOR SEX WORKER RIGHTS WE CAN SIGN TOO.



YEAH, THERE ARE LOTS OF WAYS TO SHOW UP FOR SEX WORKERS. VOLUNTEERING, ATTENDING MARCHES, DONATING MONEY, SPEAKING UP AGAINST STIGMATIZING STEREOTYPES.

RESEARCH CAN ALSO SUPPORT SEX WORK EMPOWERMENT, AS LONG AS IT'S DONE

IN SOLIDARITY WITH SEX WORKERS, CENTERING THEIR VOICES, EXPERIENCES, AND EXPERTISE.



HEY, YOU CAN READ MORE ABOUT ALL OF THIS IN G.F. JOHNSON AND K. PORTH, "SEX WORKER RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS: AN APPROACH TO SOLIDARISTIC NORMATIVE THEORY," FORTHCOMING IN INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST JOURNAL OF POLITICS.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ADDISON FINCH
TEXT BY GENEVIEVE FUJI JOHNSON, KERRY PORTH, MADINE FLAGEL,
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Understanding the intersections: A focus on im/migrant and racialized sex workers

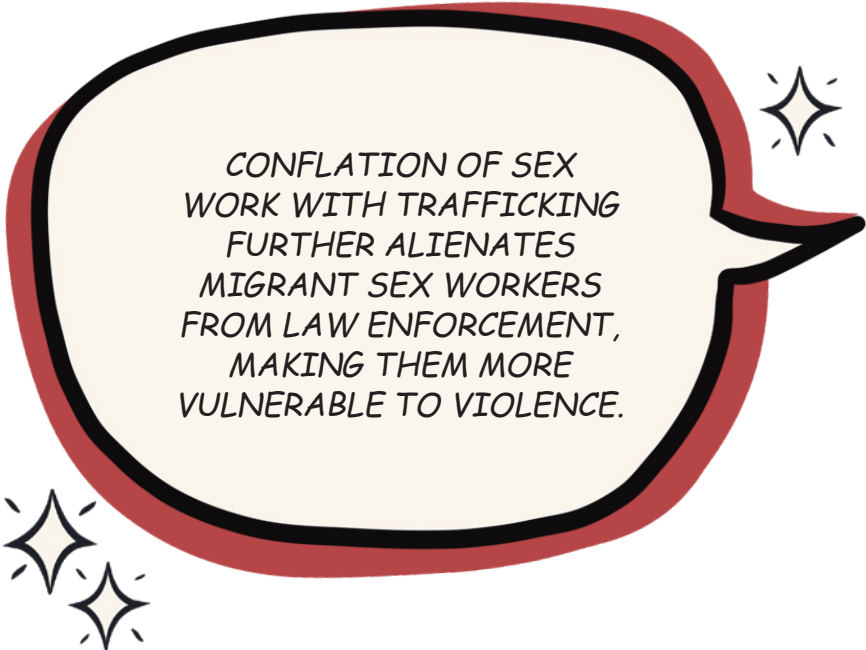
Im/migrant sex workers face especially high risks of violence. Like Black and Indigenous sex workers and other sex workers of color, they are frequently subjected to racism; furthermore, they are tenuously positioned by their citizenship, immigration, and employment status. [Butterfly](#), a support and advocacy organization based in Toronto, writes that migrant sex workers “face not only the criminalization and stigmatization which are directed at sex workers, but also racism and discriminatory immigration policy.”⁸

Alison Clancey, Executive Director of [SWAN Vancouver Society](#), a support organization for newcomer, migrant, and immigrant women engaged in sex work, notes “the increased criminalization of the entire sex industry via the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), and of the migrant sex industry via the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), namely 185(b), which prohibits employment in businesses related to the sex trade such as strip clubs, massage parlours or escort services”; this criminalization creates a hostile environment in which im/migrant sex workers seek to evade law enforcement which are seen as unsafe.⁹ Despite government responses to sex work being framed around protection, Clancey goes on: “PCEPA and IRPA have become tools to prosecute rather than protect some of the most marginalized women in the sex industry who are at heightened risk of human trafficking.”¹⁰

Clancey further identifies that given “the number of women who have experienced punitive law enforcement measures, including anti-trafficking enforcement, it is not surprising that none of the im/migrant sex workers we approached in Toronto reported that they would call the police if they experienced violence, harassment, abuse or exploitation.”¹¹

Potentially violent perpetrators, including traffickers, know how precariously positioned migrant sex workers are. They effectively operate with impunity, targeting im/migrant sex workers who they know are very reluctant to call authorities.

In research published by SWAN, 95% of Chinese sex workers based in Toronto and Vancouver stated that they would not seek assistance from law enforcement.¹²



*CONFLATION OF SEX
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FURTHER ALIENATES
MIGRANT SEX WORKERS
FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT,
MAKING THEM MORE
VULNERABLE TO VIOLENCE.*

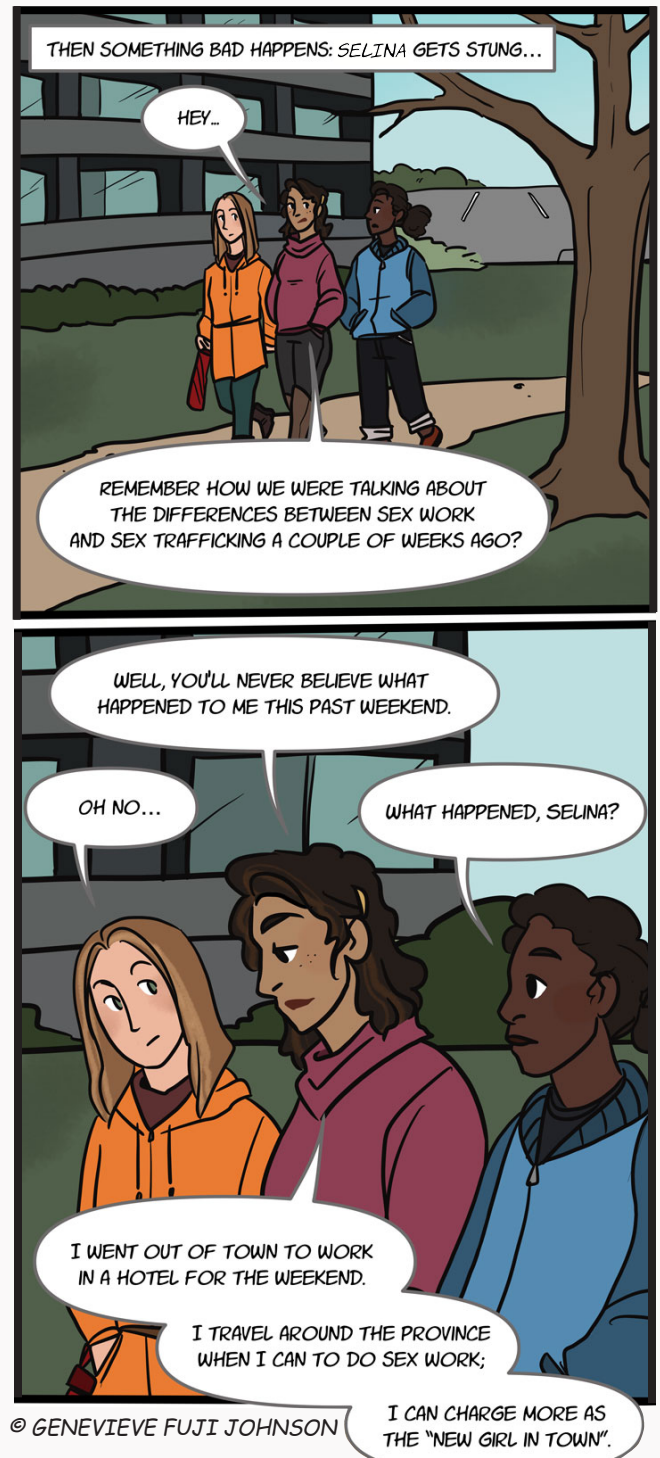
Tara Santini, Sandra Kon Hu Chu, and Elene Lam also write that sex workers often “avoid police because of the risk of immigration detention and deportation resulting from numerous regulations, including not only sex work related criminal offences, but also sex work-related and other immigration regulations.”¹³ The [Canadian Alliance](#) points out that im/migrant “sex workers have been targeted by law enforcement who often work hand in hand with Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA).”¹⁴ Referring to the work of Butterfly, the Alliance notes that in 2015, the Ottawa Police Service released information about a raid on massage parlors that resulted in the deportation of 11 women. As Butterfly writes, since Asian and migrant sex workers are forced to avoid the risks of detection by police, they often work in isolated conditions thus making them more vulnerable to violence against them. Butterfly articulates a few examples:

For example, one sex worker involved with Butterfly described being robbed four times in a week. Another sex worker was sexually assaulted three times in one week. More than 60% of migrant sex workers have experienced different forms of violence, yet they are not able to call the police as they are afraid that they or their co-workers will be arrested. Some women have been seriously injured, yet cannot freely access medical help or legal recourse. In the past two years, three Asian sex workers have been killed in the Hamilton and Mississauga area of Ontario. Even sex workers who have immigration status live with the fear that seeking help will increase the attention and surveillance on their workplace, putting them or their coworkers at heightened risk. It is very difficult for migrant sex workers to access legal support, since there are few legal professionals who have experience dealing with the complex intersections between criminal law (both sex work and trafficking laws) and immigration law.¹⁵

The following comic strip details the conversation of Selina, Jaz, and Julie as they develop their friendship and mutual understanding and learning. Selina shares her experiences of being “rescued” by cops and a social worker while she’s working in a rural community;

Jaz continues to sharpen their analysis of the harms of law enforcement targeting sex work; and Julie continues to open herself to accepting and understanding sexual exchanges that are consensual but outside dominant societal norms.

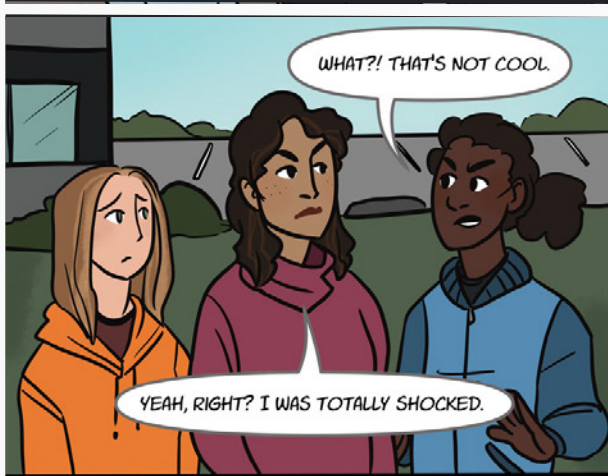
By offering these conversations, we hope to contribute positively to the movement to end the injustices against sex workers by decriminalizing and destigmatizing sex work world-wide:





EVERYTHING SEEMED FINE. I SCREENED CLIENTS AND BOOKED APPOINTMENTS.

BUT, AT 8:00 FRIDAY NIGHT, THERE WAS A KNOCK AT MY DOOR AND, WHEN I OPENED IT EXPECTING MY DATE, I FOUND TWO COPS AND A SOCIAL WORKER.



WHAT?! THAT'S NOT COOL.

YEAH, RIGHT? I WAS TOTALLY SHOCKED.

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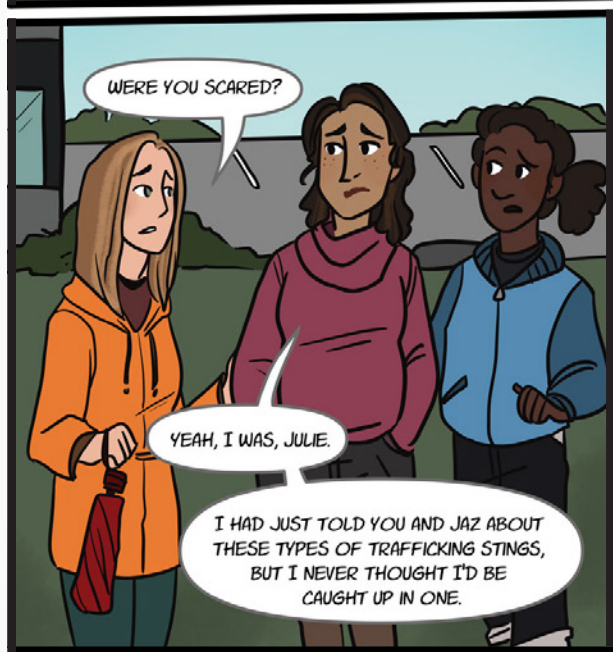


THEY KIND OF PUSHED THEIR WAY IN, SAYING:

"WE'RE HERE TO HELP YOU, DON'T WORRY, EVERYTHING IS OK..."

AND I'M LIKE, WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE!? WTF IS GOING ON?

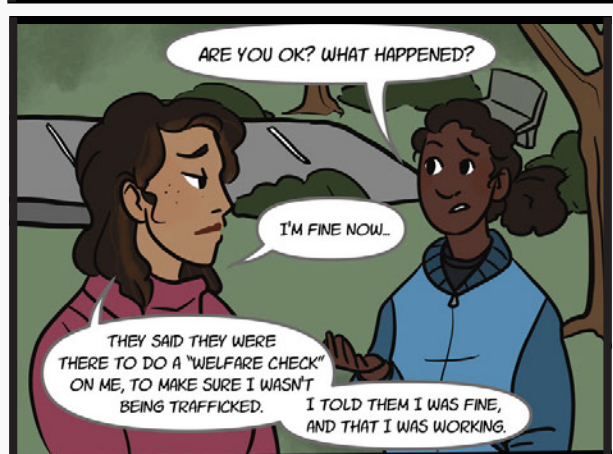
WHY ARE THEY HERE?!



WERE YOU SCARED?

YEAH, I WAS, JULIE.

I HAD JUST TOLD YOU AND JAZ ABOUT THESE TYPES OF TRAFFICKING STINGS, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE CAUGHT UP IN ONE.



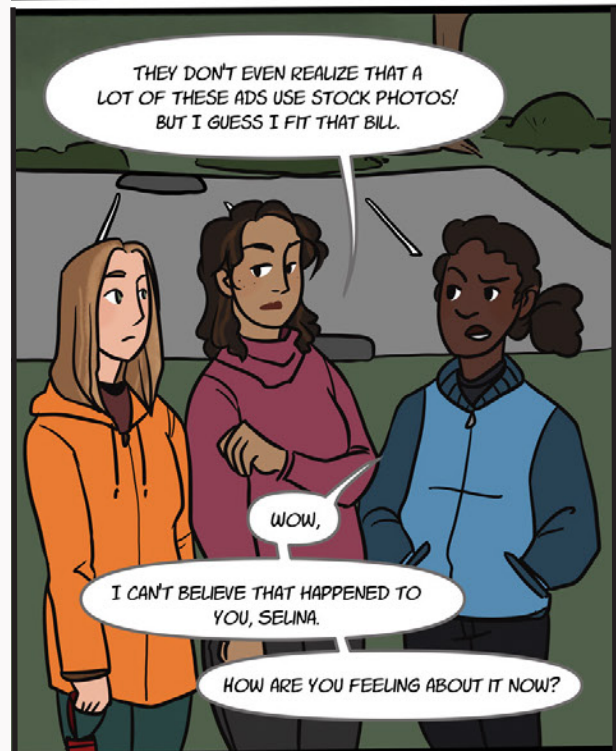
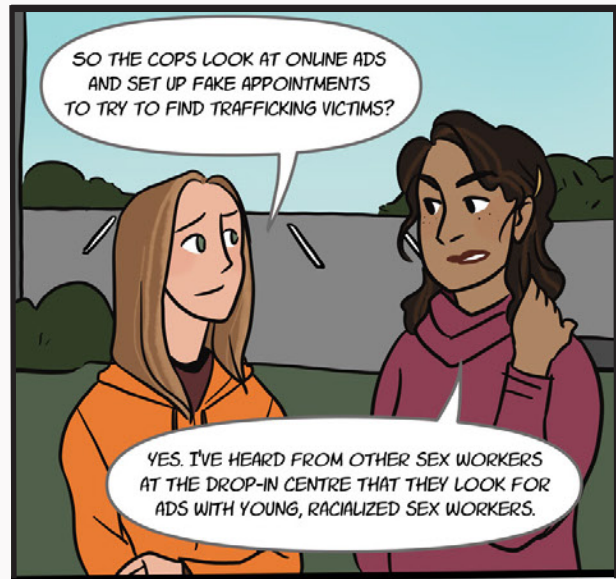
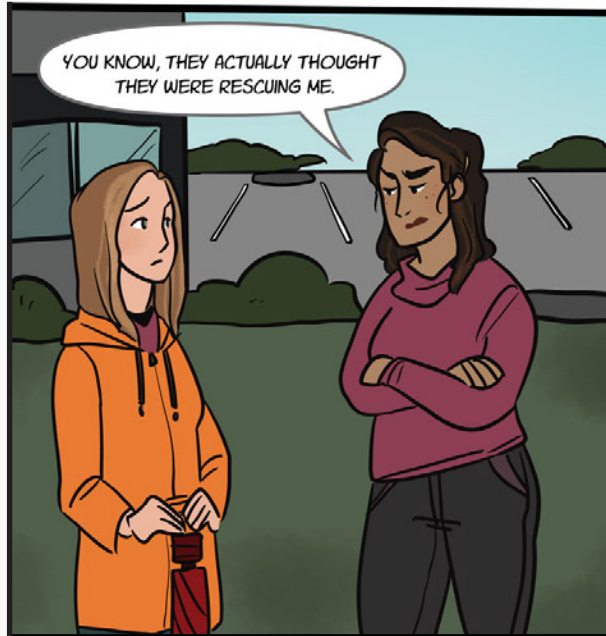
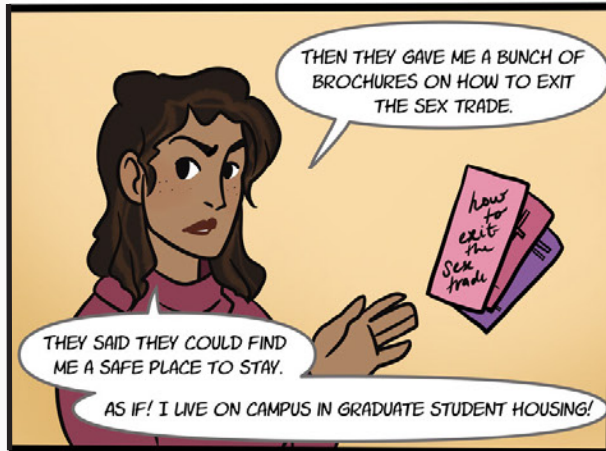
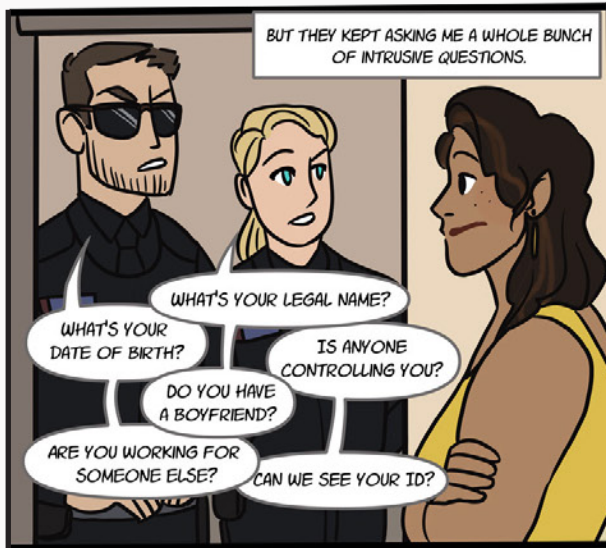
ARE YOU OK? WHAT HAPPENED?

I'M FINE NOW.

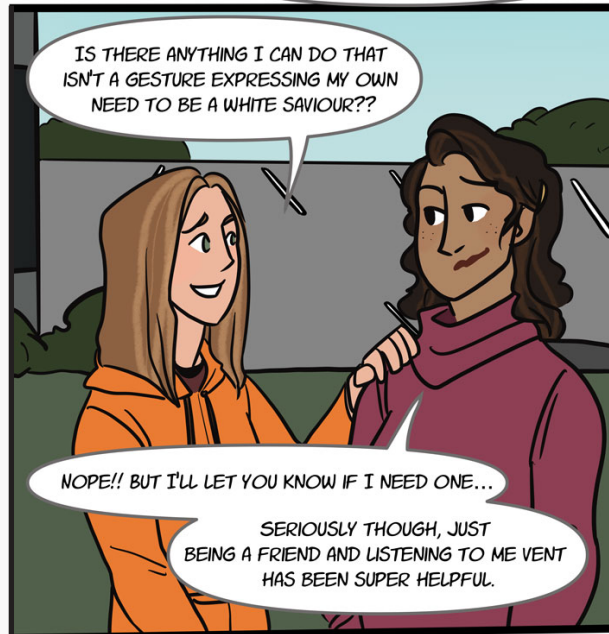
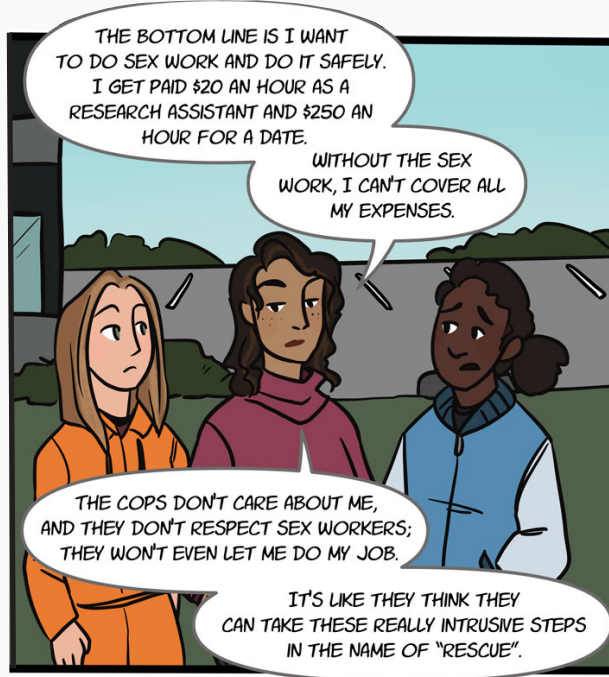
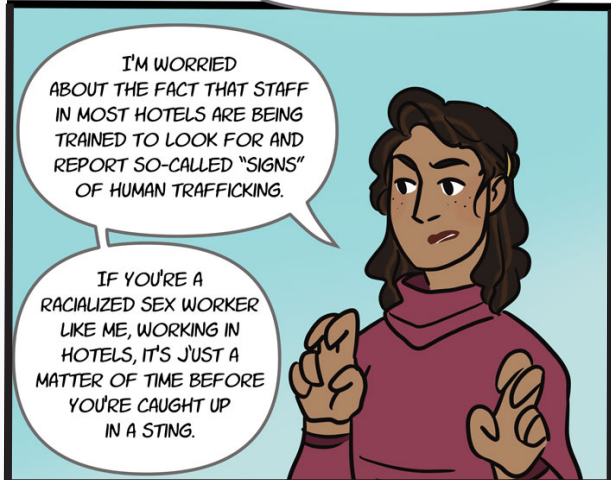
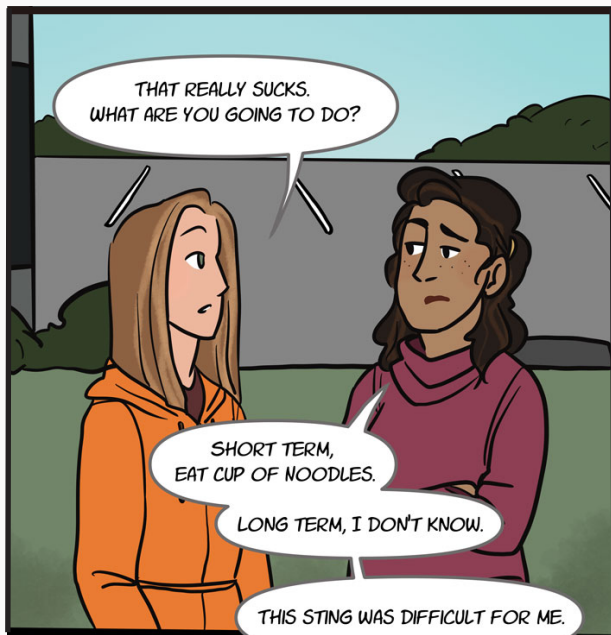
THEY SAID THEY WERE THERE TO DO A "WELFARE CHECK" ON ME, TO MAKE SURE I WASN'T BEING TRAFFICKED.

I TOLD THEM I WAS FINE, AND THAT I WAS WORKING.

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Support sex workers!

Stigma against sex workers is harmful and contributes to the enabling of gender-based violence against sex workers. To end this violence, gender-based violence organizations and service providers must act.

Some actions you can take include:

- Educate yourself, your peers, and your co-workers about what sex work is and how criminalization exacerbates the harms associated with it.
- Combat myths about sex work that are present at individual, organizational, and societal levels.
- Center sex workers as individuals with agency, rights, and knowledge.
- Involve sex workers at all levels in work to end stigma and gender-based violence against them (e.g. events, committees, Board of Directors) and remunerate sex workers for their participation in sharing their expertise.



Ultimately, ending violence against sex workers comes down to empowering sex workers!



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