

# EVERY HUMAN DESERVES SAFETY

Sex workers defend their labor, health and civil rights

EDITORIAL

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It's been 10 years since a group of sex workers came together to demonstrate against the anti-sex trade law, declaring Sex Workers' Day and vowing to attain our rights. But Korean society and the anti-sex trade law are still hostile to us.

The anti-sex trade law, demanded by women's movement organizations, was passed in September 2004. This law was created to eradicate the sex trade, without actually explaining why it should be eradicated. The women's organizations demanded stricter crackdowns to justify their own existence, and the police targeted sex workers — the ones in the weakest, most visible positions — in their investigations to boost their career points and get results by the easiest means and in the shortest amount of time.

Because the police need "concrete evidence" when they bust sex work businesses, they try to take pictures of sex workers and customers engaged in sex or similar activities, or scenes of them undressed. If the sex worker tries to put on her clothes, the police stop her on the grounds of gathering evidence. These photos and videos have sometimes been distributed on the Internet or used in the media without the workers' consent. I was taught to dress at once if the shop seemed unusually noisy when I was taking customers, and to swallow the condom, hide it inside my vagina or throw it out of the building in preparation for a raid.

When the crackdowns became more severe, the sex trade businesses left the more visible shops and took root in residential areas to avoid getting busted. The crackdowns would become so intense that the business owners would have to mediate violent incidents happening in the shops.

But now, the owners have constructed a new form of business whereby they secretly make a list of customers and connect the buyer and sex worker directly, placing the owners themselves in the most convenient place to escape in the event of a crackdown and shoving all the responsibility of the trade on to the sex workers.

The sex industry is becoming more and more covert and underground, and there is increasingly less ground for sex workers to stand on. The social atmosphere of Korea, which is very conservative toward sex, makes it difficult for women who sell sex to expect to be treated like human beings. Even when a sex worker has been a victim of violence or sexual violence, she is not looked at as a victim deserving of protection but judged as someone who has committed an illegal act. This infringes on the sex worker's right to be treated justly as a victim.

In the sex trade, it is not uncommon for a customer to hit a sex worker. But if the sex worker goes to the police and reports the incident as a victim of violence, there are cases where she is not acknowledged as such, and both the customer (the assailant) and the sex worker (the victim) end up getting punished, the former for violence and the latter for selling sex.

In one incident, a customer demanded that a woman working as a "helper" (escort) at a karaoke bar go to a motel with him and have sex. When she refused, he grabbed her hair, hit her mul-

multiple times with his fist, kicked her and threw her on the ground. He then grabbed her by the hair and threw her down a flight of stairs, causing her to black out. The customer put the unconscious woman in his car and drove around Seoul and Gyeonggi Province for hours before dropping her off at a hospital in the Gwanjin District of Seoul at around 4:10 the next morning.

The attacker was sentenced to a fine, not the proper punishment, for such reasons as the victim of the incident was a sex worker and the customer was a first-time offender; the crime was committed in the heat of the moment after the man's pride had been injured because he'd been refused sex by a sex worker; the man had dropped the woman off at a hospital; a prison sentence or probation would seriously disadvantage the man's future employment.

Cases like this, in which violence is treated lightly because the victim is a sex worker, or the victim is fined for breaking the anti-sex trade law, happen very frequently. In this kind of social environment, where the fact that a sex worker is prosecutable comes before her right to be protected, sex workers can't reach out for help when they receive unjust treatment, whether in the sex industry or in their daily lives. This makes them the most vulnerable to violence or crime in general. When it is revealed that the victim of a crime is a sex worker, people look at her as a suspect or take the crime committed against her lightly. This kind of social atmosphere makes it very likely that the sex worker will be at a great disadvantage during the investigation. This kind of treatment in turn makes it harder for sex workers to turn to the law for help, even when they are in danger or have been victimized.

The anti-sex trade law and women's organizations are focused only on rooting out the sex trade, and so do not know or care about what kind of environment sex workers are in, what kind of conditions they work in, what kind of treatment they receive or what kind of violence and discrimination happen on the scene. There is almost no investigation into the reality of the situation. It is only with extreme incidents such as a murder or a chain of suicides of sex workers that we get the attention of the rest of society.

There was an incident on Nov. 25 in Tongyeong, South Gyeongsang Province, where a sex worker jumped from a motel during a raid and died.

But people are avoiding the essence of the problem. The police are saying that the issue is compassion — giving a sex worker the time to put on her clothes during a raid — and women's organizations are demanding stronger crackdowns focusing on the business owners and customers. It is the faulty law, social misperceptions, discrimination and stigma against sex work that infringe on the human rights of sex workers, a social minority, and take away other basic rights relating to labor, health care and civil liberty. To improve Korean society, we should focus not on the prevalent ideology of the majority but on the voices of those who work in the sex trade and try to see what they experience.