

Know Your Rights: A-Z for Sex Workers Launched in London with a photo exhibition



Sex workers in the UK have produced a self-help guide to the prostitution laws (*Know Your Rights, A-Z for Sex Workers*) in response to a massive increase in raids, arrests, prosecutions, convictions and imprisonment. Approximately 200 street workers are arrested each year. Many hundreds more are given “prostitute cautions” and/or anti-social behaviour orders. Prosecutions for brothel-keeping, the charge most often used against women working together collectively from premises, have skyrocketed from four in 2003 to over 80 in 2010.

The A-Z was launched by the English Collective of Prostitutes at a recent event held at the Crossroads Women’s Centre. It was attended by over 100 people with international guest speakers from Guyana, Haiti, India, Ireland and the US. Vera Rodriguez’s stunning photo exhibition of sex work provided the backdrop for the event.

Niki Adams, ECP, introduced the event:

“This guide was written by sex workers with the help of committed legal professionals. It explains the prostitution laws in simple terms and aims to ensure that sex workers, no matter where we work, know how to protect ourselves from arrest, how to defend ourselves if charged, and where to get help. By informing the public about these unjust and devious laws, which have been passed in their name, we hope that the A-Z will build support for the decriminalisation of prostitution.”

Nina Lopez, who helped prepare the ECP’s original rights sheet in 1981, told how it triggered a movement of sex workers who stood up to the police, pleaded not guilty and educated lawyers to defend them. Ms Lopez and others at the event had been part of a 12-day occupation of a London church in 1982, to protest police illegality and racism, garnering national media coverage. An account of the Church Occupation is part of the newly published anthology by Selma James, the ECP’s first

spokeswoman – *Sex, Race and Class – the Perspective of Winning. A Selection of Writings 1952-2011*. Ms James was also at the event.



Cari Mitchell, who is often the first point of contact for sex workers needing help, laid out the current situation:

“Whilst sex workers have always faced persecution and arrest, in recent years more repressive legislation has been introduced, promoted by an alliance of Christian fundamentalists and feminist politicians. At the same time, a big increase in poverty due to unemployment and welfare cuts has resulted in more women working both on the streets and inside to support themselves and their families.

We have seen that where sex workers’ decide to fight legal charges, we can win. It is hard work but the A-Z will help by providing essential information.”

Solicitor Nigel Richardson, who was consulted on the content of the A-Z, complained that charges brought against women who *“have done nothing wrong”* seemed to be driven by the authorities wanting to profit from confiscating sex workers’ income and assets.

Amy, a sex worker from the north of England who created an online forum for *“women working, often in complete isolation”*, explained how she *“fell into prostitution”* in much the same way as other people fall into other jobs:

“I was fed up of being a cleaner, bar maid and shop assistant, often all on the same day. Prostitution is certainly not the worst job I have ever had. I have worked in the fish market and as a cleaner for people who didn’t care if we were cold or tired or how we were spoken to. I would like to share a flat with another woman but we know that we risk being prosecuted. Working on your own is so much more dangerous, plus it is harder to afford the bills so you have to see punters who you’d normally cross the road to avoid.”

The ECP’s sister organisation, US PROStitutes Collective was represented by Rachel West who described the strong movement for decriminalisation and safety in San Francisco, where she is based. In response, the police use “nuisance laws” to persecute sex workers, along with homeless people and immigrant day workers.

“Pimping and pandering laws are also frequently used against sex workers who are working with others.” US PROS recently defended a young woman from being registered as a sex offender because she tried to help another woman get off the street.

Marie Bonavia, a 72 year old woman, with a severely disabled husband, who was convicted for being a receptionist in a flat, spoke publicly for the first time.

“I was making tea and sandwiches and doing a bit of cleaning. The woman working in the flat came to court to confirm that I was there for her safety. I was found guilty but given a very light sentence, largely because, with the help of the ECP, I fought the case. If I’d had the A-Z and known my rights I may have been able to avoid arrest.”



Nicola Marcus, from Red Thread in Guyana, who was in London with other guests for an international conference *“Invest in Caring not Capitalism”*, described organising to bring sex workers together to oppose harassment from the police, church and clients. *“We found that if you stick together you have more power. We will take back this experience and be stronger as a result.”*

Maggie Ronayne, Global Women’s Strike Ireland, spoke about the worsening situation there *“where alliances have formed between the church and feminists against sex workers”*. She connected those who are promoting the criminalisation of clients with nuns who, up to the late 20th century, ran prison-like institutions for so-called “fallen women”.

Margaret Prescod, representing the *Black Coalition Fighting Back Serial Murders* in Los Angeles, USA, recalled how 12 Black women were murdered within a 40 mile radius before the police even announced their deaths. *“The press immediately believed the word of the police and referred to them as ‘the prostitute murders’ . Families and supporters campaigned to establish that these are women, these are mothers and that every life is of value.”*

Thierry Schaffauser, from STRASS the French sex workers’ union, reported on successful efforts to build the union there and in the UK, and called for support against the forced HIV testing of sex workers in Greece.

The encouraging victory of the campaign against an anti-trafficking law in India, which was used to persecute and imprison sex workers, was also reported.



There were accolades for Ms Rodriguez's photos of Belgium's red-light district. Ms Rodriguez described the exploitation of women she had worked alongside who had to pay €100 a day to businessmen and bosses to hire a window, concluding *"they are the real 'pimps'"*. She spoke of the need to build *"a movement to demand our rights so we can press to change the laws and the perspectives of outsiders. People who sell sex should be protected, not prosecuted and judged. We are workers and we want rights not rescue."*

Niki Adams concluded by calling for people to come together to defeat both the unjust prostitution laws and welfare cuts and austerity. *"Like other workers, sex workers are fighting for more money and less work. We have seen the wealth that they say doesn't exist and we want it back for all our needs."*

There was real excitement in the audience as sex workers of different generations, sexes and nationalities, met each other as well as women and men from other walks of life. There was a real sense that public opinion is now more interested in safety than in prosecution, and that if New Zealand has been able to decriminalise prostitution so can the UK.