

Call Off Your Old  
Tired Ethics



May 10th, 2021

Support SO771

To the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee

My name is Bella Robinson. I am a resident of West Warwick, RI. I am writing to you today in support of S0771. I have been a sex worker for the past 35 years and I have been the executive director of COYOTE RI since 2009. In fact I did sex work in RI prior to 2009 when RI criminalized my profession. Criminalizing sex workers has created a lot of harm. Over 89% of all prostitution arrests over the past several years have been women/ sex workers, yet legislators told us that they criminalized prostitution to protect the women.

In 2019 through the ongoing partnership between the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice's research cluster on Human Trafficking and COYOTE RI, the state's only sex worker rights organization, a historic House Bill was introduced to study the impact of the 2009 re-criminalization of indoor prostitution in the state. Join us for this Family Weekend Forum featuring Professor Elena Shih, COYOTE RI Executive Director Bella Robinson, and students of the CSSJ Human Trafficking research cluster as they discuss their research. ([10 Years After Re-Criminalization: Reflecting on a Decade of Anti-Trafficking Activism in RI](#))

There has been significant [research](#) conducted by COYOTE RI on the safety and health impact of laws governing commercial sex, specifically related to violence, exploitation, stigma, and sexual health. In fact, some of this research was recently published in the ACLU's recent [research policy brief](#).

1. The criminalization of prostitution disproportionately impacts poor women, transgender individuals, people of color and migrant workers. We need to acknowledge that criminalizing sex workers increases violence and exploitation and prevents this marginalized population from reporting violence and exploitation.
2. There has been a documented increase in exploitation and violence against people in the sex industry in Rhode Island since the passage of federal legislation **FOSTA/SESTA** (see [here](#) and [here](#));
3. A [newly published meta-analysis](#) of 134 studies across many nations published over a 28 year period showed increased violence and incidence of STIs in jurisdictions with repressive police practices;
4. A [study](#) conducted by **Baylor University's Scott Cunningham** and **Manisha Shah** of the **University of California Los Angeles** found that during 2003 through 2009,

while indoor prostitution was still decriminalized in Rhode Island, the number of rapes diminished by 31 percent, and the statewide incidence of gonorrhea among women diminished by 39 percent;

5. In **New Zealand**, where prostitution was decriminalized nationwide in 2003, a comprehensive [study](#) by researchers from the **University of Otago's School of Medicine found** that more than 60 percent of the 772 sex workers who participated reported feeling more able to refuse to see certain clients, and 95 percent said they felt they had rights after decriminalization. Human trafficking has also diminished in New Zealand since decriminalization.
6. In this [graph](#) you can see that RI prostitution arrests have gone down significantly since RI re-criminalized prostitution in 2009, which is evidence that trafficking is not on the rise in RI. In fact, in most [states prostitution arrests](#) have been significantly declining for years. In 2019 the [FBI reported](#) only 12 confirmed cases domestic sex trafficking cases involving a minor for the entire country. We encourage the end to the government-funded misinformation campaigns against “people involved in the sex industry”.
7. This is a short video that explains the [4 different models](#).

Sex workers are part of our community and we don't want to see our community members arrested, given criminal records, isolated from their communities & continue to be discriminated against when trying to access public services. We think the health and safety of “people involved in the sex industry” should be a priority for RI legislators. Everyone should have the right to report violence, abuse, and exploitation and to be able to gain access to the justice system. Policing the bodies of marginalized women shouldn't be a priority for law enforcement. Our police resources should be spent investigating violent crimes.

Sincerely,  
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