

March 4, 2022

Open Letter to John Oliver: Stand with Sex Trade Survivors, Not Pimps and Sex Buyers

We, the undersigned are survivors of the sex trade, come from all walks of life, races, religions, ethnic groups, from heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities.

What binds us is that, collectively, we have been bought, sold, and exploited on the streets and in escorting in fancy hotels, in legal strip clubs and illicit “massage parlors,” in our homes and on “sugar dates,” and everywhere in between. Collectively, we have experienced hundreds of rapes, burns, beatings, chokings, and myriad forms of abuse at the hands of sex buyers and our exploiters, causing long-term physical and psychological harm.

We are collectively shocked and disgusted that you, Mr. Oliver, decided to celebrate and glorify the sex trade on your show, [Last Week Tonight](#), aired on HBO on February 27, 2022. Despite your reputation for producing thoroughly researched segments, this 25-minute report relied exclusively on information given to you by lobbyists who promote the decriminalization of the sex trade. Where was the discussion of the harms inflicted by [sex buyers](#) on women and others they purchase? Where was the analysis of the well-documented methods used by both international and domestic traffickers or the [court cases](#) that expose the sex trade as an [organized criminal](#) enterprise? Where were our voices?

We know firsthand that prostitution is neither sex nor a job. “Sex work” is a [euphemism coined by the sex trade](#) itself to sugarcoat one of the worst forms of dehumanization and gender-based violence. “Sex work” includes all the actors and exploiters who ensure that the global multi-billion-dollar system of sexual exploitation not only persists but thrives.

You mock and belittle us when you say “the main difference between ‘sex work’ and working at [Subway](#) is that at least in ‘sex work’ you actually know what the customer’s eating.” With this one flippant line, you callously dismiss our collective traumas - experiences of violence, intimidation, rape, degradation, torture, or even attempted murder at the hands of the men, often overtly racist, who “consumed” us. For this line alone you should be deeply ashamed.

You say that prostitution has always been part of society, but which one? Many of the undersigned are [Indigenous](#) or from communities where prostitution was first introduced by European colonialists. Throughout history, other manifestations of male abuse of power - including, but not limited to, rape, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment - have permeated society. Are you saying that laws should decriminalize these human rights violations as well because they’re commonplace?

We agree with you that those engaged in prostitution must not be criminalized. Our lives were further shattered by those arrests, often times suffering compounded persecution and sexual violence from the police, and then saddled with criminal convictions that still prevent us from rebuilding our lives. But the laws you endorse on your show are gifts to sex buyers, pimps and sex traffickers.

Why? Because despite your efforts to distinguish acts of prostitution from sex trafficking, it is simple logic to see the inextricable link between them. The sex trade is where sex trafficking happens. Basic economic principles explain that [sex trafficking increases](#) when demand for paid sex outpaces the supply. To meet that demand and to increase their profits, traffickers and pimps will bring the most vulnerable – women, foster care teens, homeless LGBTQ+ youth, all mostly of color – to the wallets and zippers of sex buyers.

This is why we wholeheartedly support the “Nordic Model” or “[Equality Model](#),” a legal framework that recognizes prostitution as a system of inequality, decriminalizes those bought and sold in it, and holds sex buyers and other perpetrators accountable for the crimes they commit.

When you say: “sex buyers don’t want to be arrested any more than ‘sex workers’ do,” you demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the power dynamics that define the sex trade. We are not and have never been equal in the sex trade equation. Sex buyers are the ones with the disposable income, the sexual desire, and the power to dictate condom use or not. This power dynamic controls the survival of those purchased in the sex trade.

Decriminalizing the buying of sex would expand the sex trade and derail more women’s lives and that of their families. Legitimizing [open sex markets](#) or assembly-style brothels where women service men in required 15-minute sets - like the cases recently reported in the poorest Black and Brown neighborhoods of your own town, New York City - is not progressive. True progressivism is the creation of public policy based on human rights to prevent harm and protect the vulnerable and their communities.

Lastly, your “sex work is work” segment relies on misinformation and disinformation too extensive to list in this letter: from failing to understand the US federal legislation [FOSTA SESTA](#) that holds websites accountable for facilitating sex trafficking, to [painting a fantasy version of New Zealand](#), whose own [government](#) recognized that sex trafficking - in particular of Indigenous and Asian women - increased since it decriminalized the sex trade.

The people who advised you to promote the sex trade on “Last Week Tonight” will not rest until they can secure legal brothels in every district and rebrand pimps as business managers. And we will not rest until our legislators, policymakers and neighbors understand that the United States or any other country cannot go down the road of industrialized sexual exploitation

Had you consulted us, you would have understood that prostitution is neither a “job” nor a victimless crime. But it’s not too late, Mr. Oliver. Listen to Survivors, not the sex trade. For equality’s sake.

SIGNED,

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1v7AhrwJhmYGqbMfPeVInRBxMm4xcExnC28f8iljxBus/edit>