

**RedTraSex - LATIN-AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN
FEMALE SEX WORKERS NETWORK**

6 REASONS WHY WOMEN SEX WORKERS DEMAND LEGAL AND FREE ABORTION



RedTraSex

Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras
Sexuales de Latinoamérica
y el Caribe

Por una ley que reconozca el Trabajo Sexual Autónomo de las mujeres de Latinoamérica y el Caribe

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INTRODUCTION

Women sex workers fight for the recognition of our labor and human rights. For us, this struggle includes the full respect and fulfillment of our sexual and reproductive rights as an inalienable demand. It is in this context that we decided to raise our voices and join the feminist movement and women's groups who for several years have been demanding that States legalize abortion. We are women, like many of the social activists who fought these battles before us

Who are the people who have an abortion? It is women, in clandestine conditions and accused of being criminals. It is our body that is humiliated by the patriarchal culture and States.

Our lived experience and our organizing efforts have convinced us that the only way to reduce maternal mortality, ensure that all women can freely relate to our bodies and promote our capacity to make autonomous decisions about our lives, is to demand the fulfillment of our rights and to forge a strategic alliance with the State, so that it will create public policies to raise awareness, provide comprehensive sexuality information and education, speed up access to contraceptives, legalize the termination of pregnancies and guarantee that they are provided for free.

Even though society intends to deny or hide it, abortions do happen and it is usually those women with the least resources who undergo them under precarious conditions in a context of secrecy, fear and danger. Abortion is indeed a public health issue and as such the State has the obligation to secure women's right to the highest level of health. The World Health Organization has stated that "National authorities are responsible for deciding whether and under what circumstances to provide services for the medical termination of pregnancy"¹, confirming that it falls under the mandate of public health authorities.

RedTraSex's women sex workers fight for legal and free abortion, against violence towards women, for equality and respect of human rights throughout Latin America and the Caribbean ².

For a long time, there was a gap between our struggle and those of feminists, because of differences in how our work was perceived. Some feminist groups

refused to hear our voices and the validity of our choices and discredited our will to be considered legitimate workers.

But today we invite you to focus on what unites rather than on what divides us. What we have in common is the fight against gender-based violence and patriarchy; the defense of our freedom with regard to our body and our sexuality; and our contributions to building a more just society. As one more step in this direction, let us move forward together for legal abortion.

Women sex workers demand legal and free abortion because:

1 - Complications of abortion. Technical and managerial guidelines for prevention and treatment. World Health Organization. 1995. Page 7.

2 - Some Latin American countries (like Chile, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) forbid abortion under all circumstances; in others, like Cuba, Puerto Rico and Uruguay, abortion is legal in all cases, within a previously established time period. Finally there is a third group (like Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Paraguay and Peru) in which abortion is legal under some circumstances. Manual para el ejercicio, respeto y garantía del derecho al aborto no punible en Argentina. Women's Link Worldwide & ADC. 2014.

1

IT LOWERS WOMEN'S MORTALITY AND MORBIDITY

WHO has said, "Each year, an estimated 22 million unsafe abortions occur. Almost all unsafe abortions ³ (98 %) are performed in developing countries.

The total number of unsafe abortions has increased from about 20 million in 2003 to 22 million in 2008" ⁴. These unsafe abortions, performed under conditions of illegality and secrecy, lead to women's deaths (mortality) or to illnesses and disorders caused by these interventions (morbidity).

Women's health is jeopardized when abortion is performed in conditions of illegality, and forbidding it only worsens the conditions under which it is performed while it does not contribute to decreasing the abortion rates. In this sense, legal and free abortion would help to lower women's mortality and morbidity rates, as happened in those States that incorporated abortion in their legal frameworks from a comprehensive and service-oriented perspective around health.

2

IT GUARANTEES EQUAL ACCESS AND CLOSES THE GAP BETWEEN IMPOVERISHED AND ENRICHED WOMEN

Nowadays, money is the intermediary for access to abortion and those with an economic advantage are the ones who can access safe procedures. The access gap between grassroots and upper-class women is caused by the lack of State involvement that leaves the market as the only regulating and organizing entity.

Legalizing abortion and including it among the practices covered by health insurance schemes removes money from the picture as an intermediary, and gives all women the possibility to have it done under safe conditions, that is, places different social classes at the same level in terms of accessing the same procedure under the same conditions, thus guaranteeing the lives and health of the most vulnerable women.

3 - WHO defines unsafe abortion as "the termination of pregnancy performed or treated by untrained or unskilled persons". Complications of Abortion. Technical and managerial guidelines for prevention and treatment. World Health Organization, 1995. Page 13

4 - Safe abortion: technical and policy guidance for health systems. Second edition. WHO. 2012

IT GIVES A MEASURE OF HOW OUR SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS (SRR) CAN BE EXPRESSED AND GUARANTEES FREEDOM OVER OUR BODIES AND OUR DECISIONS

3

Several cultural mandates weigh over women, determining which behaviors are considered "right" and "appropriate". We have also been culturally and socially assigned the role of mothers and reproductive and domestic care-takers. Different mechanisms "shape" our bodies to restrict our freedom and decision-making capacity. The prohibition of abortion is one of the expressions of these mechanisms. Making it free and legal will guarantee a greater degree of freedom over our bodies and decisions, separating our role as women from that of breeders and mothers in patriarchal societies. It will also allow us the full exercise of our SRR and autonomous decision-making in the fields of sexuality and reproduction⁵.

Incorporating abortion into the public health agenda separates sex from reproduction and sets the "*10 Reasons for Sex Workers to Talk about Sexual and Reproductive Rights*". RedTraSex. 2014.

basis for recognizing our rights to pleasure, to orgasm and to sexual diversity without reproductive aims.

4

IT GUARANTEES THE PREVALENCE OF SECULAR STATES POISED TO BRING ABOUT UNBIASED SOCIETIES AND TO DEVELOP COMPREHENSIVE PUBLIC POLICIES

Religious and legal discourses reduce abortion to "a mixture of sin, crime and disease"⁶.

A religious perspective on health policies only creates misinformation and lack of options.

Making abortion free and legal, and providing accurate and appropriate information about its procedures contributes to eliminating the stigma that falls on those women who have decided to undergo an abortion (who are treated as having committed "an illegal action" and thus as "criminals") and to allow for public health planning that integrates secular, scientific and non-biased perspectives on women's bodies, on our decision to have children or not, and on how we experience our sexuality.

5

IT ENCOURAGES A UNIFORM RESPONSE BY HEALTH PROVIDERS, ONE THAT PRIORITIZES WOMEN AND NOT ECONOMIC BENEFITS OR MORAL RESTRICTIONS

In the absence of public policies, the responsibility increasingly falls on health practitioners and their decisions become individualized (each doctor must personally decide whether she/he will perform both "legal and illegal" abortions), while the medical and pharmaceutical establishments make profits without bearing any responsibility.

Lastly, if a woman goes to a health facility with severe bleeding or any other symptom resulting from an unsafe abortion, many health practitioners will judge, criminalize or stigmatize her.

If there is a law that guarantees free and safe abortion, the State repositions itself as the entity responsible for providing comprehensive healthcare and medical equipment and guaranteeing the best professional care.

IT ERADICATES CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

6

For many years, women sex workers have been exposing how the lack of legal instruments regulating our work creates a framework of illegality that allows others (including members of the police force and of the political and legal systems) to make a living and a profit and by exploiting our labor.

Being underground also pushes us to the margins of society, where we are exposed to discrimination, stigma and violence (particularly institutional and police violence).

That same combination of negative consequences is present when abortion is illegal, creating a group of people who turn this procedure into a business and profit from women's needs. In some cases, a clandestine abortion clinic functions in the same block as a police station.

The prohibition of abortion opens a gap of illegality that hinders any control over those performing the procedures and also the intermediaries. Making abortion legal reverts these outcomes, creating safe procedures, without intermediaries who grow rich on women's needs and eliminates the symbolic violence perpetrated against women who decide to have an abortion, contributing to create a more just and more equitable society.



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