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TO OUR
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e know that feminism looks bad in the media. It is associated with men-hating, intolerance and extremism. Those of us seeing feminism in action, those of us who consider ourselves feminists, know of its importance and its achievements. Before feminism, women did not vote. Before feminism, we could not get a divorce. Before feminism, there was no discussion about sexual and reproductive rights. Before feminism, motherhood as a mandate and the sexual division of labor were not challenged. Before feminism, we had not realized that the personal is political. Thanks to feminism we fight so that the State, or the Church, or any other person cannot decide about our bodies. Many issues went unspoken. Even today there are issues that are silenced, about which nothing is being said, or, as happens with feminism, only myths and stereotypes about it are reproduced.

Organized women going into the street to demand our rights also know that we are not the same, that not all of us think alike, that there are issues dividing us. This is not new: it happened within feminism when it became evident that the fight of the white women who were speaking on behalf of the movement was very different from the reality of Afrodescendant women, or reflected only the needs of straight women ignoring lesbian priorities. Trans women have also suffered violence and exclusion even within the movement. Thinking and activism are dynamic and claims have been evolving to reflect the urgent needs of different collectives that can self-define as feminists.

In the same way there is no single definition of 'woman' that we can all feel reflected in, it is impossible to define 'feminism' in a way that reflects the activism of all of us. On the basis of consensus, acknowledging our differences, we have managed to build different feminisms that have been able to strategically define our struggles over the years. One agreement we have as a movement is that women's voices cannot keep being silenced, that **silence is not healthy**, that we were condemned to the inside, to the private sphere, to our homes for too long. **We respect each and every compañera, we listen to her personal experience, we understand that each individual story is not that of the collective, and we know that rights cannot be denied, and** that if access to human rights is not guaranteed for all, then they are not universal human rights, but are privileges.

This is why we are writing these lines. Because for too long women sex workers have been relegated to a red-light area that is actually grey: to the borders of legality, to the borders of marginality. It is said that ours is “the



oldest profession”, but we are also seen as a badly kept secret, a shame for (double standards of) morality and good (and saintly) customs. Women sex workers refuse to keep hiding. We organized ourselves to make visible the precarious conditions into which being clandestine forces us, to demand **that our existence stops being overlooked and our will ignored**. And in that struggle, addressed to States, police forces, health and legal systems and the media, we find the need to also talk to our feminist abolitionist compañeras. **We are not going to be silent accomplices to the hypocrisy advocating for equality and freedom for all but portraying us as victims without will or decision-making power**. What kind of feminism wants to give power to one woman to decide what is best for another without listening to her, without respecting her voice? Wasn't this a movement for our self-determination? Isn't the right to decide about our own bodies a core feminist issue? Shouldn't it be women ourselves who reclaim our voices and speak for ourselves? In this context, where is sorority?

We are used to having our voice disqualified: neither the police nor the judicial system takes our claims seriously, **we are killed and nobody goes to jail, we are raped and nobody cares**. The silence of other feminist compañeras, who fight so hard for equal rights and opportunities for other collectives, hurts us. We are alone when we expose the murder of our leaders and activists, Sandra Cabrera, “Karla” Angélica Quintanilla, and more than 300 killed in the last 10 years. These are all crimes that remain unpunished and whose perpetrators are free. In the meantime, we demonstrate alone, with the silence, the condemnation and the discrediting weighting like a stigma. **Sometimes, this rejection hurts more than the beatings that life has made us used to: that a feminist compañera, who knows about the violence women in general and women sex workers in particular suffer, is against our struggle, calls us “pimps”, invalidates our desire, annuls our will, undermines our power**. It hurts that she is not sensitized when hearing about how our rights are trampled upon by the very States and institutions that should guarantee them: our right to equal and non-discriminatory treatment, to work, to safety, to freedom, to decisions about our own bodies, to sexual health and privacy. Throughout Latin America and the Caribbean there are laws stopping us from working, Misdemeanour Codes that are invoked as an excuse for arbitrary arrests, extortions, robbery and rape perpetrated against us. The police take what little we have, leaving us completely unprotected because nobody cares about what happens to a sex worker.

This is why we thought there is a need to clarify some ideas:

- We are not passive objects for men to enjoy. We are adult women who decide about our lives, our bodies and our profession in an autonomous way.
- We are not victims and we don't want to be rescued. Trafficking for sexual exploitation exists and it is a crime that needs to be stopped. To confuse trafficking with sex work does not contribute to this end: it only leads to misusing resources, jailing innocent people, trying to “rescue” those who have no interest in being “saved”, while the trafficking network and its leaders continue to go unpunished.
- Sex work is not illegal: what is illegal is that we don't have any kind of social security - we cannot retire, access health insurance, open a bank account, and, even less, aspire to a loan. We have no right whatsoever as workers.

It is undeniable that we must join forces against exploitation (labor and sexual), against trafficking of persons (men, women, boys or girls, for any purpose), against all forms of violence against women, against machismo that kills every day. The only way to move forward in the struggle, to achieve our claims is to act together, listening to the desires and realities of each one, understanding that criminalization and clandestinity have disastrous consequences, both in the case of abortion and of sex work. Have you thought about what the implications of being condemned to clandestinity are for our daily life?

Violence is not a necessary feature of sex work if we are able to sanction laws that protect us as workers and in the drafting of which we can be involved. **Acknowledging our rights and providing us with the legal framework that we so badly need is the only solution to stop the ongoing violation of our rights, to break the stigma portraying us merely as pieces of meat used by men. To acknowledge us as workers is to respect us as rights-holders and to stop ignoring and demeaning us.**

Women are not second-class citizens. This, that is obvious today, would not be so without the work of feminism. Women sex workers are not persons without our own desires or will. We are women, we are organized, we know about our rights. We want the best for ourselves, for our children, for our families and for all women. **To be a feminist is to fight for equal rights, knowing that the possibility that we all are able to choose will present us with the possibility that our choices may differ... and that what we choose is not necessarily what everyone else will.**

Caring for, respecting and acknowledging the other starts by listening to them. **My abolitionist sister, we invite you to listen to us.**



The image features a grid of logos for various organizations, including ASOCIACION LA SALA, MODERNU, ammar, Redtrabsex, UNES, and others. To the right of the grid is a map of Latin America and the Caribbean, with an orange arrow pointing to the continent. Below the map is the text "RedTraSex" and "Red de Mujeres Trabajadoras Sexuales de Latinoamérica y el Caribe".

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