

# Legalize prostitution? Hell no

Melanie Thompson

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The shock of reading that state legislators are calling for the legalization of prostitution in our state still leaves me shaking. Sens. Julia Salazar and Jessica Ramos are leading the charge, joined by Sen. Brad Hoylman and Assemblyman Dick Gottfried. They are pushing to fully decriminalize the sex trade, meaning pimps and johns alike would get a free ride for the harms they cause.

As if the sordid and dangerous business of prostitution is like consuming marijuana. New Yorkers should know that the vast majority of people in prostitution were sex-trafficked as children, homeless, sexually abused, in foster care or otherwise racially and economically marginalized. When they turn 18, they don't magically become "consenting adults" who stay freely in the sex trade. The trauma they experienced never goes away.

I know. I am one of them. I was bought and sold countless times for sex. I was only 12. My pimp, like all pimps, profited from my sex buyers' dollars. The NYPD arrested me for my exploitation. I was blamed for my agony.

So I'm not defending the way our laws currently work, but I'm also absolutely convinced that giving this entire awful industry a legal seal of approval is just about the worst way forward.

Thousands of us, mostly black and brown girls like me, are bought by men with money, like New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft or Wall Street financier Jeffrey Epstein, but also your neighbor. Black women and girls represent about 7% of the U.S. population, yet by some measures are more than half of those in the sex trade.

I don't know one sex-trade survivor who would call prostitution safe, empowering or an act of agency or autonomy. Sex buyers don't care whether the person they purchase is 18 or younger, trafficked or not, "consenting" or not. They just see us as disposable objects to satisfy their sexual needs. I can't describe on this page what these men have done to me. Why would New York want to legalize indescribable violence?

The legislators say they're combating exploitation. Their argument, roughly, goes: When prostitution is illegal, women are especially powerless to report crimes against them. Bring it out of the shadows and women will be fine.

But this represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what prostitution is. It's neither sex nor work, but an inherently harmful practice, rooted in gendered violence and discrimination based on sex and race.

If prostitution is deemed "work" under New York law, the likelihood that people in prostitution would gain access to the specialized services they require is close to non-existent. If prostitution is a job like any other, why would the state be under any obligation to provide housing or exit services? Will New York offer disenfranchised girls application forms to work in brothels or illicit massage parlors?

There's screaming hypocrisy here. Some of the very same people who are working hard to raise consciousness about sexual abuse, harassment and exploitation through the #MeToo movement are ready to tell New York that sexual violence, harassment and dehumanization, which are inextricable from prostitution, should be formally protected under our laws.

The right way to fix the laws is to decriminalize only us, the victims. Stop arresting us, charging us with loitering or worse, abusing us, preventing us from moving on with our lives because of prostitution convictions.

But ensure that it remains a crime — in fact a serious crime — to be a pimp, or to pay for sex. That's the only honest way to protect the people these legislators claim to care about.

*Thompson is a survivor advocate.*