

Listen to the sex workers – but which ones?

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Sunday 9 August 2015 00.05 BST

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/09/listen-to-sex-workers-but-which-ones>

The debate about decriminalising the sex trade will never be resolved while opinion is so polarized.



Protesters mark the international day to end violence against sex workers, organised by the English Collective of Prostitutes, in London. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

There should be a word for an idea that is sensible in moderation, but becomes toxic if taken to extremes. Perhaps we could call it an **alcoption**. In the recent debates about [Amnesty International changing its policy on prostitution](#), we've heard a lot of one particular alcoption: to fight our way through the legal, ethical and safety concerns, the answer is simple – we should ignore everyone else and “listen to sex workers”.

Those pushing this line present the current debate as a straightforward dichotomy: on one side are sex workers, an apparently homogenous group who want decriminalisation of both sides of a sexual transaction.

On the other side are Lena Dunham, Meryl Streep and assorted actresses who signed a letter to Amnesty saying that decriminalising sex buyers was siding with “pimps and other exploiters”.

According to the prevailing tide of internet feminism, it is easy to tell who is right. You simply look at who is speaking. “Stay in your lane, rich ladies,” sniped a writer at Feministing. “People who trade sex need people to listen to them. And they don’t need you.” But framing the debate this way is absurdly misleading. It conveniently ignores that the Amnesty letter wasn’t only signed by Dunham – she is not the sole arbiter of feminism in 2015, whatever 1,000 overwrought blogs would have you believe. It was also endorsed by charities, academic researchers and those who style themselves as “prostitution survivors”. These are women with direct experience of the sex trade who believe it is intrinsically demeaning and harmful.

And there it is, the problem with the injunction to “listen to sex workers”. Yes, policy debates are too often conducted on Mount Olympus, far from the lives of those affected by them. We should be alert to that. But from this moderate premise blooms an alcopinion. If we are ordered to listen to sex workers, the obvious retort must be: which ones?

Unsurprisingly, women who experience prostitution as little more than paid rape will do everything they can to leave the trade. But that means they’re not sex workers any more. So – hey presto – their opinions can be discounted. We end up in a “no true Scotsman” situation that skews the answers we get; only people with an overall positive view are permitted to talk about that industry. It’s as if the Leveson inquiry had only heard from *News of the World* journalists.

There is another problem with the current fashion for divining authority from personal experience. It forces disclosure. In the case of the Amnesty debate, there is an implicit demand that women must lay bare their personal sexual histories to gain the right to speak. (Oddly, men never seem to have to preface their thoughts with: “As a long-term punter, I believe...”) Not everyone who has sold sex wants to go public about it. Are those people not allowed to speak? Finally, prostitution is a public policy issue. We all live in a society in which sex is bought and sold and its existence has consequences for all of us. Demanding that the vast majority of us shut up is like telling renters they can have no

opinion on the mortgage market or that atheists can't complain about faith schools.

Lived experience gives a speaker a unique form of insight, but our infatuation with identity has led us to an intellectual dead end. Arguments often become an exercise in finding a member of a minority group to act as an avatar for our existing beliefs. In the 1980s, Bill Cosby was praised by the right for telling black Americans to work harder and be more respectable; today, there is no shortage of articles where the headline might as well be "Why I as a [blank], think X about Y".

Gallingly, in the case of the Amnesty debate, the sound and fury obscures that there is significant agreement between the two sides. Both abolitionists and pressure groups such as the English Collective of Prostitutes want to end humiliating police tactics; better support for vulnerable women and no more criminal records for those who sell sex. Reciting identity-based pieties, like a modern form of the rosary, won't help any of that. So yes, let's listen to people who have sold sex. But not just the ones we agree with.

Keep the shows short and the punters happy



Short and sweet: Sinéad Cusack in *Splendour* at the Donmar. Photograph: Johan Persson

It is one of life's underrated pleasures, to look at a theatre programme and see the words: "Running time: 1h 30m. No interval."

The last two plays I have seen – *Constellations* at Trafalgar Studios, and *Splendour* at the Donmar, starring Sinéad Cusack – both clocked in at under two hours and they were all the better for it.

Both were intimate productions with intricate texts, nothing like the bloated beasts that often lumber across the West End stage.

They also had (relatively) affordable ticket prices and perhaps that explains why they were so pleasingly svelte.

If you are charging £50 or more for a ticket, the pressure is on to justify the expense with a bum-numbing running time, whether the play deserves it or not. Never mind the quality, feel the length!

Even Shakespeare usually benefits from a trim. I'm pleased to see that Benedict Cumberbatch's *Hamlet* is a nimble two-and-a-half hours, whereas Kenneth Branagh made his film version last more than four.

With the Bard, there is one simple rule: cut half the jokes that depend on you knowing a 16th-century slang term for a vagina.

Me replaced by a robot? Come off it



Charles Lawson, an electrical engineer from Kettering, lights his robot's cigarette in 1939. In the future, will the roles be reversed?
Photograph: Fox Photos/Getty Images

Stella Creasy is worried about the Terminator. Well, the termination of jobs, actually. When I interviewed her on 4 August, the Labour deputy leadership candidate said debates about workers' rights too often ignored the disruptive effects of technology. As she put it: "Nigel Farage bangs on about the Romanians. He doesn't talk about the robots."

That might sound fanciful – there is no threat of Skynet gaining sentience and obliterating the human race just yet – but the rise of the robots is already worrying forward-thinking economists. Last year, [Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee](#) heralded a "second machine age" where automatons would take over mental tasks in the way they have replaced manual work. The consequence could be increased leisure time and living standards for everyone – or it might lead to an elite class of rich robot-owners, with everyone else left scrabbling over whatever badly paid jobs remain.

The latter vision of the future presents a huge challenge to the left, because guarding workers' rights will be more important than ever, and workers themselves will be increasingly easy to replace. Take the tube strikes: drivers can improve pay and conditions through walkouts as long as their actions reliably bring the transport network to a halt. But driverless trains are coming. Out on the roads, Uber now "disrupts" the income of cabbies; but in 20 years, both might be replaced by Google's driverless cars.

Expect to hear more about this subject because, according to Martin Ford's new book, *The Rise of The Robots*, automation threatens mass employment among professionals and creatives as well as manual workers. Yes, that includes journalists. Ford suggests one answer – a universal basic income. It's an idea that has already gained admirers on the radical left and the Green party adopted it as a policy for the 2015 election. It will get even more attention once newspaper columnists realise they too could be replaced by jumped-up toasters.