

Policing and public health interventions into sex workers' lives: necropolitical assemblages and alternative visions of social justice

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Abstract

While extensive literature documents how criminalisation harms sex workers' health and rights, limited research has critically examined how interactions between criminal-justice, health, and other systems shape support and justice for and by people who sell sex. We attend to this question by drawing on participatory, qualitative research with a diverse group of sex workers and other stakeholders in East London, UK. In addition to directly and structurally-violent enforcement practices, we identified wider, necropolitical assemblages and practices – across police, local and immigration authorities, health and social services – that disciplined sex workers' lives, responsibilised them for their health, and defunded specialist services grounded in lived realities, amid tensions over sex-work governance. These effects – grounded in notions of community and vulnerability that often privileged residents' concerns over threats to sex workers' safety and health – impacted marginalised and minoritised cis and trans women the most. Those who worked on the street and used drugs, were migrants, and/or women of colour were particularly targeted for enforcement, discounted when reporting violence and impacted by service cuts. Yet participants' appeals for redirection of funds from enforcement towards respectful, peer-led services reflected claims to social justice on their own terms. We recommend (re)commissioning health and support services that respond to sex workers' diverse realities, with and by them, alongside concerted efforts to end policies and practices that criminalise, punish, and blame. This would help to alleviate the health and social harms that we document, in support of inclusive participation in health and broader social justice goals.

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