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Raani Begum and Sultana Bibi of Project Safe and Philadelphia Red Umbrella Alliance
Destigmatize, Decriminalize, Decarcerate
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The following essay is written by Raani Begum and Sultana Bibi, members of Philadelphia Red Umbrella Alliance and Project Safe. Significant contributions on "Safe Supplies Saves Lives" from Jen Bowles, Project Safe

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# Destigmatize, Decriminalize, Decarcerate

## A Racial Justice Lens on Sex Worker Rights and Harm Reduction

Raani Begum and Sultana Bibi of Project Safe and Philadelphia Red Umbrella Alliance

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In her 1992 essay "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," Sylvia Wynter brought her colleagues' attention to the LAPD's inhumane use of the N.H.I acronym which means "No Humans Involved." Wynter begins by telling us about the police's use of the acronym to refer to "any case involving a breach of the rights of [Black people] who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos." She then explains how people are only classified as human when they fall in line with the thinking and behaviours of the status quo. Nonconformance with the established order of white supremacy renders Black and other people of color inhuman.

It is in this context that we bring up the rights of people who trade sex and people who use drugs. The use of erotic labor and drugs has existed in all of our communities over millenia. In fact, some of the earliest written documentation of sex work organizing dates back to the Vedic Era (early iron age). Suffice to say, all people

have engaged in erotic labor and drug use for spriritual, medicinal, and recreational purposes historically. We recognize the deep pains that slavery and colonialisim have brought to our communities and the means by which white supremacy has disrupted our original ways of being. Concurrently, we believe that criminalization and blanket solutions of prohibition and recovery won't address the root issues of lack of safety, access to livelihoods, and security facing our communities. Communities thrive on connection; sex work and drug use, when occuring in particular conditions, foster connection and cohesiveness and can meet a community's unspoken needs.

The ruling, white supremacist class recognizes the power of sex, sex work, and drugs and uses the legal system to inflict violence on and murder our loved ones who create and provide access; it deems them inhuman. It often successfully disappears the memories of our dead. The psychic impact of this on our community is devastating. Those deemed forgettable and "undesirable" are then further considered disposable in our own communities and relentlessly targeted from both within and without.

**We believe that sex work and drug use are not inherently harmful activities**. The harm of sex work and drug use comes from policing, settler colonialism, and white supremacy. Policing drives people underground and exposes them to the risk of violence and death.

OUR ADVOCACY CENTERS THE FOLLOWING ISSUES:

- **Full decriminalization of sex work:** Neither sex workers nor their clients must be criminalized. Neither should any governing body wield the power to decide who gets to work, how and where (i.e. licensing systems that are used in countries where sex work is legalized instead of decriminalized). No legal entity should be in control of anyone's body. All workers have a right to work without harassment or fear of governmental or communal stigma. No worker's families or

communal ecosystems deserve to be threatened simply because of the economic activities they are engaging in.

- **Full decriminalization of selling and purchasing of drugs:** Neither people who sell drugs or buy and consume them must be criminalized. Drug dealers often provide important and crucial medicines and substances that enable people to cope with the nightmarish conditions that they endure under capitalism.

- **Decriminalization as a project of Police Abolition:** Decriminalizing the sex and drug trades abolishes the need for vice units. This is a concrete step towards defunding the police, one department at a time. Additionally, people must be able to engage in these activities without the fear of police harassment. Many of our community members engage in the informal economies for various reasons. They have a right to work without fear of police, ICE, or any other harassment imposed by the State and their agencies.

- **Decriminalization as a project of Community Restoration**: Money saved from defunding the police should be used to pay for needs identified by communities themselves. For instance, Project SAFE members have identified housing, transportation, and food as primary unmet needs. Diverted money could be used to enable communities to build a foundation that they have never been able to secure. The sex and drug trades and the constellation of services surrounding these trades can all thrive and become important contributors to economic sustainability and stability.

- **Safe Supply Saves Lives**: Safe supply drug program are a critical pathway to reducing drug-associated harms, including fatal overdose. The unregulated drug supply has become increasingly adulterated with harmful agents like fentanyl,

which often occurs unbeknownst to drug sellers. Safe supply programs are being implemented in various countries and show promise in reducing harms associated with using unregulated drugs. A safe supply program consists of medical providers who prescribe medications like hydromorphone at doses that reduce or eliminate reliance on unregulated drugs. Prescribers and patients work together to find appropriate doses. This way, people who use drugs have certainty of the quality and strength of the drugs they are using, which reduces harm. When people give or sell drugs received through safe supply programs to peers, they are helping improve the quality of the community drug supply and assist people who can't access such services safer drugs to use. They are practicing harm reduction.

- **Decriminalization as a project towards Land Back:** We believe that stewardship of land must be returned to indigenous people across the globe. The harm of drug use comes from settler colonialism and white supremacy, not from the plants that are used for their psychoactive qualities. Our drug supplies must be thoughtfully curated so that they do not further harm the land or fuel our way towards a greater climate crisis. The only way to stop the climate crisis and grow plants in harmony with the land is to return the stewardship of land back to the First People.

- **Decriminalization as a project of Bodily Autonomy**: Bodily autonomy for marginalized and racialized people is always up for debate under white supremacy. We believe that the right to access sex work ties intimately with the right to access abortion, and other medication as needed without the fear of stigma. Abortion is not "shameful" and should not be considered as a solution of last resort. Rather, it is part of the human experience and healthy sexuality. In



the same way, our community should be able to ask for pain and other prescriptions from their health providers without the taboos of any substance being "addictive." Afterall, water and food is necessary for survival and is "addictive." So is medication regardless of whether people use it medicinally or recreationally. This is intimately tied to disability justice.

- **Decriminalization as a project of Survivor Justice**: Sex workers and other criminalized people often come up with unique solutions to combat sexual violence and intimate partner violence in their own communities. Turning to the police is not an option and we do not believe that policing can eradicate rape and intimate partner violence. Sex workers are often intimately aware of how revenge porn is used and how abusive family or community members can weaponize stigma into coercing victims to stay in abusive situations. We believe that eliminating barriers to resources such as housing, healthcare, and increasing wages across the board allows survivors to lead the autonomous lives they desire and deserve.