

Sex Work & Racism

Community Report #1:
Historical Overview of Racism in
Anti-Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking, &
Anti-Immigration (ASWTI) Legislation
A Summary



In the spring of 2022, the European Sex Workers Rights Alliance ([ESWA](#)) produced the first of a series of papers, which explores the relationship between racism and sex work. This first community report, entitled [Sex Work & Racism: Historical Overview of Racism in Anti-Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Immigration Legislation in Europe](#) (ESWA, 2022), is a historical overview of the racist and colonial origins that underpin current anti-immigration, anti-sex work and anti-trafficking (ASWTI) laws.

The report begins with charting the course of chattel slavery, colonialism and militarised prostitution (beginning in the sixteenth century). Colonial violence and chattel slavery ruled sexual, gender and kinship relations, in order to maintain white supremacy, strengthen racial purity and protect the (perceived) sexual purity of white women. Black women and women of colour were categorised as inherently sexually promiscuous and sexually available; 'control and terror mechanisms' (hooks, 1981) such as institutionalised rape, medical experimentation and militarised prostitution ensured white men had access to racialised women. Black men were hypermasculinised and constructed as rapists, while other men of colour were considered emasculate, to deter white women from forming sexual relationships with them. Forced childbearing produced mixed-race children; their lighter complexions were favoured by colonists. White men, crucially, were never charged with rape or any other forms of violence they enacted.

The report then moves on to connect the violent legacies of colonialism and racism with current-day policies and legislations, which disproportionately harm racialised and migrant sex workers. What is clear is that **throughout history to our present day, anti-sex work and anti-trafficking laws - and their accompanying moral panics - have been leveraged to fuel a racist, anti-migrant political agenda.**

Fears about human trafficking - specifically trafficking for sexual purposes - is exacerbated following world events, in which global borders and their politics change or shift. Historically, migration en masse - particularly of women - has heightened moral panic over class and race relations, leading to tighter, more

more punitive legislation around both migration and sex work.

The narrative dominating these debates is led by liberal feminism¹ and religious fundamentalists, who believe that all forms of sex work are male-perpetrated violence, are rape, and therefore cannot be distinguished from sexual slavery. Those that call for the [criminalisation of clients](#) - often called the Swedish model - ignore the abundant evidence that demonstrates that criminalisation² puts people at [further risk of violence](#).

Modern-day ASWTI laws resolutely ignore the realities that policed borders produce for those who need to migrate, and the realities of poverty that push migrant and racialised communities into sex work. Abolitionist feminists focus only on the gendered nature of labour exchange, without taking into account any other [intersectional](#) forms of oppressions that also shape their needs. While wealthy white women uphold their proximity to power and privilege, carving careers out of a global rescue industry (Agustín, 2007), ASWTI laws expose migrant and racialised sex workers to more violence, and more vulnerabilities.

Works Cited

Agustin, L. (2007). *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets, and the rescue industry*. Zed Books

European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance. (2022). *Sex Work & Racism: Historical Overview of Racism in Anti-Sex Work, Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Immigration Legislation in Europe*. Retrieved from https://assets.nationbuilder.com/eswa/pages/234/attachments/original/1649756144/SW___Racism_-_aligned.pdf?1649756144

hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press

1 Also called abolitionist feminists, the majority of whom are white, have secure migrant status, and are middle-class.

2 This includes the criminalisation of any aspect of sexual services for money and/or resources, and sex workers' surrounding vulnerabilities (drug use, migrant status, gender expression, for example)