

Conversation Guide: Decriminalizing Prostitution

This framework for this conversation guide is adapted from [Living Room Conversations](#), an open source project that offers a simple, sociable and structured way to practice communicating across differences while building understanding and relationships. Typically, 4-6 people meet in person or by video call for about 90 minutes. Rather than debating or convincing others, we take turns talking to share, learn, and be curious. No preparation is required, though background links with balanced views can be made available. For this conversation topic, we recommend reviewing the following briefs from World Without Exploitation and the ACLU respectively:

- [Equal Not Exploited: An overview of the global sex trade and trafficking crisis, and the case for the Equality Model](#)
- [Is Sex Work Decriminalization the Answer? What the Research Tells Us](#)

The description of the topic found in Section III is based on these briefs.

I. Introductions: Why We're Here (~20 minutes)

Each participant has 1 minute to introduce themselves.

- Share your name, where you live, and what drew you here.

Each participant can take 1-2 minutes to answer one of these questions:

- What are your hopes and concerns for this conversation?
- How do you think your faith will guide you in this conversation?

II. Conversation Agreements: How We'll Engage (~5 minutes)

These will set the tone of our conversation; participants may volunteer to take turns reading them aloud.

- **Be curious and listen to understand.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others' experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.
- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.
- **Note any common ground as well as any differences.** Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.
- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what's important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.
- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.

- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the “time out” sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

III. Biblical Reflection (~15 min)

Have a participant read aloud the following passage of Scripture.

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’ (John 8:1-11)

Take turns reflecting on any the following themes in this passage: sex, rejection/acceptance, community.

IV. Exploring the Topic – Decriminalizing Prostitution (~45 min)

One or more participants can volunteer to read the following paragraphs.

In the United States, conversations about how to address the sex trade are occurring with increasing frequency. In the past few years, several jurisdictions have considered legislation to fully or partially decriminalize prostitution. There is no question that the illegal sex trade is harmful to those exploited in it. Harms include physical and sexual assaults, permanent physical injury, mental illness, substance addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-harming, and suicide, among others.

The sex trade includes prostitution of consenting adults as well as forced prostitution, or sex trafficking. Sex trafficking occurs when someone uses means that include threats or use of force, fraud, coercion, abuse of power or position of vulnerability for purposes of commercial sexual exploitation. It also includes the commercial exploitation of a minor, regardless of whether any of these means are present.

There is broad consensus in the gender justice and human rights communities – and across the political spectrum – that those who have been prostituted or trafficked for sex should not be criminalized. Beyond this fundamental area of agreement, however, there are two diverging views.

On one side are those who argue for full decriminalization or legalization of the commercial sex industry, including pimping, brothel keeping, and buying sex. This has been broadly defined as the Full Decriminalization Model or “sex workers’ rights” position. At the heart of this model are the following arguments:

- Consensual prostitution should be a legal and legitimate business that allows consenting adults to trade sex acts for money.
- Normalizing prostitution is important to destigmatizing people engaged in prostitution and ensuring access to needed health care.
- The sex trade becomes safer when those engaged in prostitution can report violent crime without fear of arrest or incarceration, and when they can unionize and advocate for better working conditions.
- Decriminalization must include both the buying and selling of sex. Otherwise, people engaged in consensual prostitution (“sex workers”) are still part of an illegal industry and cannot achieve the safety and economic security that full decriminalization affords.

On the other side are proponents of partial decriminalization – those who argue for the decriminalization of people prostituted or trafficked, while continuing to criminalize pimps, brothel owners and sex buyers. This is the Equality Model or “end demand” model, named for its goal to promote gender equality by ending the demand for commercial sexual exploitation. At the heart of this model are the following arguments:

- Most prostitution is not voluntary or consensual. It is sex trafficking of vulnerable and marginalized individuals, many of whom entered the sex trade as minors. Therefore, prostituted persons should be treated as victims of a crime and provided social services to exit the sex trade.
- Prostitution is gender-based violence. It is inherently dangerous, oppressive, and discriminatory against women, including transgender women.
- Prostitution in the U.S. involves race-based exploitation with roots in European colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade. Prostituted persons are disproportionately women and girls of color.
- Fully decriminalizing prostitution increases the demand for commercial sex, causing the sex trade to grow. This, in turn, increases sex trafficking because there are not enough prostituted people willing to fill that demand voluntarily. In other words, consensual prostitution and sex trafficking are so intertwined that trying to make legal provision for the former causes a spike in the latter.
- The commercial sexual exploitation of children increases in jurisdictions where prostitution is legalized or fully decriminalized.

Engaging in honest conversation about prostitution provides an opportunity to explore the depths of our beliefs about sex, freedom, gender equality and human rights.

Take ~2 minutes each to answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered a question, the group may take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions/responses. Continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

Optional: a participant can keep track of time and gently let people know when their time has elapsed.

- What are the social norms that enable prostitution to flourish in this day and age?
- How might social norms around prostitution change under the Equality Model? The Full Decriminalization Model?
- What is really at the heart of the debate?
- Share something from your life experience that informs your response to, or position on, decriminalizing prostitution.
- How does your faith inform the way you think about these issues?
- Which, if any, gray areas have you identified within your own position?
- How would Jesus seek out and serve those engaged in prostitution?

Round Three: Reflecting on the Conversation (~15 min)

Take 2 minutes to answer one of the following questions:

- What was most meaningful / valuable to you in this conversation?
- What learning, new understanding or common ground was found on the topic?
- Has this conversation changed how you hear the Bible story we read?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?