



*Speech at the opening of the photo exhibition and presentation of The Reimagining Sex Work Media Guide*

*Thursday, September 29, 2022, Utrecht*

Good afternoon you all!

My name is Mischa and as you can hear I am from the South of the Netherlands. This story comes with a soft g. I will tell you about the genesis of Reimagining Sex Work but first I would really like to thank all the people involved

Sex Work collectives with good ideas and little money, it pays to write to funds like the [VSBfund](#): everyone participate, even sex workers!

And also the [SWAD](#) supported us financially and are a dear ally

Thanks to the [university](#) for the catering and this beautiful exhibition space, in this former medieval monastery

Our thanks also go to [Belle Hulpverlening](#) in Utrecht, [CandyShop](#) in Tilburg, [P&G292](#) and [PIC](#) in Amsterdam. Thanks for the hospitality and for the beautiful locations we were allowed to use for the photo shoots

Big thanks to all the photographers, journalists and editors involved. Many thanks for your creative ideas, honest advice and your dedication was touching

Our fondest gratitude is to the sex workers and models. Without you we would not be here. Thanks to you, new photos have appeared in the image banks and other stories in the newspapers. A movement has been set in motion. You are the inspiration, the champions and the protagonists!

This story of why we are all together now begins with a photo taken of a sex worker on the Rooie Brug here in Utrecht. A photo of a dear activist, Caja, on her last day of work in her work clothes, on the day the boats at the Zandpad were about to close. That photo of her was in all the newspapers, with every article about sex work. Even with articles that were not about sex work

It was no secret in our community that she found it distressing to still be confronted years later at unexpected moments with this photo and with the sad and unjustified closure of her beloved workplace

During an interview 3 years ago, I asked a journalist why this photo was always posted. The simple reason was that there were not enough photos of sex workers in the image banks for journalism! It seemed like a good idea to supplement the image banks with photos of sex workers so that image editors would have a choice

At the same time, I heard from sex workers and researchers Sarah, Yvette and Minke who were inspired by a guide written by sex workers in South Africa. This guide for journalists helps them write respectfully about sex work. Journalists cannot know everything, sex work is one of the many topics they write about

Such a guide could also be useful for Dutch journalists. We have been reading about “illegal prostitution” since 2000. With illegal prostitutes, people quickly think of criminals. They become afraid of us and want nothing to do with us, or think we need help and want to rescue us

We ourselves prefer to speak of unlicensed rather than illegal. After all, prostitution was already legal in the Netherlands, brothels were illegal. Since the lifting of the brothel ban in 2000, it is exactly the other way around: now brothels are legal and all prostitutes not working in brothels are illegal

Municipalities are actually using the legalization of brothels to close down as many workplaces as possible. Mayors do not keep sex workers in their cities, we ruin the sight. Sex workers are chased out of their safe workplaces, into illegality, to where lawlessness reigns. And the land is sold highly to property developers. Since 2000, 80% of safe and legal workplaces in the Netherlands have been closed down! Here in Utrecht alone the boats on the Zandpad, the windows on the Hardebollen and the working street on the Europalaan

Working from home or in a hotel for a sex worker is no longer allowed either. Police checks sex workers who advertise on the internet. A sex worker thinks they are opening the door to a client and suddenly there are 5 policemen in their house. Hotels in Utrecht have had to close because of this and sex workers have received fines and injunctions and have been evicted from their homes or from the country

In which other profession are 5 police officers raiding self-employed worker's workplace to check whether they have a license?

In what other profession are independent workers evicted from their homes for administrative violations?

In which other profession do criminals threaten the victim during a robbery that they will call the police if they screams?

An illegal prostitute is seen by society as the saddest of the sad. Selling your body is the lowest thing you can do. Whore is the worst swear word for a woman. Whores do not deserve respect but contempt and humiliation and therefore are often targets of violence

Calling honest working sex workers illegal prostitutes makes violence against sex workers their own fault and causes violence against prostitutes, sex workers, whores, sluts and hoers to increase. It becomes more dangerous for anyone who does not abide by the imposed sexual morality!

When you hopefully never read in the newspaper from today on that an illegal prostitution business has been busted, remember that this could also be that sex worker who has now become homeless. Unintentionally, reporters take language from politicians and police but do not seem to speak to sex workers themselves. On the news we often hear only 1 side of the story

Because many sex workers in the Netherlands are not openly sex workers, most people only learn about sex work through news, television series or pornography. The media play an important role in maintaining false assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes

Everyone has prejudices. This is the easiest and goes fastest and takes the least effort. Conscious thinking takes effort. Being lazy is our nature. All of us look at the world in stereotypes; this is how we understand the world

The more often stereotypes and prejudices are repeated, the deeper they wear into our brain, the sooner we begin to believe them. Repetition becomes recognition, recognition becomes familiarity, and familiarity cannot be distinguished from truth. Stereotypes and prejudices are assumed to be true

We wish we were rational, this we are not, we are irrational beings. We can show so many scientific studies to the contrary, activists know, numbers do not convince! Stories are believed though. Who tells the story has the power

The media can help reduce prejudice, stereotypes and stigma. Giving more sex workers the stage and more sex worker stories on TV or in the newspaper contribute to a more complete picture of truth and reality

You do not refute a stereotype by showing 1 person who does not fit the stereotypical image. More sex workers are needed, it is important to show the diversity within our community so that people get a multifaceted picture of sex workers. Always the same images confirms the stereotype, therefore it is important to tell new stories

Language and images together form a story. Sarah, Yvette, Minke, Brenda and I decided to combine our ideas and inspirations and thus Reimagining Sex Work was born. We set out to create acceptance of sexual freedom and diversity by presenting a nuanced image of people working in the sex industry. We want to live in a city where all sex workers can be safe

Minke and I are action researchers and we are fans of this methodology where people from different backgrounds connect to think about positive solutions together. In this case, we tried this with sex workers and journalists, not close friends with each other

The online focus group with Caja is particularly dear to my memory. She told her side of the story, how it felt for her to lose so much from one day to the next; her income, her day job, her workplace, her colleagues, her clients. Her independence, her freedom, her security. Journalists had no idea! We also organized photography workshops, sex workers photographed their own world

Sex workers, photographers and journalists got into conversation and so much beauty emerged:

- ♥ Photos were added to journalism image banks so image editors now have more choice
- ♥ There is a manual for journalists and sex workers, written by journalists and sex workers
- ♥ And the one photo that started it all has disappeared from the image bank and we will never see it in the newspaper again. We don't have to anymore because the image banks are filled with wonderful new photos about sex work in collaboration with sex workers themselves

Today different stories are told, they don't have to be beautiful stories, we don't want to sell fairy tales, as long as they are true stories of real sex workers.

This is only the beginning. A change has been set in motion, an alliance between journalists, photographers, editors, scientists and sex workers has emerged, our community is growing. Already articles have appeared in daily newspapers created by those involved in Reimagining Sex Work. Photos taken by sex workers themselves, were in the newspaper!

We want to hear, see and read even more stories. There are still so many sex workers who have so many more stories to tell. You just have to listen

It's terrifying for me to stand here. But I am here anyway, to show, here we are and we are not leaving. On the street they call me whore, on the news they call me an illegal prostitute, I say: Sex worker

Increased visibility of sex workers leads to normalization, increasing acceptance in society for sexual diversity so that all people, all of us, are accepted in such a way that we all actually feel safe to openly be whoever or whatever we are

