

FairTradeSex: Project description

Today, there are labels for almost everything: From organically grown food, to sustainably harvested woods and of course products where the producers guarantee fair working conditions and salaries to the workers.

However, there is one field where we have no real label, where customers can get no guarantee that the service they receive is good and that the workers are treated with a minimal level dignity. We speak here of the supposedly oldest profession of the world. We speak of the professions that is probably most exposed to abuse, injustice and violence. We speak about prostitution.

One can generally condemn prostitution. One can deny that it exists. One can prohibit it. Or one can consider it as a legitimate profession.

We simply acknowledge that prostitution exists. But we don't accept all the risks and the injustice that often comes with it. We want to launch a label for safe, secure and fair sex that is marketed in a way that it will rapidly be recognized as THE standard worldwide.

Prostitution today

There are countries where prostitution is prohibited. In others, it's officially prohibited, but tolerated. And there are countries, where it's allowed but more or less strictly regulated. Whatever the situation is, prostitution often comes with the following traits:

- **Stigmatization:** Sex workers are often highly stigmatized. This can lead to psychological pressure under which many sex workers suffer. Once a sex worker, it becomes difficult to quit the job and start another activity.
- **Low entry barriers:** The barriers of the market are very low. Entering the business is rather simple. Thus, the pressure on the prices is high. This also means that the client (representing the demand) has a lot of economical power on the sex workers (representing the offer).
- **Health risks:** Although health conditions of sex workers have been improved in many countries, protected sex is still rather the exception. Since the market competition is high, many sex workers can't afford or don't want to reject clients who want unprotected sex.
- **Developing countries:** Particularly in developing countries, the working conditions of prostitutes are poor. Human trafficking and slavery linked to prostitution as well as underage sex workers are frequent.

One more point can be added: For a client it matters what a sex worker does to protect both her own and the clients health. Today, a client has no way to know if the sex worker has knowledge in that field and applies appropriate measures or not.

The goal of the project

The main goal of the present project is to empower sex workers to improve their working conditions and to better protect their own and the clients health.

The project is founded on the assumption that a client prefers the service of a sex workers who is committed to a good health protection and who works under fair conditions.

The project has two components:

- **The fair trade sex label:** Standards are a common tool to increase quality: If market players can agree on a standard and convince the client of its usefulness, they can influence the demand. The idea of the fair trade sex label goes in the same direction: Creating a standard for good working conditions, health care and education for sex workers.

- **The platform for fair trade sex:** In addition to the label, the idea is to create an online platform which helps certified sex workers to gain access to the market. On the other hand, such a platform would allow a client to take a conscious and responsible decision when visiting a sex worker.

The FairTradeSex label

Why such a label

A Fair Trade Sex label would have two effects:

- **Empower sex workers:** Today, the client has a lot of power. Providing a certain education to sex workers empowers them to better protect and defend themselves, on economic, social as well as physical level. In addition, a largely recognized standard can act as a certain barrier to enter the market. This can further strengthen the economic position of the sex worker.
- **Transparency:** The label would allow a customer to the possibility to prefer a sex worker that is well treated and that knows how to protect her/his and the client's health over one where the client has know idea about the sex worker's working conditions.

What to certify

We imagine a label that covers the following points:

- **Legal requirements:** Does the sex worker do his/her work out of her own will or is she or he forced to do it? Does the sex worker fulfill legal requirements (age, taxes, ...)
- **Knowledge:** Does the sex worker have sufficient knowledge about sex work, in particular about hygiene, but also in marketing, customer relationship, self defense, accounting, career planning, etc ?
- **Health care:** Does the prostitute have regular health checks to prevent spreading STD?

Ideally, all the costs involved with this label, including the course and medical care) is passed over to the client.

What scale to aim for

As it seems, there are currently only few local initiatives for labels or standards. We consider this as an opportunity to launch something of a worldwide scale. We furthermore think that it is possible to launch a label that doesn't matter only for clients that are sensitive to social issues, but to a majority of a population. We intend to a label that is so much a reference that someone who travels for example to Thailand for sex tourism automatically considers labeled sex workers only.

How to market it

Launching an international standard for sex work needs appropriate marketing, both towards sex workers as towards the clients.

- **Towards sex workers:** We consider "fairness" and "better working conditions" as the two major arguments to convince sex workers to adhere to the label. In addition, we hope to be able to provide certain services (for example the courses and/or the health checks) for free.
- **Towards clients:** Whereas "fairness" may be a selling proposition towards part of the population, we think that the main argument to convince clients is the "health protection" (both of the client and the sex worker).

Whereas we think that in an initial phase, there might be a considerable media echo on the project, it is important to place information about the label at all places a potential client looks for the services of a sex worker. The collaboration with all stakeholders is of course vital.

The online platform

Why should there also be an online platform? Many people may react positively to the idea of a label but be opposed to a platform that actually promotes prostitution.

We consider the platform as an important contribution to the success of the label for two reasons:

1. **Selling a label without a product?** Imagine creating and selling a label for good meat quality while being vegetarian and against meat consumption. It may work, but the chances of success are way higher if the label can be sold at least associated with the product or service.
2. **Empowering sex workers:** Part of the “unfairness” of the market of prostitution comes from the dependence of many sex workers to intermediates. We think that a well operated online platform where (certified) sex workers can sell themselves helps them to get more autonomy. It could in addition help to reduce street prostitution.

The basic concept

The idea is simple: An online platform is created on which a sex worker can create his or her own profile. A client who wants to get the services of a sex worker can search the directory with a sophisticated search engine based on geographical location, services offered, physical traits of the sex worker or other criteria. We intend to include even the criteria of “immediate availability” since the clients behavior in regards to sex is often impulsive.

A situation could be the following: a business man arrives at the airport. He has nothing planned for the evening. He takes his mobile phone and searches for female sex worker that is blond, for a fellatio, available in one hour. The mobile app allows him to search exactly for what he is looking for. The sex worker doesn't need to walk the streets and no intermediate is necessary.

Market leader

Here too we aim at developing a strong position in the market. The stronger this position is, the more successful the label itself, and the more we can empower sex workers. Making use of the latest (mobile) technologies will help to get to that position.

What's next

The initial project concept was elaborated within a workshop at the Startup Weekend in Lausanne on March 2nd to 4th 2012. The project idea was among the winners of the weekend's competition.

The positive feedback given to the project encourages us to further explore the feasibility of the project. We thus intend to contact organisations that are active in the field of prostitution to get their feedback and potential support.

If this feedback is positive, it would be necessary to work out a detailed project description both for the platform and for the label (we think that the two should be managed as two independent projects).

Conclusions

Through higher standards, it is not only possible to improve working conditions and health care of prostitutes. It would also be possible to increase the reputation of prostitution.

If a fair trade label is introduced successfully and this not only regionally, but world wide, the potential impact can be tremendous. We think that the time is right for such a project.