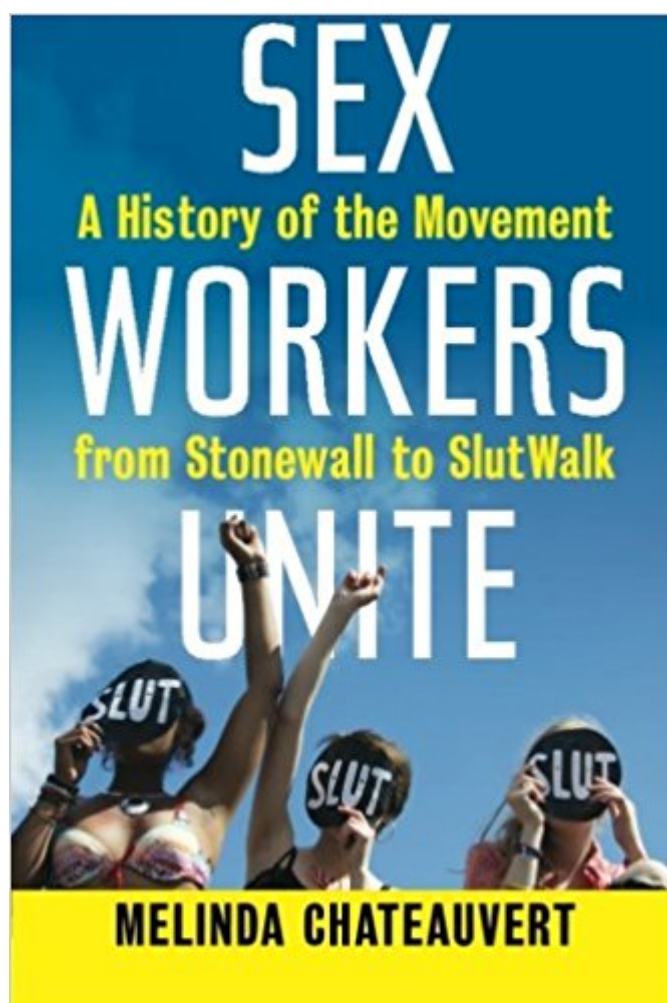


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# Sex Workers Unite: A History Of The Movement From Stonewall To SlutWalk



## Synopsis

A provocative history that reveals how sex workers have been at the vanguard of social justice movements for the past fifty years while building a movement of their own that challenges our ideas about labor, sexuality, feminism, and freedom. Documenting five decades of sex-worker activism, *Sex Workers Unite* is a fresh history that places prostitutes, hustlers, escorts, call girls, strippers, and porn stars in the center of America's major civil rights struggles. Although their presence has largely been ignored and obscured, in this provocative history Melinda Chateauvert recasts sex workers as savvy political organizers—not as helpless victims in need of rescue. Even before transgender sex worker Sylvia Rivera threw a brick and sparked the Stonewall Riot in 1969, these trailblazing activists and allies challenged criminal sex laws and “whorephobia” and were active in struggles for gay liberation, women's rights, reproductive justice, union organizing, and prison abolition. Although the multibillion-dollar international sex industry thrives, the United States remains one of the few industrialized nations that continues to criminalize prostitution, and these discriminatory laws put workers at risk. In response, sex workers have organized to improve their working conditions and to challenge police and structural violence. Through individual confrontations and collective campaigns, they have pushed the boundaries of conventional organizing, called for decriminalization, and have reframed sex workers' rights as human rights. Telling stories of sex workers, from the frontlines of the 1970s sex wars to the modern-day streets of SlutWalk, Chateauvert illuminates an underrepresented movement, introducing skilled activists who have organized a global campaign for self-determination and sexual freedom that is as multifaceted as the sex industry and as diverse as human sexuality. From the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Sex Workers Unite” does the invaluable work of showing us what a responsible and effective movement might look like, centering the voices and strategies of sex workers themselves in order to restore our best future to the realm of the possible.

•Feministing “[Chateauvert’s] portraits of individual activists and advocacy groups are well drawn, proving that humanization through story, not philosophical debates about personhood and privacy, will win this campaign.”

Chateauvert makes a strong case that ‘engaging in sexual commerce should not be grounds for disenfranchisement.’

•Publishers Weekly “The breadth of the material impressively commemorates the movement’s decades long struggle.”

•Kirkus Reviews “Sex Workers Unite is path-breaking in its claims about the expansive legacy of sex worker activism, and one hopes it will serve as a starting point for an even more expansive analysis.”

•San Francisco Chronicle “[T]he book makes important contributions to histories of feminism, lgbtq politics, and social movements and clears a path for further studies of these important topics.”

•The Journal of American History “The sheer depth and breadth of study evident in the book ensures its usefulness as a resource. But Sex Workers Unite is much more than a collection of facts and figures, however comprehensive. Chateauvert displays a deft hand with subtle ideas.

•Tits and Sass “Readers will learn a great deal about contemporary sex workers rights organizing in the United States (and a little bit about Canada) by exploring this book.”

•A Kiss for Gabriela “Chateauvert’s writing is blunt, honest and overwhelmingly liberal. Her dry but positive discussion of sex work and its employees aims to educate the reader. Her mission is to prove that those in the sex work industry are not deviants, addicts or victims. They are people making conscious choices who deserve equal civil rights and legal representation. She wants their stories told, their histories documented, and their allies counted.

•Edge “This is an important book not only for understanding the history of the movement but also for debunking myths about sex workers.”

•Dr. Joycelyn Elders, former US surgeon general “From the movement’s beginning with street-walking cop-fighting trans women at Stonewall at Compton’s Cafeteria through feminist betrayal and the AIDs crisis all the way to today’s

sex work activists and artists who make this labor visible, *Sex Workers Unite* is a fact-driven, street-smart history. This book is crucial. —Michelle Tea, author of *Valencia*

“In this definitive history, Chateauvert recounts the many challenges and successes of the sex workers’ rights movement, and shows us how much farther we have to go to guarantee everyone’s fundamental rights to sexual privacy and self-determination. —Anthony D. Romero, executive director, American Civil Liberties Union

“With a historian’s eye for the illuminating detail and the street fighter’s passion for her cause, Melinda Chateauvert offers a sassy journey through the worlds of ‘Working Girls and Boys,’ black, brown, and white, trans, gay, and straight. Against rescuers and abolitionists, *Sex Workers Unite* recovers the collective action and labor organizing of sex workers for better conditions, living wages, cultural freedom, and social justice. —Eileen Boris, Hull Professor of Feminist Studies, University of California Santa Barbara and co-editor of *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*

From the Hardcover edition.

Melinda Chateauvert is an activist who has been involved in many grassroots campaigns to change policies and attitudes about sex and sexuality, gender and antiviolenence, and race and rights. As a university professor she has taught courses on social justice organizing, the civil rights movement, and gender and sexuality. She is a fellow at the Center for Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

From the Hardcover edition.

A very timely book for these times of human trafficking mania. I really wish it had talked a bit more about survival sex and teen prostitution. It’s such a charged and difficult topic. I really wish the author would have discussed it more. It’s difficult to argue with anything in the book. But the book presupposes voluntary entry into prostitution. While giving lip service to survival sex - it really misses this major area of societal concern. I learned much from this book.

Some good information; however, somewhat disorganized and selectively sourced.

*SEX WORKERS UNITE* seems to be a rather strange title for a work that might be more aptly called "THE LAST CIVIL RIGHTS BATTLE: Freedom for Sex Workers in Puritanical America." Professor Melinda Chateauvert presents a very important, well-researched book on the history of the fight for legitimacy and fairness in the sex industry beginning with Stonewall in 1969 (which

many may regard as the dawn of social activism in LGBT rights, but which Chateauvert correctly sees as intertwined with sex worker activism as the two many times overlap) to Slut Walk in Toronto, Canada in 2011. Chateauvert covers every important group and movement within the fight for sex workers' rights over nearly half a century. The main concentration is on prostitutes, but exotic dancers, porn film actresses and actors, as well as many other sex-industry jobs are mentioned. The average reader may be surprised at how many different occupations can be found within the sex trade, and those who know will be suitably pleased to see the various jobs viewed under one major umbrella: the last frontier in the fight for civil rights. In the 1970s, tremendous progress was made with prostitutes' rights. Margo St. James and the organization she founded, COYOTE, get a fair share of attention in Chateauvert's work. "COYOTE asserted that women who worked as prostitutes should have the same citizenship rights as 'straight citizens.'" St. James felt that "hookers' lib" was really a privacy issue, one of a woman's control over her own body. St. James and her organization were also concerned about the racial profiling and assumptions of and about women of color. Although there was a tremendous split in the the women's/feminist movement in the 70s regarding the sex industry (one side felt that prostitution, pornography, and exotic dancing was degrading to women and made them subjects of sexual slavery and a kind of institutional rape), there were great strides made with the other half, the women who actually worked in the industry, and felt differently. It was unfortunate that the split between feminists was so vast. Although St. James and other activists of the times attended many national and international conferences, they were never treated legitimately. This period of time was a rather angry time in sisterhood. Just when the movement started to gain momentum, the early 80s brought AIDS. In the beginning, prostitutes were blamed for spreading it until research discovered the true roots of transmission. Prostitutes - male and female - were among the first to adapt to safe-sex routines. Prostitutes already had a higher usage of condoms than the general population, and savvy workers quickly adapted to other ways in which to practice safe sex with clients. Still, it was a battle and a time when rights for sex workers went on the back burner. Again, a connection between the LGBT world and the sex industry served for the two communities to come together and educate others, promote safe sex, and participate in positive activism. Still, the movement was set back decades. "In thirty-four states, prostitution is a felony if the sex worker is HIV positive, without regard to the type of service performed or whether transmission to the client occurred. No HIV-positive client, it appears, has ever been prosecuted." As recently as 2009, the mere possession of more than three condoms convicted nearly forty people on prostitution charges in Brooklyn, NY. In Louisiana, those convicted under a questionable and basically unconstitutional sodomy law are forced to register as sex

offenders. In many cases, sex workers just talked about the act but didn't perform it. Now they have SEX OFFENDER printed on their driver's license, a rather scary and Hitler-like tactic. A prostitute is a sex offender for talking about an act that hasn't been committed and probably isn't illegal anyway? Don't most Americans think of sex offenders as child molesters and rapists? Apparently that is not the definition in Louisiana. The women's liberation movement has been going on for a long time, and although the battle is still going in many areas, life has improved greatly for women in general. Unfortunately, for sex workers, the battle is just beginning . . . again. As long as we have men who make jokes: "If you have sex with a prostitute and don't pay her, is it rape or shoplifting?" and think it's funny, then the fight for civil rights for sex workers will continue. But the battle isn't just male vs female (after all, who generally patronizes prostitutes?), but also a struggle within the women's movement and the division of feminism. Chateauvert makes no mention whatsoever of Camille Paglia who, in the 1990s, helped to bring attention to prostitutes through books such as her "Sexual Personae" where prostitutes were, essentially, put on a pedestal and worshipped. Of course, Paglia was writing philosophy and Chateauvert is writing history. Still, it seems that Paglia deserved a mention. She may not have been a part of direct activism, but she did get attention for the cause even though it was done in a more indirect way. Has Chateauvert written an important book? Yes. Will it be widely read? Probably not. This is concerning as it needs to be. The book is very good history of the movement, but it is a bit dry and makes for slow reading. Since America has seen the racial civil rights movement and is currently moving through the gay civil rights movement, it seems logical that sex workers' civil rights movement should be next. But how does one reach Middle America? Certainly not through a book as academic as this one. Although excellent at capturing all that went on between Stonewall and SlutWalk, Chateauvert is, at heart, an academic writer. It would be interesting to see if she could come up with a work that could speak to the average person, a book with cameos of real individuals, a little humor (not of the sick kind quoted above), and something that would bring people to the cause. Because, after all, those who have been thinking know that sex workers' civil rights are right on the horizon. No, not because it has been there before and faded away time and time again, but because now is the time to make it happen.

Finally--a history of sex worker activism that places sex workers at the center of struggles for human rights. In this lively and fast-paced book, Chateauvert traces the creative and innovative campaigns that sex workers have led in the fight for self-determination, bodily integrity, and sexual freedom, from the 1960s to the present. Sex Workers Unite is alive with sex workers' own words and actions, challenging the reader to rethink the meaning of prostitution policy, labor rights, gender equality, and

freedom. In the contemporary debates around issues of consent in sex work, many people overlook the battles that sex workers themselves have fought in movements for social and economic justice. Chateauvert delivers an untold story of how sex workers were, and continue to be, first responders to the most urgent human rights violations in the country: the AIDS epidemic; the dismantling of workers' rights and rising economic inequality; and mass incarceration and the ongoing surveillance, policing, and abuse of poor, nonwhite, and trans\* people. *Sex Workers Unite* is an illuminating read, essential for anyone concerned about structures of power at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, and labor in the US.

I received *Sex Workers Unite* for free in a Goodreads giveaway. and I'm really grateful that I did. Despite the provocative title, it was well researched, useful for both casual readers like myself and more serious academics. Gloria Steinem once wrote that we should listen to people, not paper, and Chateauvert does just that. Instead of talking about sex workers, she talks to them, delivering their words right to the readers. She discusses the absence of sex workers in the civil rights movements, in feminist politics, in the gay rights movement, and in our societal discourse in general. Sex workers are talked about, talked down, to and even as we demand their services, shamed for existing. With a passionate tone, Chateauvert sets out to provide examples for activists and confront the stereotypes and stigmas about sex work. Unfortunately, the examples that Chateauvert provides don't provide a clear map for making sex workers' lives better, as she would have hoped, but they do show readers where to start-by listening to the workers themselves. Her work highlights the resilience and self care that has kept sex workers alive and fighting, stronger than society gives them credit for. *Sex Workers Unite* is a fascinating read and one that leaves you reconsidering every preconceived notion you had about sex work that you ever had.

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