

Interview with Xuân Rayne

Vietnamese, Anarchist, Sex Worker

Mèo Mun, Xuân Rayne

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We interviewed Xuân Rayne, a Vietnamese anarchist and non-binary sex worker based in the United States for their insights into the intersection of their identities, the paths for international solidarity among sex workers, and how workers in general can stand with sex workers. Xuân uses any/all pronouns.

Mèo Mun: Hi there! Tell us a bit about yourself. How did you come to the US, and what is your relationship with Vietnam?

Xuân Rayne: Hi, my name is Xuân. I'm based in San Diego, California.

I was born in the US. My parents are both from North Vietnam. Their families migrated to the South after the partition. They met in San Diego after coming by way of boat and refugee camps. I hadn't known there were Vietnamese who didn't arrive on boats! I used to date a guy whose family had come to the US by plane and I was like, "plane was an option?!" My parents and grandparents who raised me did not speak much about Vietnam except to tell me that I should be grateful for what I have while warning me to not lose my roots — "đừng mất gốc." Which is very funny because I was surrounded by non-Vietnamese people and encouraged to assimilate in order to "succeed." Vietnamese was my first language but now I only retain a first or second grade level.

My parents left Vietnam, so you can say they are "anti-communist." My mom talks about communism as something that "sounds like a great idea, but it's not how it turned out." And since I've always felt very out of place in the US, I kind of had expected it to feel like home in Vietnam? But about six or seven years ago when I visited Vietnam (my paternal grandparents — ông bà nội live in Hồ Chí Minh City) — which I'd always thought was a communist country — I was surprised: "Isn't it the same? Isn't it a bit capitalist? Perhaps it's because I'm a clueless Westerner" (*laughs*). Now I've accepted that I'll always feel a bit like I don't belong in either country.

Why did you become a sex worker?

I did it for money. I've always had a shaky relationship with my family. My refugee parents had very high expectations for me and my academic performance; they were controlling and authoritarian because they wanted their children to become successful. We were supposed to achieve the "American dream" to make their sacrifices and hardship worthwhile. There was no room for any interests or relationships that were not about getting into a prestigious school or getting a prestigious job. I couldn't tolerate it. We fought a lot when they were raising me.

At 18, my dad kicked me out of the house and cut off all support. With no work experience since I had been forbidden from getting a job, I became homeless, and had to crash at friends', sleeping in cars; sex work was the way for me to get financially independent, fast. Since then I have been doing sex work on and off for about a decade. I worked other jobs too, like food service, but those jobs are low-paid and the working conditions are bad. Once you do sex work, it is impossible to do other low-wage customer service without thinking, "I could make this money so much faster." In customer service work, you have to deal with long hours, body aches and burns, and you have to put up with bad behavior from both entitled customers and from bosses or managers — for poverty wages. I've held many jobs but I return to sex work because it lets me have more control over my time and body.

How were working conditions when you started, and has it improved?

Sex work was illegal all over the US when I first started (with the exception of some parts of Las Vegas, Nevada). Since buying and selling sex was criminalized, I wanted to keep things as secret, private, and anonymous as possible. I was afraid of being caught by the police, being arrested and getting a prostitution or trafficking charge. I started out doing in-person meet-ups, or escorting, using Craigslist to find clients. It was a low-entry platform — you didn't have to pay for the ads. I could simply post a text ad, no pictures even, and use a throwaway email address and a fake name. I was working all alone, couldn't try to find and connect with other sex workers for fear of being caught.

Since then, more anti-sex work laws have been passed and policing has intensified. This makes our working conditions worse. Law enforcement and NGOs have run very effective campaigns against "human trafficking" to pass legislation to target the spaces and resources that sex workers use, both physical and virtual. The enactment of FOSTA-SESTA¹ in 2018 made websites and service providers that host sex workers' content liable for facilitating trafficking. In response, web services, especially social media, tightened their terms of service around nudity and sexual expression including sex education, sexual health, and queer/LGBT topics — overall enforcing more censorship.

¹ FOSTA-SESTA: Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act. Like most legislation, these conflate all forms of sex trading or sex work as trafficking. Legislators, many NGOs and "advocates" do not believe that any person can consent to trading sex. (All footnotes are by Xuân Rayne.)

This pushes sex workers to more niche, segregated spaces that are exclusively “adult,” with higher costs of entry, and are more likely to be targeted by law enforcement. This is a lot like what has happened to sex work in the physical space when strolls are “cleaned up” to increase property values and retail sale through policing of lower-class people and their undesirable behaviors (sex work and drug use, most notably). When faced with this increased threat of punishment, sex workers take more risks, such as going to darker, quieter areas, unfamiliar locations, and working alone rather than with friends or allies in order to avoid the attention of law enforcement. Being socially isolated makes the work more dangerous.

In the past, I could easily get clients without having to put up any pictures of myself or attaching a name and identity to my ads. With fewer advertising spaces and smaller pool of potential clients, more sex workers have to establish social media presence to find clients and to reassure them that we are not scammers or law enforcement. This makes us more vulnerable to surveillance. I actually started Twitter to find more clients after Craigslist and Backpage were closed. When clients and income become more scarce, sex workers take more risks to make the money for rent and for survival, thus increasing our vulnerability. I’m privileged in that I’ve never had to work on the street, which is the most dangerous but also the most accessible way to do sex work. It is dangerous because of increased exposure to police and less ability to screen clients. Although, since I wasn’t talking to other sex workers and had no peer support networks, I didn’t use to screen my clients either.

What do you do in your job?

My work is very similar to other customer service jobs, like in a shop or in a cafe. First, I need to write advertisements, take nice photos of myself, and post those photos. Then I screen my clients for as much information as I can — photos of their IDs, names of their workplaces — for my own safety. After that, it’s getting dressed, doing make up and showing up to the meet-up. There’s also talking to the clients about how I can help them. The stressfulness is exactly the same as any other job where one provides a service.

After FOSTA–SESTA was passed, I also started an OnlyFans account to diversify my income. But only a very small percentage of people can make a full living on OnlyFans alone. Online sex work is not my strong point, as it requires a different skill set and I do better in person.

You’re a vocal advocate for the full decriminalization of sex work. Why full decriminalization and not legalization or the Nordic model?

To put it simply, the Nordic model, or partial decriminalization of sex work, means that selling sex is okay but buying sex is not. It doesn’t work because prostitution is usually something people do when they have no other options, and when their client pool is smaller, workers will only become more desperate. This model also doesn’t center the needs of people who are doing sex work: society still see us as a nuisance, they just want prostitution to disappear. We also have real-time feedback of this model from peer-led sex worker organizing in countries like Sweden and Ireland, where sex workers are still harassed by the police, are evicted and lose custody of their children, just for being sex workers.

The legalization of sex work, on the other hand, creates two categories: legal and illegal sex workers. The most marginalized of sex workers are criminalized in other ways, such as being undocumented, trans, black, poor, etc. It also entails a lot of hoops that sex workers have to jump through, such as mandatory STI tests, which is just incredibly whorephobic! Instead of addressing the horrible sex education that teaches mostly abstinence in the US, it implies that sex workers are carriers and spreaders of STIs, even though we are usually the ones most aware and cautious about STIs, because why destroy your own house?

This all ties back to my anti-policing politics in general, which calls for removing the policing of not only sex workers, but also of transgender people, poor people, and drug users, etc. The full decriminalization of sex work is a great start, but it is not enough. Look at New Zealand: sex work is fully decriminalized, yet non-citizen sex workers are still being persecuted; police are still targeting people who are more likely to do sex work, or people who “look” like sex workers, such as transgender people.

Some people believe that sex workers can’t meaningfully consent to having sex with clients. Your opinion?

Well, I’d ask whether anyone working under threat of being hungry or houseless can meaningfully consent to performing their jobs. This extends to the many miserable jobs that people do, like food service — will people still be doing them if they don’t have to worry about food, housing, and healthcare? People cling to beliefs like that

because they don't want to think about how they're living in an unjust, non-consensual society of capitalism. Instead, they single out sex workers as a special case to avoid asking the hard questions.

In the context of sex work, the more precarious you are, the less you are able to consent. The more ways that someone is criminalized, targeted, and punished, the more vulnerable they become. Which is the role of borders, prisons, and policing. Being made desperate makes you exploitable — desperation decreases your ability to negotiate. For instance, in every session I have a conversation with the client about the activities I'm down to do. If the client coerces or forces me to do something that I didn't agree to, then that's a violation of my consent. Usually, I have the ability to leave the situation, to prioritize my well-being over the money. But if this month, law enforcement shuts down an ad site or conducts a highly publicized "anti-trafficking" sting, there will be fewer potential clients seeking my services. I will be more desperate to make rent. I would be pressured to see someone who seems less safe (aggressive, threatening, has been blacklisted, refuses to provide screening information). I might agree to do activities that I wouldn't normally do for the money.

You mentioned in our previous correspondence that it is rare to see "Vietnamese," "sex worker," and "anarchist" in the same sentence. How does the intersection of those identities affect you?

Doing sex work as a Vietnamese in the US can be a little lonely, for there are only a handful of Vietnamese sex workers. And because I have a distant family, I'm also disconnected from my local Vietnamese community. Until I went on Twitter, I hadn't met any other Vietnamese sex workers. I also didn't have enough understanding of Vietnamese history. My family didn't want to talk about it: Vietnam was only mentioned to remind me of our loss, or to be grateful, without any historical context.

As for being an anarchist, I didn't read a bunch of theory, but I've always had this anti-authoritarian streak in me, from the very relationship with my parents. I felt like respect is something that is to be built, not accepted without questions. Also, my first job that wasn't sex work was at a worker co-op! That experience of self-organizing, getting to be your own boss, answering to no one but yourself and your peers without hierarchy, and educating each other, was the start for me. I also got to practice resolving conflicts without appealing to a more powerful authority. And then one day it just clicked: "so anarchism is what it's called!"

My being an anarchist also ties into why I do sex work. To me, seeking out a traditional job is a compromise. Having a boss, having a manager, that doesn't feel like a healthy relationship. Sex work is not perfect, but it gives me the autonomy that other jobs don't.

You're also non-binary. What are some unique perspectives of being a non-binary sex worker?

At first it was lonely, and I felt like I wasn't doing good enough. I thought I needed to present myself as someone very conventionally feminine, someone who I am not, otherwise no one would hire me. However, when you're not being yourself and feeling comfortable, it is going to show in your interactions. I would try to say things like, "I'm a tomboy, I've got short hair," so that clients would know what to expect and only hire me if they were okay with that. Many people would contact me with invasive and rude questions about my gender and sex.

Now, I'm an openly non-binary sex worker and more of my clients are queer friendly and knowledgeable, or at least interested in learning about gender identity and politics. Overall, my work interactions feel more organic. Being non-binary does affect my income, as I have a niche client pool rather than being "mainstream." But at the same time, I just know I can't change that about myself. When I dress for work, I like having flexibility to be playful with my looks. It costs a lot to look "naturally" like a woman — and not just any woman, but a wealthy one. For me, being non-binary blends into doing class drag. I might have to enter a higher-end hotel or restaurant, which I still feel uncomfortable with. I want to present myself as "richer" than I really am and in general I like pushing the boundaries of what that looks like, what is presentable, acceptable, desirable.

What paths are there for international solidarity among sex workers, as well as between sex workers and other workers? What obstacles are there?

A lot of what sex workers do is learning from each other. At the moment, I personally am learning about disability justice, because a lot of sex workers are disabled people, and I feel the importance of expanding one's concept of work and care. I think a lot of people are left out of traditional workers' movements because capitalist logic defines human worth through one's capacity to sell labor, and that needs to be challenged.

Due to criminalization in many places, sex workers have to be careful about being visible. Having their personal information like government name and address revealed can lead to loss of other jobs, academic positions, housing,

and custody of children. In general, we have to balance public presence with facing criminal prosecution and risks for police and prison violence. There will always be people at the margins and it is harder but important to learn from those positions. Sex workers are not a monolith. Every movement that deals with incarceration, class disparity, migration, trans and queer rights, etc., has the opportunity to be in solidarity with sex workers because there are sex workers within every struggle. Organizations and movements that exclude sex workers are necessarily anti-poor and not truly invested in liberation for all.

As for international solidarity, with so many different industries and global contexts, it is important to listen to the people who are trading sex in each place, and especially seek out organizations created and led by sex workers. Pay attention to who is being represented. In the context of sex work, the people being represented the most are high-end sex workers, oftentimes white, cisgender women from the global North, which leads many people to have a very warped image of who is doing sex work. That's how representation works: the most palatable voices are prioritized. Often, poorer and more precarious sex workers are ignored or actively silenced. Of course, politicians and law enforcement give attention and resources to those who claim to speak for sex workers, such as rescue nonprofits and sex worker exclusionary radical feminists. Folks should develop skepticism for any person or group that advocates for more criminalization of any aspect of sex work as a solution to trafficking. This means developing a deeper analysis of how policing and borders work to create inequities and facilitate exploitation. There needs to be an understanding that the state is the key source of exploitation. It cannot be the solution to it.

Workers also need to expand our analysis of power and authority. We have to ask the hard questions: are we willing to give away our power and autonomy to feel "safer?" How is safety defined, who is it for? Who is not included in that? We need to question how concepts of criminality are created and what structural inequalities that conceals and naturalizes. What is the role of police? Do I really believe that any government can "serve and protect" everyone equally? This is because many, including sex worker exclusionary radical feminists, believe that they can use the tools of the state to bring about a communist heaven. But despite their strong anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist rhetoric that people desperately want to hear, ultimately they are still working with the police. Ultimately, their actions are about enforcing borders and policing undesirable people. This shows that they still perceive the state and the police as something good, only in need of some tweaking and reforming to function smoothly. And that is just not historically how it goes down.

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