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## *Weaponization of Our Stories*

As sex workers, before ever discussing our trauma publicly, we are forced to consider how it will be received and how it will be used. There are a number of groups who would use our stories of abuse against us to campaign for legislation which would only compound our suffering. This means that even if we overcome every barrier to speaking up, we are still ultimately left with the question of whether our honesty will be used to fearmonger and turn the public against us.

For those who are involved in prostitution specifically, especially in countries where it is criminalized in full or in part, speaking about any of our experiences can lead to serious consequences. We may lose other jobs, families, friends, housing, or face severe harassment. When we are dealing with these severe consequences and such a high risk, the benefits to speaking out need to be large enough to outweigh them. That, or we must reach a breaking point where we can no longer keep silent either way.

Every time someone speaks up about their negative experiences whilst selling sex, there are people waiting to use those stories to argue that sex work should be banned in some manner to protect others from the same thing. There is a fault with this premise; a ban does not make a practice disappear. Criminalizing some element of a practice and enforcing that requires surveillance of those engaging in it to conduct arrests, which in the case of prostitution makes it more dangerous and not less. Despite this being simple to explain, sex workers are rarely given the platform or space to do so, and thus our suffering can be used as propaganda to prop up this sort of flawed argument.

There are many groups who will use our stories to garner support for various types of criminalization of prostitution or the banning of porn or various other harmful legislative approaches. Some are sex worker exclusionary radical feminists (SWERFs) whilst others are more typical conservatives who oppose many sexual freedoms and do not respect the right to bodily autonomy. Conservatives are more likely to argue that prostitution should be illegal in its entirety, meaning it is illegal to both sell and to buy sex as well as all associated behaviours like soliciting and brothel-keeping. Radical feminists are more likely to argue for legal models such as the Nordic Model, which criminalizes the buying of sex but not the sale and includes various laws against brothels and profiting from someone else's prostitution. Regardless of the specific legal model being advocated for, all of these groups engage in the weaponization of sex workers' trauma.

Any account of being raped whilst selling sex is used as evidence that clients are violent and that people who buy sex do so with the intent of sexually assaulting vulnerable workers (the focus usually being on women). Any account of being trafficked is framed by those who are anti sex work as being representative of the situation of most sex workers. Any account of mistreatment by managers and brothel owners is treated as proof that working in a brothel is inherently more dangerous than selling sex outside of one and is used to argue that brothels should be illegal.

In any profession, it is possible to find examples of people being abused. Human trafficking is rampant in the agricultural industry, and yet we do not presume that all farmers are forced into their line of work. Although videos of fruit-pickers may sometimes go viral with captions about the low pay, the focus is generally on how they are under-compensated for difficult work rather than how traumatized they may be as a result of their circumstances. The average working class person can relate to being poorly compensated for their work, even if not to the extreme extent of those who are trafficked, and so public conversation regarding the issue focuses on activating that empathy. The disgust for sex workers selling sex creates a barrier to this form of empathy from people who are mired in anti-prostitution stigma.

I know of no-one who is working class who has never been mistreated by a boss. Admittedly the dangers within the sex industry

are more severe than in most, and the rates of abuse are higher, but a high rate of abuse is not itself an argument for making elements of the industry illegal. Brothel managers are able to get away with abusing their workers precisely because brothels are illegal in most places and so sex workers have no recourse to challenge them. Having another person who provides the premises in which a person sells sex makes them more vulnerable to certain types of exploitation, but a third party is not necessary for a premises to be considered a brothel. Two sex workers selling sex from the same house is enough to have the place considered to be a brothel, and in that scenario there is only increased safety from working together and no possibility of an abusive manager added. A ban on brothels makes it illegal for sex workers to group together for safety, as well as criminalizing brothels owned by a third party who may exploit their workers.

The arguments used by conservatives or SWERFs for some level of criminalization of prostitution are flimsy at best. People are taken in by their arguments anyway, all across the political spectrum, because prostitution is highly stigmatized and the average person knows too little to refute them. Often all they need to be convinced that prostitution should be banned, since they won't be inclined to think about the practicalities of how such a ban would (fail to be) enforced, is a story about abuse that sufficiently horrifies them.

Not every sex worker is mindful of how their words might be used against us all. Some begin to discuss their experiences before realizing how many people have bad intentions, others are angry about what they have suffered and take the position that they wish to punish abusive clients at any cost and may even become SWERFs themselves, and some simply take the position that the truth is what is most important and intend to push back against however their words are twisted. It is unfair to say that any current or former prostitute should feel obligated to censor themselves, though it is also unfair to think that the way some people share their experiences may have negative impacts on those of us who are still living through such issues currently.

Prostitutes are often vulnerable people who can be manipulated into sharing more than they would ideally wish to. The promise of money or support can be immensely convincing even if we are already aware of how our testimony will be used in the long-term.

Among the multitude of approaches to discussing the sale of sex, one is to tell stories with heavy caveats throughout. Every time I recount an experience I have in sex work, it is interspersed with mentions of how the event would have been more traumatic or led to arrest under a different legal model. Any time that criminalization increased the danger I was in during a situation whilst selling sex, I will note it. Out of fear that people will use my trauma to support approaches to prostitution which would only be detrimental, I tie myself up in knots arguing with some imagined version of those who might try to use my words to harm me before I even finish speaking or writing them. Always being on the defensive limits a person's ability to express themselves and that cannot be the solution that sex workers default to. I cannot feel free to express myself if I am stuck playing self-defense due to how someone else will weaponize my story.

Abusers will sometimes weaponize their own trauma or mental health issues against victims on a smaller scale, through threatening suicide or harm to themselves if a victim leaves or speaks against them. Using trauma in this way is something sex workers are accused of doing, alongside accusations that we are only pretending to be struggling and are secretly much more privileged than we present ourselves to be. An activist points out that sex workers are often killed as a result of laws which ban the sale or purchase of sex and they are called a manipulator for it.

On a national or global scale, weaponizing trauma does not occur in the same way. The experiences of sex workers are used by organisations, rather than a person using their own, and the stories are meant to give people an excuse to crack down on prostitution and pornography. It's not about provoking guilt from politicians so that they do something, it's about winning over the public so they don't complain about sex workers being further oppressed by the law.

Unlike a threat from a partner that they'll commit suicide if you leave, which seeks to use guilt and concern to keep a partner engaged and tolerating mistreatment, the testimony of a prostitute who has been raped and coerced is used to make the public look the other way. Calls to action may seem to be given, with the request to support certain legislation, but in practice this simply means citizens are told not to oppose it. They are fed the stories of sex workers' trauma, which

they simultaneously want to hear more about and also to look away from, and told that all they need to do is allow the government to crack down on crime to make it all go away.

Sex sells and so do stories of sexual abuse. There's a reason tales of trauma that incite a morbid fascination in people are so often called "trauma porn".

## *How I Started*

I started selling sex in a manner that would have made me a very convenient poster child for anti-prostitution movements. I was 17, homeless, started on a site without age verification, and met with clients who were far older than me whom I did not wish to sleep with but was ultimately coerced into sexual relationships with for money. At the time, I had not yet begun transitioning and had not even accepted that I was trans to myself. From an outside perspective, and according to UK law, I was an underage girl who was a victim of sex trafficking.

Rather than giving extensive caveats as I usually would, I will recount things as they truly occurred:

After an incident of domestic violence towards myself in my home, at 17, I became homeless. I stayed with friends and sofa-surfed from place to place. Unlike most people in my situation, I was lucky enough to have a noteworthy amount of money in savings and a full-time job. That amount dwindled quickly. I did not have a high level of financial literacy and my mental health was incredibly poor. I had been admitted to a psychiatric unit briefly the year before and being suddenly cut off from my family meant that I was spiraling out of control. Soon after leaving home I could not cope with keeping my full time job, at which I was only paid £3.87 an hour as the minimum wage at the time for my age group, and so I quit. Around this time, I began to joke about the idea of getting a “sugar daddy” to pay for things on my behalf so that I could afford to survive in the long-term whilst I waited for the council to house me.

I found out that the wait list was over a year long for someone in

my situation to be housed. I signed up to a sugar dating website. I did not intend to sell sex when I signed up. Whilst I liked the thrill of being somewhat associated with the sex industry, because it was cool and taboo to me, I didn't want any of the stigma to actually stick and I did not have a positive opinion of sex workers. Some friends expressed concern and I brushed them off by telling them that my intent was to scam old men.

After a couple of weeks of responding to occasional messages through my profile but never following through, I stumbled across a man who we'll call "G". G's profile made it clear that he was not looking for sex but that he did want someone who made good eye candy. He positioned himself as similar to a mentor and spoke eloquently about being well-traveled and looking for someone to spend time with. Once I viewed G's profile, he received a notification telling him that I had and he decided to message me. We spoke and he flirted and asked about meeting. I expressed nervousness and told him that I wasn't sure about it because I was still relatively new to the site, and so he suggested that we swap phone numbers first. He asked me to send him a picture to prove who I was, and then offered to pay me if I sent him pictures that included nudity. My profile stated that I was over 18 and he assured me that his desire to see naked pictures of me was not any indication that he wanted sex, just that he wanted to see me. He offered me £70 for 3 pictures and I sent them.

I was immensely naive. When he claimed he wanted to just see pictures of me, and that he wouldn't want sex in person, I believed him. He was in his early 70s and I saw him as a harmless old man. I really felt like I was the one scamming him, that I'd made £70 for almost no effort and that I could make so much more money from him without having to actually engage in prostitution as long as I created a little sexual fantasy for him. With the proof that he was real and was so willing to send me money, I agreed to meet him in person.

G asked me to meet him at a specific train station and I agreed. I vividly remember how terrified I was. It was early spring and I was trying to convince myself that I was shaking so badly because it was cold rather than because I was frightened. I arrived early and paced around, refreshing our conversation on my phone and opening and closing chats I had with different friends. I thought about leaving and going home and kept telling myself that I needed to see it through



because I'd already spent money on my train ticket and I needed to secure some sort of income.

It got to the time I was supposed to meet him, and I spotted G. I felt like I was going to be sick and my body was giving me every indication that I was afraid and wanted to leave but I kept trying to override it. I hugged G quickly and he immediately commented that I seemed scared and that I had no need to be. I brushed him off with an excuse about it being cold out, when he noticed how I was shaking. He repeated several times that I had no need to fear him, asking me repeatedly if I really was okay, even as he put a hand around my waist and guided me towards where he'd decided to take me for lunch. I kept repeating that I was doing great and tried to make small talk, convincing myself more with every repetition.

We went to lunch. We ate. G made a joke about something I'd ordered being an aphrodisiac, which I made myself laugh in response to. Our waitress seemed deeply worried about me and kept making eye contact with me after she left our table and asked me if I was alright. G kept saying how lucky he was to be there with me and I ordered myself a couple of glasses of wine at his insistence. No-one I'd met, likely because he was so authoritative and so much older and seemed so sure of himself when he suggested I order it in front of our waitress. I imagine that she didn't want to believe I could be only 17, given how apparent it was that he was paying me to be there.

Towards the end of the meal, he slid an envelope across to me with £210 inside of it. He didn't state exactly how much it was when he handed it over, just that it was some money to show he was serious about a "long-term financial arrangement" between us and that he wanted to take care of me. With the money in my hands, I'd calmed down from my frozen and panicked state, especially given how the wine had loosened me up. At 17, I really didn't have much of a tolerance for alcohol. He asked me to come with him to the second part of our date, to the London Eye.

We got into a taxi to go there and as he was walking around to the other side whilst I sat on my end of the taxi I quickly looked inside the envelope to count the cash. I dropped the envelope into my backpack as he opened the door, for some reason embarrassed at the idea that he might see me counting it. I felt pleasantly tipsy from the wine and now knew I'd earned over £200 just from letting his man buy me

dinner. I thought I'd effectively convinced some old man to give me money I did almost nothing for.

On the London Eye, when we got to the top and were discussing my financial situation and how much money I'd need from him each month, he urged me to walk over to the rail at the edge right by the glass. There were other people around us, none paying any real attention to us. We were still talking as I stepped up to the railing looking out, and he pressed up behind me and thrust his hips against me to make it clear he had an erection. At that time in my life, I thought I was a lesbian, and I'd never felt an erection before. I was frozen in place, felt all of the blood drain out of me and had to fight the urge to be sick. He was actively grinding against me, slowly, with his coat open so that it concealed the way he was rubbing against me. As he did this, he told me he wanted me to take my profile down from the website so that he could see me exclusively. He promised me he'd take care of all my financial needs. I agreed, tried several times to make excuses for us to go and sit down, and eventually our circuit of the London Eye finished and we exited it.

I desperately wanted to just go home at this stage. Suddenly G seemed terrifying again, and I didn't want to upset him or make him angry. We took a short walk until I said I needed to get home soon because my friend would be worried, and he put us in a taxi. Whilst we were in it, he put his hand up my skirt and molested me. I remember being furious with myself because I'd worn leggings originally because of the cold but had decided to take them off because I thought they looked childish. As if I'd asked for it, by not wearing them.

When we got out of the taxi, near the station, he pulled me into an alleyway that was blocked off for some construction work and undid his trousers to expose himself. Again, I froze, and he physically grabbed my hand to place it on his genitals to get himself off. I was unable to say anything the entire time, he touched me some more whilst I cringed away, until he was finished and tucked himself back into his trousers. At no point did I verbalize "no". I froze completely and I just wanted it to be over and to get away from him and was scared I'd make him angry.

I got on a train and went home.

He messaged me after and I ignored it at first. I told no-one what

had happened and I kept looking at the money and feeling sick. I couldn't bring myself to pay it into the bank so I kept it at the bottom of my backpack. My friend who I was staying with knew I had met a "sugar daddy" and I lied and told her it went well and that I'd been paid well.

After a few days, G suggested I go with him to see a show. He told me he'd have to leave right after, but that he thought I'd enjoy it, and then asked for my bank details to send the first installment of my "allowance". It was hundreds of pounds. I went to the show and when I got there I told him I was 17. I remember feeling guilty that he'd assaulted me not knowing I was under 18, and thinking I was in the wrong for that, but then he told me he'd suspected from the beginning that I was younger than 18 and didn't mind. I didn't yet view what he'd done as assault, and so I didn't blame him for it - I felt that since I hadn't said no, since I hadn't run away, that it was perfectly reasonable for him not to have realized I didn't want to. Given that the show was an opportunity for me to get more money with no chance of sex happening, I went.

He held my hand a lot during the musical we watched but didn't touch me sexually at all. I drank a lot of wine to cope. I went home safely and he sent even more money to my bank.

My meetings with G after that followed a pattern, in hindsight. We'd have a date where he'd do nothing sexual at all, get me into my comfort zone, and would imply the next date would be the same. Then, on the date after, he'd reveal he had a hotel room booked and would take me there in between two planned events and would tell me he wanted to touch me. The first time, I told him outright that I didn't want to have sex, and he agreed that we wouldn't and told me to lay on the bed. Then he took off my underwear and touched me for a while, whilst I laid there and cried silently, and afterwards went on about how it made sense that I didn't want "sex" meaning specifically penetration because I must be worried about pregnancy or not be ready to give up my virginity, but that he was glad I was willing to do as much as I had. In hindsight, I can obviously see that he said those things to get into my head and make me feel like it was my fault he'd assaulted me and that I hadn't been clear enough. When it happened, I told myself it was my fault because I hadn't actually said no when he started touching me and that he'd misunderstood what I meant by

“sex”... as if my crying and cringing away from his touch wasn't enough.

He assaulted me many times, gradually escalating. I'll spare you the details of every instance. Each time, I told myself that the next time I'd do things differently so that it wouldn't end up happening. The money kept coming in, and I needed it because I'd spent all my savings. I was convinced that if I said and did the right things that I could keep him interested and keep earning money without having to have any sexual contact with him. Ultimately, he'd manipulate or trick me into it. Once, in the middle of him touching me while I was crying, I was saying over and over in my head that I just needed to ask him to stop and I could stop it. I was furious with myself that I couldn't make the word come out. Finally I made myself say it, and he didn't stop and I went quiet again. After, I bizarrely convinced myself that he somehow hadn't heard me.

Mid-way through seeing him, I started to meet other “sugar daddies”. I'd only make it to the first or second date, get a little money from them and a free meal and drinks and then stop replying. I didn't have sex with any of them, and kissed a few. I certainly flirted sexually with them, behaving in ways that I now recognize as being hypersexuality caused by my rapidly developing PTSD from my time with G.

Towards the end of seeing G, I'd regularly block out or “forget” that he'd assaulted me at all. I'd only think about it and remember as we were in a taxi to a hotel room at the end of the night when I'd start shaking uncontrollably. On the last occasion where that happened, G assured me over and over that we would only sleep and that he wouldn't touch me that night. In the morning, he assaulted me by forcing his dick into my mouth unexpectedly which he had never done before, and I sat on the bed in shock. He couldn't finish and ended up doing so in the bathroom, into a handkerchief, then came out and showed it to me and apologized. I thought he was apologizing for the assault at first, which was surreal, but in hindsight I think even more strangely he was apologizing for not having been able to stay hard in front of me. More concerned about the fragility of his erection than the fact he'd assaulted me. I blamed myself because he'd said in the taxi home that he didn't expect sex that night and I felt I should have known that meant he expected it in the morning.

Over the months we saw each other, where we met at least once a week, he paid me around £1000 per month. I couldn't admit to myself that what I was doing would be classified as prostitution, and certainly had no idea that it would legally be classified as sex trafficking.

Ultimately, I was able to get past the mental block of denying that I was being abused when I heard from a friend who knew I was seeing G that one of her classmates had met with G and he'd forcibly kissed her and she was horrified by it. I confronted G and he told me that he'd wanted to surprise me with someone to have sex with in front of him, because he knew I liked girls. He admitted he intentionally selected someone who seemed underage from her profile. I realized that's what he'd done with me. He showed me dozens of profiles of girls he'd talked to, him estimating their ages as between 15 and 17. I got him to leave the current girl alone, citing the mutual friend as a reason it'd be awkward, but he was persistent about finding me a girl to sleep with.

It took a short time to process and then I was able to accept that G had been abusing me. I viewed him as a monster. My disgust was so extreme, now that I'd admitted it to myself, that I kept making excuses about being ill to keep the money coming in without seeing him or I'd fake an emergency near the end of our dates to avoid a hotel with him. G tried to reel me back in, putting me in a group chat with a girl who he wanted to see me with that he'd met already. He was paying her a small allowance. I told her everything, the first time I confessed having been raped, and she relayed it all back to G. I denied it when G asked me about it, but the damage was done and I realized I could no longer keep getting money from him this way, so I got my last allowance and then cut him off and expressed my horror at the abuse he'd put me through and him trying to do so to these girls.

I saw several "sugar daddies" shortly after this, many of whom I had sex with. I intended to have sex with them before I arrived on the date and I did so with the understanding that it was expected for me to earn an allowance. After a few of these, I was given housing, and I immediately stopped.

These events caused me severe PTSD. I can picture a world in which I would never have viewed myself as a sex worker, especially if I had not seen clients other than G, where I might have presumed that my

experiences were universal in sex work and would have wanted it banned. As many survivors of sexual assault do in the aftermath of abuse, I had violent fantasies about harming G and a desire to see him punished. The idea of it being illegal to buy sex would have been appealing to me, if it had occurred to me at all, because I would have seen it as a way to have him punished since the actual rape case I eventually opened against him a year later was ultimately dismissed.

In reality, buying sex from under-18s was already illegal when this occurred, and it did me no good when I reported the man who assaulted me to the police. Reporting the rape made me so much more traumatized, from how the police mocked me to how they commented on other cases and claimed people frequently lied. I see no solution to be brought forth via policing when the police are one of the groups most responsible for traumatizing sex workers in the first place.

When sex workers are assaulted by clients it is not wrong on the basis that money was involved, it is wrong on the basis that it is assault.

## *Frequency of Assault*

When you disclose that you are traumatized, you are seen as less capable of assessing your own situation with regards to abuse. As someone who has been raped multiple times in my life, and who has suffered many more assaults of varying degrees of severity, I am seen as incapable of objectivity regarding the subject. I would say that no one is capable of being objective regarding these issues in the first place, and that I find the idea that only people who haven't experienced rape could be able to understand and analyze it to be laughable.

To create a narrative that sex work is inherently harmful, it is common for conservatives or Nordic Model advocates or Christian rescue groups to quote statistics showing incredibly high rates of sexual assault against prostitutes. Some will go as far as to argue that any paid sex is inherently rape, on the basis that money negates consent entirely. If they argue that all sex workers are victims of assault, following that they can argue that a history of being assaulted means our views on the topic will be inherently flawed.

I have frequently seen claims that 82% of prostitutes are assaulted whilst working or that 68% of us are raped, sometimes sourced but often not - the source of this claim is a study comprised of a series of interviews of 130 prostitutes in San Francisco from 1998<sup>1</sup>. The experiences of a tiny subset of sex workers in one geographical location cannot be generalized to all sex workers. As a highly stigmatized population, we must also consider who is likely to agree to be interviewed and why, and whether or not this gives us an accurate picture of the overall circumstances of prostitutes. Groups

like Exodus Cry reference this in various articles, both for the figures of the rates of abuse and also to claim the vast majority of sex workers wish to exit. No acknowledgment is made of how this data is flawed.

It is common for singular studies to be generalized partially because large-scale data on sex workers' experiences is lacking, and because it is relatively easy to find survey and interview data from specific regions with incredibly high rates of sexual violence. One particularly egregious way in which this data is used is when people reference a study of 1,000 cis and trans women in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which found that over 90% of prostitutes had been raped within the last year<sup>2</sup>. These figures are incredibly high and shocking, and included very high rates of gang rape in particular, with over 30% of cis women having been gang raped by police specifically within the last year. When so much of the rape being experienced by these workers is coming from the police themselves, the idea that this data could be used to argue that the criminalization of the buying of sex would resolve it is ludicrous. The law is enforced by police, it is not a magical barrier, and if the police are the ones enacting abuse then a change in the laws they control the enforcement of will not protect sex workers.

Rape is notoriously under-reported. The more marginalized a person is, the less likely they are to trust the police and to report being assaulted, and so we certainly can't rely on the number of incidents that are reported to the police to be an accurate measure of the rate of assault. Some studies can give us fairly accurate counts for the rate of assault in a given region, like the one in Phnom Penh where sex workers were recruited to find other sex workers and they attempted to reach people with a range of experiences. Still, there will always be a selection bias introduced through the places people are recruited. If those interviewed are all street sex workers and brothel workers and not people who escort independently from a premises, then that will skew the figures. Anyone who claims to know the precise rate of assault sex workers face overall is either naive or actively lying. We simply don't have good enough data.

Often the way risk of assault is assessed in a study is by asking whether or not a sex worker has been raped or sexually assaulted in a set period of time or in their lifetime. I have never found a study that calculates the risk of rape per encounter, between selling sex and a



casual sexual encounter for a non sex worker. A significant number of people in the broader population have been victims of sexual assault in their lifetime, but the amount who have been assaulted within the last year is practically always recorded as lower than for sex workers specifically. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (March 2021) estimated that 2.2% of adults had experienced a sexual assault in the last year whether attempted or completed<sup>3</sup>. In a lifetime according to the same survey, 22.9% of women had been assaulted between the ages of 16 and 74 and so had 4.7% of men. Whilst these figures are also subject to concerns about the rate being underreported, there is no reason to imagine that underreporting would be more severe than for sex workers, and so rates of 50% of outdoor sex workers experiencing client violence within the past 6 months and 81% having experienced it ever are huge in comparison as well as when viewed in isolation<sup>4</sup>. This is even taking into account the small sample sizes of such studies and the issues with their methodology.

One thing I do not see considered often enough, and which I implore people to think about rather than assuming the entire increase in risk is inherent to engaging in prostitution, is that the amount of partners you have will increase your risk of being sexually assaulted. People are most likely to be sexually assaulted by those they know, particularly be intimate partners, and having a higher number of partners leads to a higher likelihood of one of them being a perpetrator of sexual assault. I would not dispute that clients are likely to target sex workers and are more likely to assault a sex worker than their own partners or non sex workers they are close with, because sex workers are seen as disposable and are more vulnerable as targets, but this is not the sole culprit. In a year selling sex, outside of exclusive arrangements with a singular client, many sex workers will have orders of magnitude of more sexual partners than the average civilian.

Though most of us don't keep count, I personally have had upwards of a thousand sexual partners in a period of 7 years actively selling sex. Perhaps one thousand five hundred as the likely maximum. Other people in their twenties are highly unlikely to have such a high number of sexual partners. When someone has had sex with a hundred times the number of partners as another person, it would stand to reason that their likelihood of being sexually assaulted would be much higher whether that sex was paid or recreational.

Of course, various organizations like Exodus Cry or Nordic Model Now will use these kinds of statistics to argue that prostitution itself is inherently dangerous and that all sex workers are victims. A person could spend a lifetime pointing out the way these recorded rates of sexual violence are inflated or not representative of the broader population of sex workers. Instead of doing so and getting hung up only on debunking inaccuracies in the claims made, there is a simpler response that is applicable whether a study reliably shows a high rate of sexual violence against sex workers or not: criminalizing our clients, or criminalizing sex workers, does not make prostitution safer.

Even if the rate of assault against a sex worker in a lifetime or a year was 100%, this would not mean the buying of sex should be criminalized. Not every encounter between a client and a sex worker is rape, and so making it illegal to do something simply because a high number of people who do so also commit acts of violence is neither just nor effective. Rape is already illegal, the fact of the matter is that the police simply do not care and that the system makes convictions almost impossible and deeply traumatic to get. In a scenario where every single sex worker in the world has been a victim of rape, that does not mean that every client they've ever had has raped them.

Assuming the priority is to reduce the rate of assault against sex workers, full decriminalization of sex work is the clear answer. Criminalization of the selling and buying of sex only subjects prostitutes to arrest on top of being assaulted. The Nordic Model criminalizes clients and increases violence against sex workers, up to and including murder. After the introduction of the criminalization of buying sex in France, violence against sex workers has increased significantly. Between June and December of 2019 at least 10 sex workers were killed in France<sup>5</sup> which is a significant increase from 12 sex workers killed in 2014 over the period of an entire year as opposed to only 6 months<sup>6</sup>. The Evaluation of the Law of April 2016<sup>7</sup> published by the French Government in 2020 makes no mention at all of the increase in violence against sex workers since the law passed, but Médecins du Monde (Doctors of the World) published a report in response which included sex workers' real experiences under the new law<sup>8</sup>. This included data from Le Bail/Giametta study which showed 63% of sex workers having a deterioration in their living conditions since the law passed and 78.2% of respondents stated that the law had

increased clients' power to demand unsafe sexual practices.

Sex workers' accounts of violent assault are convenient for Nordic Model advocates to use for their political goals, but once achieved they do not wish to hear of them. Our tales of sexual abuse suffered at the hands of clients are convenient tools to argue that clients should be criminalized... but when we suffer more under their criminalization our stories are swept away, as has been the case in France despite the continued work of groups like STRASS (syndicat du travail sexual) and Médecins du Monde to get sex workers' stories out. The trauma of prostitutes is only treated as a useful offensive weapon and is never used as a means of defending us. Victim status in the eyes of the public does not afford sex workers any genuine protection, and it is fragile regardless.

The percentage chance of any individual sex worker being assaulted is used purely for shock value, and thus whatever study has the highest rate is going to garner the most attention. The more we are assaulted and the higher the statistics appear, the easier it is to suggest that a higher proportion of our clients are violent sadists, and thus the public are much more inclined to agree with fines or arrests for them.

### *Big vs "Little" Assaults*

In addition to the use of our stories of violence to argue that prostitution itself can never be tolerated, sometimes our accounts which discuss violence without extreme distress are used to argue we are too traumatized to even recognize our own abuse and must be rescued even against our will. Assaults which I experienced as being relatively minor are treated as though they should be life-ruining events. The fact they were not life-ruining events for me and that I don't appear sufficiently upset is argued to be proof that I have been irrevocably broken by prostitution.

Coercion exists along a spectrum that anti-prostitution advocates seldom recognize. People have sex for all sorts of reasons that aren't purely desire for pleasure from sex, like attempting to get pregnant or for intimacy and feeling close to a partner. There may be pressures associated with these reasons, or entirely separate pressures that push a person to have sex. Someone might feel obligated to have sex with their partner so that they won't cheat or feel like a failure for being unable to get pregnant. The traditional examples of coercion are from one partner to another, threatening them or manipulating them into sex, but pressures can also come from outside the relationship. If a woman's family teach her that she must never deny her husband sex, then she may feel obligated once married to provide sex to her husband and act like she wants to even when that is not an opinion her husband shares - perhaps it would even horrify him if he realized. Sexual assault is more complex than simply one person forcing another, and situations that do not meet our typical understanding of rape can still be traumatizing.

Prostitutes have additional pressures compared to those who do not sell sex. Those additional pressures relate to the need for money or the looming threat of prosecution by police, and create a more complicated situation regarding consent. None of this makes it impossible for a prostitute to consent, only impacts how likely they are to be able to give it as freely as if they were not selling sex.

The first client I ever had, who was not the last client to do so, definitely assaulted me. There was no vaginal or anal penetration involved in these assaults, but they were undoubtedly the most traumatic of any form of sexual assault I have suffered in my life. The factors that caused me such severe PTSD were the fear whilst it was ongoing and the inability to understand or process the events whilst they were ongoing. Whilst it isn't totally clear why some instances of violence or harm cause PTSD and others do not, we know that it is related to how traumatic events are processed. It is clear to me that I did not form memories of the events in the typical way given my repression of them and the denial I felt.

Since the first assault that occurred to me in sex work, I have been assaulted many times. Some instances would be considered more severe than the first time I was assaulted. I have been coerced into performing sex acts under threat of arrest or violence, I have been held down and raped by people much more physically strong than me, and I have been violated in various ways like being non-consensually choked during sex or hit or spat on. No instance of assault has been as traumatic as the first or caused such disruption in my life, despite many of these experiences being supposedly more serious. The idea that someone would tell me those instances were objectively worse makes me wonder what metric they are deciding that based on, since they caused me so much less mental anguish.

The sexual assaults that had a large impact on me are easy to pinpoint, even if the trauma renders my memories hazy. The most significant left me with debilitating PTSD which caused my life to spiral out of control for over a year. I used alcohol and drugs because of my inability to cope and had constant flashbacks. I was unable to stand having most people touch me, could not effectively make friends, and was constantly suicidal. Of the other most significant assaults, one was a client who started to cause me pain during sex via bruising my cervix, whom I repeatedly asked to be gentler. The client

refused, kept going after I told him to stop completely, and held my mouth open and spat into it and pressed onto my throat to force me to reflexively swallow. I made myself vomit after he left and then drank water and did so again, to try and rid myself of the feeling. I felt ill for weeks every time I thought about it and still have flashbacks when I see spit in a sexual context. Out loud, I struggle to even talk about it, because I immediately imagine it happening again including the physical sensations. To write it causes the same, though at least I can cope with that in private without the embarrassment of being perceived whilst it happens.

Outside of these incidents, I have been assaulted many dozens of times, so much that each instance doesn't easily come to mind. It's not that I'm not aware of what has happened and that I can't make broad statements - it's just become so mundane that remembering each instance takes some work. They didn't traumatize me and don't stick out in my memory, like any event in your day to day life. I know what sort of thing I typically eat for breakfast and could make general statements, but it takes me a moment to remember what I had on a specific day.

I've had many clients push a finger into my ass after I've told them no before the session. Of the clients who do this, some try a second or third time after I refuse them again and I have to physically pull their hands away. I recognize that it is absolutely sexual assault. Rather than being traumatizing to me, it is merely irritating. My experience is not the standard and my feelings about these assaults are not superior to anyone else's, it is merely the case that sometimes when I am sexually assaulted I find it mildly annoying and then move on. Not all assaults are equally traumatizing and there is no singular correct way to respond to abuse.

Depending on who I am speaking to, people may assume that I am intentionally downplaying the severity of abuse because I don't wish to discuss it at length in the moment or they may assume I am repressing my true feelings about it. I have been told that I must be in denial about how bad the abuse is because I support the decriminalization of sex work and cannot allow myself to admit the severity of the abuses that occur within sex work without feeling guilty about my advocacy. Then, naturally, there are those who suggest the lack of strong emotional response is because I am a liar.

My claims must be false, because if they were true then I wouldn't be able to bring myself to say them and appear outwardly calm at the same time.

Most people can easily agree that being groped is less severe than being raped. Both are forms of sexual assault, both are likely to be distressing or even deeply traumatizing, but being raped is far more likely to be the cause of long-lasting damage (both physical and mental). The issue is not that most people don't agree that there are more and less severe forms of assault, it's that their threshold for tolerating these kinds of abuses are much lower than for the typical sex worker.

During the worst of my mental health episodes after being raped, and for many months after, I could be triggered by even the smallest unwanted touch. My claim is not that being raped or assaulted frequently automatically inoculates you against being traumatized by such things in the future. Part of what determines how we react to abuse is how we view it and make sense of it. Having been raped does not automatically make you more capable of handling future assault, but processing an incident of sexual assault and removing the internal shame around being a survivor and negative self-talk changes how a person reacts to a future assault. If you suffer with intense shame, another assault will only compound it.

Being groped is a brief annoyance to me. I might be indignant or angry, especially about the entitlement a person has shown towards my body, though ultimately it won't ruin my day and I'm likely to have forgotten about it by the next morning. As a teenager, the same incident would have had me spiral into self-blame and I'd have had panic attacks about the idea of it reoccurring and being assaulted worse. I have been groped in public many times and it has never escalated to more severe sexual assault in a public venue, because groping is a brief display of power and the people who do it are far too cowardly to risk something more serious in public. I don't fear what an assailant might do moments after or blame myself for it and so I am less distressed.

With clients, sex workers go into a booking with our safety in mind. We are prepared for the possibility that a client may try to cross boundaries and assault us. In a scenario where a sex worker is raped or our life is threatened, we are no more protected from the mental

damage that trauma does than anyone else. Outside of those extreme events we have the far more common “minor” assaults, and regarding those the average sex worker is indeed more likely to be able to brush them off.

One way in which I am able to be less impacted by a client causing me some pain during a booking, or crossing a boundary, is some degree of dissociation. Lots of people dissociate as a coping strategy and once you start to do it the practice becomes automatic and easier to slip into. If a client slips a finger into my arse without my permission, I may take a moment to decide whether it’s worth the argument or I’d prefer to just put up with it for a minute or so since he seems likely to finish in a moment anyway. If I decide it’d be less annoying to let him have a finger there than to tell him off, I’ll dissociate for the next minute or so until he’s done. Sure, I’d much prefer for him not to cross my boundaries at all, although once it’s occurred I’d rather dissociate than have him be irritated and make me even more uncomfortable the entire time.

I find it convenient that I can dissociate not only during certain types of assault, but also in the course of a lot of otherwise agreeable paid sex. As is the case for most sex workers, I’m very rarely attracted to my clients, and I’ve often been disgusted by them. I’ve told clients that I prefer a position where we’re not facing each other just so I can make annoyed or grossed-out faces without him seeing, like I’m playing a game with myself as I wait for him to be done with his lackluster thrusting. Other times I start my well-practiced moaning vocalizations as if I’m playing an audio clip and think about something else entirely in my head. I’ll suck dick and mentally plan what I’m going to have for dinner later. Maybe a client pushes my head down so that I gag a little, and I find that rude... within seconds I’m back to musing about what time would be best to go to the bank to pay my earnings in.

Speaking about these kinds of coping strategies is entirely taboo. An admittance that we dislike the job and the sex itself is so often used to argue that every time we sell sex amounts to rape. To call it rape for me to choose to have sex I don’t enjoy renders the term “rape” to be practically meaningless. A lot of people have unsatisfying sex that bores them or irritates them, and some of them even act like they’re enjoying it so they don’t hurt their partner’s feelings. Arguing that



something is not rape is not the same as making an argument that it's good or ideal, and this goes both for wives having unsatisfying sex with their husbands and for sex workers having sex with clients.

Prostitution has impacted the way I react to sex and to abuse, that is undeniable. To suggest that it has broken me would be false and stigmatizing. I have learned coping skills for dealing with mistreatment and pain and using those coping skills has been of a great benefit to me. Sex workers do not owe anyone a certain level of distress for the violence we've faced. Whether we break down over the abuse or remain stable, either response is used as evidence that we cannot be trusted to discuss our own experiences.

Despite most of the assaults I've dealt with being inconsequential to me for the most part, the sheer number of times I have had my sexual boundaries disrespected does cause me anger. The more instances that stack up, the more hopeless I feel about avoiding more of it in the future or ever getting any form of justice for sex workers who face this constantly. To call an assault less severe or minor is viewed as an unacceptable downplaying of the horrors of prostitution, and yet my rage at how these instances accumulate is seen as far too extreme.

I am often angry at how entitled clients can be towards the bodies of sex workers and how often they harm us, no matter the gravity of each occasion. I am angrier still at people who think that these cases of abuse mean that we should fine or arrest even the clients who do us no harm at all.

## *Review Forums*

Where there are sex workers, there are sex worker review forums.

A small number of escorting sites have built-in review functions. To leave a review, a person must book through the site and have the escort accept their request and then complete the booking before a review can be left on their profile. Most allow the profile owner to hide their reviews if desired. All of this means that reviews need their own platform if they are to be broadly visible, so clients create forums to discuss the sex workers they visit. A thread will be created with a review, often including pictures and a link to their profile, and this is one of the ways people (almost exclusively men) who buy sex will discuss their liaisons with sex workers.

Make no mistake, these review forums are not reasonable places where clients respectfully review services. The reason for this is not inherent to, nor excused by, the service being sexual. People are capable of discussing sex without being hateful or objectifying the person they've had sex with. Since sex work is highly stigmatized, clients therefore remain anonymous on these review forums, in addition to having negative views about sex workers as wider society instills in everyone, so the commentary about sex workers on these sites tends to be utterly vile.

Both Christian rescue organizations and SWERFs love to use these review forums as a resource for farming stories of our trauma without even having to go through sex workers directly and risk us pointing out that they're wrong about how to tackle the issues we face.

Review forums will often contain long and graphic descriptions of sexual encounters with sex workers. Usually, they give some brief

details about communication whilst arranging the date and the premises. The description of the premises is already a significant problem. Many reviewers will give the specifics on an address or a postcode when none of that information is public, making it easier for others to stalk and harass the sex worker being discussed. Whilst giving out this information, some reviewers will speculate about whether the sex worker appears to live at the address or whether it seems like a brothel, occasionally going as far as to speculate about whether or not they might have stumbled upon a trafficking operation if the sex worker is an immigrant.

When I worked from a brothel where we had to get our own clients rather than being advertised by the brothel itself, I had a system for texting clients the address which was practically foolproof. I would give the postcode and promise the full address once they arrived. Once I got a text that they arrived, I described the car park they needed to walk through. As they walked through, I could see them from a window which overlooked it as well as on the CCTV. I'd check they were alone, not behaving in a suspicious manner, then tell them which door to walk through and which floor and door number inside of the building. As soon as this address is offered without those steps, a person can walk straight through the door when they arrive and skip that entire screening process.

Clients are notoriously unaware of the specifics of sex workers' manner of working. If the bedroom seems minimalist, they will guess it is a brothel when in reality it's a spare room and the sex worker has removed anything they might steal. I have seen many clients speculate that someone has been trafficked because they've seen another escort in the same building before, instead of considering that the premises might be a brothel they work in without having been trafficked or even just a place the sex worker is renting. If a sex worker finds a convenient Airbnb to use as an incall, they'll often tell any of their friends who might want to use a place in the area. The same location is not evidence of a trafficking operation. Like clients, the average anti-prostitution conservative or radical feminist also doesn't know much of the typical behaviours of prostitutes, and so they take clients words at face value and presume trafficking any time a client guesses at it.

In the main text of the review, about the service provided, it is

common for extremely objectifying and disgusting language to be used about the workers being discussed. Any demographic that a sex worker belongs to is likely to be fetishized, whether it's racial fetishization or fetishization on the basis of transness. Fat sex workers are mocked and degraded as if they are unattractive, which is somehow deemed reasonable to other users of the forum even though the person posting the review was clearly attracted enough to see them in the first place. If someone posts a review which does not sufficiently berate the sex worker in question for any deviation from white thin cisness, the comments will make sure to swiftly correct that. This is used as proof that clients are supposedly all bigoted abusers.

I am not in the habit of defending clients as a group. Frankly, there is no need, because it's not about them in the first place - I am always, first and foremost, concerned with what is best for sex workers and what is best for us is that clients are not criminalized. However, it does not take a genius to realize that a forum full of bigots is not evidence that all clients are bigots. The reality is that review forums as a format attract bigots and people who wish to write graphic reviews that put prostitutes at higher risk, and that clients who don't support that sort of behaviour don't post on the forums.

Since only the worst clients have flocked to these sorts of places in recent years, they have a terrible reputation among sex workers. Seeking out reviews about oneself can be an important safety measure, to check what sort of information is out there and whether certain incall locations have been compromised, but it is common to see sex workers discourage each other from reading more than the bare minimum for the sake of their mental health. For anti-prostitution advocates to screenshot these reviews and post them online or to read them out when arguing for legislation to criminalize clients is particularly egregious. They are prioritizing the client's view of an encounter over the experience and desires of the sex worker.

I often think about clients who objectify and fetishize workers as being vile, but my first thought and priority is always the worker they've interacted with. Clients frequently complain that sex workers they see don't seem totally interested and that they feel as though they were ripped off, or they'll say that the escort they met with wouldn't do certain positions or rushed them out, and I wonder whether that

client scared them or that worker was in pain from seeing too many clients. Rather than only getting angry over how a client describes the experience, we can focus on the needs of the worker and the causes of their discomfort. The answer might be that a worker had to see a higher volume of clients because their benefits were cut, and now they have pain in their genitals and won't do certain positions. These are questions that anti-prostitution advocates often don't bother to ask, instead focusing only on their disgust at the client. The focus shouldn't be on the clients in the first place.

In spite of the negative impacts on my mental health, I often search for reviews left about me and read them. If I read a review soon enough after an encounter, I may still remember it well and be able to see what comments were untrue or how the client's interpretations of my behaviour were wrong. A client may claim in the review that I don't offer kissing even though I do, and I recall that they had bad breath and so I'd made that up to spare their feelings, for example. The comments I read often misgender me even when the review itself does not, since transitioning. Both pre-transition and since, the reviews speak about me like an object or some sort of toy purely made for their pleasure and fail to consider my wants and needs.

A SWERF or anti-prostitution conservative could easily take one of these reviews about me to argue that clients do not see the sex workers they see as real people. How a client sees me does not change what I am. As a person with thoughts and desires and the right to bodily autonomy, the very thing prostitution abolitionists would argue that it is bad that clients don't see me as, I don't want these reviews broadcast and used to deny me rights as a worker.

Forums which discuss sex workers in harmful ways are allowed to thrive because of the stigma around sex work. Since most platforms do not allow the frank discussion of our work or any kind of solicitation, forums where clients talk about seeing us are driven underground. A combination of forums being hidden and anonymous and rampant stigma and misogyny (given that the majority of sex workers are women) contributes to the objectification being so severe.

The differences between sex work and other forms of labour aren't so extreme as to mean no consistency at all is required to evaluate our treatment. An awful sexist review about a waitress would not be considered reasonable evidence that it should be illegal to attend

restaurants, nor do entire websites dedicated to reviewing actresses which talk about them in a sexist manner mean that we should abolish all acting.

Abusive and objectifying language used in reviews by some members of a demographic is not proof that the entire demographic are predators, nor that whatever they are reviewing is inherently dangerous or traumatic. If that were the case, I've been called some horrific things by SWERFs and by conservatives and even by otherwise well-meaning liberal members of the public whilst we discuss sex work - should I consider those entire demographics to be unilaterally abusive? It is not uncommon for SWERFs to parrot language they've read used by abusive clients, or even to talk about us in the way they imagine an abusive client would without a direct reference. The purpose of speaking about us in these abusive terms is often stated or implied to be to make us aware of our situation and the traumatic nature of it, assuming that we are defending our right to be sex workers. They want to bully us into agreeing with them by making us feel objectified and as if there is no way to escape that other than to leave prostitution. I do not see a meaningful difference between a self-proclaimed feminist trying to modify my behaviour with abusive language and a client trying to do so. One is try to get me to give up my fight for rights as a worker and the other is trying to make me give them a more satisfying blowjob, sure, but at least the second group are honest about their motives.

## *Morality of Being a Client*

The law does not legislate morality. Many people believe it either does or should, and so they attempt to show case that an action is immoral to argue that it should be illegal. In the case of clients, they argue that the act of paying for sex is immoral and thus the act should be illegal.

Whether the act of paying for sex is immoral in different contexts can be an interesting question, but it is entirely separate from the question of whether it should be criminalized. A scenario in which it is illegal to pay for sex is one in which sex workers who are mostly desperate for money and struggling to make ends meet have a smaller and more criminal client pool. Through criminalizing clients, sex workers are forced into closer proximity with police and immigrant workers are at risk of deportation or arrest if they work with others from the same building and are considered to be brothel-keeping.

However, if I allow myself to consider the morality of buying sex, the answer is less clear-cut. A client who buys sex from a worker who is content in their job and who treats the sex worker well throughout the encounter is not doing something wrong simply because money was exchanged. If we add money to an encounter that could otherwise have happened exactly the same way as casual sex without the money involved, it makes no sense to bring the consent given into question and therefore I see no reason to view it as immoral. Most prostitution is not sex that would have happened even without the involvement of money, and so those cases only account for a small percentage. It's worth thinking about those scenarios.

A client who sees a homeless sex worker who, despite agreeing to the sex, is giving off every possible signal that they do not want it

from freezing up to flinching away to crying, is doing something wrong if they have sex with that sex worker. That is apparent to me, both looking at the situation from the outside and as someone who was in that situation as a sex worker myself when I was 17. If you know someone desperately does not want to have sex with you and you use their financial struggles to extort sex from them, this is morally abhorrent. The same goes for situations where someone is clearly being forced to sell sex by a third party and the client is aware of this.

In most cases of sex work, we have a situation which is in between these extremes. A sex worker may not love their work but instead feel similarly about it to millions upon millions of other workers in the world - they do their job to earn enough money to live and they have various feelings about it. They may feel neutral about the sex, or mildly negatively about it, but see no more negatively than a person might view a cleaning job or an exhausting bartending shift. For sex workers in situations like this, is a client doing something immoral by paying them for sex?

The typical experiences of prostitutes don't interest most media outlets because they are ultimately mundane. Our trauma is marketable and so are the rare stories of sex workers who love the job for their shock value. This means that even when discussing issues like the morality of clients paying for sex, the two scenarios that come to mind for most people are a client raping a sex trafficking victim or a client paying a rich and empowered sex worker who enjoys the act.

I do not see why paying someone for sex would be inherently less moral than paying any person for a service. Sex is more intimate than many other kinds of services, but there are jobs that include similar levels of intimacy and private contact that are not sexual such as caring professions. Jobs in healthcare and the sale of sex are both types of jobs that are taken on by mostly women and which involve a high degree of emotional labour as well as viewing people in intimate situations. The average woman in either type of profession is not wealthy and there are a large number of immigrants in each. When we assess the morality of a person being given a highly demanding care role as opposed to the sale of sex, the difference is in whether the person requires the service.

Buying sex is a luxury whilst receiving care for a disability or in old



age is frequently a necessity. Is that a good enough argument to decide whether it's acceptable or not, simply whether or not there is any alternative?

Personally, I would prefer that a person paid me for sex than that I had to work a long bartending shift. During a rush whilst working behind a bar, a person taking up even ten or fifteen minutes of my time with ordering drinks and adding to my stress will cause me far more negative emotions than that same person paying me for a full hour of sex. Am I to determine that going to a bar and purchasing drinks is immoral, from that? Or that buying sex is definitely amoral?

I can think of many instances where a client buying sex from me has been an immoral action, from when I was clearly underage to times I was flinching away and clearly demonstrating I was terrified of having sex even if I was verbally agreeing out of desperation for money. There are far more times I can think of where I see no reason I'd condemn a client on moral grounds, where I felt perfectly fine about exchanging sex for money and even had the opinion afterwards that I'd been compensated very well for the small amount of work or effort I put in. I rarely see a reason to recount those anecdotes because they're not deeply shocking and therefore don't hold people's attention.

Before I moved from one house to another, I needed to raise money for the cost of a moving van and the deposit for the new house. I decided to see a higher volume of clients to raise this extra money quickly and on one Monday I saw six clients. The first of them I remember was quite nervous and met me whilst on a break from his job. He paid me £80 for 30 minutes, was actually finished within 15 and only wanted some brief kissing and penetrative sex before he came into the condom and hurriedly got dressed. I don't recall all of the bookings from that day very well, none of them very memorable, but I recall one only because he had some interesting piercings. I saw him last that day and I actually enjoyed our conversation (about our various body modifications) and our hour-long appointment was one of the more pleasant experiences I've had selling sex. The sex was fine. I ended the day with £700, accounting for having ordered take-away food from my earnings in the afternoon, and was perfectly content. It doesn't seem to me that my clients did anything immoral there.

Even if I spent the vast majority of my time describing the average

experiences with clients, which are utterly mundane and fine, any time I speak about being assaulted it will be used as evidence that clients are evil and that buying sex is immoral. This would cause a bias even if I did spend most of my time talking about the mundane realities of prostitution, which I do not. Like anyone, I am more likely to talk about something if it is out of the ordinary for me. I'm not compelled to discuss the most boring aspects of my work, like the client who annoyingly ranted to me about his accounting job for half an hour and then had me suck him off for 30 seconds before he came and whom I promptly forgot about as soon as he left.

Clients actions towards me are easy to assess, but there is the added factor of their internal dialogue which is also worth assessing. Ultimately their actions and who they harm are the most important factor, for myself and for other sex workers, though their intent does make a difference. It is not uncommon for people to claim that clients do not care about sex workers' wellbeing at all or to say they don't view us as people - this has been true of a significant portion of clients in my experience, but by no means the majority.

Among the people I've spoken to who have hired sex workers in the past but have never hired me, in settings where I am known to sell sex but the people do not know my work persona, I have learned a lot about how people who don't often talk about being a client tend to view themselves. Looking only at the type of clients who engage with Onlyfans workers' or escorts social media profiles means we get a false impression of clients' typical self-concepts. The majority of clients keep quiet about the fact they have ever purchased sex at all.

Clients often feel a need to preface the fact they have bought sex by explaining how they were careful to avoid seeing anyone who is a victim of trafficking. They describe looking for escorts who had a social media presence and worked from a premises alone, perhaps mentioning avoiding hiring immigrants who they presume are more likely to have been forced to sell sex. Upon being told that most instances where people are forced to sell sex would not be filtered out by these measures, they are horrified.

The fear-mongering about sex trafficking doesn't only reach members of the public who are not involved in the industry, it also reaches prospective clients. They hear about people snatched off of the street working in dirty buildings with pimps answering their phones

for them and assume that if an articulate young woman answers the phone and has her own twitter account that she must be working without coercion.

Depending on how much energy I have for repeating the conversation for the hundredth time, I may explain that a workers' client-facing social media presence is constructed to seem appealing and will not always be honest. We pretend on social media that we enjoy sex with our clients even when we hate it because it's a good advertising technique. People don't want to sleep with someone who they think won't enjoy it. For a lot of clients, providing pleasure and having a genuinely good time is a large part of the appeal to them.

Clients are often made uncomfortable by the reality and seek reassurance that it's acceptable for them to benefit from the performance that sex workers are putting on. Reckoning with the idea that they may have caused a person discomfort is a hard thing to do. There's no way for a client to check whether or not the sex worker they slept with was uncomfortable during sex, since asking is only going to result in a lie and they cannot go back and ask every sex worker they've seen in the past in the first place.

We all cause workers discomfort in our everyday lives, whether that's by making a mess at a restaurant that an employee has to clean up or calling up an engineer to fix something in the middle of a heatwave. At some point, most of us have bought clothing from a company which massively underpays and mistreats their workers, which goes far past simple discomfort. Something about how sex is viewed in society means that the possibility of causing discomfort related to intercourse is suddenly much more serious and a cause for far more extreme guilt.

Talking publicly about selling sex can be very difficult, navigating all sorts of pressures, and so I rarely have the energy to coddle the feelings of a person who is paying for sexual services. We should all be open to conversations about the morality of work and jobs under our current framework, including our moral responsibility as consumers. This is not a conversation that can be had reasonably unless we have all of the information rather than only the extremes.

## *Constantly Changing Feelings*

I have sometimes been concerned that I could be used as a weapon against my own sex worker community, particularly during severe episodes of PTSD. Many of us in the sex trade have been victims of sexual abuse either prior to our entry into prostitution or during it, and that means many of us have strong reactions to arguments and discussions about rape. Directly after some assaults by clients, I sometimes have very strong reactions to that trauma that can last weeks or months, and there is no way for me to escape anti-prostitution and SWERF rhetoric during these periods of time.

Most of the time, I am able to be rational and honest about my experiences selling sex. I can recognize that I have suffered abuse and also note that most of my experiences selling sex have been essentially neutral. I don't recall the specifics of most days selling sex any more strongly than I recall individual shifts at other workplaces and I've had periods of working full-time at other jobs that have been far worse than periods of time I've been selling sex as my sole income. It is clear that there have been ups and downs within my time as a prostitute. There is also a clear delineation for me between struggling to sell sex under the persona I used prior to coming out as trans and the much less stressful experiences I've had selling sex whilst not having to pretend to be a woman at the same time.

After an assault or during a bad PTSD episode, I am likely to forget about or gloss over any neutral or positive experiences selling sex. A therapist would probably call this black and white thinking or catastrophizing, and ultimately what it means is that my anger towards an individual client who has harmed me is projected onto all

of my clients. I may express disgust towards all clients as a group in a manner reminiscent of people expressing disgust towards all men after being assaulted by one. My responses during this time, whilst completely understandable and worthy of compassion, are not rational. It is not an honest claim to say that all of my clients have been bad people who have hurt me, though it is not unheard of for me to frame things that way when I am unwell.

For a rape survivor to acknowledge that we are sometimes irrational, especially about the assault and our experiences surrounding it, is risky. We risk discrediting ourselves even outside of this episodes, with people assuming that nothing we say on the subject can be trusted due to the fact that we are sometimes irrational.

Through learning coping skills and via experiencing these issues so many times, it has become easier for me to recognize that my thoughts are not rational even whilst I am having them. Early on, before learning those coping skills, it is easy for me to imagine how I might have fallen into a pipeline where I could have been used as a mouthpiece for anti-prostitution rhetoric.

Outside of times where I am having trauma responses which impact how I feel about my time in prostitution, there are also changes to my thoughts on it depending on whether I am actively selling sex or in the middle of a break from doing so. It is hard to say with complete certainty how much the stigma around the sale of sex plays a role in the difference between my thoughts about selling sex when it is something I am actively doing compared to when it's something I can discuss in the past tense.

If I am actively selling sex, my own safety is paramount in terms of my advocacy. I would like to say that the safety of others is equally important to my own, but there's a reason that people are able to be trusted more in activist work when they have skin in the game. A threat to your own life or health is always going to be a more effective motivating factor than a threat to the lives and safety of others. If I have sold sex today and will sell sex again tomorrow, I must fight for legislation that keeps me the safest. The relative danger clients pose is far more important to accurately assess, so I can weight up how much I need money compared to the risk of selling sex to my client base and come to the right conclusion. Eventually, I take a brief or prolonged break from selling sex because I find other work or have enough

money to let myself rest, and suddenly those issues are not so pressing.

Building up resentments against clients is common throughout the course of selling sex. However, any instinct for carceral solutions against bad clients is overridden by the need to avoid involvement with the police and the knowledge that it will only make us less safe. In a scenario where I had enough money and a stable enough job that I could be sure I'd never want to sell sex again, it's not hard to picture a version of myself who would selfishly want to pursue revenge against those who've abused me even if that would make sex work overall more dangerous... because I would not longer have to contend with that danger. Committing these words to paper is important, as part of demonstrating that these thoughts are not my real desires. It is easy to imagine a scenario where I could have betrayed other sex workers because of my own response to trauma, acting selfishly, but I am confident now that I never would.

We need to create space for sex workers to have feelings which change frequently. No matter whether I am furious at the world or mired in self-blame, it remains true that sex workers are safer when neither we or our clients are criminalized. In a situation where we all understand this is the case, there is room for people with all sorts of views on their time selling sex. There is no reason that those of us who've detested every moment cannot organize with those who feel very neutrally and those who love to sell sex.

In stories about trauma during the sale of sex, I sometimes see elements of my own thoughts reflected back at me. Those of us who do not throw other sex workers under the bus to sell stories of our trauma which argue for client criminalization are not simply privileged or unharmed, we sometimes have the exact same feelings. In my case, I have had violent impulses and lashed out when people mention just the idea of hiring a sex worker, purely because they spoke about it during a time when I could not think about clients without making an association with my abusers.

Keeping a log of my feelings at different points is a good way to maintain perspective, but there are downsides. Documenting our work whilst active in a brothel can work against us if it is discovered by police during a raid, as it serves as evidence that the place is a brothel and could even be used to argue the sex worker is

participating in running it depending on what is recorded. It can be found by friends or family members. Not to mention how turbulent periods of high-volume sex work can be, and that it is difficult to write about abuse in the immediate aftermath.

Once your story of sex trafficking or sex work is out in the public eye, you are expected to conform to whatever perspective you have given. If you have given out a story of victimhood you are permitted to change perspective only to the extent of viewing yourself as a “survivor” rather than purely a “victim”. There is no space within an organisation which claims to rescue sex workers for one of their mouthpieces to argue that sex workers need rights and not rescue.

I am not alone in having nuanced and conflicting feelings about my profession. From online-only porn actors all the way to homeless street survival sex workers, we all have varying and fluctuating views. To be expected to only share one side of those emotions for a political goal is not conducive to healing from abuse.

## *Childhood Abuse*

It is a common belief that people turn to sex work because they were abused as children. Hypersexuality is one of the many common responses to sexual abuse and engaging in sex work is presumed by many to be one of the ways this hypersexuality can manifest. Therapists and SWERFs alike are likely to suggest a history of childhood molestation as a causative factor for someone deciding to sell sex. As a response to abuse, selling sex is therefore framed as a maladaptive coping mechanism.

Childhood abuse is more likely to occur to marginalized and poor children, with poverty and marginalization leading many people to sex work as the only way to pay their bills. There does seem to be a correlation between engaging in sex work and having a history of childhood abuse, but how much of that correlation is due to the demographics of who gets involved in sex work and who is likely to be abused as a child?

A person who is abused as a child is more likely to have worse lifelong outcomes in an variety of ways. Children are often targeted by caregivers, which gives them more unstable relationships with their families and can lead to homelessness and poverty. Guess what often drives people into sex work? Poverty.

Stories of child abuse are viewed as more horrifying than most other types of abuse. It is much harder to position a child as being deserving of abuse, though many abusers and their apologists do try. Prostitutes are often framed as being deserving of the abuse we go through because we chose to sell sex, and so one way in which certain groups try to shift this narrative so we are seen as victims is to appeal



to the idea that we were all abused as kids and that drove us into sex work.

I have no need to absolve myself of responsibility for my own choices. When I choose to sell sex as an alternative to starving, I make no apologies. I still make no apologies for selling sex when I do so to buy a gaming console that is a luxury and not a necessity. Selling sex is not immoral and I do not need anyone to create a narrative for me which takes away any significance from my personal choices.

The rhetoric that prostitutes have all been abused as children, and that this has caused us to illogically turn to selling sex when someone who had not been abused would not, is pervasive. People will argue that gay men are gay due to childhood molestation in a similar manner to arguing that a prostitute has chosen to sell sex due to abuse in childhood. The idea is that a behaviour is deviant and the cause is something the public automatically react with horror to, so that no stigma is removed from the act and even the victim is still demonized for deviant behaviour. In the case of gay men, other gay men are argued to be the perpetrators, which furthers homophobia. In the case of sex workers, the perpetrator is argued to be a family member or a child trafficking ring and at minimum is a proxy for the archetype of the client.

It is often claimed that sex workers sell sex as a maladaptive way to seek validation and intimacy. Victims often trauma bond with their abusers and try to please them, and so sex workers trying to please their clients for money is treated as the same phenomenon.

Knowing that it is untrue that sex workers are re-enacting childhood sexual abuse through seeking clients does not mean we do not fear being seen as proving the stereotype to be true. An individual who has been abused becoming a sex worker does not prove this sort of causative effect, nor does our over-representation in sex work, and yet knowing that people will see them as validating the stereotype makes it harder to speak up. Sex workers are discouraged from discussing any history of abuse lest it be used by bigots.

Discussing the victimization of children is a way for people who are anti-prostitution to separate their disgust with the sex industry from sex workers campaigning for our rights. They bypass adult sex workers entirely by focusing not only on those forced into prostitution, but specifically of the demographic of sex trafficking

survivors who do not have a mixed history in prostitution and instead only have tales of abuse by default because they are too young to consent to any kind of sex.

The sexual abuse of children is already illegal, as is rape. By teaching people to associate the sex trafficking of children with any instance where sex work is mentioned at all, it is possible to get people to automatically shut down as soon as the topic comes up. Any argument that sex work should not be illegal is responded to with horror because it is seen as a defense of sexual abuse to children, despite those instances not being discussed and not being relevant to the rights being demanded.

To escape accusations of grooming children into sex work or supporting the sex trafficking of children, some sex workers will divulge their own status as survivors of childhood abuse in an attempt to make people understand that they want to protect children and don't support such things. The problem is, this feeds right into the narrative that sex work and child abuse are linked. There is no way to break the association that does not make it again.

Moreover, accusations that a person doesn't care about victims of childhood abuse are partially designed to push survivors to out themselves. It is understandable that the response of someone who has suffered such forms of harm would be even more defensive than average, and people who make these claims are counting on that. Those who are anti-prostitution are counting on sex workers admitting their history of abuse. Anyone who does not admit to such an abuse history is assumed not to have one and the claims that they do not care continue, as if a person cannot support survivors without being one themselves.

It is easier to control the speech of children than that of adults, or to use their commentary without allowing them the chance to respond. No-one remains a child forever, and during childhood is when the victim is considered the most sympathetic. Children rarely have a platform or the ability to share their own trauma on their own terms. The experiences of a singular child, or a group of children, can be reused until the time period renders the story clearly outdated in which case it exists to be contrasted against the current situation. A child's story can be generalized to all children, who so many people see as objects they have complete control over, due to a lack of

consideration for them as individuals.

The child abuse stories that those who wish to ban prostitution will use are almost always sexual in nature. Sometimes they make vague reference to “daddy issues”, with the premise that neglect from a father figure has caused a woman to seek out validation from other men through sex. Very Freudian. This easily feeds into misogynistic ideas that men should be the gatekeepers of women’s sexuality, including fathers creating the sexual boundaries for their daughters without concern for their autonomy.

To argue that the root of why people engage in prostitution lies with what happened to them as children gives parents a false sense of security that they can prevent their children from becoming prostitutes. Alongside the reasons someone may use the stories of children’s sexual abuse to advance their political goals with regards to the banning of sex work, I do see a lot of self-soothing from parents who want a way to dodge the question of what they’d want for their own child if they started selling sex. It is easier to say your child never would sell sex, because you would raise them so they’d never choose to, than to reckon with the reality that the criminalization they advocate for would harm their child. It’s a way to avoid developing any empathetic reaction.

All prostitutes have a childhood and thus have people who raised us. The guilt many parents feel, believing they have failed their child if their child ends up selling sex, is difficult to navigate whether those parents provided for us and protected us well or not. Upon finding out that their child is a prostitute, parents may jump to conclusions and presume that their child was abused in the past or may blame instances of abuse they were already aware of. Every harmful idea that becomes a part of the public consciousness surrounding sex work is another reason we are unlikely to tell our parents.

Of all the stories of abuse I do see other sex workers share, childhood trauma is often the most highly guarded. Part of the reason for this is the concern about how those experiences might be used against them by those who seek to deny sex workers rights and the rest of the reasons are the same pressures that would apply to any victim. Sex workers should not be forced to reckon with these additional pressures on a topic already so fraught with struggle and self-hate.

A huge proportion of sex workers are parents themselves, and we are not immune to being impacted by these beliefs about childhood trauma and prostitution. Sex workers will typically seek to keep their children in the dark about their profession, concerned that even the knowledge of it might negatively impact their development. Discussing anything related to sex with children in an effort to educate them is conflated with the sexualization of children by some groups, but the consensus seems to be that some amount of sex education is acceptable - this does not seem to extend to prostitutes telling their children about their job in an age-appropriate manner. As far as a lot of non sex workers are concerned, there is no age-appropriate way to discuss prostitution with a child.

The messaging that childhood abuse or sexualization leads to later engagement in prostitution, along with the idea that a child having any knowledge that their parent is a prostitute is inappropriate, keeps sex workers from being open with their children at all. Telling their children about their history selling sex becomes the revelation of a secret once their children become adults, making it seem shameful.

Questions are often raised about sex workers' fitness to parent, from possible exposure to child abuse that their children might experience purely by proximity. Finding out that one's parent is a prostitute is treated as a trauma itself, whether the scenario being imagined is a child's school friends finding out their parent did porn or whether it's their parent bumping into a client at the supermarket and mortifying the child when they realize their parent has sex with strangers. Prostitutes are assumed to be bringing clients home to the same premises where their children are, routinely risking that a client might harm their child or not caring how much their child overhears.

The original claim that sex workers are victims who end up in prostitution as a reaction to trauma doesn't actually keep to a framing of prostitutes as innocent. Combined with the idea that victims often end up becoming abusers themselves, a narrative that is widely believed, sex workers are painted as being unsafe to be around children. Proximity to sex workers is treated as inappropriate for any child, no matter whether they are aware of the person's sex work or not. Teachers who have Onlyfans accounts are only worthy of headlines because of the outrage that someone who gets paid for displays of sexuality would also unrelatedly be in proximity to

children. Almost all adults engage in some kind of sexual activity in their private lives, yet when that sexual activity is transactional it becomes viewed as something which tarnishes a person and makes them inappropriate for children to be around. This rhetoric is also commonly thrown at queer people or unmarried and promiscuous women in general.

All of these beliefs boil down to the idea that sexual abuse transfers some sort of immorality from the offender onto the victim, spreading damaging behaviour and tainting a person. The idea is that if a child is raped, this leads them to seek out more rape in the form of prostitution, which in turn causes them not to oppose rape and to therefore condone the very kind of child abuse they once suffered. I see no other way to interpret all of the claims that the exact same people make about sex workers, in conjunction with one another.

Less sensationally (and more depressingly), prostitutes who were once abused as children tend to be more vulnerable to abuse within sex work than those who were never abused prior. This is because the factors that make a person vulnerable to abuse in the first instance don't tend to go away after someone is sexually assaulted, and are often compounded by issues like PTSD. It is not that sex workers seek out abuse, it is that predators seek out vulnerable people to prey upon. If these sex workers have children whilst poor and marginalized, their children will also be poor and marginalized, in turn leaving them at a higher likelihood of facing abuse.

The tendency to flatten out the more complex realities of child abuse to argue that sex workers are victims who should not be blamed for their participation in prostitution is an unhelpful impulse. It will never remain solely an argument to protect sex workers and can only serve to prop up the talking points of people who wish to ban prostitution entirely. Sex work is not rendered inherently bad because a high number of people doing the job have suffered prior to doing it.

## *The Obsession with Trafficking*

Sex trafficking and sex work are so linked in the public consciousness that a huge chunk of the public will accuse you of defending sex trafficking if you so much as mention the recognition of prostitutes as workers. The two are indeed linked, in the same manner that farming is linked to the human trafficking of agricultural workers (who make up a larger portion of human trafficking victims than those who are forced to sell sex do). Abuse that occurs when people are forced into an occupation is not a good reason for condemnation of the occupation itself.

Day in, day out, people are inundated with propaganda about sex trafficking. It shows up in TV shows they watch, in “modern slavery” training people must complete in their workplaces, in pamphlets found on aeroplanes, and in books and threads on social media. Among those who don’t consume a lot of social media, they’re likely to have seen at least some of the major scandals related to trafficking such as the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal<sup>9</sup>. Many have heard of one of the major sex trafficking conspiracies, like PizzaGate or Wayfair.

The scandals like Rotherham are real and significant abuses that have impacted huge numbers of girls. There are so many more instances of grooming which, just like what occurred in Rotherham, are going utterly ignored by the police even now. This is a real and continuous issue that the police either do nothing about or actively participate in. From the coverage, you wouldn’t know that. The coverage is so frequently focused on the gory details which people have a morbid fascination with instead of what actually helps the

victims.

Grooming and sexual violence are not made suddenly legal when money is exchanged. The minimum age for the sale of sex in the UK, where these grooming gangs are active, is 18. In addition, the exchange of money does not negate consent, and forcing anyone into prostitution amounts to rape and the facilitation of rape. The law itself has not been the issue in the large-scale cases of child sexual exploitation which have gone unchecked, so why would anyone imagine that adding more laws to make these things doubly illegal would change anything? The police have simply been choosing not to investigate or to help victims, and in many cases, with the underage victims of grooming gangs, have argued that the victims sought out or consented to the abuse.

Bringing these issues into the light so that the public know what is going on is vital, and yet in the cases which become the most well-known there is very little progress made from awareness about them. Instead of focusing on police accountability and changes to how the departments work internally to protect victims, all of the attention is on how horrific certain details of the abuse were with no progress towards a solution.

One of the reasons given for the police's failure to act was specifically that they viewed many of the girls being exploited "as prostitutes"<sup>10</sup>. It didn't matter to the police how severe the reports of abuse were when they viewed the victims as prostitutes because the abuse was seen as expected and something that the girls had willingly chosen. The idea that these children who were groomed were seen as having willingly chosen prostitution is horrific - and so is the idea that even if an adult had chosen to sell sex that they'd be deserving of such abuse and unworthy of help.

Considering the reality that the police did less to help these children because of viewing them as child prostitutes, stigmatizing prostitution further is clearly not the way to protect children from grooming and exploitation. A noteworthy portion of those who are selling sex are forced to do so and those people deserve help. Prostitutes can be abused or raped to the same extent that anyone else can, and are actually more often targets of that abuse because of our work.

These cases remain in the public consciousness for a long time and

are raised frequently. Given the pervasiveness of social media use, these real incidents mingle in people's minds with a large amount of misinformation and conspiracies which claim to uncover large-scale sex trafficking. I often hear a person mention Rotherham and Wayfair in the same breath, despite Wayfair being a baseless conspiracy about a US furniture company secretly being a front for a sex trafficking operation spread by QAnon<sup>11</sup>.

Conspiracies about the trafficking of children gain popularity alongside real instances of trafficking being exposed to make them seem more credible. QAnon timed much of their propaganda about celebrities and "elites" engaging in sex trafficking with revelations that came with the arrest of Jeffrey Epstein. Part of the point is to cover real trafficking with fake stories about trafficking to keep people from knowing what is real and what isn't. Of those who aren't conspiracists and who can spot the false stories, eventually many start to assume that any co-ordinated grooming gang or trafficking ring they hear about is just another conspiracy and stop looking into these claims on an individual basis. There simply isn't enough time in the day to fact-check every scandal.

People who otherwise mistreat their children still feel a desire to protect them from outside forces, primarily because they feel they should be the only people having an influence on them. The concern is not for the child's own sake, but is felt in the same manner as the threat of damage to one's property. A narrative about child trafficking is a good way to garner support for anything, because it captures the attention of people who deeply care about their children and also of those who view them as property in this way. For trafficking to exist, there must be traffickers, and once enough outrage has been cultivated all the propagandists need to do is point to a particular group and lay the blame on them.

Sex workers advocating for the right to work together (meaning the decriminalization of brothel-keeping) are often called the "pimp lobby", even by prominent radical feminists like Julie Bindel. This makes use of the panic around trafficking to demonize sex workers themselves and to conflate prostitutes with the exact group of people who often exploit us.

These tactics are commonly used against all sorts of groups. Gay men are accused of grooming children, as are trans people in the



current political climate. Fringe ideas grow from these more mainstream attacks, leaving a percentage of people with alt-right beliefs who will claim that puberty blockers are being normalized for the express purpose of keeping kids looking young for the purpose of sex trafficking them. There is no evidence behind these claims, yet people believe them easily due to being conditioned to accept any conspiracy thinking regarding trafficking.

Public obsession with trafficking is not an accident nor purely the result of human curiosity towards things that horrify us. The propaganda surrounding the subject is a means to control the populace and encourage them to hate specific groups. This has historically been done through accusations of blood libel against Jewish people or the more recent human sacrifice conspiracies during the Satanic Panic. The Satanic Panic seems to have been part of solidifying specifically the sexual abuse of children as the most effective kind of propaganda for causing moral panic on a large scale, since it included many types of claims about ritual abuse and even murder but the sexual abuse is what stuck in the minds of many.

As more people parrot the same propaganda, we also see new claims surfacing which are created entirely by singular individuals with the aim of going viral on social media. It is common for people to tap into the fear that people have around trafficking, particularly middle-class white women who are not one of the main groups at risk but are likely to believe they are, to spread false information about the current schemes of traffickers.

One type of false information I see a lot of, regarding trafficking, is descriptions of traps used to abduct people. Someone will claim, without proof or a source of any kind, that traffickers are now marking cars in the car parks of shopping centres by putting flyers under a windshield wiper or tying a piece of ribbon to a wing mirror. The general premise is usually the same, although the details change: a person pauses when reaching their car to inspect the flyer or ribbon or other marker with confusion and the trafficker swoops in and abducts them. If we think about this scenario critically it does not take long to find the holes in the story, like the fact there are much easier places to abduct someone from and the fact there's no need to mark the car at all when someone could simply wait by a car and grab a person as they approach or grab them entirely away from the car.

Women in particular are conditioned by this kind of misinformation to believe they are at constant risk of being picked up by traffickers. This is not the reality. "Traffickers" do not generally abduct people at all; they have no need to do so. A person looking to exploit another person by profiting from their prostitution will look for someone who is desperate for money and convince them that selling sex is a good method to earn it. They are likely to offer protection or security or clientele, whatever offer convinces the other person, and over time draw them into engaging in more and more sex acts for less and less money. The people they tend to target are poor, usually women and/or queer people in poverty. In practice, the demographic skew of who is in poverty means this happens to a lot of black and brown people, immigrants, and/or trans people. People whom the police are unlikely to follow up on and who will not be missed by anyone wealthy or who has connections.

Middle-class white women are not even on the radar of the vast majority of those looking to sexually exploit people through prostitution. From the messaging that is ubiquitous online, you'd think they were the number one target.

Kidnapping and sexual slavery would be a more accurate description of exactly what the public picture when they hear "sex trafficking" than the real legal definitions in different countries. The Modern Slavery Act 2015<sup>12</sup> in the UK states that "a person commits an offense if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person ("V") with a view to V being exploited" and clarifies that "it is irrelevant whether B consents to the travel". Exploitation is then defined as any experience which falls under a number of subsections which includes "slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour" and "securing services etc by force, threats or deception" as well as "securing services etc from children and vulnerable persons". Regarding securing services from "vulnerable persons", the Modern Slavery Act 2015 states that something is sex trafficking if "an adult, or a person without the illness, disability, or family relationship, would be likely to refuse to be used for that purpose". To use simple language, this means that a situation in which a brothel hires a disabled worker or a homeless person would be considered sex trafficking if the brothel has any involvement at all with the worker making it to the premises.

Under the UK definition of human trafficking regarding the sex trade, a large number of scenarios are considered to be trafficking that people would not generally think of in such a way. If someone provides you transportation to a premises (even in an area you already live) and you pay them a cut of what you earn there selling sex, that is considered not only pimping but also meets the definition of sex trafficking if you are a “vulnerable person” as they define it. If someone’s partner threatens them and takes them to another building to sell sex, that is legally considered sex trafficking. These scenarios are immoral and abusive, but “trafficking” has the implication to most people that a person has been kidnapped and taken to a different country or at least a different area. When they hear the statistics on trafficking, they presume this number refers to people who are kidnapped and forced to sell sex, and so the number given does not accurately reflect the number of people subject to that specific type of sexual violence.

The UN definition is even looser. “Trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control of another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” Following with “Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs.”<sup>13</sup> This definition may seem specific because it gives a list with some quite specific language. If we note the “or” being used throughout, it becomes clear that not all of these things have to occur to meet the definition. Trafficking is when someone is either recruited or transported by means of any of the rest of the things listed.

One example that would be considered trafficking by this UN definition would be if a person is recruited to sell sex by providing payments or benefits, for the purpose of exploitation. The exploitation can simply refer to profiting from the prostitution of another person. So, any scenario in which a third party arranges clients and they profit from doing so whilst paying the sex worker would be considered sex trafficking. Practically any instance where a third

party is involved would meet this definition of trafficking.

In the US, the definition is even more ridiculously simplistic - "the term 'sex trafficking' means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act"<sup>14</sup>. That is quite literally any instance in which a person sells sex. "Severe forms of trafficking in persons" are defined as trafficking which happens by force or fraud or coercion<sup>15</sup>.

In the US in particular, where essentially all prostitution meets their definition of trafficking, any statistics on trafficking will be hugely inflated compared to any reasonable person's understanding of what trafficking is.

We cannot allow ourselves to assume that the public obsession with trafficking means that the public are educated on trafficking. They are not. If they are going to use misleading statistics, then the people unjustly included in those statistics should be able to speak about their experiences without being told they must defer to victims of trafficking or that they are privileged. People who have experienced sex trafficking are not in ideological opposition to sex workers, they are among us and we are among them and we share many experiences.

Victims of trafficking are not guaranteed to stop engaging in sex work once free from their traffickers. Those who are brought overseas to sell sex often have an agreement with the trafficker who brought them over, and are generally aware they will be selling sex to pay off their debts regarding the cost of being brought over to whatever their target country is. A portion of these people wish to move to have a better life or for better earning opportunities to send money back to their families. Once a trafficker is repaid, they often continue to engage in prostitution because it is a business they already know well and they are often not qualified for other jobs.

I have met many other sex workers who came into the UK through groups that pay for their travel in return for working in a brothel environment to repay them plus an extra fee. In the cases of those I met, this work lasted for several months before they had repaid those costs and were able to negotiate percentages after that stage. Some moved to different brothels under completely separate management, usually to have more freedom and to have a place they could work

from whilst they rented a separate home. I have worked in brothels with various women in these situations, sharing stories with them about how I started selling sex in exchange for hearing theirs, and found that their opinions are far more nuanced than those I see promoted.

The stories of immigrants and trafficking survivors are their own, and there are plenty of people who are sharing them and whose words go ignored. Among the people I have known, most wished to remain as anonymous as possible and many had significant shame over selling sex. Those feelings are ones that I understand intimately and so I am conscious of not sharing those specific or identifying details.

What I will note is that none of the people I've met who were trafficked, including some who had been forced to sell sex by traffickers and raped on numerous occasions, did not desire rescue by outside forces. Like me, they did not trust the police and did not desire their involvement. No matter how great the public obsession with trafficking becomes, people don't want to hear their stories because they're not sensational or sympathetic enough.

The stories of trafficking that really sell and capture the attention of the populace are about children and young people who are citizens of the country they live in and are snatched off the street out of nowhere. Perfect victims that the consumer can project all their feelings onto and feel righteous about saving.

## *Lust for Arrest*

The public excitement that is often expressed when a sex trafficker is arrested might lead people to believe that the public care deeply for the victims. In reality, often the victims get little to no consideration at all, beyond their stories creating fodder to attack the abusive figure with. Pointing out that a person is a sex trafficker becomes an easy dunk for likes on social media, rather than a true indictment of their behaviour.

People find the idea of sex trafficking horrifying, and so they attack the people who do it and enjoy when they are arrested or die, but this attitude isn't reflected in what policies they support or what they know about the victims in these situations. Upon the arrest of Jeffrey Epstein, people were excited at the prospect of seeing him punished and treated him as a proxy for all sex traffickers and pimps in general. Very few of those same people seemed to know what had happened to his victims, or whether they were now safe. Some could recount vague instances of abuse but know none of the specifics or how those victims were found and targeted. Their disgust without real understanding means they will end up supporting reactionary measures, even though those measures actually harm the exact victims they supposedly want to protect.

I can think of no clearer example of the way people's desire to see sex traffickers punished means supporting harmful things, than people celebrating the idea of sex traffickers or abusers being raped in prison. Rape is incredibly common in men's prisons, as is transactional sex. A serial abuser placed in a prison environment is far more likely to abuse and rape other inmates than they are to be

assaulted themselves, especially if they are wealthy and well-known, and treating prisons as if rape should be rife within them as part of the punishment only does further harm to marginalized people.

Each time there is another round of sex trafficking panic, people want to get tougher on sex trafficking as a crime. At first this might seem like a good idea. In reality, most arrests around prostitution are of sex workers themselves. Police cannot always differentiate between who has been forced to sell sex and who has chosen to do so, and frequently do not even try. Stricter laws against pimping or brothels ultimately lead to sex workers being arrested for working together or for supporting each other financially. When you make it illegal for people to work together, they will either go to prison for doing it anyway or they will work alone and have no-one else there if a client tries to hurt them. This is lost in the argument for more policing and incarceration.

Kidnapping and rape are types of harm which are already illegal, and adding extra laws regarding sex trafficking does not make it suddenly easier to prosecute traffickers. It does, however, feel much more satisfying for the public to watch an abusive person be taken away in handcuffs by a human trafficking taskforce than to see them arrested for kidnapping or rape. Never mind that the same taskforce traumatizes sex workers and trafficking victims during raids of their workplaces, often arresting the workers and arranging for them to be deported.

We all want sex traffickers to be dealt with. I want them to be prevented from doing further harm and for their victims to be safe as my first priorities, whereas some people simply feel glee at the idea of seeing them punished. Non sex workers can simply enjoy the public vilification of these people who have committed horrific crimes, but every time there is a trending topic relating to sex trafficking it is a different story for sex workers and trafficking victims (of which there is significant overlap). We have to worry where the current news cycle will take us and what legislation they will push next, whether that's SESTA/FOSTA which forced many sex workers back into selling sex on the street and through third parties who may be abusive and exploitative. backpage being shut down and the crackdown on soliciting sex online has pushed many people into working in brothels or returning to managers and "pimps". There's modern slavery

training that gets us detained at the border when we travel. I cannot see the public get whipped up into a frenzy and enjoy justice being carried out, because there is so rarely real justice and the public panic always has negative consequences.

The interest in the suffering of abusers is huge, from the general public. It is distinct from the way that victims of abuse often fantasize about harm coming to their abusers as a way to cope. People enjoy hearing about people being incarcerated or beaten who are acceptable targets, meaning that the same people can enjoy both stories of sex traffickers being locked up and of prostitutes that they do not see as victims being arrested. I am not concerned for them personally when a sex trafficker is traumatized by the police, and I cannot bring myself to experience sympathy. My concern is entirely what this lust for their suffering does to the psychology of those who celebrate their arrests as if it's a sport. Perhaps it leads them to the incorrect idea that the punishment of these traffickers passes for justice, when it does not.

Outside of these high profile instances of trafficking, like Jeffrey Epstein or Andrew Tate or the Rotherham scandal, most abusers get away with it. In the situations where someone actually faces consequences, certainly not everyone involved is caught and it takes so long for anything to happen that the count of victims is already absurdly high.

The police benefit from people seeing trafficking as a big issue, and politicians giving them funding to create units and taskforces to tackle it, because they can pad their salaries and conduct long investigations which target only a small number of serial sexual abusers. They never run out of traffickers to target and so any time people start to notice that the problem still exists and the police aren't effectively handling it... they can ask for more money. A police unit can point to the number of raids they've conducted in the name of stopping sex trafficking and people get excited, never looking deep enough into the issue to find out that only prostitutes themselves were arrested or that most sting operations did not reveal people who were coerced and were instead used to deport sex workers.

Those who don't share this excitement for the arrests of sex traffickers are often argued to be defending them or to lack empathy for the victims. It doesn't matter if I lay up at night wishing death on those who've abused me, or if I feel rage at those who would abuse



others and imagine them suffering all kinds of torture - if I put that aside to ask myself what actually keeps sex workers and/or trafficking victims safe then I will be framed as if I'm complicit. People mistake their feelings of disgust or anger for actual help, in the same way people offer thoughts and prayers in lieu of action when a person needs material support and feel as though they've done a good deed.

We need to redirect this excitement over the idea of punishment for traffickers to a desire to rally for justice for victims of sexual abuse within prostitution.

Disseminating videos or photos of abuse is a common tactic to try and illicit a stronger emotional reaction from people who aren't joining in on publicly condemning these sexual abusers. Those who do not care about the safety of victims will not be swayed by these materials, and those who are already angry will simply be distressed by them. The real reason to post such things is for engagement on the topic, and also to raise awareness. These can be positive goals. Abusive survivors make use of these emotional reactions to spread awareness, sometimes showing pictures of bruises or videos of themselves being abused so that other people can see what it is really like and perhaps recognize the signs from their own loved ones. Removing that context and instead sharing a video of someone else's abuse without their permission and without information on how to help people in such situations does nothing but give the victim even less control.

Looking into the tags on Twitter after Andrew Tate was arrested on the 29th of December 2022 would have had you subjected to videos which are not tagged as sensitive content showing him beating women. He spoke and wrote openly about his sex trafficking tactics, admitting to the way in which he coerced women he met, and yet still people want to see the trauma with their own eyes. It's not enough to be condemn him for what he's done and to arrest him, the public must see the moments of abuse that have probably left permanent psychological scars on his victims. Videos they are likely to later come across for themselves and be further harmed by.

The conflation of videos of abuse with videos of consensual kink is also rife, in a way that primes people to react with similar disgust to any porn performer who engages in domination play. Abusers will physically assault and degrade their victims, and some porn plays

with the idea of degradation and assault in a consensual manner. So, showing an abuser like Andrew Tate abusing someone and also creating this kind of “kink” pornography without context or explanation causes people to make the association. These kinds of associations are later used to place further regulations on the porn industry or to ban types of porn altogether. When people are unable to create online content or work with studios, and therefore cannot get work, they are much more likely to engage in prostitution which is notably higher risk. The sharing of abuse content alongside kink content fuels this cycle, and it happens because kink content is created with the intent of being watched and so it is much easier to find than footage of real abuse that people are usually trying to cover up.

It is not uncommon for SWERFs to post compilations of porn scenes which include choking or spanking or rough sex and to directly compare these scenes to sexual abuse and rape. If they could find larger amounts of footage of real violations, I have no doubt they would be using those instead, especially because they present this media as being genuine sexual assault and thus clearly have no moral objection to showing those kinds of videos to the public. Once the public have an appetite for this kind of content, they want a constant stream of it.

Interviews with the abusers and traffickers are sought out more than the words of the victims about their thoughts and experiences. Part of the reason there is often a lack of pushback for this from victims is that they often wish to remain anonymous to avoid public scrutiny, or that they know every time they speak out they will receive a new wave of harassment.

High-profile cases are not our only opportunity to hear from victims, and victims can speak out even when their abuser is not widely known or has not been arrested. The focus does not have to be on the cases that make it into the news, as if they are the only source of information about trafficking survivors. We can seek out those who wish to speak without looking to the victims of Jeffrey Epstein or the Rotherham scandal specifically. A legal case may in fact serve to silence victims far more, out of fear of being sued or impacting their case.

I fault no-one for their understandable anger towards those who coerce others into prostitution and control or force them with regards

to selling sex. My own anger feels utterly overwhelming at times, to the point that it is paralyzing. We cannot allow the satisfaction of seeing one high-profile person be arrested delude us into thinking there is some sort of large-scale justice for victims of sex trafficking. Most importantly, we cannot let this lust for arrest take precedent over the safety of the survivors of the abuse.

## *Feminism and Whorephobia*

Activism which results in a clash between sex workers and radical feminists is often framed as being between “the pimp lobby” and simply “feminists”. Sex workers are neither a pimp lobby nor are we generally in opposition to feminism. Not all sex workers are educated on feminist perspectives and a lack of education in general is frequently a contributing factor as to why someone has become a sex worker in the first place, but through lived experience most sex workers have seen the impacts of sexism and the importance of bodily autonomy. There are Marxist feminists among sex workers, liberal feminists, and intersectional feminists who understand the ways in which the oppression of sex workers and of women and based on race or fatness or transness all interlink and impact each other.

Sex worker activists are almost all feminists, of one type or another. There is a long history of sex workers being excluded by feminist movements, either because we are seen as traitors for supposedly allowing men to objectify us or because prostitutes are of ill-repute and feminist movements do not want to be associated with us. Unlike those whose ideologies are formed purely based on written theory they have read or on groups they associate with, sex workers as a collective are unable to turn away from feminism even when many subsets under the feminist umbrella choose to reject us. Bodily autonomy, countering violence against women, the right to sexual freedom: these are all rights that sex workers are forced to fight for and which are supposed to be feminist ideals. Whether sex workers were to use the label or not, these goals would be in alignment with feminist ideals even though certain feminists are hypocritical when it

comes to the topic of prostitution.

Liberal feminists may be inclined to use catchphrases like “sex work is work”, but are ultimately easily taken in by weaponized stories of sex workers’ trauma. To make sense of these two different perspectives, it’s common for this subset of feminists to separate sex workers into victims and empowered workers. They often consume the stories of our trauma that are put out by radical feminists or by conservatives, but are at least likely to have some criticisms of the way these stories are presented. Support for the Nordic Model for prostitution is common among liberal feminists, however their support is much more flimsy than of typical SWERFs. The opinions of sex workers are seen as more authoritative by liberal feminists, with the view that members of a group should have their words uplifted, and so demonstrating that sex workers are most likely to support an approach of decriminalization is more likely to convince them. It is not a good idea to view identity as a proxy for determining if a person has a reasonable opinion on a select topic, yet in this case it works to sex workers’ benefit.

I see how easily swayed the average person who does not know much about sex work can be, and feminists who’ve built their framework for understanding patriarchy without considering our experiences are not exempt. Being compared to a whore is an insult that they see as degrading to women on the basis that being a whore is bad, rather than understanding that prostitutes are a part of their same struggle and should not be considered something degrading to be compared to.

The language sex workers use should not revolve around the comfort of others, however I do tend to wonder whether certain terms are alienating to some feminists. It is possible this is part of what drives them away, but in attempting to change this we face other issues with messaging and broader public support.

The term “sex work”, coined by Carol Leigh, seeks to group together anyone who sells sexual services or performances. Grouping together prostitution with pornography and stripping and other sexual professions means there are more people who are fighting together over similar issues. The more numerous we are, the higher our chances of success. With explicitly calling these jobs “work”, the term also makes it implicitly clear that we deserve workers’ rights and are

not simply victims. This seems to be somewhat acceptable as a term to most feminists, with certain radical feminists rejecting it, partially because it is so simple and clear.

However, the language we use to talk about sex work doesn't stay so inoffensive. Words like "whorearchy" and "whorephobia" certainly cause hesitation among many people. Some don't want to use terms which are almost exclusively used as insults, even when describing our oppression. Even using clear language to differentiate between prostitutes and other kinds of sex workers can be difficult, when practically everyone understands the term prostitute and yet also sees it as an insulting term. We have phrases like "full service sex worker", which might catch on in time, but when I am speaking to people about my need for rights or telling them what I do for work it is exhausting to explain what these terms mean every single time. If I tell someone I am a prostitute, they know exactly what I do for work in a way that they do not intuitively understand if I say I am an escort or a full-service sex worker. A hesitancy to use these terms means that feminists who do not sell sex often feel like they should not participate in our conversations. To be fair, part of reclaiming these terms and using them is precisely to make some of these conversations exclusive to sex workers, although in the long-term this isn't beneficial for gaining support.

SWERFs often use language that makes the other feminists they speak to feel good, like "prostituted women" which uses terms surrounding prostitution that they understand and doesn't apply a specific label to the sex worker. Using the word prostitute as a verb means discussing prostitution as something which is done to a person and which a person can be rescued from, rather than an identity. In the same way that a "rape survivor" or "rape victim" is not linguistically demeaned by being associated with rape, calling someone a "prostituted woman" frees them from those concerns. This language also denies sex workers autonomy and treats our work as though it is simply a way we are acted upon rather than something we do, but this concern is not immediately clear to people who aren't familiar with our struggles.

If your options are to use more commonly understood language and terms like misogyny and rape culture or to use words like whorephobia and full service sex work, with no other context it is

obvious why many people will shift to the language they see as less provocative and confusing. Personally, for these reasons I frequently refer to those who sell sex as prostitutes, because it is the term that is well understood and simply changing what word we use doesn't relieve us of any stigma. We are prostitutes, we engage in sex work, and we experience anti-prostitute stigma.

Our language should not be forced to be made palatable. I tend towards the opinion that grouping together different kinds of sexual services under the label of a sex work is a good choice but that we need phrases besides those with slurs or insults to describe facets of our oppression. If we're speaking about the stigma which harms children who have been groomed into selling sex, for example, calling this whorephobia is obviously going to garner a negative response. Referring to this as anti-prostitution stigma is still accurate, whilst not associating the child with the word whore.

Ultimately, sex workers should not be the ones forced to make these changes to our language or to reach out to feminists to bridge any gaps between the activism for general women's rights and for sex workers' rights. There is massive overlap in our needs, most sex workers are women, and feminists should be seeking to understand sex workers better.

Too often, feminists will appeal to the level of danger that women are in as a way to provoke empathy in others, to convince them to fight against misogyny. Those figures frequently include large numbers of sex workers, yet those experiences are collapsed into the broad category of women's experiences without their status as sex workers being noted. If our trauma is good enough for them to use to appeal to the masses, prostitutes should not have to appeal to them for acknowledgment of us. Feminists cannot avoid the reality that the oppression of women as a group has always been tied into control over women's sexuality, and that includes how the state reacts when women engage in prostitution.

### *What's More Traumatic?*

A lot of people suffer from being in serious poverty. Comparing abuses in sex work to other jobs is often considered unfair, on the basis that other jobs are not so intimate and that people believe there is some sort of quality to sex that makes it more traumatic to do without enjoyment than any other kind of work. Rather than make these comparisons, I would like to compare some different scenarios instead that people often ignore. Selling sex contrasted with choosing not to sell sex and instead to suffer in poverty.

After being assaulted in my teens, I took a break from selling sex. I was too traumatized, could not engage in any sort of sex act without becoming very upset and having flashbacks or breakdowns, and therapy was helping but at an incredibly slow rate. I was receiving benefits from the government of roughly £115 every two weeks, as I was a student studying my A-levels, but there was an issue as I was on break from school for the summer and my application to continue for the next year had not been processed correctly. I was cut off. Usually, I'd have gone out and sold sex the day I realized and made myself at least £100 to pay for food and necessities. This time I couldn't, and I was not allowed to have a traditional job or my benefits wouldn't restart for even longer, so I suffered without money.

Over the next couple of days, I ran out of food entirely. For the following ten days, I starved. Around day four, I started to throw up stomach bile. It happened uncontrollably at random times for around 48 hours, always after I woke up and then occasionally throughout the day. I drank water from the tap in my bathroom to stay hydrated. The lack of food made me very physically weak within only a few



days. By day ten, I had chest pain any time I walked and constantly felt weak and light-headed. On the last day, I finally received my benefits into my account. During all of this I tried to get to a food bank but was denied because I no longer had the proof I was on benefits (due to the processing error) and by the time I was desperate enough that I would have started begging people I was delirious and too weak to walk outside.

Once I had the money, I decided to drag myself to the local corner shop. What was usually a two minute walk took me more than half an hour and I kept having to sit on the floor on the pavement. I was past caring what anyone thought of me, if they were judging me, and struggled to get there. I called a friend who was abroad visiting family and he talked me through getting to the shop, giving encouragement. When I made it there I bought bread and houmous, because I thought I could keep it down. I also purchased some crisps and a bag of pasta and sauce. My plan was to eat when I got home and do a more comprehensive shop when I was no longer so weak. In addition, I grabbed myself a Lucozade (an energy drink with less caffeine than most which was often said to be good for drinking after being sick). I sat outside for a moment and drank some of the energy drink with the hopes of giving myself enough energy to get home easily so I could eat. I managed to cross the road, collapsed, and promptly vomited the half an energy drink I had just consumed all over myself and cried. No-one checked on me, people walked right past, and I was inconsolable because I was so angry at myself for wasting the 50 pence that much of the energy drink had cost that I'd consumed and the fact I'd wasted the calories it contained.

The next hour or so was a blur but I eventually made it home, only to be spotted by the people in the office of my supported housing unit who were so concerned they suggested an ambulance. I explained the situation and that I just needed to eat, and ate bread very slowly in tiny bites within the office. With what I know now, I recognize my struggle to eat and the reaction I had as refeeding syndrome. My support worker was inconsolable, repeating that I should have come to her sooner to express how bad it was, but I had come to her many times to tell her I had no food and no money or way to get any and was brushed off. She must have assumed that I was exaggerating or looking to con her out of some money all those times.

In the following days, any time I ate I would become dizzy and feel my heartbeat stuttering. I struggled to stand up or walk and was so weak. If I fell asleep, I'd wake up cold and gasping as if I'd not been breathing properly. I also had some hallucinations during this period, which I am admittedly more prone to than the average person. Eventually a friend was able to come over and go to the shop for me with my debit card to buy me some more food and bring it to me and over the next few weeks I built my strength back up.

Three months later, my benefits were cut off again due to another error. I immediately started advertising on several escorting sites and had a client by the next day. I met him at a hotel and he must have been able to sense how desperate and scared I was, which I presume he liked - he pushed various boundaries and manhandled me and pinched me painfully, leaving bruises on my skin, and thrust enough to bruise my cervix. He left the hotel room and gave me the keycard to it and I spent 45 minutes in a scalding hot shower once he left, shaking and crying. Selling sex that night and suffering that abuse was still infinitely easier than the ten days I spent without food and took less of a physical and mental toll. If forced to choose between the two scenarios again, I would choose to sell sex without question.

My experiences whilst in poverty are not sensational in the same way a recounting of times I have been abused whilst selling sex are. People always want to focus on how selling sex must have impacted me, meanwhile even six years after the event where I didn't eat for a couple of weeks I still have an unhealthy relationship with food. I am obsessed with making sure the fridge is closed because I am terrified that food will spoil. The sight of an empty fridge makes me feel sick. There is sometimes a psychological block for me when I am completing a task, where I do not want to eat anything, and so I will work twelve hour shifts at other jobs without consuming any food and then binge eat the moment I get home.

The night my benefits were cut for the second time, that I spent with a client, was upsetting. I remember feeling devastated at the time and scrubbing at my skin because I felt so unclean after sex with the john who'd responded to my ad. However, thinking back on the event doesn't make my throat close up with panic like thinking about the time I starved does. I often remember the time when I couldn't eat and don't think back on that particular client who was rough with me at

all unless I'm reminiscing about experiences selling sex.

It is not acceptable that anyone should be pushed into selling sex as a result of poverty. The solution to this seems obvious to me; we need to end poverty. To ban prostitution would mean condemning me to starve and never giving me an alternative. Of course, plenty of people say that abolishing prostitution should come with exit services and support, to which I say that simply providing the financial support alone would be enough because then people wouldn't have to sell sex. If support is provided so that people do not have to turn to selling sex when they do not desire to, why would anyone need to ban it? It reeks to me of people being so sure they know what is best for others that they want to take away one of sex workers' only options. Sometimes selling sex is genuinely my best option.

Bookings with clients are not usually upsetting for me. Most of them range from somewhere around neutral to mildly annoying. If I see eight clients in a month, for an hour each, or six with a couple of appointments lasting more than an hour, I can pay my rent and my bills and have some money left over. Sometimes I've seen eight clients in the span of a couple of days and then I've taken the rest of the month to rest and do whatever I like. During one point in my life I did this for several months in a row without issue and had a huge amount of time to myself. I am not deluded when I say this was better than most other jobs I have had. I was isolated because I could not tell people about my work, and I was unwilling to see more clients than necessary to pay my bills so I didn't save any extra money, but it was otherwise a good experience. If I could go back, I'd have pushed myself to see a higher volume and to save some of that money. My reasons for not doing so were primarily tied to a lot of panic I had about viewing myself as a lesbian and whether it would be "unlesbian" if I saw more clients than absolutely necessary. Funny to think about now as someone who is very proudly bisexual, yet still sad.

No-one is more equipped to decide whether selling sex is a better option for me than other jobs than I am. I know myself better than anyone else. An outsider cannot presume to know with absolute certainty whether I would have been happier in a full-time job that caused severe pain in my joints and emotional distress from workplace harassment, or selling sex with the occasional client who might mistreat or assault me. There are too many variables, and they

will differ for every sex worker.

## *The Weird Stuff*

Having the public only be interested in the most sensational of sex workers' stories means all of our other issues are completely overshadowed. If it's not something that could make it into a thriller or an episode of a police procedural show, most people won't know the problem exists.

Sponges and their use is a huge concern. That might sound like a ridiculous or niche issue - it's not. There are a lot of risks to vaginal health in sex work, including STIs and damage from the friction of having sex too frequently, and one of them is the use of sponges inside of the vagina to block a period. Sex workers insert a sponge into the vagina after a period starts and the idea is that it is dense and absorbent enough for you to have sex while it's inserted with no sign of blood. Depending on the sponge and what material it is, it can be inserted in such a way that a client will have no idea that it's there and a sex worker can successfully continue selling vaginal sex during their period.

A variety of different sponges are used. Often the go-to choice is a make-up sponge, out of desperation when a period suddenly starts but the sex worker hasn't yet made enough money for rent or food and doesn't have time to wait until the end of the period. Others use natural sea sponges, which can harbor bacteria and cause infection. Soft tampons exist which can be used for this purpose, but they can be prohibitively expensive and make-up sponges can be bought in bulk so that they cost only pennies each.

Toxic shock syndrome is relatively well-known as a phenomenon among people who have periods. The back of a box of tampons usually

has instructions about not leaving them in for more than 8 hours to avoid it. With sponges, the theoretical safe length of time has not been studied and we have no data on how often people suffer severe illness from using them. We cannot know exactly how pervasive the problem is and how many people are dealing with regular vaginal irritation or infections or whether their use might increase the chances of condoms breaking and STI transmission, because the research simply does not exist.

Not all of our issues are so serious as those which pose a risk to our health. Like any profession, there are struggles which are more of an annoyance than anything else. Sex work is not exempt from this facet of having a job. I have read extensively about sex work and yet when looking at published works I find almost no mention of complaints that are ubiquitous among sex workers.

A huge pet peeve of mine is how the average client seems completely unable to follow simple directions or to find an address. If I start selling sex from a new location, I have to workshop my instructions on how to find the address until clients seem to consistently be able to find it. This has been so consistently true for me and for every other sex worker I know that it becomes a factor which makes me doubt the authenticity of someone's accounts of experiences in sex work if they work from an incall and never mention a client having difficulty finding it. Most of the time this is purely an irritation due to the waste of time from having to guide a client through to finding the front door. Once or twice, it had resulted in a client knocking on the door of my neighbour or asking a passerby for where to find my exact address.

No-shows (clients who ghost after making a booking and don't show up) are something practically all escorts have to deal with. A bizarre thing about people who make bookings and don't show up for them is that they often text again afterward as if it never happened, acting as though they're texting for the first time. Clients are known to mass message sex workers using the same first message, sometimes making bookings with multiple people and then only showing up to one of them or to none at all and simply get off to the idea of seeing a sex worker. Evidently after mass messaging people they will delete the conversations and completely forget who they've already contacted!

There are also some mild social missteps which occur when another

person does not realize a sex workers' profession that can actually be quite funny instead of upsetting. I once started going to a new STI clinic after beginning work at a brothel in London, and during the intake questionnaire the nurse asked me how many sexual partners I'd had in the last month. I was doing the math in my head to work out how to answer, and was about to settle on around forty, when she clarified "one, two to three, more than four?" as the categories. The numbers were so much lower than my expectation that I actually laughed out loud before stating that it was more than four. A question about whether I had ever sold sex followed later, to which I answered that I was currently doing so and the nurse was finally able to make sense of my earlier reaction.

Through a lack of awareness of the strange little issues that are so common in sex work, media that is supposed to be about our lives feels inauthentic. Our lives are not purely full of misery! We joke, we have funny occurrences as a result of people not knowing what we do for work or in the course of seeing clients who do ridiculous things. Fiction which seeks to depict us, unless written by sex workers ourselves, rarely authentically depicts anything but incidents of rape or violent assault which are the only things the authors can easily find research or testimonials about. That is not reflective of the full range of our lived experiences. No wonder so many people have such a false impression of how sex workers live.

In some ways I find this lack of information to be a comfort, when it comes to protecting sex worker events or groups from being infiltrated. It is easy to spot when someone is merely pretending to have knowledge of sex work, or when they're brand new to it and still building their impression of the work from stereotypes.

I consistently find that I can tell whether someone is asking me about selling sex because they're simply curious or because they're considering selling sex for themselves by the types of questions they ask. Someone who's thinking about selling sex can listen to me for hours while I tell different anecdotes or mention having to make up lies to explain the gap in my CV. What you can and cannot write off on your taxes whilst selling sex is vital information for those who wish to sell it, and is practically useless to anyone else. People who would never consider selling sex cannot help but cut me off and ask their burning questions about my most scandalous experiences.

Usually sex workers cannot risk revealing some of our more shocking experiences, like celebrities or politicians paying us for sex. There are exceptions for those who are already public figures and who will not out themselves by going public with the information, but doing so means losing most future clients because your discretion can no longer be trusted. People want to grill me on which famous people I know are clients if I mention my awareness of any. It's one of the few things that aren't traumatic that people have a strong desire to know from me.

As with any profession, there are always going to be trade secrets and mundane facts about the job that not everyone is privy to. I see no reason that sex work needs to be an exception to this. What I do see is a great need to create associations between sex work and some of the more innocuous things that are involved. Have people picture us making irritated faces at a client's sub-par dirty talk when we're in a sex position where they can't see our face, instead of imagining us shaking with fear.

Prostitutes are frequently not seen as full people - a view which the mundane or slightly strange details of our lives might challenge.



## *Sharing in Private*

The stigma around public discussion of sex work means I have trouble sharing what has happened to me even in private and to my friends. This issue is not distinct to discussion of prostitution or of my work in porn and can apply to anything with traumatic elements or that is highly stigmatized. Notably, my hesitance to discuss prostitution is much stronger than other experience I have had which were traumatizing, which I know because I do not have similar difficulty in discussing the grooming I underwent during my pre-teens and early teens or the incident of physical abuse which caused me to leave my childhood home and become homeless.

To justify it to myself when I speak about things that have happened to me in sex work, I make it educational. If there's a purpose to me sharing what I've lived through then I can tell myself I have the right to say it and dismiss my guilt that I will make some people uncomfortable with my words. An anecdote shared in service of explaining why sex workers need certain types of help feels productive to share, rather than leaving me feeling humiliated upon admitting to my struggles.

Resentment builds up over time, through no fault of those around me, at my inability to divulge the specifics of different incidents. Those around me are unable to understand or anticipate my reactions to things which remind me of trauma I have been through because they do not know about it in the first place. Friends crack jokes about my birthday or act like I'm being unreasonable by not celebrating it because I don't explain that I was raped by a client on my birthday and I am reminded of it every time my birthday comes up. I get

uncomfortable in certain areas of London because I saw so many clients in that area when I was a teenager and the memories are depressing, so I keep my head down or chatter endlessly about nonsense and am of no help in navigating if we end up lost.

We are all more than our trauma, but our trauma does have a huge influence on how we behave. So many things I do can be traced back to past encounters with clients. Particularly during sex, I have responses which are bizarre or do not want to be touched in certain ways but am almost always unwilling to explain why. Making a connection with a partner becomes so much harder because even if they know that I sell sex, they have to rely on how they presume selling sex was for me because I won't explain it to them. I leave people to make assumptions and then find myself furious when those assumptions are incorrect.

Any sex worker who tries to date is likely to have had the experience that, upon pushing ourselves to share even some of what our work is really like, even partners who claim to be perfectly comfortable with us selling sex and meet us as people who already do so will become uncomfortable with our job. The more we talk about it, the faster their jealousy and anger and worry builds. The barrier to discuss how a booking with a client went is already so high with non sex workers and then every time we surmount it there's a slap in the face and a reminder of why we don't usually do so. A prostitute tells their partner that they just sucked someone off for hours and their jaw hurts and their partner is suddenly complaining about their sex life or bringing up that they don't get to receive oral sex often.

Most people cannot separate out types of sex to understand how sex workers view them. There's the kind of sex we have at work and the kind of sex we have for leisure or in relationships. Sometimes the experiences can overlap in many ways, from accidentally dissociating during sex with a partner because it's so ingrained to do with clients all the way to phrases a partner might say, but there's still a difference in how each type of sex is viewed. When a partner starts to feel like a client and the sex feels transactional, that's a sign to practically any sex worker I know that they should leave the relationship.

Since most people can't see that we view "work sex" differently from casual sex or fucking a long-term partner, complaints about a

booking with a client aren't taken in the spirit they're intended. I want to complain about a client who was slobbering over my dick and muttering about how he loves to give oral because it's all about my pleasure, whilst giving the worst head I've ever received in my life, and have that complaint viewed as if I'm talking about a customer who orders cocktails whilst I'm bartending and clearly want to close the bar that acts like they're doing me a favour by letting me make an interesting drink. I'm not on the verge of tears when a client's using his tongue like he's mimicking the spinning of a washing machine on my genitals; I'm rolling my eyes. If whoever I complain to won't understand it that way, there's no point in me sharing.

Inevitably when I am seeing many clients, one of them assaults me sooner or later. Each time it happens, I have to work out if I'm going to bother telling anyone the specifics of it. Most of the time I don't, unless it comes up when I'm chatting with sex worker friends in a group chat or in person which could be weeks or months after it happens. At one stage I took clients in my own home as incalls whilst the friend I lived with was out at work - by the time he came home I'd be composed even if a client had assaulted me that day and I'd speak about my day almost exclusively in terms of how much money I'd made and maybe some brief descriptions of clients if one had an unusual job. The only times I can recall talking about a client at length, even to the person I lived with, were rambling on about a client with dick piercings who I'd found immensely attractive because finding a client attractive is so rare or recounting how a client got cum in my eye so he'd know why my eye was red. Mentioning an assault feels pointless and depressing without any benefit.

Making my trauma a vehicle to discuss the issues sex workers face through giving examples is one of the only ways I know how to discuss it. I might write something hoping that a friend will read it and gain context about me because I could never get the words out in person. I know that's not an ideal way to communicate my needs. There are many sex workers out there who have no outlet at all and keep everything bottled up.

Being completely sincere becomes impossible if the people around you don't know that you've sold sex. Little moments where you wouldn't otherwise think of it suddenly bring sex work to the forefront of your mind. A drinking game with friends becomes a

minefield of lying and dodging questions about "body count" or worst kisses or one-night-stands. A conversation where a friend asks your opinion about being the third party in a cheating situation requires you to omit how your own life experiences have shaped your opinion. I am lucky enough to be surrounded by people who are supportive of me selling sex and who are unashamed if I bring it up around new friends of theirs. Still, in my relatively privileged situation, I omit various facts about my life so that I don't bring down the mood in conversation.

Plenty of sex workers tell people around them about their work, but divulging the specifics is a different story. From what I have seen, it is common for sex workers to only be fully open about the nature of our work life with each other. In brothels I have had no issue sharing things with relative strangers who work there with me that I wouldn't even tell my best friend. We chat about times clients have assaulted us and times a client has smeared shit across our bedsheets because they don't wash their asshole and there's no judgment or hesitation in the conversation. I am unable to recreate this with people who don't sell sex, no matter how hard I try.

How do we work out what's appropriate to share and what isn't? Some people don't want to hear about the sex lives of their friends at all, which seems similar to the negative reaction a person is likely to have if the sex life of their parents or sibling is brought up. Other groups of friends openly share all of the information about their sex life with vivid descriptions, swapping photos of people they've fucked or asking their friends for opinions on their nudes before they send them to someone. These boundaries take time to work out. Having a person ask what you do for work and navigating conversations about what that entails becomes fraught when talking about it might cross a person's boundaries for how sexual they're willing for a conversation to be.

This doesn't mean I never share anything with non sex workers, though I sometimes regret when I do. As time passes, I get better at working out when it's appropriate to reminisce about a client or incident with my closest friends. That being said, I've had friends who message me dozens of times to check on me when they know I'm seeing clients after I've casually mentioned how rough some of them can be or how they can scare me. Others have overreacted so strongly

to what I think are mild stories that they cried and I wonder how they'd ever tolerate hearing what I actually consider to be severe.

All of this struggle adds a certain allure to the idea of simply saying all of the lurid details without preface or caveats. It's not fair that we have to manage other people's feelings just to talk about an average day at work if the workplace is a brothel. Keeping so much bottled up makes it very appealing to imagine the attention it would bring and the relief of getting the words out. Fear of the consequences usually wins out over those desires, but they're very real. It's part of what makes anti-prostitution organizations who want to use us as mouthpieces so attractive to some sex workers.

We cannot forget one of the main purposes for sex workers sharing their trauma in public settings, which applies mostly to those who have been outed or can no longer hide that they have engaged in prostitution (especially those who are very high profile). Exposing our trauma can make us into more sympathetic victims. There is no shame in people telling others about their true experiences of abuse in the sex industry to avoid losing their family or friends or community - the shame belongs with those who would ostracize them for not adequately performing victimhood. However, we must admit that an implicit part of this defense is to argue we're not like those other whores who haven't been traumatized and who choose to sell sex. On a small scale, playing into your family's bias against prostitutes to argue you're one of the good ones and stay safe isn't something I blame anyone for... doing this to a huge audience of people to prime them to support legislation that hurts us all is not something I can forgive so easily. How our stories might be used varies wildly depending on whether we tell them in private or in public.

## *Porn Trauma and Trauma Porn*

Part of the appeal of the term “sex worker” is that it joins various forms of work related to sex into one category to be used for fighting for sex workers’ rights. Many types of sex workers, from strippers to prostitutes to porn actors, have shared needs. Unfortunately, given that practically all of the terms for prostitutes have extremely negative connotations, “sex worker” is not only used as a catch-all for anyone in the sex industry but also as a term to reference only prostitutes specifically. This causes some strange clashes, when commentary is made about prostitution and only refers to it as sex work despite the commentary not applying to other forms of sex work at all.

Porn actors who work independently are often called “online-only sex workers”, especially if they film exclusively solo content or content with their partners whom they are in genuine relationships with. In contrast to this, “in-person sex workers” will be used to refer to strippers and prostitutes. This separation tends to be used to distinguish between which types of sex workers are more at risk of physical violence, with the understanding that all forms of sex work are subject to stigmatization by virtue of subverting expected heterosexual monogamous relationship dynamics.

Plenty of organisations openly oppose the creation or distribution of pornography. Radical feminists claim it is damaging to actors and viewers alike, by creating unrealistic expectations about sex for viewers which leads them to enact abuse in their sex lives and by abusing mostly the women in porn to create the content in the first place. Conservatives argue that porn addiction leads young men to

consume pornography instead of seeking out relationships and that it is immoral for women to expose themselves sexually to an audience. Some of these viewpoints are shared by the porn actors who create the content.

Being involved in any form of sex work does not necessitate a positive view of clients, and this is just as true for those who create porn of themselves or act in porn videos for studios as it is for people who sell sex directly to clients. Many of those who use platforms like Onlyfans are harassed and objectified by their fans in ways which are deeply distressing to them. Sex workers who make porn may be pressured to work by their partners, have their content leaked and made free to view without their consent, and have content sent to family members to out them for their profession.

As much as people talk about engaging in porn being supposedly glamorized since Onlyfans and Manyvids and IWantClips became so well-known, a massive amount of the conversation about porn has a focus on the possible consequences of acting in it. I am sure that most people who use the internet have heard some version of the phrase “the internet is forever” - this is applied to creating online porn with the implication that a person must eventually regret their participation and wish to wipe the evidence off of the internet. When porn performers do feel that way, this becomes another story for various news outlets to milk to demonize sex work as a profession.

These new platforms mean there are a higher number of people in the past few decades who make porn without sex work being their main source of income or their long-term profession. This situation does not lend itself to claims that people are forced into it by desperation, with those arguments being reserved for people who do porn full-time or move to other states or countries to have their porn career managed by a third party. Instead, the claim is that large numbers of young women are manipulated into doing porn and are therefore traumatized as a result of crossing their own boundaries.

Blame regarding the damage done to a person’s life when they are exposed as a porn performer is laid on sex workers who talk about their profession and might have given someone the idea, instead of with the family members or employers who ostracize the sex worker once they find out. It is true that some people fall for the marketing of online sex workers which is actually aimed at clients and which

seems to glamorize the industry, but it is not true that those sex workers are more at fault than the people creating stigma around the work.

To promote their pornography and attract paying customers, sex workers may put out videos on various platforms showing a highly curated version of their daily life and speaking positively about the job whilst not admitting any harm or downsides. They do this because it's not attractive to clients to imagine the person they're watching porn videos of resents being objectified so much and might even be miserable at the prospect of having to film porn that day. Advertising is public and so ends up being viewed by people who are not that target audience, some of whom are struggling with money and considering sex work themselves. This does give them an overly rosy view of what being a porn actor is like. Considering that likely every other source of information they consume, barring if they stumble across educational content about sex work, is created with the intent of making sex work seem dangerous and terrifying... this glamorization doesn't seem to be the main issue. Advertising oneself as happier in a job than you are isn't automatically a form of grooming others into that profession.

Tearful tales of being manipulated by social media into believing that it's okay to do porn are a common way for people to try and recoup some of their reputation if doing porn backfires and their audience does not react as positively as expected. This only works for people with some degree of online following before they launched their foray into porn and is essentially damage control. Of course, this does not apply to every person who claims to have been manipulated by the media around them - some were sheltered and had not been exposed to what porn is or how it works prior to discovering sex workers advertising themselves and got in over their head. Unlike those with larger followings, people in this situation tend to be desperate and looking for any way to earn money and never gain significant public traction and therefore stop having made very little money and suffered some degree of harassment and embarrassment. In reality, these poorer people are worse off and certainly more upset or even traumatized by the experience, but it's not as sensational to say they got 20 customers to their subscription service than to point to the person who already had a following whose porn videos were



seen hundreds of thousands of times. The scale of the viewership is not necessarily what decides the extent of the suffering.

Rather than only scale, the severity of the damage done by participating in porn is often measured by the type of porn that it is. If the porn has any sort of BDSM involving rope or rough sex, suddenly it is treated as though it is inherently assault by radical feminists and a person's story in the porn industry is considered worthy of combing through for instances that will seem shocking. If some of the porn scenes have misogynistic premises, this can be presented as evidence of sexism leveled at the worker themselves.

Regarding the assertion that BDSM is automatically assault, this ignores the desires and autonomy of women themselves. I say women because they are the focus of this idea, not queer people. Particularly gay men who often engage in this kind of play and are dismissed as simply degenerates because a clear victim/perpetrator distinction cannot be drawn. Women's sexual desires are ignored or claimed to be derived from their desire to please men. No woman is seen as having the capacity to be a masochist or to desire the thrill of being choked. If a woman says she enjoys these things, she is painted as a liar or said to only believe she enjoys it because of trauma. As if wanting something as a result of your life experiences and how you cope with them is inherently bad, something that is assumed to be the case but not argued directly.

The women who enact these practices in porn (choking or spanking or gangbangs or piss play) are not only framed as victims of actions that are treated as abuse and argued to be impossible to be consensual, an additional accusation is leveled that this kind of pornography increases the likelihood that people who view it will enact these things. For example, groups like Fight The New Drug (an anti-porn organisation) would say that because there is a lot of choking in porn, porn watchers are more likely to choke their partners. Following on from this, they argue that many of the people watching this porn will do so non-consensually after assuming that it is typical.

There may be a correlation between consuming a lot of porn and committing acts of sexual violence.<sup>16</sup> Although the evidence on this matter is conflicting, even if true this neither proves causation nor functions as evidence that pornography is sexual abuse itself.

Pornographic media reflects the desires of its audience, and people with specific desires seek out specific types of porn. If someone is obsessive about sex, they're going to watch higher amounts of porn. This isn't proof that watching more porn makes a person more likely to engage in sexual abuse, since you'd have to account for why people began watching porn in the first place and whether that reason is what drove them to commit sexual assault and also drove them to watch porn. After all, most people watch it. Studies on porn usage generally have trouble finding subjects that do not watch any porn at all, for comparison.

Just as any kind of media can give people ideas about how to do things or what is typical, porn can obviously give people ideas for sex acts they may not otherwise have considered and may cause them to expect such acts. It seems obvious to me that the only way to reasonably combat this is to educate people about sex and treat porn as the product that it is rather than letting it be the first resource people use to learn about sex. To deny porn performers the right to make certain kinds of porn is to deny them freedom of expression and cut off their ability to earn money. Some performers are certainly pressured to film scenes and sex acts that they do not otherwise wish to perform, and to resolve this it should be made easier for sex workers to use platforms independently and for them to access other jobs if they'd prefer.

Abusive relationships and poverty, as usual, are the common culprits causing porn performers damage. Someone filming scenes with a large company and co-stars on a set is much safer if they can afford to have firm boundaries because they don't need the extra money that can come with having less of them and doing more extreme scenes. People filming masturbation or sex videos from their home are far more likely to be traumatized by the control of a partner than by imagining the number of people who may have seen them naked or by a rude reply left on a nude photo.

The discourse around smaller online content creators is still changing rapidly, working out the best way to attack sex workers and frame them as immoral from the right-wing and working out how best to frame them as either victims or gender traitors from radical feminists.

Women in porn who deny that an experience filming porn was

traumatic will be labeled gender traitors and be blamed for worsening the objectification of women, whilst the men in porn are labeled as predatory and rarely discussed as performers in their own right outside of when a story of sexual abuse goes public. This framing of the men in porn as all being predators doesn't even help the women who are victimized, because it frames all of their experiences as being assault rather than recognizing the situations where they actually didn't give consent. In that scenario, anyone who denies they were abused every time they did porn and instead points to specific instances of harm is treated as an unreliable narrator about their own experiences and does not receive help. SWERFs do not want to give sex workers support on our own terms, for things we raise as real issues.

At a certain point, one has to wonder if anti-porn groups are using stories of the trauma people in porn experience for self-gratification in a manner that is not dissimilar to the way they frame pornography-watchers as enjoying abuse on screen. They consume these stories to cause a reaction in themselves that makes them feel good, where sexual gratification is substituted for the satiation of their savior complex. Reading and reposting a story with the vague statement that people should help, or offering words of advice, is treated as though it is comparable to material aid. Any time their commitment to the cause slips and people start to listen to sex workers a little, commitment to the cause is re-affirmed by viewing interviews or documentaries or reading accounts of abuse in porn.

The phrase "trauma porn" is sometimes used to refer to this phenomenon in a pejorative way. I don't think that term quite encapsulates what is happening. Although some of the dynamics are similar in that accounts of abuse are consumed primarily for entertainment and for the viewers to feel good about themselves, there is a distinction in that they feel good about themselves for *helping* (even when they provide no material support in reality). If accounts of trauma really were being consumed in the same way porn was then the use of people's trauma would still be harmful and distressing to the victims, but it would not have so many negative effects. The requirement to feel like help is being provided, unlike the satisfaction from porn which comes from merely watching, means the spread of rhetoric about the victims which denies them autonomy is required. Instead of only enjoying hearing about another person's suffering,

they must argue to make it worse by making the industry they work in illegal or further stigmatized.

Sometimes even well-meaning people fall into the trap of speaking about porn as inherently negative even whilst defending people's right to make it. A phrase like "trauma porn" implies that the consumption of porn is bad and is so similar to the claim that all porn is footage of trauma because it is automatically degrading to be paid to perform sex acts on film.

Normalization of certain forms of sex work is the enemy of rhetoric which seeks to shock people with the seriousness of the trauma from it. The more people impacted by something in reality that people can see, the less likely they are to be taken in by claims about the level of damage it can do. High numbers look good when horrifying people with the scale of an issue, only this works much better if those numbers are inflated or the people in a certain situation are dissuaded from speaking about it. More people make porn now than ever, for small audiences and broadcast directly from their homes, so people looking to spread a certain narrative have to shift their angle. If people see making porn as more normal then suddenly filming from home isn't so damaging and is an example of people grooming others into sex work whilst encouraging misogyny through the content of the porn - towards the forms of sex work they can argue are **truly** damaging, like prostitution.

When this shift in the narrative happens and this theoretical person who was lured into prostitution by porn performers is discussed, SWERFs cannot find themselves examples. So, they resort to assuming trauma from sex workers they see and projecting this backstory onto them as though they are a fictional character. They feel vicarious horror imagining what might have occurred to prostitutes they view on the street, or whom they see post on social media, presuming based on their demographic or the way they talk about sex work that they have been lured into it. An attractive woman in her early twenties talks about becoming an escort after learning about it on social media and they presume she was groomed rather than that she sought out the information due to poverty.

Sex workers should be the ones telling our stories, not people observing us. This applies just as much to porn performers as it does to prostitutes. Though there is overlap, we should be careful that one

group does not speak for the other regarding issues that are specific to one group. I see this most often stated with regards to porn performers speaking over in-person sex workers, but find that the reverse does also apply. Porn performers do have rhetoric which targets them specifically, like the idea that their work does harm outside of the act itself through the people who view their porn, that can be hard for those who escort independently and out of public view to understand. Street sex workers and strippers are more likely to intuitively understand because there is some degree of public view of their work, whether it's people seeing them on the street or their club's advertising.

## *Those Queers*

Cis women make up most of the people who sell sex, by a significant margin. However, trans people of all genders are overrepresented when considering our prevalence in the population, as are gay cis men. It is also noteworthy that many of the cis women involved in prostitution are lesbians or bisexual. The popular stories about sex work pertain to cis straight women's experiences partially because those are indeed the majority but also notably because cis women are easier for the average person to view as an innocent victim. Most people have taken in enough propaganda in their lives about queer people being sexual deviants or sex-crazed that our presence in the sex industry is viewed as a personal moral failing tied to our queerness rather than a systemic issue related to our circumstances.

Trans people often get involved in sex work because we are more likely to be homeless and face job discrimination that limits our access to other forms of work. We are also more likely to be living in poverty. It is hard to get good quality data on the extent of the problem because even places which record information on the total number of homeless people often do not note whether service users are trans and therefore cannot separate out the trans population when presenting data. The 2015 US Transgender Health Survey had 29% of respondents claiming to be living in poverty and 30% said they had experienced homelessness at some point<sup>17</sup> A quarter of trans people in the UK have experienced homelessness according to a YouGov survey by Stonewall<sup>18</sup>. Even compared to other homeless people, trans people appear to have a higher likelihood of being unsheltered in the US, with 63% of homeless trans adults being unsheltered compared to 49% of

cisgender adults, and the figure being 80% for “gender non-conforming adults”<sup>19</sup>.

Homelessness is a huge motivating factor for people to sell sex. There is no barrier to sex work in the way there is with practically any other job. No qualifications are needed, selling sex can be done anywhere, and people can do it informally and on the street or solicit people they know even if they do not have internet access or the ability to travel. Queer people of all types are more likely to face homelessness and poverty and so are more likely to consider the sale of sex.

One major deterrent from selling sex is the risk of being branded as a sexual deviant or arrested. Criminalization of same-sex sex acts or of crossdressing is still a reality in various countries and is only recent history in others, so for queer people who are facing these consequences already there is less concern relating to increased risk. Relative to the danger they are already in of arrest or harassment, sex work has a lower threshold to seem worth it for the extra money.

Discussing the existence of queer people in sex work forces people to reckon with the factors which push people into sex work, and thus we are often ignored. For those wishing to create a frenzy about the prevalence of sex trafficking, admitting to the reality that it is largely poverty which is the driving force behind participation in sex work is not convenient for their narrative. Even among those who admit that poverty is a major driving force but who believe that clients should be criminalized cannot peddle their rhetoric as successfully when discussing queer people because they are constantly bumping up against the reality of the criminalization of this behaviour among queer people and how it did not help. Gay men who were paid for sex by other gay men were no better off when it was illegal for them to do so.

A lot of people who oppose rights for sex workers also oppose the rights of trans people (TERFs are often SWERFs and vice versa, see: Julie Bindel). Trans people often use sex work as a means to afford medical transition, as it is frequently not fully or even partially covered by the government or by medical insurance. The costs of assessments by psychiatrists and psychologists are exorbitant, with surgeries frequently costing a year's earnings for someone making minimum wage. Trans people in poverty frequently have no hope of

ever affording a surgery in their lifetime without some alternative method of earning money, and sex work provides that option. Denying sex workers certain rights and trying to reduce the client pool also means denying trans people one of the only available methods to afford access to transition care.

The danger trans people are in within the sex industry does not make the kind of story which makes people feel good about themselves, where they can imagine themselves as saviours for opposing the sex industry, so the stories are less appealing to the mass market.

Before I transitioned, people always wanted to hear about my experience as a sex worker the moment it came up. They asked constant invasive questions and were either titillated or horrified by accounts of my experiences. Now that I have been transitioning for several years, people who know I am a trans man often dismiss my sex work as being tied to my identity which they fetishize and therefore they presume that I enjoy the work or they presume I am a cis man and dismiss my sex work as gay promiscuity.

Trans women in particular are fetishized and sexualized to an extreme extent, whilst also being framed as predatory regardless of the fact that they are a population who are highly victimized. Clients will abuse trans women who are involved in sex work with the understanding that they will not be treated as sympathetic victims by the surrounding community or by the police.

Due to the extreme lack of data on trans people's experiences, since we under-report crimes against us as a population that does not trust the police and many organisations do not record whether a person is trans in a way that can be used to generate statistics, often discussion of our experiences is the only record we have that harm is occurring. The UK does not record the identity of a person and whether or not they are trans when they are murdered (the police force simply records a sex which may be what a person is assigned or may be their legal sex), as an example, so the only source for the number of trans people killed in the UK is the Trans Murder Monitoring project which claims the number is 12 trans people murdered between 2008 and 2022<sup>20</sup>. This is based on people reporting murders to the project, or the project finding news articles online. A trans person in the UK may personally know of multiple trans people murdered in England within



a year - meaning their personal experience, by complete chance, already shows the rate to be several times higher than recorded.

There is a striking lack of information regarding the specific needs and issues of transgender people in sex work. It is hard to discuss issues faced by a population when we are forced to rely on anecdotes because the data simply is not recorded. Yet, for a population of cis women in sex work whom we have much more data for, anecdotes about the specifics of abuse are uplifted as though superior to the statistics or more important than them.

For myself, the most frightening experience I have had in a brothel was undoubtedly when I worked in one after being on testosterone for a period of several months. I had started to be presumed male much more frequently, when dressed in masculine clothing, but was still assumed to be a woman perhaps half of the time at a glance. I had assumed that if I were to present femininely, everyone would assume I was a woman, because I was not yet passing consistently and had a very large chest. Pretending to be a cis woman to work for a few days in the brothel was something I assumed would be easy.

Upon arriving at the brothel, it became apparent to me that it would not be anywhere near as easy as I thought. I put on make-up and wore a bra and a dress and felt immensely uncomfortable, conforming strictly to gender stereotypes in my presentation. Clients still found me to be too masculine, from how my fat had redistributed to how much lower my voice was (though I artificially attempted to speak in a high voice). Bottom growth (clitoral enlargement) from using testosterone meant that people commented on my genitals with suspicion. One client outright asked me if I was a trans woman who had genital surgery, clearly angry at the idea I might have been a trans woman and not told him.

It is hard to determine exactly what factors led to it, but presenting as a woman after having been on testosterone for a few months meant that clients were much more violent. Clients were more likely to use degrading language towards me or to assert my female-ness as if trying to correct me for my behaviour and body and voice and also to convince themselves. The less feminine they perceived me to be, the more entitled they felt to remind me of what they perceived as my place by pushing sexual boundaries and being rough with me.

A much higher percentage of my clients now are gay and bisexual

men and I openly advertise myself as a transgender man when selling sex. This has changed many things about my dynamic with clients and how they treat me, with gay male clients being more receptive to the necessity of condom use or comfortable discussing PrEP use. Certain risks have lowered for me the longer I transition for, from the average client, and so during some periods of time it would be easy to claim that I have gotten safer. Although my average experience per client has improved, the negative experiences have admittedly become more severe over time. The severity of physical violence increased. Further into transition, as someone who is openly trans, it became more likely that I would end up covered in bruises after a brief period of selling sex than ever before simply because clients were rougher with me. Where I might previously have been seen as dainty or fragile and worthy of protection, I was viewed as someone whose body was less valuable.

The only people who seem to have considered the experiences of trans people in sex work at length are other trans sex workers. Trans people who do not sell sex often do not wish to be associated with us and sex workers who are not trans are often not privy to the gender dynamics that impact our treatment. It is so common for people to speak about sex work broadly whilst defaulting to “she” and “her” for a theoretical sex worker and to talk about misogynistic views against cis women as the driving force for mistreatment of sex workers. When discussing health issues sex workers face, the default assumption is that anyone selling sex has a vagina and anal sex will be viewed as a more extreme sex act. Even for trans people whom some of these assumptions apply to, there are additional aspects to our experiences which mean the analysis of sex workers’ conditions stemming from these assumptions do not fully apply to us. Trans women do experience misogynistic violence against them - their added experiences of transmisogyny are left out of the discussion. Trans men do usually have vaginas - their health issues from vaginal sex will differ because of factors like vaginal atrophy from testosterone and a lower likelihood of (but more severe consequences of) pregnancy if taking testosterone.

Although trans people and gay men are severely lacking in public understanding or in acknowledgement from people discussing sex work, discussion of lesbians in sex work is also suspiciously absent

from anyone but sex workers themselves. A significant number of the sex workers I meet are lesbians or bisexual women and yet if I were to only consume documentaries or the popular media about sex trafficking and prostitution I would never end up with that impression.

Lesbians who choose to be involved in sex work without force or threat cannot easily be placed into either the victims category of prostitutes nor into the sexual deviant temptress archetype, which leaves them in an odd position. Rhetoric that demonizes queer people for their promiscuity does so by viewing the desire as sinful and then acting on it as a lack of self-control - lesbians whose clients are men make this much more difficult to argue, since the idea that they desire them is nonsensical. Of course, homophobia and misogyny are not limited to be reasonable explanations for phenomena, so the argumentation used to demonize these lesbians is to claim they are confused or lying about being lesbians or to suggest that they are actually bisexual.

Within *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing remarks that many prostitutes seem to be lesbians<sup>21</sup>. The book is one I did not read with an intention to learn about the history of perceptions of sex work, having read it to learn about the history of the medicalisation and perception of queer identity. Rather than seeing the prevalence of lesbian sex workers as evidence that lesbians engage in sex work frequently, Krafft-Ebing's assumption is that "repugnance for the most disgusting and perverse acts (coitus in axilla, inter mammae, etc.) which men perform on prostitutes is not infrequently responsible for driving these unfortunate creatures to Lesbian love". He also references another author with a claim that "this vice (saphism) is met more frequently among ladies of the aristocracy and prostitutes". This information is relegated to a few lines within a relatively small chapter of a book which spends most of its length discussing various sexualities and behaviours which it pathologises.

It is often the case that the history of queer people in sex work is a footnote either in texts which discuss the history of queer people or the history of sex work. These footnotes often try to fit us into a framework that was not built with us in mind, assuming that our experiences are fundamentally the same as for non-queer people or non sex workers. Incorrect beliefs about sex work on top of incorrect

beliefs about queerness lead us to be doubly misunderstood.

Resources for queer sex workers will not be funded or receive support if people are not aware that they are needed. This leaves us to create the resources and support networks for ourselves, in the absence of anyone else who can do so. To get support for those projects, awareness must be spread outside of only circles consisting of other queer people. This leaves the question of the best method to do so, and we must consider the drawbacks of raising awareness purely through providing the details of our traumas without offering suggestions for the solutions.

## *The Happy Hooker Myth*

Exporting the “Happy Hooker” myth is one tactic used to oppose the weaponization of sex worker trauma. One could frame it as self defense against this narrative of prostitution as solely traumatizing, to craft a view of sex workers as empowered women who enjoy selling sex. It is not one that will be effective in the long-term and undermines our struggle for rights.

There are some people who decide to sell sex because they enjoy sex and decide to also make money from having it. They accept only clients who they believe they will enjoy meeting with and they experience no noteworthy harassment or abuse. It feels empowering to them. The group of sex workers this is true for is a very small fraction of the total number of sex workers in the world or in even the countries with the highest living standards globally. The vast majority of sex workers do not enjoy their work but do not currently have access to other options that would allow them to stop. Most of us begin selling sex due to poverty. These facts do not undermine prostitutes’ fight to be recognized as workers, nor our struggle for rights - our status as marginalized and impoverished workers is exactly why we need rights so desperately.

To argue that the “Happy Hooker” archetype is common and that we should support sex workers because some of us enjoy it is nothing but rhetorically throwing poor and struggling sex workers under the bus. We have just as much of a right to hate our jobs as everyone else and to not be criminalized for it.

A version of a sex worker that people will consider acceptable and worthy of respect cannot be created in a world where the act of selling

sex is itself seen as shameful. If we do not wish to sell sex and only do it out of desperation then we are treated as victims who need our choices taken from us for our own good. If we enjoy selling sex and aren't abused then we're immoral sluts who deserve any abuse that might come our way. This is how we are viewed and until that changes, creating an archetype and claiming only that type of sex worker as acceptable will never succeed.

We should also consider who the happy hooker archetype is even accessible to. The attempt to create a persona of a person who loves selling sex and isn't stuck in the profession can be easily warped in the mind of a client through the lens of their prejudice. A recent immigrant who does not speak English fluently is going to be assumed not to have better options, and to therefore be selling sex out of necessity rather than choice, which means that if you create a false dichotomy between victims and happy hookers then they will be placed into the victim group. Modern slavery raids disproportionately impact immigrant workers, who are reported and targeted more often for these traumatic operations by police, and these issues are exacerbated just as much by false messaging that all consensual sex workers love the job as by the propaganda that we all hate it. If every sex worker who enters the industry voluntarily is supposedly perfectly content, what does that tell any member of the public who lives next to a brothel and sees a prostitute who looks unhappy?

Many sex workers who advertise themselves as being happy in their work will use their income as proof. How could they possibly be traumatized or trapped in sex work when they've made so much money? The premise, to some extent, is that we should understand they could quit at any time because they have so much money in savings. Again this splits sex workers into two groups, poor and rich, not dissimilarly to how the legalization of sex work (as opposed to the full decriminalization of it) splits sex workers into legal sex workers and the illegal underground market.

Sex workers who are marginalized, either due to their race or transness or fatness, are often unable to charge the same rates as other workers and obtain the same number of clients. Black workers are frequently undervalued and even when trying to use the happy hooker archetype are treated as if they should be paid less because of

the racist hypersexualization of black people. Unlike white cis women who can present themselves as loving sex and yet still highly selective and a luxury service, black sex workers of any gender are assumed to have a smaller client pool to choose from as white clients view themselves as the arbiters of attractiveness and as if they're doing black sex workers a favour by seeing them at all. Many clients will refuse to pay the same amount and so outsiders view black sex workers as more victimized because they're not reaching "happy hooker" hourly rates.

A sex worker may be seen as an exception who proves the rule regarding their demographic, who only draws more attention to the usual abuses via their contrast. Indigenous women make up a small portion of Canada's population and yet supposedly make up the majority of street sex workers<sup>22</sup>, meaning that even when an indigenous sex worker is able to make a large income from sex work and presents as a success story that success is always contrasted with those selling sex to meet their basic needs. It is worthy of note that the statistics on which demographics do sex work, especially in tracking down street sex workers to assess in the first place, are incredibly inaccurate largely because the research subjects often don't want to be studied, but as long as people believe these statistics then in the minds of the public it's no different whether the statistics are actually true.

No account of enjoyment will ever be effective as a counter to a tale of abuse, nor should it. When there are many stories of abuse and many of enjoyment, protecting people from suffering is going to outweigh the desire to give people the freedom to have some extra fun. Personally, I'm more than willing to give up things that I enjoy if it means doing less harm, and there are many groups out there arguing we should do so in support of important causes. People are inundated with requests that they buy things second-hand and don't partake in fast fashion, or that they boycott chains which donate in support of harmful legislation, yet we should imagine that when it comes to sex work they'll abandon that mindset? Enjoying sex work, as one individual, is not a sufficient argument that it should not be criminalized. Instead, a more reasonable argument is to point out that criminalization leads to more harm.

I am not innocent of playing into these stereotypes myself with clients. I've had clients get nervous and want reassurance that I'm not

being forced to sell sex by a boyfriend and/or pimp, or ask why I became an escort with concern in their voice, and I've claimed that I just love having sex and thought I should at least get paid for it. Their reason for asking is to assuage their guilt about paying for sex and my answer avoids having to admit that I only do it for the money and to ruin their fantasy. When I've said such things it's not out of a desire to make myself seem more respectable or to further a political goal, it's because I'm worried it'll take the client longer to get his dick hard if he doesn't truly believe that I find him attractive. Longer it takes for the client to get it up, the longer they're likely to try and give me sub-par oral for, and fuck that.

Most of us don't have our political position as sex workers in mind during every moment we're working. We don't have time to be concerned about public perception and how we frame our experiences when we're still in the middle of experiencing them. Acting as though you are less vulnerable means clients don't get tipped off on how to exploit you the most easily, so acting as though you earn more money than you do or claiming to love the sex is a good way to get repeat clients without dealing with more extreme violence or harassment. To criticize this framing fully we must recognize why workers employ it.

The first time I had sex with a client and genuinely enjoyed it, I felt as though I would sound fake if I spoke about it at all. Long before he contacted me, the client had been a sex worker himself, and was one of the few I've ever had who was considerate and didn't ask me to remove my binder or inundate me with irritating questions about what I personally enjoy that I would have to lie in response to. He happened to be my type, too, and I agreed to see him again without him paying - the first time I'd ever done that. It was such a different situation from most I've had whilst selling sex and I'd doubted other sex workers claims to ever enjoy sleeping with a client in the past when I was hating every booking I had.

How are any of us to know it's possible to have these different types of experiences all together as one person, if we don't discuss them with each other for fear of not being believed? It's important that we aren't gullible, especially with how many people attempt to infiltrate anonymous sex worker spaces to gather information about us, but we must be open-minded about the plurality of experiences.

We should not censor ourselves when we do enjoy part of the job.



The perception that we are always miserable does us no good, and more importantly is dishonest. What we need are truthful and well-rounded accounts that do not focus solely on suffering or on enjoyment, at least when sex workers are speaking to each other or raising awareness.

## *Prostitutes' Feelings*

The emotions of the prostitute are often regarded as unimportant. Our distress and desperation are sometimes used to score easy political points, but make no mistake that the majority of people do not care how we feel even when they say they wish to help us. Almost anyone who frames their support of sex workers around saving or rescuing us, including when they say they will do so via the abolition of the sex trade, is doing so for the fulfillment it brings them and not out of a concern for us as people.

Disregarding our real emotions means that any feelings can be projected onto us without issue. The prostitute can be the traumatized victim when needed for stories to fearmonger about trafficking, and she (the cis female archetype of the sex worker people picture) can be framed as a seductress who takes advantage of her clients when the goal is to trap women in poverty and treat choices made to try to survive as immoral.

With the need to discredit sex workers who ask for rights whilst other groups want criminalization in the name of abolition comes the claim that some of us enjoy being abused. When all else fails and we cannot be smeared as liars about engaging in prostitution or about suffering harm as a result, there is no rhetorical avenue for those who are anti sex worker to take besides to treat us as masochistic and titillated by our own trauma.

Those of us who openly push for changes in the law regarding prostitution, whether through public speaking and attending strike action or writing about our experiences and showing up at consultations on legal changes, are likely to be accused of asking for

these changes for our own benefit. Sometimes we will be framed as pimps using a persona, but when our identity cannot be denied then the argument is that we want higher numbers of clients for ourselves. If we consider SWERFs argumentation that all prostitution is rape because they view payment as nullifying consent, any accusation that some sex workers would impact legislation because they want more clients is a claim that those sex workers want to be raped.

Wanting more clients is one reason sex workers may want to avoid restrictions or criminalization of prostitution or of strip clubs or porn. A restricted client pool of only people who are willing to break the law means the average client is more violent. When there are less clients to choose from, prostitutes and strippers alike are pushed to take more risks with which clients they sleep with or give private dances to - even if they would otherwise refuse due to the number of red flags.

Either the claim is that we enjoy being raped, or it is that we enjoy being able to hold our experiences as survivors of sexual assault over other people. It is common for people to reference the fact they have been raped as a way to lend credence to what they say about sexual assault or rape culture, and groups criticizing sex workers are not immune to this. Women who are anti sex work will discuss being victims of sexual abuse and argue that a culture where sex work is normalized leads to a higher risk of such abuse and the objectification of women even outside of sex work.

This argument has been made to reject projects like the managed zone in Leeds, an area where sex workers were allowed to sell sex between certain times within a set location. Street sex workers were able to access resources from outreach projects without fear of arrest, including getting first aid or condoms. Safety of sex workers was not the focus of activists for the abolition of the managed zone and instead the complaints were focused on the sight of street sex workers making people uncomfortable or the idea that it might increase the amount of street harassment against non sex workers<sup>23</sup>. These residents are seen as innocent and undeserving of this harassment in a way that sex workers are not, as if sex workers will either feel less distressed by it or as if their distress is inconsequential.

One resident in the Listening Well Report for Holbeck is recorded as saying "they (the sex workers) are so relaxed, they move about the area anywhere. The women look horrible, disheveled, drug addicts, no

teeth”, the complaint making a point of noting sex workers relative comfort as a large part of the problem. The issue is not any potential suffering that might be indicated by a disheveled appearance or seeming unwell, but the idea that we might not be ashamed and hide it away from public view.

The treatment of the prostitute as an unthinking unfeeling actor, who simply sells sex because it is what they do, denies us acknowledgment of the fact we have the same rich inner life as anyone else. If it would be uncouth to argue that sex workers who are clearly unwell and struggling must secretly enjoy their trauma, the only avenue left when trying to deny them basic rights is to dehumanize them. Assuming that a sex worker does things simply because they fall into it and it does not occur to them to leave, outside of situations of force, makes it easier to believe they would simply cease to sell sex if it were banned.

Any feelings we express are construed as lies by one group or another. If we complain about how we are treated then we must be lying about anything positive we say about sex work. If we say we sometimes enjoy sex work, we must be lying about our history of abuse. We are not treated as capable of complex emotion.

It is simultaneously true that prostitution can be convenient and take less of a physical toll than other jobs that might be available to someone, causing relief, and that prostitution can be terrifying due to threats from potential clients and health risks. One individual may feel comforted by having prostitution as a fall-back option if things go back and devastated at the idea they might actually have to make use of that fall-back plan. Prostitutes are not one-dimensional concepts, we are people.

In my worst moments I have felt as though I am too hysterical to be worth taking seriously. Crying after being assaulted by a client, obsessively scrubbing my skin until I bleed, I wonder how I could ever be objective about the sexual assault of sex workers. I convince myself that my feelings will always be too extreme, that my hatred for clients when I am triggered and reliving memories of abuse will make me too jaded to be able to listen to arguments about why clients should be respected. When actually confronted with these discussions, people accuse me of not caring about victims and of sucking up to clients because I recognize that criminalizing them would only make sex

workers more vulnerable. I realize that although how I feel will impact my views, people are not accurately assessing my feelings at all.

A lack of a proper outlet for our feelings, from a combination of self-censorship to avoid our words being twisted and insufficient support on the occasions we do share, leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms to replace that outlet. We turn to drugs or to dissociation, both of which leave us in states that make us seem abnormal. A sex worker might get high and act very emotionally and be characterized as crazy or might dissociate and be characterized as mindless and unintelligent. Emotional regulation can be damaged easily by trauma and drug use and those are things sex workers are more likely to come into contact with.

Anything a sex worker does can be argued to be a behaviour which seeks out harm, leaving us the blame for any attacks or harassment we might suffer from. Sex workers are organizing to protect ourselves from abuse, not to seek more of it, yet in organizing and speaking up we are more visible and open to personal attacks on our character and emotional reactions.

Aileen Wuornos is a notable sex worker whose story was used by news outlets for shock value whilst her own feelings about that trauma were dismissed. Her story exemplifies many of the issues people have with showing empathy towards sex workers. Aileen killed seven men and the press wanted to spin the tale as that of a ruthless female serial killer, surprising the public who thought that women weren't capable of such atrocities. In reality, Aileen had been abused since she was a young child, first being sexually abused by her grandfather and then later becoming pregnant at 14 when she was raped by her grandfather's friend. At 15, after giving birth, she started selling sex and living in the woods. She continued to sell sex into her 30s, homeless for various periods of that time.

Throughout her time selling sex, Aileen was raped and assaulted many times. She claimed that eventually, one man tried to kill her and she killed him in self-defense; her first kill, Richard Mallory. Over the next year, she killed six more men until she was eventually caught, whom she maintained that she killed because they had each attempted to rape or kill her. One of the main criticisms used against her defense was that it seemed so unlikely that she could face so much

violence in such a short space of time, framing her as a liar who exaggerated to a ridiculous extreme. Many claimed that she had finally snapped after years of being degraded as a prostitute, that she had a hatred of men that drove her to murder - a claim which went hand-in-hand with the revelation that she was in love with a woman and was dating her. In the end, she was executed for her crimes.

In her own words, Aileen stated, "You sabotaged my ass, society and the cops and the system, a raped woman got executed and was used for books and movies and shit, ladder climbs, reelection, everything else. I got a big finger in all your faces, thanks a lot." She was cognizant of how she was being viewed by the public, how they dismissed her experiences as a victim to view her only as a perpetrator of violence, and she pointed it out. That did not protect her from the death penalty, which towards the end of her life she was actively seeking to escape the abuse from the prison guards.

No matter what a person thinks of Aileen and whether or not all of her kills were self-defense, it is clear that she was not a cold and calculating person. She was traumatized and understandably enraged by the injustice she had faced, fiercely protective of those close to her, and expressed so much empathy that she openly forgave her girlfriend for turning her in. The idea that she experienced 7 attempted rapes and/or assaults within a year does not shock me, because as a homeless sex worker she was at an immensely high risk.

In her last ever interview with Nick Broomfield, before her execution, Aileen discussed her use of self-defense and her certainty that the police allowed it:

Nick: "I am asking you what got you to kill the seven men?"

Aileen: "And I'm telling you because the cops let me keep killing them, Nick, don't you get it?"

Nick: "Not everybody is killing seven people. So there must have been something in you that was getting you to do that."

Aileen: "Oh, you are lost, Nick. I was a hitchhiking hooker."

Nick: "Right."

Aileen: "Running into trouble. I'd shoot, shoot the guy if I ran into trouble, physical trouble, the cops knew it. When the physical trouble came along, let her clean the streets, and then we'll pull her in. That's why."

Nick: "But how come there was so much physical trouble? Because

it was all in one year. It's seven people in one year."

The information about Aileen's childhood sexual abuse was public and people were not hesitant to openly discuss her claims of repeated rapes and attacks at the hands of her clients. Those stories were morbidly fascinating to the public, yet were treated like fiction or seen as a just punishment because Aileen was engaging in prostitution. Nick sees no issue with questioning the premise that she'd encounter so much physical violence, even in her last interview before her death, because he cannot accept the reality of the danger of prostitution and see Aileen as a full human being.

Aileen Wuornos' story is not exceptional among sex workers in terms of the violence she faced. It's not exceptional in terms of the lack of care from the police force. What is exceptional in her case is that she didn't die at the hands of Richard Mallory. Women like Aileen often end up dead. Sometimes at the hands of their clients and sometimes at the hands of police and sometimes from the cold when sleeping rough on the streets. Perhaps some of the men she killed after Richard Mallory would have raped her and then let her go after, there's no way to know, but the expectation that she should tolerate being raped over and over until one of those clients finally killed her is clearly unjust. No-one could tolerate such abuse in the long-term without it having devastating impacts on them. The idea that someone should tolerate such abuse purely because they are a prostitute, or that a prostitute is more capable of tolerating that kind of trauma because they do not feel emotions the same way other people do, is almost as harmful as the abuse itself.

Some people want to pathologize Aileen or sensationalize the idea of a female serial killer. The truth of the matter is that an extremely vulnerable woman who was repeatedly abused was put in various situations where her life and body were at risk and the police did nothing but watch. Her anger was not exceptional or a symptom of psychopathy, it was a feeling any reasonable person would have if placed in her situation.

Men who target vulnerable sex workers are allowed to get away with it whilst sex workers themselves are arrested for trying to earn money to survive. Men like Samuel Little, who confessed to 93 murders (mostly women, many of them sex workers) and was the most prolific known serial killer in US history, get away with so many

of their crimes because of who they target. Peter Sutcliffe, also called the Yorkshire Ripper, managed to avoid being caught for a decade because his victims were sex workers. Only when he started to kill “innocent young girls” as opposed to sex workers (in the words of the police) did the police start to care at all. The pain and even the death of sex workers is seen as utterly unimportant.

We are not thoughtless about our situations, nor are we all mired in misery about them. Sex workers are merely a group of people who share a profession. If our feelings are to be weaponized for a political goal, it becomes necessary for activists to dig past our learned indifference or despair and to reach for our rage. Anyone who would dismiss our feelings outright is not someone for whom we should have to make ourselves appear respectable, and anyone showing basic empathy can see that our anger is justified.



## *Whorearchy and Speaking Up*

Making up stories about prostitution gives the creator of such stories the ability to speak about any scenario. In fiction, a protagonist can be from any background and have any sort of experience whilst the tale is told through their mindset. Regarding true stories, this is not so simple. Whilst any sex worker can speak about their experience in theory, in practice there are a huge number of barriers.

A street sex worker who trades sex for drugs will have a multitude of reasons that speaking up would not be a good idea for them. Revealing ongoing drug use puts a person at risk of arrest, broadcasting that you are in a vulnerable position makes it easier for predators to target you, various support services may reject them if they are aware of them selling sex, the list of reasons goes on. A person who has a need to trade sex for drugs is also not likely to have much of a platform for their words to reach a wider audience even if they do want to talk about their experiences. Finding the time or mental clarity to write is yet another barrier.

Once you become aware of the extent of the disinformation campaign about sex work and sex trafficking, as a sex worker, it can often feel necessary to correct it. What we must consider is that just like how those who spread negative propaganda about sex work are highly likely to be middle or upper class and white and cis and to not be immigrants, so are those who combat the disinformation. If you have very few prostitutes willing to speak at a protest or in front of legislators, you take whoever you can get that is capable, but at some stage we need to make active efforts to lift up the voices of those who are most marginalized and are at the intersections of several types of

bigotry.

Sugar babies tend to attempt to fly under the radar and not be perceived as sex workers at all, but outside of their specific niche there is certainly a hierarchy of sex workers who are regarded with varying levels of contempt by the public. People are much more willing to listen to the words of a successful porn star than of a prostitute selling sex on the street. For those who become famous enough in a less stigmatized form of sex work, they are afforded more credibility, though this still does not overcome the issues of racial disparity or transphobia or ableism.

To allow for progress to be made and for more sex workers to become activists if they wish, support must be provided for when those who speak out are targeted for their activism.

I've discussed how privilege can give someone the ability to speak about their experience, but there is another truth about which sex workers speak up that can sometimes be less intuitive. Sometimes when a sex worker has nothing else to lose, it allows them a certain kind of freedom to express their opinions without concern about many of the consequences. Being estranged from one's family certainly isn't a privilege, and for sex workers that is something which makes them more likely to speak up because they have no concern of their family finding out. Even in the case of a supportive family, being publicly known as a sex worker can result in your family members being targeted.

All that is needed by prostitutes with nothing to lose is for someone to amplify their words.

On an individual level, listening to the sex workers around you and spreading their positions to others is a good start. This can be done by non sex workers and sex workers alike, taking the testimony of people with different experiences and sharing them. Recommending a book or a show can help, but there's going to be a small success rate in convincing someone to read or watch something explanatory. Bringing up these ideas in conversation is much more likely to get someone to think more deeply about a topic and to do their own research in the long-term.

Nuance should be respected. Sex workers who talk about complicated feelings regarding clients or managers should have those opinions respected even when someone is arguing with them. To only

present someone's positive comments about sex work, when they speak frequently about experiencing abuse, is as much of a misrepresentation as the reverse.

I often wonder if I am the right person to speak at any given time, only to find that I am the only person willing to. When someone wants a perspective on trans sex workers in general, I tend to think that a trans woman would be better suited to speak because there are more trans women in sex work and they are targeted for more violence. To speak instead, from my position of relative safety within the trans community, feels wrong. Then I consider that if a trans woman were to speak up, she'd be attacked more viciously for doing so than I would, and I wonder whether I have an obligation to speak up specifically because I will not be the target of transmisogyny.

My own neuroses aside, this does speak to a thought process many sex workers go through. Either we feel we are too privileged to be a good representative, are too marginalized to be able to speak up without fearing massive violence, or we come from a demographic that has an easier time being heard and want to make space for those who are less able to speak. As a community, we support each other.

Nowadays I've found a comfortable position for myself. I speak both to educate people and to work through my own experiences in a healthy way, whilst being careful not to speak over others about their own needs or experiences. In wondering whether I am the ideal demographic to speak for sex workers as a whole, I am giving in to the assumption that any prostitute who speaks is a mouthpiece for our entire group. I am not. I have had experiences selling sex as a woman before I transitioned and I have had experiences selling sex as a trans man since doing so. My views are not universally shared by all sex workers and I'd never claim that they are. If what we want is diversity of thought and experience then I think it's reasonable for my own to be among them even though I would never want it to be the loudest.

Online porn creators worry about our content being leaked and viewed for free a lot, and knowing it has been posted without our consent can feel like a type of violation. I find the feeling to be similar when something I have said or written about abuse by clients as a prostitute has been taken from its original context and used to argue against my rights. I cannot pretend this has never made me hesitate in

speaking. I hear people I meet regurgitate information to me from a friend they once had who was a sex worker and I wonder how many people have done that regarding my own positions. Do they repeat what I say in a manner that helps or in a manner that actually advocates against my needs and desires?

I can wonder endlessly about the impact but none of that matters when we already know that prostitutes being silent doesn't help anyone. Discussion of trauma cannot be avoided, nor can we stop others from wanting to weaponize it against us or use it for money and clicks. I'm going to continue to speak with the hope that the content of my words is understood and is longer-lasting than what people might pluck from them for shock value.

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