

Shaking up the views of sex work

The lived experience of one sex worker

Contribution



Pic: 1928 by Mark Gertler, private collection

I'm a single parent, a PhD university student and yes, I'm a sex worker. I've been a sex worker for the past 12 years and I love my job! During this time I have attempted to access a lot of service providers and have walked away from all but one. The one I chose not to walk away from, was someone who listened to me, respected and supported my decision to remain being a sex worker and did not, at any time, try to encourage me to leave the profession. Every other service provider seemed to have an agenda to ensure that I chose not to do sex work, as I was told, that was the only way in which my life would

improve...I disagreed! Many service providers brought into the whole pathologisation of sex workers which got in the way of them listening to my 'truths'. I don't think there is any other job to where the worker is immediately pathologised (and assumptions made) like they are in the sex industry?

Even when a negative view of sex work was not stated explicitly, I could certainly feel it come through implicitly and that was enough for me to not want to engage with that particular service provider. I found that many service providers found it difficult to understand or believe that anyone, who was educated, strong and autonomous, would want to be a sex worker; would feel empowered by that choice and even feel proud of the work they do...their inability to believe and listen to my story, effectively silenced me...I chose not to use these services, which severely limited my access to services full stop.

Many people usually want to know how I became a sex worker...they question if it really was my choice? I first gravitated toward the sex industry as I was living in poverty and wanted to provide a better lifestyle for my son.

When I first considered becoming a sex worker, I too was not immune by the dominant ideas that much of society holds about sex work and sex workers. To be honest, the whole idea scared the life out of me...I saw the sex industry as being a place full of violence, dangerous, soul-destroying, a place where women would be taken advantaged of, forced into acts that they weren't comfortable with and having to put up with sick, perverted men. I had decided that I would get in and out fast, making the money that I needed to and never telling anyone that I had done this. This being said, it is not like I didn't have other options – I did. I could have given up my home and declared bankruptcy; I could have chosen to work in another job – I was offered a position stuffing envelopes or I could have worked as a check-out chick but I knew that this wouldn't pay enough for my son and I to live in the lifestyle we were used to; I could have borrowed money from my parents; could have sold my car and pawned all my items of value but I chose to remain independent, chose to retain the lifestyle that my son and I had always known; I chose to be a sex worker and it wasn't long before I couldn't have been



happier about that decision. It was the best decision that I could have ever made (for lots of reasons).

Anti-sex work feminists, on the other hand, would call this 'forced by circumstances' but I wasn't forced, I did have other options regardless that those options were limited, they were still available to me yet I still chose to do sex work. Sex work was not as I had imagined; it was not as I had seen in the media or had read about in books.

What other job can a woman walk into, with no recent references or work experience, get employed immediately, work flexible hours to suit her and her family, get a decent wage for a relatively short time at work and get paid cash in the hand at the end of her shift so she can pay that very pressing bill the next day. It may save her electricity from being cut off?

My experience of sex work changed the dominant ideas of which I thought about sex work very quickly and today, after much contemplation, I chose to identify as a sex worker under my real name. Choosing to use my real name is liberating but also a risk...I risk what you may think of me, where and with who you may share that information with and how they may react to me; I risk future employment by telling you (a dilemma I have always been acutely aware of – how do I explain the past 12 years of employment?) This can pose a very real danger in many ways.

The most liberating and empowering experience I've had in applying for a job was recently when I was able to apply for a position at SWOP (Sex Workers Outreach Project). Part of the criteria for this position was 'sex work experience', so for the first time I was able to include my skills as sex worker in my resume and covering letter; for the first time I did not have to hide who I was or how I gained some of those skills; for the first time in a job application I could be 'me'!

Sex work is often seen as an unskilled profession yet I have obtained and used more skills as a sex worker than what I ever did as a therapist or as the coordinator of a child protection service. As a sex worker I run a small business and pay my taxes like every other worker in the

world. I also use the same skills as a therapist – listening to and really being there 100% with clients; I'm a negotiator – being clear about what services I provide and what I won't provide; I'm a medical practitioner – I check every client for visible STI's; I'm an educator – I often educate clients about sex and safe sex practices; and lastly I'm the perfect girlfriend!

I would say that at least 99% of my clients are incredibly respectful and considerate people. Being a sex worker has taught me that everyone, no matter how good looking they are, lives with a certain amount of insecurities about themselves, their bodies and/or their sexual needs. They are not perverts or people to be frightened of – they are simply human.

I know that it may be difficult to believe but I really do enjoy my work, I'm proud of the service I provide and I'm proud to identify as a sex worker. Regardless, for many years, I kept my employment a secret from friends and family. I only recently came 'out'.

My secrecy, and in turn my isolation, is a direct result of how people see sex workers. Please I ask you to examine your own thoughts on this. How do you view sex workers? Let's face it, in the minds of much of society, sex workers are drug addicts, vectors of disease, uneducated victims. They are a scourge on society, who ruin families and destroy marriages and their clients are perverts. They are always bad mothers, thieves, liars. They are dirty, immoral whores.

Would you 'out' yourself as a sex worker if you knew that's how people would see you?

If that nice young woman next door, who babysits your children and cooks you the occasional meal, that goes out to coffee with you, was to tell you she was a sex worker - would you still look at her in the same way?? Could you leave her alone with your children? Could you leave her alone with your husband? Would you hide all your valuables next time she came over? Or would you stop her from coming over at all???

(Adapted exercise taken from A Narrative Workshop on "Therapists who are Survivors of Past Sexual Assault Working in Sexual Assault Services")

I don't hide my job because of my feelings about my work - I hide it because of your feelings about my work. It is your ignorance and feelings that victimises, humiliates and degrades me. It is your feelings that make me ashamed of who I am and what I do. I can't hold my head up high and be proud of myself, until YOU allow me to do so.

It cannot be said enough: sex workers are people – they are your friends, your family members, they are wage earners, tax-payers and parents — and they deserve the same human rights as everyone else.

Ally Daniel

