

Sex work and the sex worker

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Abstract

“K” is an intersex, trans and sex worker rights advocate. I interviewed K about their sex work experiences, how the needs of sex workers might be respectfully addressed and the ways in which feminist frameworks interface with the experiences of sex workers. Cristan Williams: How long have you been involved with sex work? K: I’ve [...]

Article



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Cristan Williams: How long have you been involved with sex work?

K: I’ve been in different types of sex work and I think that it’s important to that there is a difference between cam work, street work, escort work and other types of sex work.

When I initially got involved with sex work it was as a street worker. It was done out of necessity. I was a teen and I was homeless. I turned to sex work as a means to survive. Through doing that I ended up in what I realize now as a form of trafficking. At that time I didn't realize that I was a victim of trafficking. I didn't understand that being shared among a group as a teen was trafficking. So, for me, that experience was not at all comparable to what I do now.

What I do now is work through an escort agency. I get to pick my clients. I meet with them and we engage in a theme that is already predetermined. I meet my clients as a character I have created for them. I have also done porn work and I have done some dominatrix work as well.

CW: Speaking in terms of broad brush categorizations, feminism offers various frameworks to conceptualize sex work. Generally speaking, some second wave feminist framework views sex work as a type of rape in that people usually don't do sex work without being pressured - either economically, through relationships, etc - into sex work. Since being coerced into sex acts is rape, sex work is viewed as being one of patriarchy's most effective forms of subjugation. Moreover, the sex industry can be viewed as the DNA of patriarchy in that every form of female subjugation is sexualized. Other forms of feminism are more discursively focused on reducing harm, shame and guilt. Third wave feminism gave rise to a significant focus on sex worker health needs and even union organizing.

I don't want to give you a contrived description of feminism. The lines that I've drawn aren't, in actuality, hard and fast; there's a lot of overlap and shades of grey between 2nd, 3rd and 4th wave feminism. I don't know that I've met a feminist who's not concerned with the personal, the political and the social systems that coerce certain experiences. Many feminists - from radical feminists to "4th wave" feminists - agree that sex workers themselves should not face arrest for doing sex work.

K: I think it's situational. There are certainly instances where sex work is forced. That's real. However, I don't find it to be true that every form of sex work that I've experienced was rape. When I was doing sex work - street work - out of necessity, I was a very different person than I am now. I was very insecure about my body; I didn't know who I was or what I wanted. I was vulnerable and financially, it felt like it was my last option.

Where I am now, I'm financially stable. I'm on really, really good terms with my body. I like my body as it is. I understand my sexuality. I'm a much happier, much more stable person. If I were the same person I am now - as a teen back then - I would not be doing sex work because that experience was so dehumanizing. I didn't have any say over my body, my environment, who I was with or what I was doing.

When some feminists say that all sex work - in every way and in every circumstance - is being "prostituted," I experience that language as being dehumanizing. Moreover, I think that being referred to as a "prostitute" is also problematic, similarly with the word, "John." Our culture has a certain idea about what that looks like and who does that kind of work. Sometimes sex work is only viewed in just one way; it's easy to do.

I think that when people want to demonize sex workers or they want to do away with all sex work, they tend to ignore the underlying reasons that some people go into sex work. If it is done out of necessity, loading them down with cultural baggage around language doesn't help. Attacking sex workers doesn't help. Trying to outlaw sex work doesn't help. When sex work is what you have to make it to the next day, dealing with sex work and sex workers by taking away that only option isn't any real intervention into

the underlying issues.

Help looks like knowing why people are engaged in sex work. It looks like learning about what their needs are and offering material support systems and safe spaces. Simply outlawing sex work without first addressing the issues that make some people go into sex work isn't helpful.

Sex work and sex workers aren't monolithic. Taking an intersectional approach to each person's experience and offering real and substantive support isn't as easy as seeing us all in only one way or hoping that a magic bullet in the form of prohibition will address the issues of sex work and sex workers.

As to porn, there are many different forms and it's important to note that. Also, it's important to note that there different reasons some do porn. Some are able to define what they will and won't do, who they will and won't do it with, what scenes they will and won't do and they're able to work with people who they have good chemistry with. Not everyone has that control. There are others who do it because they need money now and they don't have a say in what they're doing, and they may not enjoy the work they're doing.

In the porn work that I've done, everything was negotiated and I didn't do anything I wasn't okay with doing. Before anything happened, I got to meet everyone else. We had control; if we wanted to stop, we would stop. The production company I worked with was very willing to work with us as performers.

Today I enjoy my work; I don't do it out of necessity. Where I'm at with my work is that most of my clients are people who I would be with, with or without the payment. If it ever again becomes not fun or enjoyable, I'll move on to something else. For my current situation, it's hard for me to see how some view it as such a negative or damaging thing.

CW: Do you see your artistic work and your sex work blending in any way?

K: Absolutely. I do a lot of performance-based artwork and specifically, character acting. As I mentioned before, when I arrange a theme with a client, I figure out what their interests are, and I develop a character that meets with them. For me, my work is performance. It is performative and it is performance.

I provide my clients with the option of presenting as male or female, masculine or feminine; creating different hair and makeup if that's wanted, facial hair if that's wanted. For me, it's an extension of my performance work and I don't really view it as anything other than performance.

I know that I am a very sexual person. I have a very high sex drive and for me, it seemed foolish not to utilize this skill set as a performer and as someone who really enjoys sex, particularly with people whom I get to choose and who want to have sex with me and is willing to pay for that privilege. For me, what I do now, it's like the perfect job.

CW: Can you talk about inherent work risk in sex work?

K: From my own experience, street work was definitely more dangerous and more high-risk in many different ways. When I was doing street work, I was doing it because I needed the money and because I needed a place to stay for the night. There was always this fear when I would have a potential client

drive up - do I get into this car? If I get into the car with this person, are they going to hurt me? Are they going to rape me? Are they a cop and if so are they going to hurt me, rape me or arrest me? There was always this fear and the fear was always coupled with wondering what the next person might be like. Is there going to be a next person? Is the next person going to be better or worse? Or, will I sleep outside tonight?

If you've seen and known as a sex worker, you are automatically dehumanized and so there was also fear about just people in general. All of these issues are made worse if you've seen as a trans sex worker. When I was doing sex work, as an intersex bodied person, I was working as female, but my body was not visible as a typical female's body. I was therefore seen as a trans woman sex worker.

There were instances where I was harassed or attacked because I was viewed as being a sex worker. I had instances where I would get in the car with someone and they'd pull a gun on me and rob me of what little money I had made. I was very fortunate to have never been arrested and while I had interactions with cops, I fortunately never experienced violence from a cop, though I knew others who had.

As I work now, working for an agency, the agency that I work for is membership-based and all of the clients that go through the agency and are members and all have a background check. I certainly acknowledge that's not 100% safe; at the same time, I'm dealing with different demographics. There's a huge difference in the amount of money that I'm making versus street work. The amount that I charge makes it so that my clients are more professional individuals. I've only had one problem with a client who attempted to do a sex act that was barred as per our agreement. I had said that it was not going to happen and then he started to get violent towards me and I was able to get out of the situation. I contacted the agency and let them know about the incident and they lost their membership.

While it's not totally safe and there is the occasional jerk, I feel much safer than I did doing street work. Going back to what it's like for street workers, I have a huge amount of privilege working through an escort agency, in being able to talk about being an escort, even to people who are active in politics and to people who are police officers who are my friends. I don't fear violence or arrest for talking about it.

Access to condoms and other barriers is a lot easier for me and location is also a privilege. When I was doing street work, I was working out of someone's car, behind a building or a stranger's home. There wasn't a safe space to do what I was doing. As an escort, I do in-calls and out-calls. When I do out-calls, they are in hotels I have to approve of. There's a different level of safety.

CW: How do you think our culture should regard sex work?

K: I don't think sex work is ever going to go away and in that regard, I think legislating prohibition is foolish. That being said, I've seen some amazing things being done in other countries. I think it's always important to recognize that there are different types of sex work and different reasons for going into sex work.

I recall hearing about a country where there was an area where sex workers would buy a permit to do sex work and those without permits would be fined. The money raised through this funded services for sex workers. While something like that won't work for every situation, I think it's a step in the right direction. There are places where sex work has structure, legal protections, safety standards and I

think that's also beneficial. I think vocational training is good as long as it's not punitive or corrosive; some people would definitely want that. Making social services available to all sex workers would be helpful as long as it recognizes different forms of need. There is no one thing that would address all issues for sex workers and any legalization would need complex structures built into it.

I think it would be really important to make it so that sex work wasn't a crime first and foremost. I would like to see some way to be able to report income legally so that tax money could go into funding necessary services for sex workers. How do we fund services for sex workers when there's no way for us to pay into a system to support sex workers? I know that some may not prefer to pay taxes on their work, but we need to be able to fund services.

CW: How do you feel about laws that target sex workers?

K: Unless you're going to address the underlying issue, people are going to do what they have to do to survive. Prohibition isn't helpful and at the same time, it's important to recognize that people wouldn't be doing it if they had another option. If it's a housing issue, provide them with housing. If it's a drug issue, provide them with harm reduction skills and support systems. I think that if you don't want people to do street work out of necessity, instead of making it illegal, address the underlying issues.

I want to acknowledge that when I was doing street work, I was underage. I don't view children or teens able to make informed decisions about sex work. In that regard, I think child trafficking is a totally different issue than the sex work that I do today. When I talk about sex work done out of necessity, I'm specifically talking about people who are of age. At the same time, turning the kid into a criminal due to their circumstance isn't helpful either.

CW: As someone who did sex work as an underage kid, what kind of support did you need?

K: Being arrested or taking me back to my parents would have been the worst thing for cops to have done. Our culture isn't set up to actually address the needs of queer youth who are doing sex work. For me, my parents were the reason I was on the streets. Bringing me to my parents would have caused me real harm. Shelters can be of some use, but at the time, shelters wouldn't take someone with a body like mine. Shelters that did work with me were not safe. I don't know if a counselor would have helped. Having real resources that could actually help someone like me would have been great.

The root of doing survival sex work is the need for food and for shelter. Cops aren't able to provide that and social services - without the state getting involved, a legal case and months of dealing with bureaucracy - aren't able to work with underage kids. Because the reality is that our society isn't set up to help in a way that's immediate and substantive, the best thing for me at the time was to not be arrested, to have some practical harm reduction materials - condoms, lube, a list of resources - because the street was better than the other options available to me at that time.

I mean, there were times where maybe an unsafe shelter or jail would have been preferable to sleeping outside or having to deal with my parents. But, it's not always the best thing and for someone who's trans or intersex, any option can be dangerous.

CW: For the individuals who are reading this and who may be doing sex work, what advice would you share with them?

K: If they are of age and they're doing sex work because it feels good and they make good money, I would tell them to have fun. If they're doing sex work because there's a necessity behind it, I would tell them to be safe, to connect with other sex workers, look for a Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) in your area, and definitely connect with them. Stay in contact with other sex workers, share information and keep each other updated about bad clients. I recommend using apps like Kitestring that will alert your friends if you miss a check-in and at least let someone else know where you're going to be and how to contact you.

Sex Worker Help:

If you are a sex worker and would like resources or someone to talk with, you can call the National SWOP 24/7 helpline at 877-776-2004.

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