

HO LOVER:

about dating & friending sex workers

HO LOVER: about dating & friending sex workers (By Sunny)

I have been asked a bunch of times if it's hard to have sex workers as lovers. Does it make me feel insecure about our sex? Do I get jealous? Do they get sick of sex? Do I worry about my sexual health? Before I address some of these questions, I want to instead question why the queries are always about negative things. I don't understand why not many people say – “wow, you're so lucky – that must be amazing”, or “tell me about all the great things you must get to experience”, or even simply, “congratulations, sex workers rock!” So I want to start with some of the many ways I have greatly benefited from having sex workers as lovers and friends.

ABOUT WHO IS WRITING THIS

Firstly though, a few words about my location in this topic. I'm a white queer trans-guy of mongrel class background (mostly raised by a single mum who financially struggled and who grew up poor, part-time by a rags-to-riches dad who grew up working class, was middle class when I was young and is now wealthy). I have lots of sex worker friends and have dated or had casual delicious somethings with a bunch of sex workers including escorts, dominatrixes, strippers, sensual masseurs and people who've made porn. The majority of these sex workers have been femme identified women. They have mostly had some layers of privilege which means they've had more control over their work than more marginalised sex workers (just like privilege often brings more control in other professions too). Most of them have had really crappy experiences with at least some of their loved ones in terms of reactions to their work. Sometimes I'm sure I have been that crappy loved one. **I am not attempting to speak on behalf of sex workers – only they can do that.** I do not believe sex workers should have to do all the tedious/painful work of educating others (unless they choose to), so this is my way of doing some of the work necessary to keep myself accountable and to support non-sex worker friends and lovers in challenging sex work stigma within relationships and beyond.

WHY SEX WORKERS ROCK!

Ooh, there's so many reasons sex workers rock! Because I'm writing this article partly to challenge some people's idea that it's difficult being with sex workers, I'm going to focus on the ways I benefit from having sex worker lovers and friends. Firstly; the most obvious – sex workers are often skilled hot lovers/ play buddies! They are sex/play professionals. Like any field, sex work takes time, experience and training to excel at. Sex workers pay attention to learning how to make people feel good – physically and emotionally. Also, some sex workers have experience working with clients with various disabilities which makes them more capable of having hot sex with lovers with disabilities. Ooh if I had a dollar for every time I have thought to myself “I am so fucking lucky” (and not just when I’m coming). I want to point out that not all sex workers like sex, or are experts at sex – and assuming they are can put an undue amount of pressure on them to be sexperts (see the tips section below for more detail about this).

Part of these professional skills involves not only the physical techniques of how to get someone off, they also include figuring out what someone’s needs are, either verbally or through paying attention to body language and other cues. Negotiations with my whore lovers about what we each want and need have often been radically easier than with non sex worker lovers. This also extends to negotiating consent – making sure that we are each comfortable and safe during our time together and that we are able to communicate (through various ways) how we are feeling throughout.

One of the things I’m most grateful to my sex worker lovers and friends for is the deep unlocking of my own sexuality. The dominant culture ideas I’ve been steeped in about sex have left me with a lifetime of shame and secrecy to dismantle. As a survivor of sexual assaults (some of which I didn’t tell anyone about for over 10 years), the layers I’ve had to peel back have been greatly helped by my relationships with sex

workers. The opportunity to have consensual, loving, skilled (and hot) sex with my lovers has helped my body to heal from these experiences.

Also, as someone trying to find ways to responsibly and hotly express my masculinity within sex with women/femmes I cannot even begin to describe how amazing the space opened up by my femme whose lovers has been. Why am I giving airspace to my evolving masculinity? I believe that creating new models of feminist masculinity are completely necessary in actualising a feminist world. Also because I am interested in healing. As a first priority, supporting the healing of women and femmes who are brutally and subtly hurt by the patriarchy. And secondly recognising the ways the patriarchy hurts and incapacitates all people including masculine gendered people. As most of the clients of my sex worker lovers have been male and masculine, my lovers are experienced in and open to the myriad of masculine sexualities and identities. The way one of my lovers in particular has been able to hold a space where I get to consensually explore and express non-patriarchal masculinity within our fucking and play has been a significant sexual healing for me. Now, what was that you were asking about what is hard for me? Shit, I know something's hard, and it sure as hell ain't the difficulties.

I've also had the awesome opportunity to unpack some of my ideas about sex. I didn't even realise that I had been carrying around subtle and not-so-subtle socially perpetuated messages about the destructiveness of sex. Relationships with sex workers have enabled me to see the power of sex, which can be amazingly positive when harnessed consensually and responsibly. As an example, I went through a political training program during which I specifically chose to not pursue any crushes while the program was running. I thought that fucking my peers would be counterproductive to my studies and the greater purpose of the political education. When one of my lovers did the same training the following year she discussed the possibility of making out with/romancing/sleeping with a few of her fellow program participants. I felt concerned for the impact this would have on her

learning and on the group. Through the evidently amazing interactions she had in this course and a very smart article she wrote about sex-negative attitudes in the course, I got to witness the potential for sex to provide comfort and connection, rather than causing trouble. In her critique, my lover points out the ways that having intimate connections with people can nourish and strengthen political work by engaging each other in the struggles of our lovers and friends. For example, I wouldn't be writing this article if I didn't have such kick-arse relationships with whores.

I have found my lovers and friends who are sex workers to be mostly really amazing listeners, healers and fabulous at providing support and care. Whilst I also recognise the particular responsibilities I have as a masculine guy in making sure that this care is exchanged consensually and with an analysis of patriarchy, I have GREATLY enjoyed and benefited from having the care, support and counseling skills of such amazing professionals.

I've benefited from how mobile and flexible some forms of sex work can be. I've had some inter-state and international lovers and friends who have been able to travel to my city to visit me, because their work is more flexible and transportable than mine. It's important to note though that not all sex workers are mobile, like if they work for an agency, strip club or massage parlour where they need to book time off, or if they are marginalised in ways which prevent their mobility.

And importantly, I love sex workers BECAUSE and INCLUDING what they do for work (not inspite of) – for many sex workers it's part of who they are, and not something I can just remove and claim to love the rest of them. If you're having a hard time with your lover or friend being a sex worker, I'd challenge you to write a list of all the things you love/ like about that person, and I would bet that a huge percentage of those things are also things they apply to/ learn from their work. Go on, I dare you.

I want to acknowledge that because I've dated sex workers with relative layers of privilege who have had more control over their work, I haven't had experiences like supporting a partner who has been subject to criminal arrest. I also haven't dealt with other things like the implications of being in a common law or legal marriage where the sex worker partner is not paying taxes and the impact this can have on both partners.

SOME TIPS

Here are some things I've found useful either through my own experience or through the generosity of sex workers in telling me. Many of these ideas could be used in your relationships with non-sex workers too!

Disclosure to others: always ask if it's ok to disclose to others (family, co-workers, friends etc) that your lover/friend is a sex worker. The world is a hostile place for sex workers. They have lost their jobs, been assaulted, jailed, shamed, looked down upon and humiliated by people who hate sex workers. So don't assume that it's ok to tell other people, even if you would think that person would be open and react well. Ask if there are general rules for who you can tell or if they'd like you to check in every time before telling someone.

Frequency of sex: understanding that, just like non-sex workers, a sex worker *may* not want to have as much (or any) sex on particular days – especially when they are working. Or conversely, they may in fact want more sex after they have worked, as a way of coming down from work. This may extend to wanting/ not wanting you to be flirtatious with them or making sexual references. This is not that different to the myriad of other reasons why a non-sex worker lover, may not want to have sex on a particular day – like being tired, pre-occupied, sad or just not feeling sexual. Some specific suggestions:

- Focus on how you can be responsible for your own sexual needs if your lover is not in the mood to have sex. Jack off. Get another lover (if you are non-monogamous). Watch porn. Pay for sex. Or accept that you can't always get what you want. If you have layers of privilege (like being white, male, masculine, cisgendered, class privileged etc) which have taught you to feel entitled to someone else's body and/or sex, this will probably do you some good anyway!
- Ask your lover questions about what they want - "are there any things that generally do/don't feel good when you've been working?", "would you prefer to be the one to initiate sex on those days?", "would you prefer I didn't flirt or make sexual references?", "do you like to be cared for/ pampered when you come home from work or would you like physical space?" Etc.
- Get to know patterns with your lovers – whether they're likely to not want sex/ sex talk/ flirting and generally for how long after working. This doesn't replace checking in with them and establishing consent each time, but can cut down on the amount of communicating you need to do.

Safer space: there are lots of ways you can participate in making spaces safer for sex workers. For example:

- House- I've recently started asking potential new housemates or houses where I'm interviewing for, what their feelings and opinions are about sex work. I do this in the same way I check-in about whether people I'm going to be living with are: feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist etc. I pro-actively seek out living situations which I know will be supportive of the professions of my lovers and friends.
- Forewarning: ask if your lovers want you to forewarn others (like your family or friends) that they are sex workers, so that they don't have to go through annoying and potentially hurtful first reactions. Sex workers are often left to educate those around them about sex work – this can be tiring and frustrating.

Forewarning people allows them to ask *you* their questions, and to process the information before they meet your sex worker lover. Don't just assume this is ok though – even if your lover has consented to you telling others, intentionally doing so to forewarn people may feel patronising.

Have the difficult conversations: in order to be articulate about the amazingness and value of sex workers and combat negativity/ oppression that I hear from friends and family, I listen to and read the words of sex workers to learn more about how to challenge sex work stigma when I hear it and see it. See the resources section at the end.

Safer sex: Like in any relationship, it's absolutely your right to negotiate whatever precautions you want with your lovers. However, assuming that sex workers are any more likely to have STIs than other people is both inaccurate and offensive. I've learnt a huge amount about safer sex practices from sex workers. Far from the irritating question: "but don't you worry about getting an STI from your lover?" – shit, I have never met a bunch of people more invested in and skilled at preventing the transmission of STIs. After all, many sex workers are the safe sex experts! Do you know how to check out someone's bits for possible STI's? No I mean like really. I had no idea you could squeeze someone's dick and look at the discharge to give you clues! It's also a very normal and comfortable part of my sex with some of my whole lovers to check out each other's genitals and discuss anything questionable.

Because I've been in non-monogamous relationships for a long time now, I'm used to negotiating safer sex agreements – I do this because both I and my lovers sleep with other people – not because they're getting *paid* to sleep with other people! If you're not used to negotiating this sort of thing, I suggest you first educate yourself on STI transmission (look up websites, pick up some pamphlets from your local testing centre, do a workshop) then figure out which risks you are and aren't prepared to take, and negotiate accordingly. Recognise that you

may need to be extra sensitive with how you negotiate boundaries/ safer sex practices, because it's possible your sex worker lover has had upsetting experiences of being perceived to be 'diseased' by other lovers or potential lovers. For example, you may specify to them that these are your safer sex practices with everyone. Rather than having to ask my lovers for details on what they get up to with other people (like what their safer sex practices are – which may feel invasive or just plain tedious to constantly negotiate), personally I find it easier to assume EVERYONE I sleep with (whether they get paid or not to fuck other people, whether they've been tested or not) could potentially have or contract an STI, so my safer sex practices take this into account. Likewise, in fact it could be ME that contracts an STI so I also make sure my safer sex practices are less likely to pass things on to all my lovers. The consequence of me passing on an STI to a lover who is a sex worker could be them not being able to work for an extended period of time while they seek treatment.

Asking about work: there's a fine line between asking someone validating questions about their work and fetishising or demanding education or fascination value. What is ok to ask sex workers will vary with individuals. Usually before I know someone well enough to know what these boundaries are, I ask general non-invasive questions, like 'how was work last night?' To completely ignore someone's profession and not ask them any questions about their work can be hurtful, offensive and a likely demonstration of stigma/disapproval. I ask all my non-sex workers friends/lovers about work – why shouldn't I also ask my sex worker lovers and friends? Here are some questions which are probably likely to be invasive, tedious, boring or offensive - "how much did you make?", "do you get tested?", "does your family know?" "how did you get into that?" "do you have a pimp?" "so do you work on the street?" "aren't you afraid of getting hurt?" "you might have a choice but what about those who don't?" Whilst some sex workers may be happy to answer some of these questions, particularly to friends they know who are exploring the possibility of being sex workers themselves, ask with caution and check-in about what questions are ok to ask specifying why

you want to know. If your reason is for education or curiosity, educate yourself first by reading some of the amazing things sex workers have written (see resource section).

Sexperts: even though I acknowledged earlier that often sex workers are skilled hot lovers, don't assume that just because your lover or potential lover is a sex worker, that means they must know everything about sex. I know some sex workers who feel under pressure to have instant fabulous, hot sex with people. Many sex workers, just like everyone else, get nervous about sex with a new lover. And similarly, that means you don't have to feel intimidated or inadequate about the possibility that they may have had more sex than you.

But is sex work feminist? Ooh this question makes my blood boil! As a proud feminist man, it devastates me that many feminist movements have been some of the fiercest opponents of sex work. Firstly, very few other jobs get the same political probing applied. Do we ask 'is cleaning feminist?', 'is being a solicitor feminist?', 'is being a teacher feminist'. Folks – we live in a CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY! Women are more or less exploited in whatever profession– especially women of colour, women who are trans, poor women, fat women, women with disabilities... So why should we apply an extra lense of feminist analysis to sex work?

Anti-sex work feminism also assumes that all sex workers are doing their jobs because they have no other choice.

1. Some sex workers do their jobs because they enjoy it.
2. Some sex workers don't enjoy their work and don't have *better* "choices" because of the aforementioned white supremacist capitalist patriarchy – so it's not sex work that's oppressive, but rather the context that they live in that gives them few other good options!

So all feminists would be much better off putting their energy into fighting capitalism, patriarchy and racism and supporting the amazing

work of sex workers to have their own autonomy rather than trying to 'rescue' sex workers. Because sex workers have been subjected to so much rejection, scrutiny, demonisation or attempted rescue from feminists, to even vaguely question, insinuate or imply that your whore lover or friend is not feminist could be super hurtful.

Challenging misconceptions about sex work and violence: a quote from a sex worker, Juliet November, "there is nothing intrinsically dangerous, damaging or violent about providing a sexual service for money. Just like any other industry, what are dangerous are the conditions that some folks work in – so some workers with more relative privilege (e.g. middle class, cisgendered) have great working conditions where they have a lot of control over their work. Some sex workers with less privilege in society (e.g. Indigenous, trans) have a lot less control over their work and face much higher risks of discrimination and violence. What is certain is that the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work puts sex workers at risk of police violence and in vulnerable positions if they are victims of partner violence. Many women (and others) are assaulted, coerced and hurt more frequently within their intimate domestic relationships – by lovers, spouses, partners than by clients. We need to listen to what sex workers most directly impacted by violence are saying about how to make their *whole lives* safer."

- **Sex workers themselves are best placed to educate, support and equip each other with the community and tools to combat violence against sex workers, both in their work lives as well as in their personal lives.** Be very mindful before you ask a sex worker about their safety that you are not assuming all danger comes from strangers, clients or from their work. What about their family and friends? Are they coping with the violence of discrimination in their community? With partners who are judgmental? Maybe they're having a fine or boring or whatever time at work but need your support around sex worker discrimination —DON'T ASSUME.

- If you'd like to work as an ally for sex worker rights, support sex worker led collectives and organisations (donate money, do the boring work for them...). Be aware of the need for and right to have sex worker only spaces and time. Don't assume that because you are supportive your presence won't impact on sex workers ability to speak and organise openly. Be careful which organisations you support though, many well-intentioned but misguided organisations that claim to support sex workers are actually run by non-sex workers and operate from a 'rescue' frame of mind.

Don't assume what someone's reasons are for doing sex work. Some whores do it because they love it. Others because it pays the bills and leaves them time to spend with their kids. Other's because it's the best option available in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (translation: everyone needs money to survive and it's much harder to get decent jobs if you're one or more of the following: woman, poor, person of colour, trans... sex work is a very viable option for many people). Also, sex work like phone sex, peep shows and porn work can be a good option for some people who don't have access to paid work because of their disability or their physical/mental/emotional capacity to do other work within a capitalist system.

Genuineness: Just because someone fucks (or strips or spans...) for money, doesn't mean their interactions with clients are ingenuine. Beliefs and ideas which perpetuate this are unfair, unhelpful and call into the question the integrity of sex workers not just within paid interactions but also beyond. Sex workers provide an invaluable service (that's why people pay for it) – part of that may include making a client feel good about themselves in a world which may make them feel ashamed of their bodies, desires and vulnerabilities. Just because the exchange is for money that doesn't mean the interaction is necessarily any less genuine. Do you question the genuineness of professional child care workers or doctors? And maybe there are some parts of work that sex workers “fake” it through – so what? I bet everyone does to some extent.

I had a lot of customer service jobs (supermarkets, fast food...) – shit if I wish I had a dollar for every smile that I faked! Do you question the supermarket cashier when they smile at you? Probably not. Early on in my experience with sex workers as lovers, I had some thoughts jump into my head – “are they faking it with me”? Everytime I had that thought, I reminded myself of how it wasn't any more or less likely probably that I was faking a smile to them.

A FINAL FEW WORDS: MAKING MISTAKES

I don't claim to be any sort of expert on how to be a good friend/ lover to sex workers. What I've learnt has been through the generosity of sex workers in sharing with me, having relationships (friendships and lover-ships) with sex workers, reading & listening to the lived experience and political analysis of sex workers and also through messing up. I'm learning more and more about how to both be accountable and also kind on myself when I do mess up. Being accountable for making a mistake means:

1. deeply listening without defensiveness to the experiences of and impact on the person who was hurt (if they want to share this),
2. clearly acknowledging how you messed up (without making excuses or subtly expecting support for how bad you feel about it),
3. apologising,
4. doing work to come up with suggestions of ways you could address your behaviour/ mistake/ make amends,
5. listening to the wishes of the person who was hurt,
6. taking the agreed upon steps,
7. and having a process for re-checking in over time (for example - 'would you like me to bring this up again or would you like to be in control of when we check in about it?').

This process may be very quick if the hurt was minor, or you may need to invest a bunch of energy over a long period of time if the issue was more serious. Sometimes the person may not want to have a process with you, in which case you will need to respect their wishes (including no contact), reflect on and modify your own behaviour so that it doesn't happen again. There are some great resources on accountability, mostly for sexual assault incidents – but similar principles can be used in any case where someone has caused someone else hurt). For example: the last chapter in the Color of Violence anthology and the resource list on the INCITE! webpage <http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=114>

RESOURCES BY SEX WORKERS

There's a bunch of amazing resources out there that you can follow up and educate yourself (rather than hassling your friends or lovers to educate you).

Web-based Resources:

- boundnotgagged.com
- Mariko Passion - <http://marikopassion.wordpress.com/>
- Hexy's Blog: <http://www.hexpletive.com/>
- <http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2010/04/27/sex-work-sexual-assault-awareness-and-the-danger-of-misconceptions/>
- <http://www.harlots-parlour.com/>
- weasiansexworkers.wordpress.com
- Every Ho I Know Says So
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTdBXLC01Qk>
- Cyd Nova's blog - <http://cydnova.wordpress.com>
- Juliet November's blog - <http://bornwhere.wordpress.com/>
- Lusty Day's blog www.lustyday.com
- Clip by Laurie Anderson 'The Economic Exploitation of Women'
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGO35p7zTjY>
- sexworkerspresent.blip.tv
- Emi Koyama www.eminism.org especially "Instigations from the Whore Revolution" and "Surviving the With Hunt" (USA)

Organisations:

- Empower Foundation, Thailand. www.empowerfoundation.org
- DMSC, India. www.durbar.org
- Maggie's: The Toronto Sex workers Action Project.
www.maggiestoronto.ca
- Sex Professionals of Canada. www.spoc.ca
- Women with A Vision, New Orleans, USA. www.wwav-no.org
- Stella, Montreal. www.chezstella.org
- Davida, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. davida.org.br

Books/ Magazines:

- Laura Agustín's Sex at the Margins (www.lauraagustin.com)
- Scarlet Harlot's Unrepentent Whore
- Spread magazine (now defunct—formerly published in USA)
<http://www.spreadmagazine.org/>

Performance/ artists:

- Debby Doesn't Do it For Free (Australia) -
www.debbydoesntdoitforfree.org/
- Mirha-Soleil Ross (Canada) - Yapping Out Loud: Contagious Thoughts from an Unrepentant Whore.
- Kirk Reid (USA) <http://www.kirkread.com>
- San Francisco Sex Worker Festival - www.sexworkerfest.com/

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

HUGE THANKS to the following people for amazing feedback and contributions to this article: Juliet November, Lusty Day, Scarlet Alliance, Vanessa Lash, MVT and various anonymous others.

FEEDBACK & CONTACT INFO

Please feel free to distribute this article to others, and send any feedback or if anyone is interested in collaborating on further resources:
sunnydragonflight@yahoo.com

