

Reframe Health and Justice

Sex Workers' rights and Human Trafficking

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Policy Issue Resources

Oct 20, 2020

A Note on Language: When writing this piece, I went back on forth on who I was writing this for. There was an intentional decision to give some examples, but an attempt to go into detail. The tone is written for a general audience, but for people who have experienced these behaviors it can be hard not to see yourself no matter how something is written. Everyone experiences things differently, and no two situations have the same intention, impact or needs. The most important thing is that whatever feelings which come up are taken as valid, and treating these with the intention and care they deserve.

Every October, the country takes a moment to raise awareness about intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic violence and dating violence. This time we are having this conversation in a context unlike any other. IPV is about structural violence as much as it is about interpersonal violence, and we are watching in real time as a global health crisis is making resources and services even more challenging to access and how the continued need to stay at home has meant some survivors are spending prolonged time with people who are increasingly looking for control in a world coming apart at the seams.

Sex workers experience higher rates of myriad forms of state and interpersonal violence, which includes intimate partner violence. While experiences of IPV are also higher for the same marginalized identities as those who participate in sex work women and femmes, people of color, Native women, LGBTQ individuals violence may show up in specific ways for sex workers which may not be identified as abuse at first glance.

This article briefly lays out some of the ways in which sex workers have unique experiences around intimate partner violence. While this is meant to be a quick discussion of a nuanced subject, it is important to keep in mind that not everyone will experience the behaviors below in the same way, and everyone gets to determine their experience of support and healing.

When someone has a stigmatized behavior, job or identity, society creates the script that can be weaponized to dehumanize and emotionally abuse their partner. Reciting these narratives, intentionally or not, can be a sign of an emotionally abusive situation. Partners might use a range of shaming and dehumanizing behaviors or language such as shaming someone when they come home from or are preparing to go to work, degrading language about how sex work changes someones value, narratives about dirtiness/cleanliness, or simply refusal to acknowledge that part of a persons life. Knowing that stigma and shaming are a prominent issue for many people who trade sex, control might also be sought by threatening to out a person to their friends or family, knowing it will lead to isolation or shunning, and isolation from a support system.

An abusive partner may also blame their aggressive behaviors of jealousy, conflating relationships with clients as the same as other intimate, sexual relationships. An abusive partner may lash out every time their partner goes to work a shift or a session, and subsequently blame their jealousy/rage on that persons decision to engage in sex work. A sex worker experiencing that violence may internalize that their decisions are the problem not the violent reaction to them and feel at fault or experience gratitude for simply having someone willing to put up with your job. Abusive partners may exploit this gratitude, promoting isolation, keeping someone from leaving an abusive situation, or feeling like they deserve this kind of treatment.

Much of this emotional violence simply weaponizes the narratives that sex workers hear every day from media, friends and peers, victims service organizations, social media, even clients who say they would never date someone who traded sex even if they patronize the service. Abusers can easily pick up narratives which contribute to emotional violence, as well as use these narratives to tell someone that they are lucky to have found someone willing to date them in the first place.

Financial control

Another vulnerability that many sex workers face, especially those who operate exclusively in cash, is the financial precarity that comes with being unbanked, or having limitations to what a person can declare for their income. Operating exclusively in a cash-based economy can mean no credit history, no ability to get a lease or a loan, no rental history for a new place to live, and a range of other limitations for those who have lived off the radar, especially for years at a time. Its not uncommon for sex workers to rely on their partners to access some of these financial options, paying in cash for rent while their partner is the only one on the lease, or putting a car in someone elses name. Holding that much cash can also make someone far more vulnerable to outright theft, with no ability to address the situation. This dependence can put sex workers wishing to leave an abusive situation in a difficult position, knowing they will have to give up some of the economic security that was found in having someone willing to take on this liability.

Financial control and exploitation can always be another mechanism of the abuse, and sometimes that exploitation can reach the level of human trafficking. This is, of course, not inherent to the sex trade, and financial control is a common way that abuse can manifest. Especially when you have two people who are economically struggling, and there are few good options, making a few hundred dollars in a single night can look like easy money. Partners can use this narrative to pressure someone to work more, or hand over more of their money, knowing how hard it can be to find other work.

The impact of emotional abuse regarding a persons participation in sex work can also be attempts to cut back on engaging in sex work, making them more financially dependent on an abusive partner. If knowing that every session is going to lead to screaming and throwing things when you get home, someone might think twice about working. This means less financial independence and less ability to leave. Physical violence, especially violence which leaves marks or has lasting injuries, may have the same effect of curtailing, or at least making more challenging, engaging in commercial sex. Its hard to shoot with a black eye and its hard to dance with a fractured wrist.

Criminalization of the sex trade also includes its own forms of vulnerability for intimate partner violence. Just like with other forms of interpersonal violence from clients or law enforcement, criminalization of the sex trade makes sex workers less likely to call law enforcement and turns sex workers into a target population. But because criminalization extends far beyond simply prostitution charges, partners may exert control by calling the multiple systems which perpetrate state violence against people who trade sex. Threats to Child Protective Services (CPS) mean a threat to take away someones child, and bringing up someones history in divorce or custody proceedings can have the same effect. Threats to call someones parole officer has been utilized by a range of perpetrators of violence. Similarly, because migrant sex workers exist under layers of criminalization at the local and federal level, someone may threaten to call immigration, and especially under a vehemently anti-immigrant administration, have a lasting effect on that persons behavior or willingness to leave.

While some of these behaviors may be employed as intentional tactics to abuse and control a partner, sometimes these may also be unintentional manifestations which replicate common narratives about sex work, fear, safety and shame that partners are experiencing. Much like racism, misogyny, or transphobia, our society perpetuates whorephobia and abuse against sex workers. Partners of sex workers who engage in the behaviors described above may not even realize the impact that they have, and not everyone will experience them as harmful. Its hard to find support when youre trading sex. Its even harder to find support when struggling with those things as a partner and the internalized shame and isolation will only exacerbate those reactions. Lacking in examples of healthy relationships when one person trades sex means couples and chosen families are often struggling to unpack complicated feelings together, sometimes navigating trauma and resilience at the same time. Lacking in comprehensive information about relationships and sex can also mean it takes longer for someone in the sex trade to name what is happening, and even longer to identify it as a behavior which is causing emotional harm. Intention and impact may be different, and one of the most painful truths to hold is that love and harm can easily become overlapping experiences. Weaponizing the ways people are harmed by the state and the world, knowingly and unknowingly, can take an incredible amount of introspection and analysis, and there can be scant places to turn to try and unpack that experience.

Just like other forms of violence against sex workers, the roots of much of this are nothing inherent to sex work, but instead are direct products of the ways sex workers are marginalized, stigmatized, criminalized and abused more widely. If sex workers werent regularly told they were unloveable or broken, it wouldnt be a potent place to go for someone trying to cause harm. If sex workers didnt fear having bank accounts shut down, it would be easier to establish a financial identity. If a call to CPS wouldnt get children removed, a threat wouldnt hold the same weight. While there is much to be done to collectively address the many ways that sex workers are made more vulnerable, the beginning must be a commitment to understanding and undoing the shame and stigma which fuels this abuse, and a commitment to allowing people to define what hurts, where its coming from, and what they need to heal.

by Kate DAdamo, Partner at Reframe Health and Justice

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