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Shadow Women: Wives Betrayed by Sex Buyers

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Abstract

Shadow women are women whose husbands betray them by using prostituted women. Until now, there has been almost no attention paid to the harm to the wives or partners of men who use prostituted women. In this interview, Dr. Ingeborg Kraus talks to the former wife of a sex buyer. She describes the impact of her husband's betrayal on her and her family. This type of harm needs to be taken seriously and more research done on it.

Keywords

prostitution, wife, partner, sex buyer, betrayal, prostituted woman, trauma

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SHADOW WOMEN: WIVES BETRAYED BY SEX BUYERS

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ABSTRACT

Shadow women are women whose husbands betray them by using prostituted women. Until now, there has been almost no attention paid to the harm to the wives or partners of men who use prostituted women. In this interview, Dr. Ingeborg Kraus talks to the former wife of a sex buyer. She describes the impact of her husband's betrayal on her and her family. This type of harm needs to be taken seriously and more research done on it.

KEYWORDS

Germany, sex buyer, wife, partner, betrayal, legalization, prostitution

SHADOW WOMEN ARE WOMEN whose husbands betray them by using prostituted women. Until now, there has been nearly no consideration paid to this “collateral damage” of prostitution and there are very few reports about it.

In Germany in March, 2018, I conducted an interview with a woman whose husband betrayed her in such a way. Her story touched me deeply. Only then did I become fully aware of the dimension of injury she and other women suffered. In reality, an enormous amount of harm is caused if a woman's partner goes to a prostituted woman. This kind of betrayal has devastating consequences for the whole family, and victims aren't taken seriously and don't receive effective help.

Contradictorily, there is the danger that even therapists reverse the roles of culprit and victim, and that the betrayed spouse becomes brainwashed by them. In Germany there is virtually no specialist literature about sex addiction, and so there is no possibility of enlightening oneself about the issue or understanding what is happening to the person or those around them. The other reason is that in my professional capacity as a therapist, I get to know a lot of women who are devaluated by their partners. Perhaps their partners don't go to prostituted women, but every man has access to porn even if he doesn't access it directly. Everywhere we are confronted with pornographic representations of women, even without wanting to see it. And in a country where prostitution is legalized, it remains a man's right to go to prostituted women or to have the privilege of deciding against it. And if we take a closer look at the issue, ultimately, all women are shadow women in a country that legalizes the buy of sex and considers prostitution as sex work.

The woman I interviewed about the harm her husband's sex buying caused her, told me: I have been living with my husband for 36 years and have been married to him for 27 years. We have three adult children who don't live in our house any longer, having finished their education. When everything came crashing down, my youngest daughter was finishing secondary school. The image of her father, my husband, collapsed in a heap.

My husband is self-employed and financially independent, so he had the opportunity to make time for his actions without making us suspicious. Every day he was there for common meals and he was always present in family life. Additionally, I felt very supported by him. He cared about all of us so much that I never asked myself where he was or what he was doing. He always went to prostitutes from his workplace and directly afterwards he sat with us at the family table for lunch.

Over the course of years, I experienced him becoming emotionally uninvolved in our family life. His sexuality changed, too. Again, and again I tried to speak with him about it, but he refused to talk to me. There were times when he touched me in a different way than normal. Today I know that it was because he had been to a prostitute beforehand. I felt it but couldn't name it. I told him: "You're treating me like a prostitute, you're touching me like a piece of meat." There was no more intimacy. There was no more tenderness, it was only about creating stimulus. It wasn't so much about the things that he wanted, but more about the way he demanded them. He began speaking in a demanding, commanding tone of voice, which disgusted me: "Do that, touch me like this, sit down in a special way, go over there...". It always stopped when I complained and ended in an argument. Suddenly, he had special preferences which he didn't have before, or at least didn't demand them so stringently, for example concerning erotic dress. From time to time, I changed according to the dress which I had selected. There were many devaluations, especially concerning my sexuality. There were times when he obviously wanted to take revenge on me because I had sexually refused him. I developed more and more the thoughts: "I don't satisfy him. There's something wrong," but I couldn't name it. Again, and again, he made strange comments: "Basically, I like blonde women, or blue eyes...". But this happened at long intervals and was not so extreme that I would have divorced him because of it. However, even though it caused a lot of trouble, I would never have guessed what the reason behind these things was.

To me, he always spoke in a very derogatory way about men who eyed up women passing by, and he got angry when he found out about cheating men in our circle of friends. He presented himself as being interested in women's rights and he supported me in my professional development. I was sure that in this matter he was very genuine.

He was always ready to perform his duties as a father of a family, but emotionally he wasn't reachable anymore and he was often grumpy. Over the course of time, he numbed emotionally, didn't recognize me, and had less lust for sex. When we had sex, it happened without any remarkable intimacy, it was more about being satisfied with what happened. I didn't expect much anymore in emotional matters, and thought it was normal when you grow older and had been together for such a long time. When I spoke about it with other women, they told me the same things. I didn't recognize how much I was suffering. Afterwards, I think that in some phases I was depressed without being aware about it. Finally, I tried to get therapeutic help, because I thought something was wrong with me. However, due to the fact that I didn't know what was really going on in my life behind my back, this

couldn't change the root problems, although it raised my well-being and made me emotionally stronger.

My husband and I spoke a lot with each other, but in the aftermath, I recognized that when it was about our problems, our conversations were a sham, because I never got to know what was really happening. Over time I got used to my husband's numbness and didn't notice him avoiding eye contact with me. I thought all this was normal, because I didn't know anything outside of my own family and was convinced I had a real, good, marriage in comparison to other ones. This was deception, illusion, and numbness. I didn't feel anything anymore.

Over time I decided to make a combined therapy for my body and soul. I have regained my senses very slowly in a dimension I wasn't aware of before I got to know what had happened to me. Step by step, I could notice things again, and one day I discovered a message from an unknown woman on my husband's mobile phone. This was the beginning of a process of revelation which lasted for more than four years.

At first, he denied it all – even in the couple's therapy he only admitted to as much as I had found out before. In the therapy sessions it was considered to be a couple's problem to which both of us had contributed. He tried to keep up his strategy of lies in therapy, too; he tried to trivialize and minimize. Even if there were obvious contradictions, the therapists weren't interested in making a detailed investigation. Neither his obvious lying, emotional violence, and power which he used in this way were picked out as a central theme, nor his attempts of trying to systematically drive me crazy. The term for this is "gaslighting": a kind of emotional psychological terror and systematic abuse where the abuser provides misinformation to the victim and aims to make the victim suspicious of her own recognition and reason. The aim is to confuse, daunt, and make the victim insecure until she questions her own psychological health.

Instead, I was treated like I was a jealous wife who had developed abnormal fantasies and who had to learn to accept him as he was. However, my fantasies were significantly more harmless than what had actually happened, because the dimension of the real treason was unimaginable for me. It was like brainwashing. He kept on denying, and the therapists joined in on the "game." Only after 4 years the whole picture was revealed once I found unexplained new addresses of brothels and prostitutes on his navigation system by accident. After this, he had no other option but to admit to everything.

For me, it was a terrible time. In these years we were traumatizing each other again and again. For him, every revelation was a traumatizing experience. It was for me, too. When I think about how we lived together and what it did with us... It wasn't possible anymore to watch TV together, to go to a cinema, or just to go anywhere together. He was sitting or walking next to me, permanently and obsessively preoccupied with looking at women in a lustful way. He had developed a significant sex addiction and was convinced he was entitled to look at women as sex objects. He wasn't present in our relationship anymore. It wasn't only the loss of intimacy and closeness; my husband was also emotionally impoverished. While I worried and tried to motivate him to do something good for himself, I recognized that he got more and more lethargic and didn't have pleasure in anything.

There was a time before I knew about it all, shortly after I had started my combined therapy for body and soul, when I told him: "Something has to change,

otherwise I will break away from you.” Then he started therapy but lied to his therapist and told me how much he had neglected me, that he had made many mistakes and that he was struggling for a second chance for our relationship. In the meantime, he was going to prostitutes. He was leading a double life; at the end he had several women simultaneously and serially, one after the other. It was a horrible wake up moment when it was revealed. It was a torturing and traumatizing time. I wanted to know the truth about my life. The life I thought of as my own didn’t exist. I persistently have extreme reactions when I discover contradictions anywhere. My thoughts circulate around the question of what was there or could have been there.

I became active and looked for self-help groups and therapists who specialized in treating sex addiction. In Germany, there are virtually no possibilities, and it’s difficult to be heard. That’s why I went to Great Britain. There they have another way of handling sex addiction, and there are groups and institutes for sex addicts and their partners. I found wonderful girl friends with whom I have kept in contact until this day. Due to this contact I recognized that I was lucky that my husband had supported me when I became self-employed. I got to know women whose husbands had lost control when visiting prostitutes and amassed high debts. Without their wives knowing, they had ruined the whole family.

In prostitution there are fields where the women are very expensive and want to be impressed with very expensive presents, showing a wish-list on their web pages. The men want to measure up to these women as great guys, fulfilling their wishes for expensive presents, or they want to help them out of any alleged crisis. It’s upsetting to see how women, in addition to suffering from trauma and humiliation, have to compensate for these debts. Furthermore, I had the luck of not being infected with any sexually transmitted diseases.

In the time after the revelation, our social circle changed too. Nearly all of our contacts broke off, because I wasn’t ready to pretend to anyone, and the reactions (of women, too) to my husband’s prostitute-visits were in some parts extremely denigrating towards me. A girl friend said: “It’s naive to believe that men don’t do it, that’s why I make sure he gets sex regularly, so something like this won’t happen.” The attitude was it seems to be your fault. I am so angry about this. Maybe one reason is that in the past I thought the same and wasn’t able to imagine any situation like this. Today I am angry because it happens so often, that it’s made easy by our society, and is simultaneously hushed up.

Social consensus is obvious, the woman is shamed. If a man goes to a prostitute, it’s because his wife isn’t sexy or good enough in bed.

For me, it took many years to get back my strength, to regain the feeling of being sufficiently attractive, that all is ok with me, that I have a normal sexuality.

For a long time, I had been thinking that no part of my body was good enough. Over time my husband stopped giving me compliments and nice things. My feelings when I learned that he chose women online was: There isn’t any part of my body that he can’t find better and more beautiful elsewhere, from my toenails to my hair. And this also concerned my sex organs, my breasts, face, legs, knees, hands, skin, eyes, lips... and moreover, my posture, the way I move, my voice, my kindness... like there was nothing about me which he couldn’t find better, more beautiful, more pleasant, elsewhere. It determined my self-image for a long time. I couldn’t stand looking at myself in the mirror. All I could see was: I am old (although he is 10 years older than me), I don’t really have nice hair, and my eyes are

not as beautiful as those of a 25-year-old blue-eyed woman from East Europe. This insight came with the knowledge that he went to prostitutes, and with every revelation it got stronger, like a re-traumatizing experience. This feeling couldn't be silenced anymore. It felt like: There's nothing left that's lovely in me, nothing special, precious, nice. I felt like a store for spare parts.

It took an eternity until that changed; I have been suffering because of it for years and have been concerned about my self-image. Additionally, in this time I couldn't go out, watch movies, or read magazines without being triggered, because everywhere there were those images of women with half-opened mouths, deep cleavage, and so on. On every road there were posters with those images, and on every footpath, I passed by there were posters advertising brothels, or when I drove behind trucks you could see images of well-formed female buttocks. I was permanently triggered and simultaneously I asked myself, what are they advertising here? And I found it that it was advertisement for lamps. What I felt was a mix of extreme rage and extreme humiliation. Often, I had thoughts when I saw a woman in the city and imagined that she had satisfied my husband orally.

I think it's very important that we start speaking about overcoming shame, and no longer consider it normal that men go to prostitutes. Women have taken the role of considering prostitution as a normal thing, and if they speak against it, they are derided as being prudes.

There is no deterrent without legislation that punishes sex buyers. Men think it is their right and convince themselves that women really want it this way. I genuinely think that there is something akin to feelings of shame and self-contempt directly after the act. But even after this, we as women have to be the ones to suffer for them; on the one hand, this was obvious in the devaluing way my husband spoke about prostitutes when he had to speak about this with me, and in the time when he visited prostitutes regularly, and on the other hand it manifested in the way that I was devaluated, meaning that there was something wrong with me. Only in this way my husband could justify himself.

Doing something which stands in contradiction to your personal values generates – even secretly – extreme unease. The term for this is cognitive dissonance. In order to reduce the dissonance and uncomfortable strain connected to it, without giving up their sex-addicted behavior, men create a kind of staggered thinking, an inner division of their self-perception into a part which only belongs to their personality when they move in a certain circle with its own system of values. One part is apparently disconnected from the other part, such that they pretend to themselves, “forget” wives and children when they are visiting prostitutes and forget these visits when they spend time with their families.

In psychological terminology, this unconscious inner division is called “compartmentalization.” On the one side there is the loyal, caring husband and father, on the other side there is the audacious, limit-crossing, arrogant stud who buys sex carelessly from women who are virtually as old as his own daughters. If men are caught in this addictive behavior, they have a completely different way of thinking in comparison to their normal life where they have to control their addictive behavior. That's the kind of inner division. And that's what causes such traumatizing effects if you try to reconnect these parts – for the men, too. These two parts aren't fused in their personality. They really believe that they delight prostitutes with their virility, because that's what they pay for and what the prostitutes have to pretend to them, whereas this is from what they have to dissociate.

My husband simultaneously idealized prostitutes and despised them. And for me, he felt the same, on the one side he idealized me and on the other side he devaluated me completely.

In relation to prostitutes, it's about power, manipulation, and illusion, but in reality, it's about fear: the fear of being in a close, real, intimate relationship on an equitable level. My husband started visiting prostitutes when I had nearly finished my studies, became more self-confident, and didn't have to depend on him as much as before.

Recently, I found an open letter from a prostituted woman to the wives of her punters. She wrote scornfully that of course every woman reading this would think that she wasn't the wife of a punter; that it wasn't realistic. However, this is reality as measured by the number of her married punters. And then she started listing the arguments as to why we as wives or partners benefitted by accepting and valuing her "work," because in comparison to a loved partner, she doesn't want our husbands, doesn't even really want to have sex with them, and therefore she wasn't a danger to us, as though she was only a petty evil we have to accept because that's how men are. No wonder, this image of men is devaluing. This woman doesn't recognize, maybe because she never experienced it directly, that fraud, secrecy, treason, and looking at women as pure sex objects – dehumanization – is the real problem. Because of it, mutual respect, trust, and real intimacy, become impossible, and so prostitution has destructive effects on the base of a true partnership. It's different if the man has an affair with a "real" woman, a "real" person with real feelings. Surely, this is extremely painful for the partner, but it doesn't destroy our value system and a human's capability of loving completely.

I call us shadow women, because we stand in the shadow of this system. We have no choice, we didn't pick it out, and we don't have a voice in the whole discussion about prostitution. One reason is that a majority of women hopes never to have to be concerned about this, and the other reason is that those who know it have a very real fear of being shamed and attacked as soon as they speak out about it. This is an unbearable thought when taking into account the massively traumatizing experiences due to the long-time fraud, betrayal, and misuse of wives and partners, and according to the desolate psychological condition resulting from it. Nowadays it is more acceptable to come out as a prostitute and to engage in prostitution as a job than it is to be the betrayed wife or partner. And that's a characteristic assignment of traumatizing too: humiliation and placing the shame on the victim.

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