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## A Mule for the Patriarchy: Waking Up to the Harm of Prostitution to Wives and Families

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## A Mule for the Patriarchy: Waking Up to the Harm of Prostitution to Wives and Families

### Abstract

I exited from commercial sexual exploitation eight years ago. Here, I share my reflections on how my actions directly impacted other women. I describe how my participation in the sex trade adversely affected the wives and girlfriends of sex buyers. I posit that sex sellers negatively impact these vicarious victims by subscribing to and endorsing “sex work” ideology. I assert that the collective good of all women is diminished by viewing sexual services as a market commodity. I stress that the collective good of all women is enhanced by assuming responsibility and compassion for one another.

### Keywords

Canada, sex, sex trade, commercial sexual exploitation, prostitution, sex work, shadow women, sex buyers, wives, families, harm

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## A MULE FOR THE PATRIARCHY: WAKING UP TO THE HARM OF PROSTITUTION TO WIVES AND FAMILIES

Andrea Heinz

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### ABSTRACT

I exited from commercial sexual exploitation eight years ago. Here, I share my reflections on how my actions directly impacted other women. I describe how my participation in the sex trade adversely affected the wives and girlfriends of sex buyers. I posit that sex sellers negatively impact these vicarious victims by subscribing to and endorsing “sex work” ideology. I assert that the collective good of all women is diminished by viewing sexual services as a market commodity. I stress that the collective good of all women is enhanced by assuming responsibility and compassion for one another.

### KEYWORDS

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I WAS 22 WHEN I FIRST ENTERED THE SEX TRADE IN CANADA. At the time, I had many racing thoughts. “Will I end up being hurt or killed?” “Will I make a lot of money?” “Will my friends and family find out?” My limited exposure to the sex industry growing up meant everything about the activity was unknown. I ran through every possible scenario in my mind of how things could go bad, as well as the possible benefits. I weighed the risks and rewards, ultimately realizing the futility of doing so. I was sixty thousand dollars in debt, which all but guaranteed my decision to participate. At no point did I ever consider another woman. I only thought of the buyer and myself.

It wasn't long before the first man mentioned his wife. He was a middle-aged jeweler. He boasted about how he and his friend used a collective cover story to get away from their “nagging” wives in order to frequent the studios once a week. What he said didn't affect me at that time. I had been selling sex for only about two weeks, and I was relieved to be making money. Over the course of the year that I saw this man, he always laughed to me about his “secret hobby.” The arrangement between us ended abruptly, however, after he sexually assaulted me in the back room of his jewelry store.

There were countless buyers who would remove their wedding ring. Those men annoyed me right from the start, not because they were adulterers but because they somehow thought that by removing their wedding band, they were offering a sign of respect to their wife or to me. Perhaps it helped to dull their guilt about paying a stranger for sex. I recall discussions about this with other women in-between sessions; how the men were oblivious to their tan lines or ring indentations that informed us of their marital status regardless. We laughed about how they thought we cared whether they were married or not. Their money was all that mattered.

I never once asked a man if he was in a committed relationship, although many would readily offer the information themselves. Some would say, "I should probably stop doing this because I am married," but the majority of disclosers would tell me just so they could offload their frustrations about their wives. They particularly seemed to complain about what they deemed to be shortcomings in physical appearance and sexual performance. I disliked the men who talked down about their partners but would reassure the guilt-filled buyers that, as long as they still loved their wife, they were doing nothing wrong. I'd tell them that meeting their personal needs was warranted if it helped them be a happy, loving husband. At the time, I believed the remorseful buyers who deceived their partners were somehow more respectable than the arrogant ones.

The girlfriends and wives of the men were always in the background. Many of their smiling faces stared at me from family photos placed on nightstands and dressers in their bedrooms while I had sex in their bed. The odd man would turn the frame around to face a wall. Sometimes the men would have their cell phones ring in the middle of the session. They would either ignore the call, or they would answer it right then, often motioning for the sex acts to continue while they talked to their partner. Performing fellatio on a married father while he spoke to his wife on the phone was the first time that I ever felt guilty about selling sex. She continued their conversation, unaware her husband was at a brothel, and sounded so kind and loving when she said, "Hurry home, sweetheart." I sat in stunned silence for a moment after that man left, wondering how or if their family unit had suffered so that I could receive three hundred dollars. I kept hearing his wife's friendly voice.

Sometimes the studio phone would ring, and a woman on the other end would ask, "What kind of massage do you offer there?" Perhaps they were investigating a suspicious number found in their husband's call log. We always told them it was a brothel, unaware if it was a call inquiring about "employment." One owner, in particular, delighted in such calls, saying that cheating could lead to resentment, divorce, and poverty, which gave her "a great way to acquire new talent." A woman I knew had in fact entered the sex trade after discovering her spouse of over 20 years was a sex buyer. She called it "compensated revenge."

One evening at the studio, the door chimed, and an unknown female appeared on the camera. She looked uncomfortable. I assumed she had mistaken the business for a registered massage therapy clinic, which sometimes happened. When I greeted her, she pulled out a family photo of her, a man, and their young children, asking if I had ever seen her husband visit the studio. She said she noticed thousands of dollars had been withdrawn from their savings account, always in three-hundred-dollar increments. In addition, she had discovered his online searches for escorts and concluded that he was buying sex. I didn't recognize him. Even if I had, "outing" a buyer would have meant "career" suicide, something I wasn't willing to risk for any random woman. She left to go to the next studio, desperate for some answers.

Then there was "Scott" (or so he said), a client I had seen a few times previously. It had been a while, and I said, "Hey, long time no see." He showed me his ringed finger and announced, "Yes, I got married!" I gave the customary "Congratulations," but then I asked, "What are you doing here then? Isn't this the newlywed phase?" He smiled and said, "No complaints with her; the sex is great. She doesn't know I do this, but it's ok; it's not technically cheating if it's sex work." I interpreted that to mean I was an object with whom he was initiating sex, not a living, breathing person with a name. I was not a "real" woman. I "didn't count." Enduring his touching immediately

after was an extremely difficult challenge. I felt objectified and used. It was the first time I truly felt like I had been purchased.

I am not sure if it was one of those final instances or an accumulation of them all, but something changed at that point. Until then, I had only ever viewed my actions through a narrow lens. Trading sex had been something that, to me, only ever involved the buyer and myself. Girlfriends, wives, and co-parenting exes were affected by that transaction too, but I never stopped considering my own interests long enough to realize the connection. Many women and families bore the sacrifice(s) for my gains, yet my industry peers would constantly say, “If it’s not you, then it’s another woman” and “You’re not married to his wife” as if that would somehow reduce/eliminate my feelings of culpability. Perhaps they just knew that it made no difference whether we were the wife or the whore; neither of us ultimately garnered respect.

Not only did I begin experiencing strong “other woman” guilt, I also began to understand how selling sex was reducing me, reducing all women, to nothing more than a purchasable commodity for men. I had felt moments of empowerment in the past but could no longer retrieve those feelings. Any mentioning of a girlfriend or wife would cause me to experience overwhelming sadness and guilt. I secretly hoped every one of those women would somehow catch their husbands cheating and find themselves a trustworthy, genuine partner instead.

Our decisions are rarely void of a ripple effect, and suddenly I began to see the harmful impact that my part in the industry caused. I was acting as a mule for the patriarchy by championing and perpetuating the objectification of women, the exploitation of our sexuality, and the distortion of consent. I felt I was betraying women and going against the efforts of those who fight hard every day for our authentic equality. Although survival sex had been my entry into the industry, I was one of the lucky ones who eventually became financially stable and autonomous. I could no longer justify my continued participation in something so brutally destructive to women.

It is very challenging to discuss the role of the sex seller in the perpetuation of harm without appearing to be victim blaming. It is important to note that the sex trade, a patriarchal system, only exists because of the demand for paid sex services by (almost exclusively) men and that the vast majority of sellers and victims are female. It is undoubtedly a system of one sex dominating and exploiting the other, a practice of which women are not responsible for causing. However, within the subculture of sex sellers, there are varying degrees of consciousness to the harm that the sex industry brings to other women. Based upon my personal interactions with hundreds of sex sellers over the past fifteen years, I believe there to be three levels to the consciousness had by those who sell sex: unaware, mildly aware, and aware.

The unaware sex seller is, as the name implies, completely unaware of the negative impact of the sex trade on other women. Perhaps she is new to the industry and has not yet experienced a buyer mention his partner, or she has never had the thought of another woman come into her mind at any given time. I believe most sex sellers initially begin in a state of being unaware.

In contrast, the mildly aware sex seller has heard a buyer mention his girlfriend or wife but has not reached a full realization of the connection between her participation and the harm experienced by the man’s companion. There may be certain reasons for the lack of internalization, including but not limited to, poverty, prior abuse, numbness, and/or substance abuse.

Poverty appears to place many women into a state of active denial, and I believe that was certainly the case for me personally. If one is aware that they have no choice but to participate in the sex trade, they will attempt to rationalize and justify their situation as a means of self-preservation (Heinz, 2020).

Prior abuse might also lead some sellers to not be fully aware of the harm. They may have experienced deception and betrayal within their personal lives and have come to expect such behaviors within interactions, seeing them as “normal.”

For some women in the trade, the disconnect might be a result of the numbness that ensues when one is repeatedly dissociating. Dissociation can have the effect of creating a constant state of emotional detachment whereby the seller “numbs out” (Heinz, 2020). If there is usage of drugs and/or alcohol as a coping mechanism or due to an addiction, there is removal from the present moment which can restrict the woman from reaching the point of full awareness.

The final type, the aware sex seller, has not only experienced the existence or mentioning of a buyer’s partner but has fully internalized the connection between her sex trade involvement and the impact upon other women. Those who are aware either assign moral weight to the realization, with resulting concern about the harm, or they do not. If women assign a moral weight to their awareness of the impact, there is a risk that their continued participation will cause them to experience a sense of injustice, grief, and guilt, just as I did. These women appear likely to seek exit when they are financially stable, and where a successful transition out of the industry is possible.

Since leaving the sex trade, I’ve gained deeper clarity about not only my personal actions but also the bigger picture of what endorsing the mass commercialization of sexual access does to women. With the blinding effect of the money no longer having an impact on me, I have grown increasingly remorseful for how I could have ever had any part in the sex industry at all, especially as an owner of a brothel myself. My personal work titled, “On Exiting from Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Insights from Sex Trade Experienced Persons” speaks to what I call the “tipping point” whereby certain sex sellers arrive at a place where they no longer derive any positive feelings from their involvement, and instead begin to view their participation in a newly negative light (Heinz, 2020). Although the harm I have caused can never be undone, I feel compelled to do all I can to expose and denounce what I believe to be one of the greatest human rights violations in existence – sexual exploitation.

To the women I “employed” at my brothel, I am so sorry.

To all the girlfriends and wives of the men with whom I had sex, and all the women in family units with men from whom I took family unit funds, I am so sorry.

To the women I impacted culturally by saying, “sex work is work,” I am so sorry.

It is the ultimate injury to say, “sex work is work.” It undermines our collective regard for one another as women, as sisters, in preserving our personal dignity and genuine sexual integrity. Work is traditionally payment for labor or activity, a voluntary exchange of service for wages. To refer to capitalized sex rooted in socioeconomic marginalization as “work” is to normalize and legitimize women’s sex-based oppression. Such wording implies a mutually agreeable and equitable exchange, the very antithesis of what selling sex entails.

In addition, the phrase “sex work is work” serves to silence anyone who challenges the dominant narrative of universal empowerment and willful choice had by sex sellers. For many who are active in the trade, both buyers and sellers, it is said in an

effort to rationalize and justify their participation. However, such declarations provide a great disservice to women when we become hyper-sexualized and exploited through the many subtleties of the “adult industry.” This language creates a powerful normative effect that is devastating on both an individual and social level.

Ingeborg Kraus (2019) calls the wives and partners of sex buyers “shadow women.” She describes the impact of the sex trade on the women outside the sex industry in her work titled “Shadow Women: Wives Betrayed by Sex Buyers,” saying, “there has been nearly no consideration paid to this “collateral damage”... and there are very few reports about it” (p. 1). She adds that “victims aren’t taken seriously and don’t receive effective help” (p. 1). Within her consciousness-raising paper, Kraus shares the insights of a woman who was married to a man who purchased sex. Much of what this woman shared in Kraus’ paper aligns with what I have witnessed, and it resonates deeply within me.

Kraus (2019) quotes a wife who got to know women whose husbands had engaged in sex buying until they “lost control...and amassed high debts. Without their wives knowing, they had ruined the whole family” (p. 4). I still see the woman at the studio door holding the family photo, trying to make sense of it all, and where the family savings had gone.

The wife in the Kraus interview expresses her belief that the “social conscious is obvious, the woman is shamed. If a man goes [to buy sex], it is because his wife isn’t sexy or good enough in bed” (Kraus, 2019, p. 4). I think of the countless men that took pleasure in “wife-bashing” to me.

Kraus describes how men “forget [their] wives and children when they are visiting [women in the sex trade]” (Kraus, 2019, p. 5). Many sex sellers, like myself, can surely attest to the buyers who remove their wedding rings and somehow neatly compartmentalize aspects of their lives separate from one another. What personally struck me the most poignantly though was how the wife of the sex buyer summarized the impact on her directly. She says, “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” (Kraus, 2019, p. 4). It hurts me to think of how many women I may have caused to share similar sentiments.

In an additional paper written by Kraus in 2019, titled “Betrayed Partners and Men with Poisoned Souls: Interview with a Former Sex Buyer in Germany,” she states that:

...what the buyers are doing to their wives is an incredible harm, causing huge mental health damages” (p. 3), adding that, “given the fact that there are a great number of married men, or those in a firm relationship, who buy sexual services, the number of psychologically injured women in these relationships probably reaches the two-digit millions (p. 4).

When sex sellers, as part of their learned and prescribed role, gleefully pander to men’s desires for sexual access on-demand, men’s general perceptions of women change. Misogynistic and sexist views of women are reinforced, and suddenly all women are considered procurable pawns. Some women become “worthy” of payment for their sexual availability, and others, not. For many of the latter (e.g., partners at home) who already experience betrayal, loss of otherwise joint money may be an added insult.

There were multiple times that I witnessed the aware sex seller state such things as “I don’t give a sh\*t about his wife” and “His relationship is not my problem.” Although the sex trade victimizes all women as an oppressive system, is there no responsibility whatsoever to be had by those who knowingly and purposefully step on other women so callously when other viable income opportunities exist? It is both an uncomfortable and unpopular consideration to pose given the fact that the sex trade is a man-made culture in which women undeservingly bear (and have historically bore) the brunt of shame and repercussions. Nonetheless, I feel it is a valid question.

I have many regrets from my time in the sex trade, but none so many or severe as the damage I, directly and indirectly, caused to my fellow women. Sexual access is an intimacy I believe is best earned through trust, respect, and mutuality. Such ideals surely support equality between the sexes far better than monetary coercion. Women who choose to sell sex among other viable options might benefit, as I did, in taking time to stop and truly question what they are doing, accept personal responsibility for the harm in which they are involved, and build compassion for their fellow women.

Women as a group deserve solidarity given our continuous worldwide struggles with male violence and patriarchy. When circumvented consent becomes sanitized as “work,” it negates the harm done to all the women involved—the sex sellers themselves, the buyer’s partner, and women as a whole. If it is “a job like any other,” men are merely accessing a service, not cheating other relationships, and in turn, women become a product like any other—objectified and dehumanized. As with other capitalist exchanges, there exists a constant struggle between supply and demand. Sex sellers want to provide the least amount of service for the most money possible; sex buyers want the most amount of service for the lowest degree of expenditure. The tension of pushing and defending boundaries is what defines and determines the sexual transaction. Conceding is not consent.

Those of us who have endured commercial sexual exploitation and defected from “sex work” ideology are often snubbed and/or severely berated by women who are still active in the industry. We are accused of being anti-woman and anti-choice—as detractors of women’s bodily autonomy. We are accused of hampering the pursuit of female empowerment and financial independence. Our insights and opinions on equality, dignity, and respect are not welcomed nor supported by those who are still actively participating. Labeled as “SWERFs” (Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminists), abolitionist-minded women become “the problem,” not the sex buyers nor their actions. The sex trade drives a massive wedge in between women and our collective unity, further entrenching our subjugation by men.

Women who understand and navigate patriarchal systems have the option of challenging the systems that constrain them. It is long overdue that we, as women, prioritize each other when faced with the choice of ignoring or dismissing our shared presence. My personal opinion is that that genuine feminism holds all women in high regard, as we stand united in dignity and equality, our sexual integrity not for sale. As long as we remain divided by price or availability, we are universally disposable. We all deserve mutually respectful relationships, with each other and men alike, in a world of social, economic, and political equality.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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vulnerable women. *Dignity* thanks Ingeborg Kraus, trauma therapist, and Sandra Norak, survivor and member of Sisters e.V., in Germany, for their comments on this essay.

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