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Seeing the Shadow Women: The Hidden Victims of Prostitution

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Seeing the Shadow Women: The Hidden Victims of Prostitution

Abstract

A group of hidden victims of prostitution has been brought to light by Ingeborg Kraus, a trauma therapist in Germany, and Andrea Heinz, a woman with experience in the sex trade in Canada. *Dignity* has published four articles by these two writers in the last year. Their nascent body of work is uncovering important new information and perspectives on prostitution. Through their own experience and interviews with wives of sex buyers and women with sex trade experience they show us a more holistic view of the harm of prostitution. They write about the wives and families of men who are involved in prostitution. They describe how the *shadow women* suffer from the harm of prostitution. By broadening the analysis of the negative impact of prostitution on women and the community they conclude that legitimizing prostitution as *sex work* is a mistake that undermines our collective regard for all women and their personal dignity and genuine sexual integrity

Keywords

prostitution, shadow women, victims, women, wives, partners, family, sex buyers, harm, betrayal, sex work

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EDITORIAL

SEEING THE *SHADOW WOMEN*: THE HIDDEN VICTIMS OF PROSTITUTION

Donna M. Hughes

Editor-in-Chief

ABSTRACT

A group of hidden victims of prostitution has been brought to light by Ingeborg Kraus, a trauma therapist in Germany, and Andrea Heinz, a woman with experience in the sex trade in Canada. *Dignity* has published four articles by these two writers in the last year. Their nascent body of work is uncovering important new information and perspectives on prostitution. Through their own experience and interviews with wives of sex buyers and women with sex trade experience they show us a more holistic view of the harm of prostitution. They write about the wives and families of men who are involved in prostitution. They describe how the *shadow women* suffer from the harm of prostitution. By broadening the analysis of the negative impact of prostitution on women and the community they conclude that legitimizing prostitution as *sex work* is a mistake that undermines our collective regard for all women and their personal dignity and genuine sexual integrity.

KEYWORDS

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A GROUP OF HIDDEN VICTIMS OF PROSTITUTION has been brought to light by two insightful observers. Over the past year, Ingeborg Kraus, a trauma therapist in Germany, and Andrea Heinz, a woman with experience in the sex trade in Canada, have written about the harm of prostitution to the wives and families of sex buyers (Kraus, 2019, 2020; Heinz, 2020a, 2020b). *Dignity* is proud to publish these new perspectives that reveal the damage that prostitution causes to partners of sex buyers, their families, and communities.

In the anti-sexual exploitation movement, most of the focus has been on the victims who are bought, used, and hurt by sex buyers (Barry, 1984, Hughes & Roche, 1999; Raphael & Shapiro, 2002; Norma & Tankard Reist, 2016). More recently, there has been research on the sex buyers that create the demand for victims (Hughes, 2000, Demand Abolition, 2019). Kraus and Heinz now draw our attention to the *shadow victims* of prostitution, the women in relationships with sex buyers.¹

In “Betrayed Partners and Men with Poisoned Souls: Interview with a Former Sex Buyer in Germany,” Kraus (2019) recounts learning about the injury to the *shadow*

¹ In this editorial, the term *wives* will be used for all women partners of men.

women and what they suffered. She interviewed a former sex buyer, who lost his wife and family after his wife discovered his years of secretly buying sex. The man told her: “I violated the fundamental rights of my wife. ... I had unprotected relations ... I finally infected my wife with herpes” (p. 3). The man describes his wife’s reaction when she discovered his long-term involvement in prostitution:

The basis of trust that she believed made her marriage safe was thrown away by the person to whom she had given her unlimited trust. Probably, she actually had broken heart syndrome.

Further, he sees the damage of prostitution going beyond the individuals and families to society as a whole: “The whole society suffers with all these damaged and injured people. A society that permits this sorrow is sick (p. 4).

Prostitution is toxic to family relationships as Kraus learns. She interviews a wife who describes the negative impact of her husband’s involvement in prostitution on her and the family in “Shadow Women: Wives Betrayed by Sex Buyers” (2020). The wife sees her life as *before* and *after* discovering that her husband was involved in prostitution. She describes the years of decline to their relationship that she later realized was caused by her husband’s involvement in prostitution. Her self-image and self-esteem declined, and she sank into depression unable to understand why her relationship with her husband was failing. As Kraus documents, the wife may not know specifically what the man is doing, but she feels the distance, and it slowly corrodes the bonds that hold relationships and families together.

I experienced him becoming emotionally uninvolved in our family life. His sexuality changed, too. ...I felt it but couldn’t name it.... There was no intimacy. There was no more tenderness. I told him ‘You’re treating me like a prostitute, you’re touching me like a piece of meat’ (p. 2)

Later, when she learned about his years of involvement in prostitution, she and her daughter were devastated by what she recognized as his lying, emotional violence, and gaslighting. In her article, Kraus goes on to describe the harm to this woman and the family in detail. As the woman tries to save their relationship, she found that “He wasn’t present in our relationship anymore” (2020, p. 2). Even the sex buyer’s daughter is hurt: “The image of her father...collapsed in a heap” (p. 2).

Another author who has experience in the sex trade providing sexual services and managing and owning a massage parlor (brothel), has bravely stepped forward to offer her observations on the impact of prostitution on wives and families. Andrea Heinz (2020b), author of “A Mule for the Patriarchy: Waking Up to the Harm of Prostitution to Wives and Families,” writes about her growing unease at men’s callous references to and derogatory comments about their wives. She notes: “The girlfriends and wives of the men were always in the background” (p. 2). At one point, as a sex buyer dismisses his wife, she realizes that she too was not seen as a real human being, but an “object with whom he was initiating sex, not a living breathing person with a name” (p. 2).

Eventually, Heinz encounters the *shadow women* who appear as they try to track down where their husbands—and money—were going. They’d call her “studio” to ask what kind of massage was offered there. Then one evening a woman came to the door with a photo of herself and her family. She wanted to know if her husband was coming there to buy sex.

Increasingly, Heinz is repelled by the men and starts to identify more with their wives. She writes:

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 (2020b, p. 3).

Heinz writes about the harm of prostitution, as a practice and an industry, to all women. She writes:

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.... I felt I was betraying women (2020b, p. 3)

Heinz (2020a) has also done research on women's experiences entering and eventually deciding to leave the sex trade. I encourage everyone to read her research and insights into women's motivations, experiences, and decisions to leave prostitution. Her research found that the "aware" women who decide they can no longer tolerate the harm of the trade realize: they "not only experienced the existence ... of a buyer's partner but has fully internalized the connection between her sex trade involvement and the impact upon other women" (Heinz, 2020b, p. 4).

Kraus and Heinz introduce us to an important group of people who are harmed by prostitution. Both authors look beyond the harm to individuals to see the negative impact of prostitution, especially legalized or decriminalized prostitution, to the whole community.

Kraus writes that men's betrayal of women and families is worsened by legalized prostitution: "It remains a man's right to go to prostituted women or to have the privilege of deciding against it" (2019, p. 1). Kraus extends her analysis to all women in a country (Germany) where there is legalized prostitution: "Ultimately, all women are *shadow women* in a country that legalizes the buying of sex and considers prostitution as sex work" (2000, p. 3).

Heinz also sees the harm of prostitution to all women. She concludes:

the ultimate injury [is] 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 (2020b, p. 4).

Our analyses of the harm of prostitution need to include the *shadow women*. In describing the harm of prostitution to them and their families, wives don't talk about patriarchy or think about the exploitation of the women and girls used in prostitution. They talk about betrayal: betrayal of trust; the intimacy of their relationship; and the sanctity of their vows or promises. This kind of betrayal has devastating consequences for the whole family.

To the *shadow women*, who only know their experience, the betrayals and destruction of their relationship is personal. They don't think collectively about how many other women are being hurt in the same way or how that makes the collective harm social and political. In a feminist analysis we understand that *the personal is political*. When many women are harmed by the same negative experiences—even

when it's one at a time—the impact is social and political harm to women as a group. And when a significant number of women and families are devastated by men's involvement in prostitution, it has negative consequences for the whole community.

The anti-sexual exploitation movement needs to reach out and engage the *shadow women*. They need to know they are not alone. They too fit into the abolitionist community of survivors, scholars, and activists who oppose the harm of prostitution. As the wife of a sex buyer says:

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 (Kraus, 2019, p. 6).

We need more research to understand the profound damage that prostitution is causing to *shadow victims*—wives and families. And by extending the analysis, we can see how prostitution causes corrosion to the community by destroying community values, increasing mental health problems and substance abuse, damaging public health, and eventually contributes to crime and corruption.

As the editor-in-chief of *Dignity*, I strongly encourage you to read these four important articles. (The links to these articles are in the references.)

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