



Departing from stigma and secrecy and elevating stories of agency: Narrative practice in the voices of sex workers

by Kaur Serendipity¹



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Abstract

This paper explores the use of narrative therapy and community work to respond to the complexities surrounding women's experiences in the sex industry. It offers practices for therapists and community workers seeking to engage with sex workers in ways that are respectful of their hard-won knowledge and seek to elicit double-storied accounts in relation to hardship, thicken stories of preferred identities, and explore absent-but-implicit values, hopes and commitments. These practices include an innovative use of re-membering questions and a collective Tree of Life process adapted to the specific experiences of women in the sex industry. The paper elevates the insider knowledge of sex workers, particularly the lived experience of women engaged in sex work in which they have a high degree of choice and autonomy. It includes a collective document of sex workers' insider knowledge about confronting stigma and isolation, addressed to people whose work intertwines with sex workers in some way: therapists, support workers, lawyers, police, activists.

Key words: *sex work; Tree of Life; re-membering; collective document; narrative practice*

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Much has been written about women who have been trafficked, coerced or otherwise unwillingly arrived at sex work (Agustin, 2002). And while the challenges for counselling and psychotherapy with sex workers have been described, little has been published about narrative therapy with sex workers. This paper offers a perspective that has been missing from the literature. It privileges the voices and insider knowledge of women who choose sex work of their own volition, and conveys how narrative practices such as re-membering, externalising, deconstructing dominant discourses, the use of therapeutic collective documents and the Tree of Life can highlight agency and elicit preferred identities when working individually and collectively with people engaged in sex work.

I have intimate knowledge of sex work, and this paper is shaped by my insider status as someone with lived experience in the industry. I hope this paper will encourage people whose lives connect with sex workers – professionally or otherwise – to depart from the dangers and limitations of single-storied understandings that can bring additional hardship to people in the industry. I share stories of sustenance from people fighting marginalisation, stigma and isolation, and hope to illuminate sex workers' resistances in ways that restore dignity (Reynolds, 2019). The stories and perspectives in this paper are from the experiences of cisgender women who do sex work. I hope in future projects to honour the experiences of trans and nonbinary folks and cisgender men who engage in sex work.

This paper describes narrative therapy conversations I shared with seven women who described themselves as “high-end” sex workers. They had a high degree of freedom and autonomy in their work, setting their own terms in relation to location, services and remuneration, rather than having terms imposed by clients or managers. Each of the seven women participated in three sessions. The first two were one-to-one conversations with me, and the last was a group session that involved the women working together to write a collective document (Denborough, 2008) and create an adapted collective version of a Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006). The group was culturally diverse in that it consisted of four women from the dominant Anglo cultural background and three women from Black, Asian and minority cultures.

I hope this paper assists readers to question dominant discourses and makes visible insider knowledge that is distanced from the prejudiced, moralistic frameworks

that commonly exist about sex work. I hope the stories included here bring out aspects of women's lives that are not usually revealed: their leading role in their own life stories and the avenues they pursue in expressing personal agency, making decisions about what is important to them.

Descriptions of sex workers' lives that honour their own agency, skills and knowledge are rarely found in published literature, but there are some exceptions. I'd recommend:

- Kate Toone's (2018) insider paper “Come back for us: A critical reflection on the shared history of queers and sex workers and our need for solidarity”
- Michael G. Curtis Jr's (2017) master's thesis *Sex worker and proud: A phenomenological study of consensual sex workers' lives*
- Yu Ding's (2020) article “Beyond sex work: Understanding work and identity of female sex workers in South China”.

The context

Dominant social discourses position women in the sex industry as victims: oppressed, there by force, unable to exit the industry, in competition with one another, emotionally distant, unqualified for other work, and/or addicted to substances. These discourses are often accompanied by reports about trafficked migrants, underage girls and dominating pimps. The sex industry can indeed be a site of abuse, coercion and exploitation. I acknowledge the diversity and variety of forms of sex work, the diversity of experiences people have in the industry, and the different conditions of work that exist, some of which are conducive to abuse, trafficking and violence. Harcourt and Donovan (2005) reviewed 681 publications to produce a global typography commercial sex work. They identified at least 25 types of “direct” and “indirect” sex work, including street prostitution, escort work and brothel-based work, as well as lap dancing, telephone work, and massage with sexual services. I am well aware that there are many whose experience in this industry is negative and who experience harm. The participants in this project each described taking actions in solidarity with people who work in less privileged ways

(for example, donating to relevant local charities that support women to leave the industry, such as ONE25² and SWARM³).

This paper, however, elevates the voices of female sex workers whose experience in the industry has been generally positive, and who have privilege within the hierarchy of sex work: a high degree of control over their working hours, location, pay and conditions. This includes sex workers employed by escort agencies who are able to refuse bookings. Because the pay rate is high, the longer they are in the industry, the more selective they can be, as they are able to free themselves from financial constraints (such as debt or unpredicted expenses), which are often the impetus for entering the industry. This paper is about women who have a sense of agency in relation to their sex work, whose presence in the industry is of their own volition, and who don't want to be pitied or labelled "victims".

The participants used the term "companion" when talking about their role. This involved daytime, evening or overnight bookings offering "the girlfriend experience": time spent enjoying dinner or other activities as creative and varied as clients are willing to spend, from visiting exhibitions or the theatre to attending a spa, in addition to sexual services carried out at a hotel or home. The activities were chosen by or negotiated by the companions, and were used to create conversation or a sense of familiarity. Some bookings would have a minimum duration of two hours, while some participants only accepted dates of a minimum of 24 hours and only worked during weekends.

Four of the seven women had other jobs and considered sex work to be "moonlighting", despite it providing a much larger income than their "civilian" job. Three worked exclusively in the sex industry. Five participants worked for an agency and two worked independently.

I'll now describe the narrative practices that I used in the one-to-one conversations with the women and some of what emerged in these conversations.

Re-memembering conversations

The participants were interested in re-memembering conversations (White, 2007) in relation to their "dates" – the men and couples to whom they offered their

services. I will include here some of the questions I asked in the individual meetings and the directions these conversations took.

What did this person appreciate about you?

Betty highlighted that her listening skills were appreciated the most. "I don't think people realise how much listening we do. Clients like to be heard, and sometimes they come to us because at home, they're not listened to or asked about their day. They don't feel seen."

"Affection", "warmth" and "validation" were named by most participants. Others described being appreciated for offering "respect", having the "discretion of a confidante", "reliability", "zest for life" and "joviality".

What skills and initiatives did this person value in you or your time together?

Penelope emphasised being valued for her excellent conversational skills and that a large part of a date involved talking over dinner, sharing a bottle of wine. Tracing the history of this skill, Penelope attributed it to her work and her studies, and also to observing how her grandparents spoke in a calm and kind way to other members of the community.

Other skills that were valued included an ability for intimacy, ability to "connect in meaningful ways", empathy and "adopting a nonjudgemental position".

What might this person say about how you have contributed their life? How do you think this contribution might have made a difference to how this person saw their life?

This question elicited stories and knowledge that were out of phase with dominant views about sex work. The participants highlighted often-neglected aspects of their clients' lives, known by very few. By sharing their stories, they illuminated a different narrative. I heard stories of clients being given the opportunity to become a better version of themselves, becoming happier, more alive, triggering a chain of life-affirming, courageous decisions such as taking up paragliding, becoming bolder in business, inviting more generosity.

Anna read a card from a client: "I appreciate your independent mind, your enthusiastic, nonjudgemental joy for life and all its pleasures, your willingness to develop a beautiful blend of intimacy, hope, desire, laughter and love."

Freya brought in a book with a hand-written dedication from a client: "You have enabled me to fulfil dreams that in my civilian life I would have never been able to. Meeting you has been life changing."

Penelope read a message from a client: "You offered me the opportunity for escapism and the realisation of certain dreams and fantasies, and with you I found a desire to explore my sexuality. With the ever-increasing pressures of the modern world, time spent with you really gives me something incredible to look forward to, and it is worth saving for."

These acknowledgments of the effects that the women's work had on their dates contradict the dominant discourse that all forms of sex working are objectifying and demoralising. Sophia said, "I had to unlearn many things I was taught when I was younger, when I too was under the weight of terrible misconceptions about sex workers. I now see value in what my connection with the clients brings to both them and me". According to Morgan (2000, p. 14), "thin description leads to thin conclusions about people's identities, and thin conclusions often lead to more thin conclusions as people's skills, knowledges, abilities and competencies become hidden by the problem story". Thin descriptions about sex work were challenged in this exercise.

Externalising secrecy

Externalising creates distance between a person and a problem and opens space to find preferred ways of relating to the problem (White & Epston, 1990). Externalising secrecy and shame supported the creation of alternative stories. It also made it possible to richly acknowledge the real effects of the hardships experienced by sex workers. These included economic hardships that precipitated taking up sex work and hardships exacerbated by shame and secrecy. The externalising questions I asked included:

- What kind of step was it when you stood against poverty?
- What was this debt separating you from that you wanted to hold on to?
- What has secrecy taken away from you that you valued?
- If shame tries to make a comeback, how will you handle this?

Externalising conversations about secrecy revealed that secrecy offered protection to important values held by the participants, such as relationships and dignity. Anna said:

My father would think I'm better than that, that's why I am trying to protect his ingrained notions about how a daughter should behave, how a woman should behave. I don't want to shatter his view of me. He would feel I am denigrating myself; he wouldn't understand it's something I embrace and want. He would hate that his daughter is a sexual being who ventures into things like sex working. Coming from a religious East African background, he wants to know his daughter is loved and cherished by one person, in a marriage, because that feels safe and better for him. I keep everything a secret from him to preserve this relationship.

Other participants said that secrecy protected their other jobs, which they loved and valued and would lose if their sex work were exposed. Secrecy gave the participants control over their lives because they gained a sense of agency over who was allowed to step into knowledge about their sex work. Safety was another important factor that secrecy protected, particularly for participants who lived alone. Penelope explained that while secrecy protected her preferred way of being seen in society, she felt she had grown apart from people who wouldn't understand:

It took a long time before I told my best friend. The reason why I felt I had to let her in was my fear of dying, and I wanted someone to tell my family, to be able to speak to them and dismiss that stigma. I wondered who would represent me? Who would explain? Who would know the reasons why I've done this?

In describing what secrecy took from the lives of participants, a common phrase was "sharing stories": communicating and sharing anecdotes was hindered by secrecy. In Freya's words:

I am a communicator, and secrecy has taken away my chance to communicate with my friends and family freely about these experiences. It's quite lonely for me. Experiences are better for being shared. My clients are the only ones who know me in this capacity. That's why I write them letters.

When asked about the influence of societal views on sex work in maintaining secrecy's position, the participants confessed that they entered the industry

with prejudices that matched dominant discourses. They harboured misconceptions about those in the industry, but agreed to join with the intention of remaining only until alternative solutions could be found for the financial issues that prompted them to join the industry. With time, they departed from stigmatising ideas and opted to remain in the industry for multiple reasons, including having control over their time, meeting new people, becoming activists for sex workers' rights, feeling stimulated by their relationships with clients and other women in the industry, and for some, the ability to explore bisexual fantasies that couldn't be explored in their civilian life.

Betty said,

I know there's stigma and shame. But there's so much more, too. My relationships with clients have allowed me to fight for and access things that made it possible for me to enjoy life, not just survive. I joined [the sex industry] because I wanted more money. I am really proud that I can say that I am part of this, part of this movement. I understand I have privileges, but I have earned my place here. I have learnt so much as a person. I have developed more kindness and compassion because of the people I have met – little moments with different people. Some people want intimacy, some want to be cared for, some want the centre stage. But it gave me the chance to put on a pair of glasses and I saw what people can do and be in their vulnerability. Many other sex workers I have collaborated with have shown great empathy and connection with their clients. You look at the clients' lives and somehow examine yours and how you live it. Stigma and misconceptions almost robbed me of these lessons.

Betty had departed from known and familiar discourses to new journeys that opened space for a fuller participation and a stronger voice in the story of her life.

Acknowledging struggle through the absent but implicit

There were moments in our conversations when the concept of the "absent but implicit" (White, 2000) was significant. When the women were speaking of the struggle and pain they had been experiencing prior to starting sex work, I used the following questions to illuminate neglected aspects of their stories:

- When you said life before sex work was a struggle and a fight, what kind of life were you struggling and fighting for?
- You described the pain of your son being put on an eight-month-long waiting list for health care. What is this pain testimony to? What is it you hold precious that has been violated?
- What do you give value to, that you're refusing to abandon, that sustains you in this work? What matters to you?

Responding to risks with collective action

The risks for workers in the sex industry vary, depending on the form of work undertaken, with street sex work, for example, exposing workers to greater risks than high-end escort work. The participants in this project spoke of three types of risk: health risks linked with lack of condom use, physical violence and emotional risks. Participants wanted to talk more about emotional risks, as they stated that these were the most significant risks encountered by sex workers, irrespective of what form of sex work they are taking part in. The marginalised position of sex workers means that while not all workers in the industry encounter aggression and sexual health issues, all of them encounter discrimination, stigma and exclusion, and many experience the stress of leading a double life.

The women's initiatives in response to emotional risks involved connecting and engaging with other sex workers, including organising get-togethers, spa retreats and days out. This was easier, however, when working for an agency, and social connections were not readily available to the independent workers. To reduce the risk of exclusion, an "indie collective" had been created as a space for independent workers to meet and support each other through advice, mentoring and protection. This generated connection and a sense of affiliation with others working in settings that can be isolating. These initiatives unfolded through time, becoming more than just "wellbeing rituals". The get-togethers became regular, and with the help of social media they were usually funded by donations from clients. These events played an important role in privileging the insider knowledge and voices of workers. They offered a chance to share information about sexually transmitted infection screening, sex education

and sexual health, as well as blacklists of clients with a negative reputation and security tips such as identity screening. Some independent workers had initiated small female-run partnerships that involved renting an outcall location and sharing costs with others. This discreet endeavour offered a solution to those who refused to work in hotels. It created a safe place to negotiate their work and see clients, and allowed them to access safety and protection when required. These responses provided a platform that helped address the workers' predicaments and dilemmas, reduced loneliness and elevated hard-earned knowledge and experience. All the participants had a strong appreciation of these initiatives, which can be seen as unique outcomes. They were clearly filled with meaning and symbolised what was important to these women. I asked Penelope a number of questions about these initiatives.

Serendipity: Can you explain to me what is it that you want for your life, and how that fits with your initiative to organise this?

Penelope: Well, I want to make it easier for others. I hope "passing the baton" [the name Penelope gave to this initiative] can help us not only feel safer but continue to enjoy this work, and have our heads screwed on. That's when we're at the highest risk, when we're not sticking together. I just hope to make this field better than when I started, for the other girls. One of the new indies now has at least three mentors that will know her bookings and can check in with her after her bookings are completed to see if she is safe. In an agency you have the manager who checks on you. If you're an indie and nobody knows you're doing this, who's going to check you've left the client safely?'

Serendipity: Would you say "passing the baton" and getting the women connected has improved life for you and others?

Penelope: It will improve their experiences in this work. It was vital for so many of the young and unexperienced ones. They had a space to ask questions in a relaxed location. I remember how hard it was for me when I started, with no-one to ask questions, no-one to take me under their wing.

I went on to ask about what Penelope's initiatives said about what she held precious in the world and in her life, and about the history of these values. Penelope said she found this exploration a novel experience: "I never took the time to think about why I did that and why it mattered to me. It's good to know my values can have consequences on women's lives".

Some of the other questions I asked the participants about their collective initiatives included:

- What ideas or forces supported these ways of connecting with other sex workers?
- What are your intentions in using these knowledges and skills to help other sex workers?
- What do these intentions reflect about what is important to you, or about precious beliefs about life and the world?
- Do you do other things that reflect this principle?
- Are there any proverbs or sayings from your culture that are linked to these values? Or are there any songs, stories or images from your community that are linked with this knowledge or skill?
- Where else in life have you come across initiatives like the ones you have described?
- Has this become important to you recently or has it been important for a long time?
- What might someone have seen you doing back then that would be an expression of these values?
- How did you learn this? Who did you learn this from?
- Did the women in the collective become allies in this act of resistance? What differences did it make to have an ally?
- What would you call this initiative?

Exposing patriarchal discourses

The women spoke about the toxic competition in the sex industry, and how it is conducive to envy, jealousy and hostility among sex workers. Patriarchy manifests as a divisive force of competition and comparison. It creates the illusion that there is only one appropriate appearance for sex workers, leading workers to fear that they don't measure up. Discourses around appearance, age and attractiveness lead women to compete with each other for clients, supporting a

narrative that only a few can succeed, and only at the detriment of others. This, in turn, separates workers from each other as sources of support.

The initiatives taken by the women to promote safety and to support each other without discrimination sought to limit the power of this discourse. Their actions created a community that offered degrees of immunity to the isolating power tactics sponsored by patriarchy.

The questions I posed to expose dominant discourses included:

- Do you think other people ever have a similar experience [of whatever issue is being discussed]? Which people in particular are most likely to have this sort of experience?
- How might other people experience this?
- Why do you think women of different ages, sizes and shapes might end up feeling this way?
- What does this suggest about what sex workers should be doing in such situations?
- Are there any other things that this set of ideas says you should be doing?
- Where do these ideas come from? Who benefits from you seeing things this way?
- What are you promised as a reward if you do all the things these ideas say you should be doing?
- Do you think this promise is always delivered? Were there other reasons why you had bookings, despite not being of a certain age, shape or size?
- How much of this fits with how you prefer to think about yourself?
- Is this an example of you keeping going with what is important to you in contrast to what these ideas tell you that you should be doing?

These questions elicited accounts of other aspects of the women's work that were appreciated, such as conversation, listening, humour and conveying nonjudgemental attitudes, and shed light on the limits of appearance-based discourses.

A collective Tree of Life

In our session together, we used the "Tree of Life" exercise (Darnell, 2017; Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006) to thicken and document the women's preferred life stories and to elevate their sense of self. The stories shared by these women in our conversations together contradicted the normalised cultural truths that often structure sex workers' narratives. We also looked at the skills and values that afforded the participants the ability to navigate the challenges involved in sex work. Our conversations allowed us to share with each other the gifts we had brought from the various cultural groups we belong to, and to reflect on the differences and the similarities in our values, skills, hopes and dreams.

A collective tree

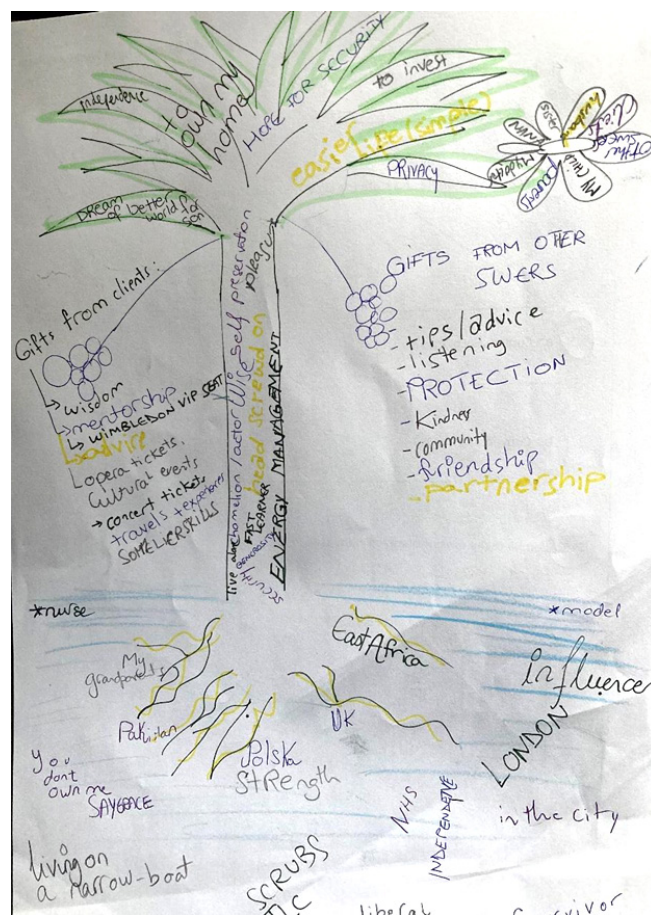


Figure 1. A collective Tree of Life

The women were invited to share stories about their backgrounds and countries of origin, the communities they came from and what is important to them. I adapted the prompts for each part of the metaphoric tree.

Roots and soil

The roots were used to represent significant people, areas and origins that had contributed to the women's identities. The soil represented the day jobs and other roles the women had, the places they got their energy from, their sanctuaries, and the songs that they played while they got ready for dates.

Prompts for the roots included:

- Where do you come from?
- What aspects of your country or community are you proud of?
- If I could interview your country or your community, what would it say about you being an expression of it? What values would it see in you that it would link with itself?
- What are you affiliated with, in being part of this city?
- Can you tell me a story that shows something special about your relationship with this place?
- What is it that you appreciate in what East Africa (or other place) gave to you?
- Prompts for the soil included:
 - What influences you on a daily basis?
 - Have you always enjoyed this?
 - Can you tell me a story about how this became important in your life?
 - How would you describe living on a narrow boat?
 - What does this say about you and what you stand for in life?

The trunk

The trunk was used to represent the skills and abilities that enable the women to do this job, or that this job had given them. One participant indicated she had become a chameleon, assessing each booking before opting for the colour/attitude/mood/persona she would put on. "Energy management", "fast learning" and "experiencing pleasure" were other important aspects.

Prompts for the trunk (skills):

- Can you tell me a story about something you've learnt about yourself since entering this industry?
- What would other people tell me about your skills?
- What's it like hearing the other participants say this about you?

- How does your ability to turn into a chameleon contribute to your wellbeing?
- What's the history of this skill in your life?
- Can you share the first time you remember using energy management?
- What ancestors share this skill with you?
- Who gave you this skill?
- How have you demonstrated it in the past?

The leaves

The leaves were used to represent the hopes and dreams that motivated the women to work in this field, for example owning a home, investing, security and independence.

Prompts for the leaves (hopes and dreams):

- What is the history of this hope of owning your own home?
- What is privacy trying to protect that is meaningful to you?
- Is dreaming of security linked with somebody significant in your life?
- Can you tell me a little about your relationship with this person?
- How come you haven't given up on this dream of having independence?
- How long has independence been important to you?
- Can you share a story of the first time you realised this was important to you?
- Who else would agree that this is important to you?
- What has sustained your hope for a better world for your son?

Flower petals

On the flower petals, the participants added significant people who had supported them in balancing the work and other commitments, or whose views the participants valued. These included other sex workers, children, sisters and partners.

Prompts for the petals (significant people):

- What was special to you about your nan?
- What do your parents know about you that you sometimes don't know about yourself?

- If I could look at you through your child's eyes, what would I see?
- Did you have good times with your partner?
- What would your sister say are your moments of greatness in life?

The fruit

The fruits were used to represent gifts from clients, other sex workers, and significant people outside the industry. Gifts from clients included experiences, new abilities such as acquiring sommelier skills, travel, advice and mentorship. Gifts shared among sex workers included collaboration, friendship and a sense of community.

Prompts for the fruits included:

- How did your clients contribute to your life?
- What did that make possible for you?
- What did you discover about yourself as a result of that contribution?
- How might have you contributed to your parents' lives?
- How did other sex workers contribute to your wellbeing?
- Why do you think they gave you this?
- What made her act in this way towards you?
- What did she see in you that you can now see in yourself?
- What did your grandmother appreciate about you that would have led her to give you the skill of knowing how to wait?
- From what ancestors can you trace the gift of generosity?

Still standing – enduring 'the Inevitables'

I also used the Tree of Life metaphor to help us speak about the ways participants had endured hardships. Through exploring what enables a tree to remain standing even after being shaken by storms and harsh conditions, the participants named the more challenging aspects of sex work and how they weathered these.

They named the difficult times the "inevitables". They shared how, if they had a negative experience with a client, they would circulate a warning to others in a social media group to prevent further bookings with that person. As we discussed dealing with the inevitables, I shared a story about coastal redwood trees, which despite their great height, have only shallow roots. The secret of their survival in strong winds, floods and other challenges is connection – their roots spread outwards and connect with other coastal redwood roots. Their roots intertwine and this togetherness adds to their stability. The participants loved this analogy, and acknowledged that their connectedness with each other provided them with a similar strength in responding to the stress of leading a double life, providing shelter from isolation and enabling them to stand together against exclusion and discrimination.

A collective letter

Newman (2008) emphasised how narrative practitioners can use documentation to enable people's stories to continue to live in the lives of others. The following letter was written collectively during the session the group of women had together. Its purpose was to highlight stories about how the women had addressed the effects of isolation and other challenges in their work. I sought to make links between the women's personal experiences and the broader social issues they represented, to move from an individual to a collective approach, and to enable the women to contribute to other groups and communities through documenting their knowledge and making it available to others experiencing similar hardships (Denborough, 2008). Through this process of drafting the letter, further stories of resistance against hardship emerged. As Denborough (2008) described, collective narrative documents "convey a range of hard-won skills and knowledges, in parallel with a rich acknowledgment of the circumstances in which these have been hard won" (2008, p. 36).

What keeps us going: A collective letter from the words of sex workers

Living in the shadow of stigma, discrimination, secrecy, pain, judgement, misconceptions, labels and exclusion is challenging. With this document travels a hope that it will support people who are joining the industry, people who are curious about us, and people whose work and worlds intertwine with sex workers in different ways: therapists, support workers, lawyers, police, activists.

We are seven women working as high-end sex workers. Here are some stories of what keeps us going during challenging times.

People think we are our work, but really, we are human beings like you: women trying to make a living in a patriarchal society. We juggle many roles and wear various hats. You see, people who sell sex are everywhere. We are your neighbour, your colleague at work, the person in the queue at the post office or in the waiting room of the health clinic. Our kids probably play in the same parks or go to the same schools as yours. We probably go to the same place of worship.

Supporting each other

Being there for each other is a form of sustenance: a way to remove isolation, a way out of despair. Sometimes, being able to talk to someone who understands and doesn't judge – and can listen without gasping – makes a difference in how we walk this journey. Connecting with people in the industry provides protection, mentoring, sharing of knowledge and ideas, and it ultimately reduces loneliness.

The skill of supporting each other stems from a desire to be safe in our work – protected, understood. Here are some examples of the expression of this skill:

- offering to pay for a sexual health screening test for a sex worker who can't afford it
- offering to call each other after a booking is over to check we're safe after the client has left
- organising get-togethers and extending the invitation to people who work in different forms of the industry.

One sex worker created a platform for “naming and shaming” clients whose behaviour is risky, so women in the industry are able to warn and safeguard each other. The sex worker who started this traced the history of this initiative to her childhood, when, as the eldest of her siblings, she was in charge of keeping the younger ones safe when their parents weren't around. Initiatives like this make a real difference to our lives because they remove some of the effects that secrecy has on some of us.

Supporting families – our own and each other's

The sex workers involved in this project prioritised providing for their families with food, better opportunities and a better education. This was a way of responding to many difficulties linked with the nature of our work and a strong motivation to keep choosing what works instead of folding under the pressure of the hardship. One of the participants said: “Being a sex worker means that I can spend more time with my son, who is disabled. It also means I can pay for private health care for him. I have waited for so long for funding to be made available for his care, and I was done with waiting. I now can offer him the best treatments and I am available for him in more ways than I could be if I had to work all day to be paid just enough to be able to put food on the table.”

Another participant supports her family who live in a war-torn country. “I can resist the challenges brought by this work when I know that the money really makes a difference to my family back home. When I know that my father can have the dentures he needs, when I know that my brother can access education because of my work, I feel the grip of shame loosen. Where I come from, we are proud that we don't treat other people's material needs as trivial. I am so glad I actively do something to contribute. It isn't just material though. Some of my clients have improved the quality of my life by advising me, counselling me, guiding me, mentoring me and offering perspectives I would have never been exposed to if our worlds had not met.”

Freya mentioned the solidarity among women in the industry who have difficulties finding

childcare that is discreet and reliable. Some sex workers who have children develop friendships and babysit for one another. This is an expression of solidarity and a recognition of the challenges that secrecy creates for some sex workers. In tracing the history of “looking after each other”, Freya remembered how when she was a child, the community was the family. All the doors were open, and dinner was rarely at home. Most of the children came home already fed by other mothers and spent hours playing together in the neighbourhood. She remembered how her mother cooked large quantities, expecting to have at least five of the neighbours’ children attending dinner, and how welcoming every family was.

Investing in ourselves, in our health and wellbeing

We understand the importance of looking after ourselves. We invest part of our earnings in our health, paying for treatments and memberships in health and wellness centres. We make better choices when it comes to nutrition and self-care now, and this affects how we feel, sleep and live. The way some of us resist discourses about the “dirty” bodies of sex workers is by really looking after our bodies, eating healthily, ensuring balance between rest and work, and keeping up with all the testing. These are all acts of rebellion against people who use graphic and misogynist language in debates about sex workers and their bodies. This skill is rooted in the knowledge that there is hate towards us as a group, that stems from misogynist and old ideas about sex. We are on the receiving end of responses of disgust. There are discourses of bodily degradation, discourses of us being disease-spreaders. To stand against all of that, we are vigilant in how we treat our bodies.

Empowering our children

Some of us are motivated by wanting to empower our children by ensuring they have better opportunities than we did. “My children are in debate clubs. They take martial arts classes. They learn a different language. We didn’t have these chances and privileges growing up. At least they do, and it gives them a head start.

They will not be as advanced as other children, but my work is moving them forward.”

Making something meaningful for the future by funding skills and education

We know that some of the people involved in sex work are at the bottom of the social pile in terms of qualifications for well-paid jobs. We are not bankers, scientists or politicians. Some of us have been able to fund our own education from our earnings, an action that supported us in seeing ourselves in preferred ways, rather than in ways stigma tries to convince us to see ourselves. This is an expression of wanting to be financially independent, beyond the sex working years of our lives. One of the participants shared how she had always wanted to be a qualified hairdresser, but for economic reasons her parents weren’t able to support her to pursue that path. Knowing that, with time, she would be able to save and pay for the course with her own finances enabled her to forge her own relationship with her work, based on what it made possible for her, and not based on how others might think of it.

Anna, who is of African origin and very close to her roots, shared how she had been donating and campaigning for girls’ education in her home country. She encourages her clients to donate too, and influences them by subtly reminding them that “the cost of a bottle of perfume could make more of an impact – here, let me show you how to donate to CAMFED”.⁴

Refusing to take on patriarchal values

It takes care not to take on patriarchal values. We have to learn and notice the signs that indicate that we’re susceptible to these values, and choose to work in collaboration instead of in competition with each other. This involves the skill of working in solidarity with each other first and foremost: refusing comparison with each other in negative ways, refusing invitations to see ourselves as being in competition with one another, and instead, recognising the uniqueness of what each of us can offer to the industry. This is really sustaining of us as sisters. We are aware of the ways in which patriarchy sets women to compete with one another. Some of

us are watchful for the times when patriarchy wraps its tentacles around us, putting us down, diminishing us, making us feel inferior when we don't have the "right body shape", the "right height" or the "right skin colour" to be able to generate income in the industry. There are some rules that are known to most of us: we never badmouth other sex workers in front of clients. We don't gossip about other workers (although some clients, believe it or not, sometimes pry). We resist invitations to join in when clients throw mud at other sex workers, and we very quickly make it clear we're not interested in participating in gossip.

People think we are our work, but really we are human beings just like you, trying to make a living in a patriarchal society.

We hope this letter is helpful to you.

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Notes

- ¹ Kaur Serendipity is a pseudonym.
- ² One25 is a Bristol-based charity supporting women who do street sex work.
- ³ SWARM stands for Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement, a collective of sex workers that campaigns for the rights and safety of people engaged in sex work.
- ⁴ CAMFED (Campaign for Female Education) is a grassroots pan-African organisation promoting education for girls.

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