

THE SHIT WE JUST SHOULDN'T PUT UP WITH

WARNING SIGNS AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

A SWOP-CHICAGO RESOURCE | BY RUBY RUE, ED. K KOSTER

VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE EXPERIENCED VIOLENCE AT THE HANDS OF SOMEONE THEY KNOW...

THE SAME GOES FOR SEX WORKERS.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - WHEN IT HAPPENS TO SEX WORKERS - IS COMPOUNDED, REINFORCED, AND EXCUSED BY WHOREPHOBIA.

HERE IS A LIST OF THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR IN A RELATIONSHIP THAT IS SPECIFIC TO SEX WORKERS AND OUR EXPERIENCES.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE | BEHAVIOR THAT THREATENS, INTIMIDATES, UNDERMINES THE YOUR SELF-WORTH OR SELF-ESTEEM, OR CONTROLS THE YOUR FREEDOM

VERBAL ABUSE

- Your partner calls you any number of slurs against sex workers: 'hooker,' 'whore,' etc.
- Your partner calls you names to demean you and your profession.
- Your partner tells you that you don't deserve to be loved, don't deserve food, don't deserve to live. (You do deserve to be loved, well fed, and able to live).
- Your partner threatens to harm you, or leverages your profession and possible difficulty of police involvement should they hurt you.
- Your partner threatens to harm you if you don't make enough money for them or if you don't stop working.

CONTROL

Due to whorophobia, it's easy to rationalize 'controlling' behavior as genuine care, support or a 'natural' reaction to your work. Here are some controlling behaviors we've experienced, and patterns we've noticed:

- Control can come from *both* partners who *aren't comfortable with you working*, and from partners who *don't think you're working enough*.
- Comments like "I feel like [your sex worker friends] are out of control and a bad influence," "I'm worried about your safety [traveling for work]," "I'm just worried about your future," "I'm helping you set goals" or "I'm just trying to help you get your shit together."
- Often, sex worker partners want to control "how" you work, when you work, what you do at work, or get jealous of your clients and want to know what you're doing all the time, and may question/doubt what you tell them. Sometimes, it's a flat-out demand for you to quit your job. Sometimes, it's a flat-out demand to work more.
- A partner 'trying to help you get your shit together' may give you directives about exactly how you should 'fix' your life, have unreasonable expectations and demands, and micro-manage. Suggestions are always okay, but it is never okay for someone else to set your schedule, set your goals, tell you exactly what you should do, or how you should go about doing it.

JEALOUSY AND POSSESSIVENESS

A subset of control, this one is something that it seems sex workers are especially vulnerable to...and that many of our friends, family, or colleagues may think is normal, or our fault. These are some things we shouldn't have put up with:

- Your partner conflates you seeing your clients with you having affairs, and your partner does not understand the difference between an affair and seeing a client for a job.
- Your partner is "okay" with your job so long as they have control over who you see, when, or where. This can be a dangerous situation because it hinders your ability to screen clients, etc.
- Your partner does not approve of you talking to other sex workers or having friends who are sex workers.

ISOLATION AND THREATS

Abusers often isolate victims from their support network to gain control. For sex workers, stigma already does so much to isolate us from our primary community support systems (as well as alienate us from social service support systems). Here are some ways abusers can further isolate sex worker partners:

- For sex worker parents, a partner/pimp may *pressure you to have a schedule that keeps you away from your kids* and that family/friends/local day-cares can't meet child care needs for, and then arrange childcare.
- A partner may pressure you to distance yourself from other sex worker friends, to quit your job or to keep a schedule that impedes your relationships with family. A partner may also use sex work as a reason why you can *never* interact with your partner's family, friends, or network. Like control, for sex workers, it's easy to rationalize and empathize with your partner's concerns.
- Isolation can also be *convincing you that you won't get support elsewhere, or threatening to isolate you from support systems*. A partner might question your ability to find someone who'll love you besides them, given your work. An ex-partner might respond to your questions about child support payments with, "Sure, you go tell a judge I'm not paying, and I'll tell a judge what you're doing for a living." A pimp or manager may convince you that you will not receive support from social services or the police if you reach out.

ECONOMIC ABUSE | WHEN ONE INTIMATE PARTNER HAS CONTROL OVER THE OTHER PARTNER'S ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES, OR DISCOURAGES OR PREVENTS THE OTHER PARTNER FROM WORKING TO GET ECONOMIC RESOURCES.

DISCOURAGES OR PREVENTS YOU FROM EARNING INCOME

- Your partner has convinced you that all problems in your relationship are based on how you make money, you might quit... and end up financially reliant on the partner.
- Your partner may offer to financially support you if you quit sex work, and subsequently counter requests for support in meeting basic needs with claims that you are a 'gold digger' 'useless' or 'in the relationship for money'.

TAKES AND 'MANAGES' MONEY YOU EARN FROM YOU 'FOR YOUR OWN GOOD'

- A partner may tell you that it's dangerous for you to keep your own money or keep your own bank accounts, because what you do is illegal. They then take all of your money, and pay for your expenses, or say they're making investments in your name.
- A partner may also question your ability to take care of basic things on your own — they may attempt to convince you that you won't be able to place ads or find clients, take care of your kids, find drugs, or manage finances without them.

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- Your partner is under the false impression that because you are a sex worker, you are always sexually available.
- Your partner is under the false impression that sex work is rape, which means, according to the abuser's backwards logic, that it "doesn't matter" if they sexually assault you.
- Your partner may withhold sex or intimacy as a way to punish you for working, for not working enough, for not making enough money, or until you give them money you've earned.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

- Slapping, hitting, kicking, etc. Even seemingly small things like slapping should not be disregarded. Small acts of violence can be meant to communicate how much they value you and your life (or rather, how much they don't). Violence can escalate.
- In the context of BDSM relationships, the Dom/Domme must respect when you code. Your Dom/Domme must respect your hard limits. Your Dom/Domme should not punish you for coding or for having limits. If your Dom/Domme breaks any of these rules, then they are an abuser masquerading as a Dominant.

HOW WE COME TO ACCEPT THIS BEHAVIOR?

We shouldn't. But we also shouldn't beat ourselves up if we have in the past or are now. Getting out of an unhealthy relationship is hard for everyone, and for sex workers, slut-shaming, whore-shaming, and criminalization make it even harder. Together, society and the abuser chip away at our sense of self-efficacy and ability and convince us that the abuse is understandable, that it's our fault, and that we can't get and don't deserve better.

SHIFTING THE BLAME

- Your partner may make you feel like the problems in your relationship are all your/your job's fault, or like you don't deserve the relationship.
- Your partner may dismiss calmly expressed concerns about your relationship, and immediately refocus the conversation to what you're doing wrong or what's wrong with you... or your job.
- You may hear comments like "I'm not answering your calls because I can't talk to you right after you've screwed someone else," "I just get really upset whenever you come home smelling like the club," "I'm normally not like this, I just can't stand you stripping for/fucking/touching other people"
- Your partner may use your job to justify violence: "I've never hit anyone else, but they weren't f&g%*ing other guys."
- Cheating – In the context of a monogamous relationship, your partner claims that it is "okay" for them to cheat because of your job. It is not okay.

INTERNAL MONOLOGUE

- Thinking to yourself, "I don't deserve him/her in the first place because of what I do."
- Feeling afraid often; feeling "like you're walking on eggshells." Being more jumpy than usual.
- Blaming yourself, blaming your job for problems at home.

THE "APOLOGY"

- Your partner's apology for their behavior may often include blaming your job. They might say things like, "If you left that awful work, I wouldn't be so angry," "I just hate to see you degrading yourself," or "It's illegal, and it stresses me out." These are not acceptable apologies for their behavior that was caused 100% by him/her and not by you or your job.

LEAVING AND RECOVERING

MAYBE YOU STILL HAVE A JOB OR STILL LIVE IN THE SAME TOWN, BUT EITHER WAY, LEAVING AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP, AND THE AFTERMATH OF AN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP IS A VERY DIFFICULT PERIOD. YOU PROBABLY DON'T THINK VERY HIGHLY OF YOURSELF, AND YOU'RE STILL FILLED WITH A LOT OF FEAR. AND YOU PROBABLY STILL ARE QUESTIONING WHETHER IT *REALLY WASN'T THAT BAD, WHETHER IT REALLY WAS ALL YOUR FAULT.*

BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF. EVERYTHING ISN'T GOING TO FALL BACK INTO PLACE RIGHT AWAY. IF YOU REMAIN IN THE RELATIONSHIP, BUILDING HEALTHY PATTERNS FROM THE BOTTOM UP TAKES A LOT OF TIME. IF YOU LEAVE, BUILDING UP YOUR LIFE AGAIN FROM THE BOTTOM UP DOES TOO.

IN EVERY CASE, A VICTIM HAS SOME PART OF THEIR AGENCY STILL INTACT, HOWEVER SMALL. THE MYTH THAT AGENCY HAS TO BE COMPLETELY REMOVED FROM THE VICTIM IN ORDER FOR THE VICTIM *TO BE* A VICTIM IS A FALLACY THAT LIMITS THE DEFINITION OF ABUSE AND THEREFORE PERPETUATES VICTIM-BLAMING.

ABUSE IS ALWAYS SIMULTANEOUSLY AN ABUSE OF TRUST. YOU TRUST THAT SOMEONE YOU LOVE ISN'T GOING TO HARM YOU, OR IF THEY HAVE, THAT THEY'RE GOING TO CHANGE AND NEVER DO THAT AGAIN. YOU TRUST THAT THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH AREN'T GOING TO HARM YOU. THESE ARE BASIC ASSUMPTIONS THAT WE CARRY IN OUR LIVES IN ORDER LIVE, AND ABUSERS ARE PEOPLE WHO DISREGARD AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THAT TRUST.

REGARDLESS OF WHAT SOCIETY... OR AN ABUSIVE PARTNER TELLS YOU – YOU DO DESERVE SUPPORT, AND YOU CAN GET SUPPORT. IF YOU REACH OUT FOR SUPPORT, YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO WITHHOLD YOUR STORY. YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO TELL YOUR STORY. IT'S ALL UP TO YOU, AND WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL SAFE AND UNDERSTOOD.

GETTING SUPPORT

- PEER SUPPORT CAN BE GREAT. REACH OUT TO LOCAL SEX WORKER ADVOCACY GROUPS, LIKE SWOP. (FEEL FREE TO USE A PSEUDONYM IF YOU'RE MORE COMFORTABLE THAT WAY). IF THERE'S NOT A SEX WORKER SUPPORT GROUP NEAR YOU, YOU CAN ALSO GET PEER SUPPORT ONLINE.
- DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES ARE VICTIM-CENTERED, AND ARE THERE TO HELP YOU, NOT JUDGE.
- IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE STIGMA OR PREJUDICE FROM A DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICE PROVIDER, KNOW THAT IT'S NOT YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO EDUCATE THOSE EMPLOYED TO HELP YOU, AND KNOW YOU CAN CONTACT US OR ANOTHER SEX WORKER-CENTRIC ORGANIZATION TO TO RESPOND.

RESOURCES

- THE NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE | WWW.THEHOTLINE.ORG ~ 1-800-799-7233
- HIPS [SEX WORKER SPECIFIC HOTLINE] | WWW.HIPS.ORG ~ 1-800-676-HIPS
- SEX WORKERS OUTREACH PROJECT | WWW.SWOPUSA.ORG ~ INFO@SWOPUSA.ORG ~ 1-877-776-2004 [WARM-LINE]
- SEX WORKERS OUTREACH PROJECT – CHICAGO | WWW.SWOP-CHICAGO.ORG ~ 1-312-252-3880 [WARM LINE]
- PROS NETWORK-CHICAGO | WWW.PROSNETWORKCHICAGO.ORG [SEX WORKER FRIENDLY RESOURCES IN CHICAGO]
- SEX WORKERS PROJECT | WWW.SEXWORKERSPROJECT.ORG [LEGAL SERVICES, SOCIAL WORK]