



Relationship boundaries, abuse, and internalized whorephobia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the connection between low levels of relationship power, and external and internalized whorephobia from the perspective of an experiential sex worker. Though the theory of internalized oppression and stigma isn't new, it's rarely applied to research or discussions regarding sex work. This autoethnography aims to remedy this by providing a base for deeper analysis & research.

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In my time as a sex worker, I experienced many instances of joy, but also cutting grief from experiences of unjust whorephobic violence. As with many potentially dangerous professions such as careers within law enforcement, military, and paramedicine, some of this violence is due to the unsafe spaces and people we must engage with in order to be effective in our work. However, some comes from those we trust the most – our intimate partners.¹ Whorephobic beliefs may lead intimate partners to dehumanize us, and refuse to respect our boundaries, while internalized whorephobia may lead sex workers to feel powerless in the face of this abuse. Though I am an out and proud sex worker, who has spent years unlearning whorephobia, even I am not immune to the destructive forces of others' whorephobia. According to a 2014 study in Vancouver, Canada, I am not alone in my vulnerability to whorephobic intimate partner violence (IPV); this study found that approximately “21.5% of sex workers in [noncommercial] intimate relationships had recently experienced physical or sexual violence” (Argento et al., 2014, quoted in Muldoon, Deering, Feng, Shoveller, & Shannon, 2015, p. 513). According to Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, and Dejong (2000), relationship power and intimate partner violence are inversely associated (quoted in Muldoon et al., 2015). This paper will address a time in which my status as a sex worker lead to low levels of relationship power.

On Valentine's Day, 2018, my partner video recorded me performing fellatio on him. Then, without my consent, sent a copy to his other partner. I was horrified – but why? Sexually explicit videos of myself were already available online – some protected behind a pay wall, others accessible free-of-charge. As a sex worker, I was used

to sharing my sexual labor. This form of violence was only devastating to nonsex working people, I thought. I had internalized the whorephobic narrative that sex workers sexual labor – both paid and unpaid – exists for public consumption; by this logic, my consent was not necessary. This internalized whorephobia left me powerless. I did not feel justified in having sexual boundaries within my personal sex life that I did not exercise (or need) within my professional life.

Because I was sexual with men I did not love for money, I believed I was obligated to be especially sexual with the man I loved for free – even if this meant permitting him to overstep my boundaries. After all, whorephobia told me he was doing me a favor by *permitting* me to do sex work. He *allowed* me to be sexual with other men. Sex work was not a job. It was a privilege – a dirty privilege. My job embarrassed him; therefore he deserved an amazing sex life. I also believed I had *no choice* but to let him be sexual and romantic with other people for free, because I was sexual and romantic with other people for money. This led me to love him at the expense of my own boundaries. Monetary exchange as my sole motivation did not matter. Because of this toxic belief, I could not justify asking him to remove the presence of my own sexuality from his secondary relationships and struggled to request a monogamous, or closed polyamorous relationship.

Whorephobia lead me to be passive in his abuse. Sex work is the only job where people expect your partner to control your work in some way. It is not uncommon to hear of sex workers “saving” a sexual act for their significant other, for example, or for sex workers to only do a certain form of sex work because their significant other would not let them do a higher paid or more explicit form of sex work.

In sending those videos and pictures, he stole agency from me. It was one thing to set a price and provide a service. It felt entirely different when it was not on my own terms. I received nothing in return. Explaining why I was angry felt like an insurmountable task; I did not feel entitled to the agency he stole from me. Refusing to consent to others seeing me in a sexual way was not something I felt I, a cheap whore, was allowed to do. I disgusted myself. I had internalized all the whorephobia that had been thrown my way.

Internalized whorephobia makes you desperate and clingy. Because I could not believe another person would love me, I praised my partner for very menial things. I was thankful when he did not out me, as he often did. I was grateful that he allowed me to do my job, even though he expressed disdain for my clients. I clung to every shred of freedom he allowed me and stopped noticing when freedoms started slipping away. It was not until our relationship ended that I realized how modest my fashion had become, due to his influence.

In the moment, I did not call him out. I could not even convince myself I was entitled to be upset. It makes sense that I'd be mousy. It is a real act of resistance to stand up to everyday whorephobia. I was also in love with this person and could not imagine myself finding another person who would date someone like me – a disposable whore. Whorephobia breaks down your self-esteem, and tells you lies about yourself. You're dirty. You are an embarrassment. No one will love you. It took me years in the industry before I found true pride in my work. But in this moment, I was ashamed. My partner was treating me the way society showed me I was to be

treated. I saw it in movies, in jokes, and in the comment section on Facebook after another whore is murdered.

Until you unlearn societies teachings, whorephobia feels justified. You believe that you deserve to be ostracized; that what you are doing is wrong and sinful. You believe that you deserve only whatever scraps others offer because you are a whore. As long as I refuse to perform the “perfect feminine” and choose a career as a sinful whore, I will continue to receive abuse from patriarchal men as punishment.

Writing of his violence continues to awaken my buried grief. My grief as a whole does not stem from that one particular moment – rather, from a compounded lump of micro traumas (those traumas whores face everyday yet are forced to swallow down), and macro traumas. When you exist in an oppressed position, you do not have time to unpack and process smaller traumas. You also cannot afford to expect better treatment from your oppressors.

Whorephobia makes setting relationship boundaries complex. This is because of the whorephobic idea that sex workers are always sexually available to their romantic partners. Like many other whorephobic ideas, sex workers often internalize this idea, like myself. This makes defending your boundaries hard, as you do not feel entitled to have boundaries. In order to live a happy life as a sex worker, one must unlearn years of internalized whorephobia. This unlearning may come in different forms for different people. Sex workers deserve to have their boundaries heard, known, and respected.

Sex work is a politically loaded profession; some sex workers may feel uncomfortable discussing their work – and any violence they may have experienced – due to a fear of judgment, or the risk of being pathologized. It is for this reason that therapists must be especially sensitive to the complex social, and political contexts of sex workers lives.

Though I cannot access the private thoughts of my ex-partner, nor do I know if he would have incited the same, or similar violence against me had I not been a sex worker, I know my internalized whorephobia disrupted the power balance within this relationship. Unlearning internalized whorephobia allowed me to seek non-toxic non-commercial relationships. Building trust with a sex work positive therapist, as well as surrounding myself with an accepting community was key in the process of unlearning. By feeling heard, supported, and understood by mental health professionals I was able to cushion myself from the violent whorephobic narratives that fed my internalized whorephobia.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. Whorephobia refers to the negative stereotypes, stigma, and marginalization sex workers face, which stems from a pervasive fear and hatred of sex workers. This fear and hatred frequently intersects with the fear and hatred of other marginalized groups. For example, many cis-male sex workers face both homophobia, as well as whorephobia.

Reference

Muldoon, K. A., Deering, K. N., Feng, C. X., Shoveller, J. A., & Shannon, K. (2015). Sexual relationship power and intimate partner violence among sex workers with non-commercial intimate partners in a Canadian setting. *AIDS Care*, 27(4), 512–519. doi:[10.1080/09540121.2014.978732](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2014.978732)