



DIRTY TALK!

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN RADICAL SEX WORKERS GET TOGETHER TO TALK SHOP? ALMOST ANYTHING.

BY AMANDA KRUPMAN

The sex worker activist: an increasingly common character. Defying stigma, she fiercely denies that her job(s)—stripper, fetish indulger, call-girl—make her a victim. She might look to hook up with others doing similar work, “out” or not, to get together and shoot the shit, recounting the incredible and the hum-drum. Not just coffee klatches, these groups have the capacity to organize over workers’ rights, negotiating the terms of their labor in the same way other disenfranchised groups have done. Some, in fact, have launched some very successful campaigns (run and see the documentary *Live Nude Girls Unite!*). More often than not, these women identify as feminists—many calling the work itself empowering—and are thus motivated and equipped to flip off the frowning appraisals of the sex industry that have dominated most feminist thought for decades.

The Story

During an unexpected jaunt to the South side of Chicago at 2 a.m. in a 1977 Lincoln Continental, I got to talking with the girl sitting in my lap. I’d talked to her before, but tonight we were full of gin and in close-quarters. She was a nice Jewish girl—educated at Cornell, former UFCW organizer and current law school applicant—who had a lot to say about her crotch. To be accurate, she had a lot to say about crotches. Our fellow inhabitants of the Continental—liquored up, yelling together in hearty, mixed-dialect Spanish—hardly seemed to remember we were in the car, let alone paid any attention to her blab. Despite her audience of one, she enunciated declaration after declaration as if she were standing at a lectern. Curly-haired, with heavy-lidded eyes and boisterous cleavage, identity politics articulated with goose-step polish, here was Lisa*, Sex Worker Activist.

The Continental kept on roaring down the Dan Ryan. Lisa was both didactic and digressive. She free-associated all the way from the stylistics of prostitution to *bacterial vaginosis*. All sex workers, in her estimation, are artists, and all artists worship the same god: money. Although—*ha ha*—there’s no such thing as a starving artist stripper. Phone sex, her forte, requires artisans, stylists of both the sweet-nothing and the crude word, who craft their calls to keep ‘em from getting off just long enough to make a decent profit. Which you need to afford birth control these days. Which should be subsidized by the government. Along with sex ed, so someone will tell these girls to stop douching, for fuck’s sake.

The Continental, its wide girth hugging onto a lane and a half, was heading steady down Halsted. Lisa continued delivering her wildly swinging primer on the Postmodern Pains of Woman. Tina, meanwhile, with one hand on the wheel, the other twirling her hair, was expertly negotiating the art of sitting cool at a red light while a car full of men and marijuana smoke sat in the parallel lane, humming with piqued interest and sexual bravado. She pulled off her Newport with slow control, allowing her head to swivel just slightly to glance coolly in return, then eyes back to front, concentrating on the light’s timer. Ana, older, louder, and in the front passenger seat, was less interested in maintaining such form. She sat twisted in her seat, facing Tina and the car, openly mocking.

“Why those fucking guys staring in at us? Tina, stop showing them your *chocha!*” She threw back her head to emit a succession of

high-pitched barks. Her dark curls fell back to reveal a drunken smear of laughter. Tina laughed roughly, and tossing her hair over her shoulder, allowed the men to see her smile.

Lisa smiled, close-mouthed. Her sexual confidence had been overtaken by a distinctly different manifestation being exhibited by Ana and Tina. I could guess at what she was thinking: *You save that kind of bluster for a hustle, you don’t just splay it out in the everyday.* Lisa played lascivious with her politics firmly attached, though she’d probably deny it. It’s safe to say that Ana or Tina, pragmatists, would agree with a lot of what Lisa had to say about selling sex, but they’d shrug it off as something obvious, a concept that doesn’t require a lot of verbiage to legitimate. But Lisa was often best when she’d unpack her ideas like the barrel and muzzle out of a rifle kit, locking the instrument together while eyeing her target.

We all knew each other through work—as healthcare assistants in an abortion clinic. It was necessary for all of us to work closely: in emotional capacities, providing advocacy and support for women that came to our clinic, explaining the process—everything that both could and could not really be explained; in technical capacities, assisting doctors in procedure, cleaning and sterilizing instruments, taking blood samples and vital signs, performing ultrasounds; and in menial capacities, disposing of biohazardous gunk, scrubbing steel and Formica, managing the occasional brawl between a patient and her boyfriend. What this work led to in the day after day toil, no matter who you were before you started working there, was a sharply honed, fearless, crude sense of humor.

We had developed an insular subculture, made so by the general discomfort most outsiders feel when talking about abortion. Most seem to imagine that each workday for us is like enacting scenes from a tragic opera. To reveal that we spend a lot of the time cackling, guffawing, and sometimes speculating on each other’s pubic hair (Loud coworker #1: “I bet Una’s got a retro muff.” Loud coworker #2: “No, I bet she trims that shit. Everyone who shops at J-Crew shaves their pussy.” Una: “Shut up, bitches. My bush is sacred.”) doesn’t jibe with the expectation that we are either feminist earth mothers that sacrifice all for the better of humankind or militant footsoldiers, performing our functions with steely determination.

The truth is that some of us initially resemble the former archetype, some belong more to the latter, and that these identifications slip away completely for most of us after putting in enough time with the realities of public health work. Speaking openly about sex in every imaginable context becomes the only universally shared agenda. And it is most definitely an agenda. You can see the way a new employee begins to revel in the newfound freedom of talking about whether she has removed stray hairs found around her areola, or on the immediate after-effects of anal penetration.

The Transition

Naturally, through the culture of no-holds-barred dirty talk, all taboos eventually break down, and you become privy to the most intimate details of your coworkers’ lives. And it becomes apparent that many of the clinic’s workers, like Lisa, have done other work that leads to being more attuned to the smutty quip. Performing

in peep-shows one summer in San Francisco. Getting a second phone line for getting people off. Brandishing a riding crop and sticking stilettos into willing flesh for \$90/hr. Though some offer up these stories faster than others, no one chooses to couch their dirty talk in qualifications or with any affected modesty.

This particular abortion clinic on the North side of Chicago may be a relatively rare safe space for these kinds of revelations. Many of the clinic's workers would not feel comfortable talking to outsiders about their past or present engagement in prostitution or other "deviant" or radical sex. Even, or especially, around others claiming progressive politics. Some of the women who are both clinic workers and former sex workers wouldn't even call themselves feminists. Perversely, these women may feel freer to share their experiences than the women that fall in between these camps—the self-identifying feminists who have not crossed over into making frank discussion or defense of their sex work part of, or at least compatible with their feminism. It makes you wonder just how many young women—third wavers, postfeminists, et al—actually are or have been engaged in sex work on the sly while remaining dedicated to feminist activism. This question led me to search for women willing to talk.

The Research

The pornography debate within feminist discourse is a notoriously tail-chasing one. Are women necessarily made victims by pornography? Well, what constitutes pornography? Should feminists spend their energies protesting the existence of strip clubs and prostitution? Or should they participate in harm-reduction programs for workers and back programs that aid strippers and other sex workers in improving working conditions? In the recent past, most of the problems were worked out in separate spheres, with feminist writers dialoging with other feminist writers, and sex workers working amongst themselves. There were a few notable exceptions that broke through, like Scarlet Harlot and Annie Sprinkle, two sex workers turned performance artists/educators who illuminated the hilarious and joyous side of sex work.

In the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, it became clear that a crusade started by a few trenchant pioneers had taken hold. There was now a concerted effort by the young women doing sex work to forcefully rip away the stigma, if only to feel more free to

be visible in defending workers' rights and being "out." Defending kinky sex and freedom of fantasy, and then repositioning the feminist (and Socialist, Marxist, and scores of other modifiers) critique of sex work's economics placed high on the third wavers' agenda—which could now exist within sex worker rights' groups and other sex worker based communities. Sex workers were finally speaking for themselves, and though they were still subjects of research and analysis by outsiders, they were beginning to organize and offer their own political response. This could incorporate feminist influences, and it often did.


A lot of the writing that began to be anthologized and published in mainstream magazines sticks with the personal: the essays stretch to offer a phenomenology of a feminist sex worker. Others have more specific targets, often criticizing media portrayals of sex work as simplistic, at best, and well-meaning programs that offer alternatives to prostitution as off-base or in need of reform.

Dana is a social worker who has quit providing escort services in the industry so that she can more fully attend to her clients, but still works within the sex industry as an activist. She has presented at numerous conferences, curated sex worker art shows, and is a committed organizer for sex worker's rights. She offered me a paper she wrote in graduate school to read over, in which she asserts:

The majority of what society knows or sees about prostitution is the most visible part of the industry—street prostitution. Yet, even then, street prostitutes are not given a voice in how to define the work they engage in and why . . . Also, most of the research on prostitution [is] conducted on street prostitutes, thus ignoring the experiences of other areas of the sex industry.

Dana further articulated common misconceptions in our interview, and described how they affect the kind of conversations she gets into with friends and colleagues: "As far as 'progressive' or 'liberal-minded' thinkers, the most pervasive argument I encounter is equating trafficking to prostitution. I've also been accused of supporting or advocating for the rape of women because I am pro-sex work, that being pro (choice) sex work."

Minax, a professional dominatrix who leads BDSM classes and workshops in Chicago, and hosts the S-Work Social, a kind of sex worker salon that meets every other month, frankly denies that the



**WE'RE FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS
OF ALL SEX WORKERS—FROM THE STREET
TO THE POLE . . .**

two realms are either necessarily linked or mutually exclusive:

Yes, I consider myself a feminist, and I take this approach to my work just as much I would as any other type of work that I might be employed in. To me, being a feminist is not about being a sex worker, it's about being a feminist who also happens to be a sex worker.

Though Minax pointedly avoids making a direct correlation between sex work as feminist work, she effectively implies that there is no reason to believe that identification with feminist philosophy would be compromised or made contradictory by one's involvement in prostitution.

Dana's use of the term "pro-choice" is notable. Sex worker activists like Dana and Lisa are often committed to co-opting this feminist language to articulate their experiences within the sex industry. This activist mentality has no boundaries. Though some women concentrate their activism in sex workers' rights, many others have found that their reproductive rights activism, their public health work, their domestic violence advocacy, their scholarly pursuits, their unionizing efforts—all led them to a better understanding of sex work, and with understanding came the curiosity to, well, get down and dirty themselves. Money was, importantly, *not* the only driving force. This is arguably the strongest point against the classic feminist characterization of sex work as necessarily exploitative because women only get involved because of a patriarchal design that limits women's economic potential. Though the existence of abusive, non-consensual trafficking and prostitution continues to remind us that these generalizations have come about for a reason, sex worker activists are challenged to express the positive aspects of sex work under consensual terms: "There's definitely an alternative, kinky element to it that attracted me at first and continues to attract me," one states. "[It's] a way of expressing myself and a way of integrating into my work the aspects of my personality that enjoy assisting others in their Erotic Journeys. The money is an added bonus," says another. A third agrees: "My initial attraction to the work was more curiosity than money. . . I was intrigued by the world of sex work and was curious to see if I could do it."

Furthermore, a woman having the choice to do sex work carried through into deciding what type of sex work was right for her. As most outsider analysis of sex work focuses on the "visible" forms of street prostitution and exotic dancing, it ignores the vast number of erotic service communities that exist at any given time, which are all subject to high variation in clientele, health concerns, contact rules, and so on. Though there is a lot of crossover, with some workers doing movies, modeling, and escorting simultaneously, many other areas are more particularly suited to certain talents, like *pro-domme* work, fetish indulgence, or burlesque (Interestingly, many of these specific kinds of sex workers distance themselves from the term "sex work" or "sex worker.") So one can be intimately associated with the work, not needing to create distance between themselves and the work they choose to do. Audacia Ray describes why she decided to no longer be an escort: "I spent a few months as an escort and didn't like it very much—I found I wasn't good at relating to my clients, who were mostly lawyers and bankers—two things I have no interest in . . . Doing [sensual] massage was more suited to my personality."

Dana speaks to the difficulties that arise in organizing and community-building for this ocean of workers: "The escorts don't necessarily "hang out" with the strippers; the strippers don't hang with the street walkers; the street walkers don't hang out with the phone sex operators; etc. . . The sex industry is not as cohesive as it should be, in order to make some change happen in society and societal perceptions."

Minax remarks on another barrier to working together: "There are many movements to work toward more camaraderie among sex workers, but generally speaking, they are provided for people who *self-identify* as sex workers." [Italics mine.]

Community building seems to a general desire for many sex worker activists. Of course, there are plenty of girls who do not make their sex work part of their overall lifestyle, do it primarily for quick money (this would be mostly everyone), and consciously maintain distance from their work. And most women, even sex worker activists, are discreet about their work, especially when working in social service organizations, women's rights organizations, and other social-justice projects. Minax was fairly sure that her BDSM workshops and general visibility kept her from being on a board for at-risk youth. Dana ran into trouble when a newspaper article chronicling her sex worker art show popped up while she was in school for social work. All the women I've talked with have said they've lost potential lovers and friends when discussing their work. Sex worker activists, though tough, brave, and armed with the most developed senses of humor in the working world, are still not immune to the pervasive stigma they would like to eradicate.

Though there are tensions between anti-prostitution advocates and sex worker activists who narrow in on sex positivity and freedom of sexual expression, they all agree that the most needy women—often addicts, sold into prostitution by mothers or men they're somehow attached to—are the women that most desperately need a voice and help to get out so they can make their own decisions and negotiate their own terms. Dana remarks on the nature of sex work activism and notes how more non-judgmental, practical work needs to be done to assist these women in beating their addictions and escaping from the abuse that keeps them doing sex work because they're offered little to no alternative:

A lot of the younger generation of sex worker rights advocates are jaded by the glitz and glamour presented in the media and the history of the forerunners of the movement here in the US They fail to realize that we're not only fighting for the rights of escorts, exotic dancers, burlesque performers, phone sex operators, etc. We're fighting for the rights of all sex workers—from the street to the pole . . .

It's obvious that the sex worker activists—the largely feminist-identified, younger women who are not poverty-stricken or working for a fix, maintain a power of choice. Their refusal to be condescended to, fetishized, or lumped in with a different population with a wholly different set of problems is often incompatible with the work they attempt to do alongside those who have feminist aims but deny prostitution can be positive. This keeps them radical and defensive. And sometimes, despite the racy words and whip-smart wit, quiet. ©

* Some names have been changed for privacy reasons.