

# SO YOU'RE DATING A SEXWORKER...



**HYDRA**

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Printed in March 2022 in Berlin, Germany

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# HELLO AND WELCOME!

We're very happy this zine found its way to you!

This zine was created by Emy and Alice. We're both sex workers, workshop facilitators and artists based in Berlin, Germany. In late 2020, we were asked by Berlin sex-worker organization Hydra e.V. to facilitate regular meetups for sex workers about dating non-sex workers. If you're new to the topic, maybe you wonder why.

Most sex workers date and have personal sexual and romantic relationships. Some get married or have children. Our job brings extra challenges to the already challenging human experience that is dating. The stigma around our work is everywhere: in the media, in conversations, in the law. So if someone is not a sex worker, doesn't know any sex workers personally, or hasn't done research in the right places, they might have the wrong idea. The media often gives a negative image of sex work as a whole or promotes polarizing content that makes it seem like we're either high-class luxury escorts or survival street workers, when many people exist in between those realities.

This booklet may be your first entrance into our world. You might be familiar with sex work, but would like to learn more specifically about dating. Maybe you're already dating a sex worker and since it can be challenging at times, you're looking for support in figuring some things out. Or you might be a sex worker yourself who wants to see what we came up with and if you'd be interested in sharing this resource with people in your life.

When we date as sex workers, we know that our job can be misunderstood by the people we date, or that it can trigger different reactions in them. Which in turn, can trigger challenging feelings for us. Therefore, it's important that we have spaces to talk about our struggles, but also our successes, with other sex workers who have similar experiences. This is what the "Dating Civilians" meetings are about. "Civilians" is a word used by many sex workers to refer to people who are not sex workers.

We've now facilitated these meetups for more than a year, and we've heard many different experiences from sex workers. We thought a lot about the topic, on top of what we already knew as two sex workers navigating their own relationships for a long time. We decided to

make this zine, mainly addressed to civilians, to share what we learned and hopefully help people better navigate dating sex workers. This zine won't cover everything; this topic is complex, every sex worker has a different experience of sex work and dating, and this zine is based primarily on our own lives as well as the experiences we've collected from friends and colleagues.

A little more about the point of view from which this zine is written, and what it covers: between the two of us, we have worked as escorts, in a brothel, in a strip club, in a champagne bar, as a sex phone operator, as a domina, camming, given erotic massages and done porn. We've never done street sex work, and we don't know what it's like to work as someone who's not white or disabled, as we're both white and able-bodied (although one of us is neurodivergent). We're also both queer and involved in activism.

We've both worked in countries that were either following the Nordic model (see in "Learning about sex work") or have legalized sex work, which has also influenced our perspective of sex work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From now, we'll refer to sex work and sex worker as "SW" and "SWer".

# LEARNING ABOUT SEX WORK

SW has been around since the very first civilizations (there is even a goddess of SW in Babylonian mythology), so why is there still so much stigma surrounding it? Sex is seen as dirty outside of heterosexual reproduction and family life, and is a topic that is shrouded in shame. Sexism also means that people with numerous sexual partners, especially people perceived as women, are seen as 'slutty'. On top of all that, money is a touchy topic in our class-divided capitalist society. So what could be more taboo than putting sex and money together?

SWers are not immune to doubt or shame, but for our own reasons (which differ from person to person), we still do this work. As a result, we experience a lot of stigma: from family, friends, partners, prospective non-SWer employers, and from our own internalized whorephobia. Which is why we need lovers who assist us in dismantling the toxic system we live in that keeps us all trapped in shame. Sex is not dirty, and money is a necessary resource in a capitalist system. There is nothing wrong with having sex for money.

The reverse of the medal is that sometimes, SWers who just want to make a living are hailed as radical activists. Not every SWer loves their job either. It's all about finding the balance between accepting each other and understanding that every job has its downfalls, especially one where both clients and providers feel the weight of the societal stigma. On top of that, widespread stigma also means bad laws and lack of access to government aid; it also impacts the police's treatment of us and means we often can't report assault. Trans\*, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) and undocumented people suffer from this stigma on top of, and exacerbated by, the other oppressions that they face.

A lot of SWers are fighting for the decriminalization of SW. The Nordic Model, which is advertised as helping SWers, means that our clients can be penalized for seeking sex. This often means unsafe working conditions and clients that are afraid and sometimes aggressive. In contrast, decriminalization would mean that SW is a job like any other, which is not subject to extra regulations, checks, or raids. SWers all over the world are

advocating for decriminalization.

In this booklet, we will explore different topics around dating SWers. To you who date or could date SWers, we will try to give you the best advice we can, from a place of empathy. Our goal is not to “teach” you to be perfect or to never have negative feelings about SW, but to help you see that on the contrary, these feelings are important and must be addressed. They are here for a reason. You probably weren’t raised knowing everything (or anything) about SW or prepared to date SWers, as we have certainly not been raised to *be* SWers or know how to handle everything about it.

The feelings one can have about the topic of SW come from various places. Of course, there is the stigma that we find everywhere in media, politics and conversations. But there is more than that.

One thing that came up in our meetings is the close relationship between the opinions that people have about sex work, and their own separate relationships to the general concepts of work and sex. So before you start reading this zine, we ask you to try to interrogate your reactions to what you’re reading. What is your relationship to work? What about sex? Do you feel happy or frustrated at your job? Do you feel like your work is a chore, or something fulfilling in your life? Is sex an area of shame or play, or something in between? Do you think that having sex is right only if you have romantic feelings, or are you comfortable with the idea of casual sex? Was the idea that sex can be sold something that was taboo in your childhood?

We hope that you will find in this zine: new knowledge, interesting advice, but more importantly, understanding. What matters the most is making the effort to understand each other, where we’re coming from, what our experiences are, what we need to feel safe. Cultivating mutual empathy and communication is key in any relationship.

## *SW is a job!*

First off, let’s clarify: SW is work! It is very stigmatized work however, so everybody, SWers included, have stronger feelings about it. But at the end of the day, it is a

profession: we're paid for a service for which we develop special skills.

This is important to say because it's not how mainstream media presents it. For example, you may not know about the skills we develop doing SW: communication, adaptability, good listening, consent, digital management and cybersecurity, marketing, negotiation, safe sex, security, acting, knowledge about fantasies and sexual practices, seduction, compartmentalizing... are just a few of them. Some of those skills are on the margin between what people would deem "social" (as opposed to professional or manual) skills, and for that reason they don't get recognized as work, even though they are what we're paid for. But you wouldn't think of a therapist as someone whose job is "not real," and in fact, those social skills are the reason why a lot of SWers are open-minded, empathetic people!

There are only a few countries in the world where SW is legal, versus tolerated but illegal or fully criminalized. Even in those countries, like Germany, this legal recognition is often a means to control and limit us, while also keeping SWers subject to a different treatment than other workers. It is harder for us to have our voices heard, form unions, work under laws that actually serve us, and sometimes to have access to basic services like health insurance and services.

When we work as employees (brothel, strip club, erotic massage parlor, etc.), like any employee, we also have to handle the relationships with our colleagues, our boss(es), and sometimes fight for better work conditions. When we work as freelancers, like all freelancers, we have to market ourselves and organize our own schedule. Because our work is often not considered "real work," and we suffer in many ways from that lack of recognition, it is very important that the people close to us, including our partners and lovers, understand that this *is* a job.

Some people don't understand *why* we do this job. If this is your case, know that there's a large range of reasons, and that we shouldn't have to justify ourselves. Like in any job, we can do it just because we need money, because we like it, or because the schedule fits our needs. SW can also be a resource when there are no other jobs available to us: that can be the case for some undocumented or unhoused people, and also some transgender folks.

There is also a common misconception around the idea that SWers do this job because of childhood trauma. This can be a hurtful assumption, even for those of us who do see a connection between their childhood trauma and SW. This bias implies that there's something inherently wrong with what we do, and it robs us of our agency by portraying us as victims. The choices that people make based on their childhood experiences, good or bad, are also legitimate. Why should SW be any different?

The stigma also plays on our personal relationships: as SWers, we can feel that we don't "have the right" to a personal family life or love life, especially if it is traditional, like being monogamous and having children. Some of the people we date don't see us as capable or willing to want this kind of life. This misconception is supported by actual laws and court rulings which put us in danger of our children being taken away because of our line of work, for example.

On the other hand, for some people doing SW can lead to a different understanding of the world. Through the varied experiences and meetings that SW provides, we might have developed our own unique perspective. Sometimes that can mean not wanting children or even partners, and prioritizing our job. It can also mean a different understanding of sex, because it is the tool of our trade.

Last but not least, the stigma plays a role when our partners ask us to quit SW. Asking someone to change careers for a relationship is a big deal, but in this case it can seem "right". The stigma suggests that we're always victims, and that sex should only be had in romantic relationships. These biases strip us of agency and can make us feel misunderstood, undervalued or disrespected in our choices. As we will explore later, it is also ok if *you* discover that you really can't emotionally handle being in a relationship with a SW. But if you ask us to quit without really understanding the implications, we might not feel seen, and we may feel judged.

The stigma is what pushes us to think that we should quit anyway, but if we do, it should be for our own reasons, in our own time. It's OK to choose to quit for the sake of a relationship, as long as we don't feel forced. The important thing is that you don't take it for granted that we should quit in order to *be* in a relationship. To not assume that we would

necessarily be happier doing something else. To consider that this is a lot to ask, and that if we decide our job is more important, that's a valid choice too. To consider that we will lose some or all of our income and may have to switch careers completely, which is especially hard after doing SW. In this situation, we invite you to check in on us, to make space for our feelings, and to remind us that not only is it OK to miss it sometimes, we can also choose to come back to it.

### *Whorephobia: the stigma inside all of us*

Growing up in this world, the way we think is impacted by common societal views: how adults talk about certain topics when we're children, the conversations we hear, what we see in books and on TV, in articles, on social media, etc. Even if we question some of it and try to think for ourselves, if something gets repeated enough times, it leaves a groove in our brains. This learned bias shapes our opinions and determines how we react, especially if we haven't intentionally researched the topic and learned about it. These negative opinions may be hurtful towards specific groups of people. In the case of SW, a pattern of biases that may lead to words or actions harmful to SWs is called *whorephobia*.

Whorephobia: the systemic oppression that SWers suffer from, stigmatizing them as "whores" in the derogatory sense of the word. It covers any talk, behavior or representation maintaining hurtful biases and prejudices, such as SWers being "unworthy," "dirty," or "amoral."

Internalizing whorephobia doesn't mean you're *bad*: we all do it, it's a logical consequence of growing up in the world. Maybe you have some thoughts that imply that doing SW is bad, that your partner/lover is a victim, that the work they do is "less serious," that there's something wrong with the number of clients they have sex with for work, or with how they get naked in front of them, or you might be afraid they'll give you STIs. All these biases, and more, belong to internalized whorephobia.

When you enter into any relationship with a SWer, casual or committed, you will come into contact with your own whorephobia. Maybe you've internalized all the biases we mentioned, or maybe just specific ones and not others. It all depends on the opinions

you've been exposed to in your life.

Your SW partner or lover will enter the relationship with their own internalized whorephobia, about themselves. It will be different for each SWer of course, but we all grow up in the same world where biases about SW are omnipresent. We might also have already experienced whorephobic behaviors towards us in the past. If non-SWers around us, like you, do the work to dismantle their own biases, it will be a huge support in our own deconstruction.

Dismantling internalized whorephobia is deep, lifelong work for everybody involved. Saying you support SWers, participating in our political cause, or reading this pamphlet is only the first step in a long and arduous journey. In order to truly support your SWer partner, you will have to come to terms with the fact that they *are* having sex for money, or getting naked for money, etc., which means that you will have to confront your own feelings about what that means. You will have to hold the image of what is happening in your mind without resentment, anger, shame, fear, or judgment. This is not an easy task for you or for us.

Some of us may be guarded about the topic of SW for all these reasons. When we're often judged or hurt by society, by the people we meet, and by our own thoughts, it can seem necessary to build walls. A lot of us struggle with what to share with our non-SWer partners: if we share only the negative parts of the job, we may avoid triggering some jealousy, but be once again seen as victims. If we share only the positive parts, we avoid being victimized, but we might trigger some jealousy. Thinking these things through is an additional and tiring challenge in our relationships.

The weight of the stigma is also why some SWers or former SWers sometimes don't come out to their partners/lovers about doing SW or having done it in the past. If the person you've been dating for some time tells you that they have been doing SW while they were dating you, it may come as a shock or feel like broken trust. These feelings are valid, but we invite you to consider why they didn't tell you sooner. It is very likely not because they wanted to deceive you, but because they were afraid. And in the world we live in, we have good reasons to sometimes be afraid to come out.

This simple fact is not an invitation to wonder if any person you date is hiding that they're a SWer, or to become suspicious that your stripper or cam model partner is doing full service (having sex with clients) on the side. On the contrary, the more you show that you are knowledgeable and open about the topic of SW when it arises, the more chances there are that your partner will open up to you if there is in fact something they didn't share with you.

Dismantling our own whorephobic biases is not easy, and there is a specific point that we would like to address. Regularly, non-SWers tell us about how they *could never* be SWers, when we didn't ask them if they would like to be. It may be our partners, our friends, or sometimes total strangers. So we asked ourselves: why is it so important for some non-SWers to state they couldn't be SWers?

We have a theory: sometimes when we learn and develop a more positive view of something we originally thought was bad, we think it means we have to be or do that thing. We ask ourselves the question for the first time: "could I be gay?" "could I be trans?", "could I be a SWer?" You can learn how to see SW in a good light and still not want to do SW, and it is perfectly OK. But if you start enumerating reasons why you wouldn't do SW out of nowhere, it may make us feel judged once again.

# HOW TO SUPPORT US

We're not asking you to be perfect, but simply to do your best. Supporting others can be tricky. We learn general guidelines about how to support communities or groups, but each person in that group has their own opinions, experiences and needs. Sometimes we want to be supportive so badly that we overdo it and it ends up being counterproductive. Sometimes we fuck up and we have to deal with our guilt. Sometimes we repress our own feelings because they wouldn't fit the image we have of the perfect ally only to explode later and end up doing more damage. But sometimes we also feel how precious our support is for someone we love and it fills our heart with joy.

The most important skill to develop is to listen to your SWer partner/lover, to see the uniqueness of their personal experience, and to respect their needs, boundaries and feelings about their work. Remember that when you're having an argument with your SWer partner, it's never just you and them in the room: it is you, them, and the world. With the weight of its deeply embedded bias, the world always supports the whorephobic part of the argument. Be kind.

## *Gaining knowledge*

One important piece of advice is to do some research by yourself, or to ask around for resources (you'll find some at the end of this zine). Some of us will be happy to teach you about the topic, others don't like to educate, are tired of doing so (when we're out we sometimes have to repeat the same things a looooot), or are still figuring things out for themselves and don't yet have the words to explain to others. Looking for resources about SW made by SWers is ideal, but always remember: each of us has their own experience, and what you read doesn't necessarily apply to your partner/lover.

## *First date*

When we go on a first date as a SWer, the question of whether to come out and how much to reveal comes up. We may choose to avoid it entirely, either because we're not out, or because we want to avoid explaining our work on each first date and prefer to keep it for later. If we choose to come out, we may not want to spend the whole first date talking about work. SW can trigger a lot of curiosity, and although we understand why, it can sometimes make us feel like we're an unpaid educator or a circus attraction. If you're on a first date with a SWer, we invite you to avoid intrusive questions, and to show interest in other areas of our lives. If we just announced we are doing SW and you ask us right after for details, why we started this job, how much we make, and what type of clients we have, it may make us uncomfortable, or want to leave without paying!

## *Coming out*

Coming out is a delicate and vulnerable topic, as it can potentially mean danger, so respecting the choices of your SWer partner on this matter is extremely important. Always consult with your partner before telling someone they're a SWer. Maybe they don't want anyone to know, maybe only people they trust, or maybe they are fine with you telling anyone that *you* trust.

If your partner wants to be out with certain people you know, or everyone, something interesting might happen. With their coming-out, by themselves or through you, you will come out as the partner of a SWer. This can extend some of the stigma to you: some people might think you're in a difficult situation by dating a SWer and pity you out of the blue. Some people may see your romantic life as less of a success. Some people may ask you how hard it is for you to date a SWer, or suddenly tell you that they could never date one. Others will ask you intrusive questions about your partner's work. Some may now consider you the new "sex work expert" in their life. Some might tell you how lucky you are, fetishizing your partner by implying that because they're a SWer, they are surely very sexy, "good in bed" and open to a lot of sexual practices.

In short: you might experience a lesser version of what we experience, and also have to deal with it, as we do.

### *Dismantling whorephobia*

Dating a SWer could also lead you to take more notice of whorephobic comments in the media or in conversations, whorephobic storylines in movies, and realize how fucked up and common it is. You may also notice the impact it has on your partner, if it does have one. In these moments, you can support them if they ask you to, or open up about how that makes them feel.

You can also educate people about SW if you wish, especially when your partner isn't around. For example, a friend of yours may use "whore" as an insult to talk about someone; another friend might embark on a speech about saving the poor prostitutes. When you educate others, remember to take care of yourself and choose your battles! Not everybody wants to change their mind.

Sometimes you might say something that you didn't realize could be hurtful to SWers. If your SWer partner/lover points it out, remember that it is OK to make mistakes, especially when we don't know something, but that trying to welcome constructive feedback instead of being defensive is precious. It will expand your understanding of the world, and will make your partner/lover feel safer with you.

### *Space and activism*

Some of you may already be active in social justice movements. Maybe you weren't, but now that you've realized how much stigma SWers face, and seen your partner suffer from it, you want to change things. If this is the case, just one word of advice: be careful not to unintentionally end up taking more space in this discourse than SWers themselves, beginning with your partner. One of the traumas of being SWers can be feeling that our voice is taken away from us. Non-SWers talk about us, have opinions

about us and make all kinds of decisions that affect our lives. Also, if your partner is a SWer but doesn't want to be an activist, that's a valid choice. Treading the path can be hard enough as it is.

## *Fetishization*

Sometimes people get very excited about the topic of SW, and think that our job makes us "cool" or "hot". That might seem like a good thing, because it's an outwardly "positive" reading of our job, unlike the stigma that we often experience.

On the other hand, it can also be too much and make us feel fetishized. Feeling fetishized means not feeling seen for our whole personhood but rather objectified because of a part of our identity that triggers strong emotions or sexual attraction in some people.

This might manifest in a number of ways. It can arise if you're excessively interested in our job at the expense of other parts of our lives, or if you're often more excited than us about our work and we don't get to share negative or neutral feelings about it. It can also be you bragging to your friends about dating a SWer. If you do any of this, it might be because you're proud of dating a SWer, or because you just discovered the topic and are very excited about it. There's nothing wrong with these feelings, but sometimes they can make you lose focus on the complexity and uniqueness of the person you're dating. SW isn't just a fun and sexy job, it is a nuanced occupation that people feel differently about.

## *Sharing*

Your partner/lover will have their own specific experience of SW, and being open to what they want to share with you will allow you to better understand who they are. However, as we already mentioned, work can be a sensitive and even painful topic for your partner/lover because of the stigma they experience. Some SWers will share a lot with the people they date, others won't. We all have different boundaries about it.

By the same logic, if someone you just met or began to date tells you they're a SWer, don't look for their online SW profile or show up to their workplace without asking them if they want to share those things with you.

When our partners share about their work, whatever work it is, it's always nice to show that we're proud of their skills and successes. It is the same with SWers, no more, no less.

## *Agency*

As we mentioned, as SWers can be afraid to tell our partners about our less positive or even negative experiences at work. We are often seen as victims when people talk about our work, which takes away our agency. Asking us how we feel about our work and what we want without making assumptions is a way to support our agency. If we share our work struggles with you, it's important that you don't then use this disclosure to immediately tell us we should stop working. We invite you to remind us of our agency, our skills, and how well we handled situations in the past. If something happens, we invite you to ask us what we want to do about it.

It's natural to have strong feelings and reactions when people that we love are hurt. But sometimes partners can be too protective and focus more on the person who hurt us rather than on us and how we feel after a difficult event. This can be very affecting in the case of sexual assault, for example: we may feel as though not only our agency was betrayed by a client who crossed our boundaries, but our feelings are also being belittled when we share about the event in our personal life.

A piece of advice: if you're having an intense reaction to something that happened to your partner at work, we suggest that you focus on something physical, for example make them a tea! While you're in the kitchen boiling the water, use that time to reflect, breathe, and ground so that you can be able to center your partners' needs in this hard moment.

## *Communicating your own emotions, needs and boundaries*

We shared different ways to respect our emotions, needs and boundaries. It is equally important that you communicate yours. Knowing clearly where we stand with our partners and lovers when it comes to SW will help us feel safer, and it is the gift to know you and love you better. If your partner is open to it, you can share a little about the whorephobic biases you still struggle with, and where they come from. We will talk more about jealousy later, but if you experience jealousy about specific things, communicating it is the key to finding ways to handle those feelings together.

One thing that sometimes happens is non-SWer partners telling us that they're absolutely fine when they're not, and it generally impacts the relationship negatively. If you don't know yet how you will feel about dating a SWer but want to try, say it. If some emotions arise later on, notice them. It's also a chance to get to know *yourself* better, by noticing what situations make you uncomfortable and discovering why.

It's okay for feelings to evolve, and also to start out being okay with something and then change your mind. Keep communicating! Those moments can be difficult, so remember to take care of yourself too, take breaks, and drink water!



# INTIMATE INTERACTIONS

## *Jealousy: the “green-eyed monster”*

After internalized whorephobia, jealousy is the other big challenge that arises most often for non-SWers dating SWers. That's not always the case; we all have different triggers when it comes to jealousy, and for some people SW is not one of them.

If you notice that SW can trigger jealousy in you, there are a few things that you should know. The first one is that internalized whorephobia and jealousy often collaborate with and reinforce each other. You can work on these topics separately, but also notice where they intersect.

Secondly, there's an intersection between SW-related jealousy and the topic of monogamy and polyamory (or other relationship styles), especially for full service SWers. This intersection leads us to consider the difference between our sex life at work and our personal sex life. On this point, the experiences of SWers often differ, and it could be interesting to ask your partner what they think about it. Some SWers are polyamorous and consider their clients quite alike to other lovers they could have. Some SWers will want a polyamorous relationship but see their work as separate from their personal sex life. Some SWers want a monogamous relationship, and don't consider their clients as their personal lovers.

Let's focus on the last two options. It may be difficult at first to understand that sex can be a service and not a private pleasurable activity, and what makes those two things so different. When we're having sex with our clients or with other SWs (for example in a booking together or in porn), we are working. It means that even if we like some parts of it, we're here to give a service. The aim of the work is the arousal or pleasure of other people, not our own. A lot of SWers have a very different mindset at work and a work persona that is different from their personal self. This is also important on a mental health level for a lot of SWers because it helps us keep a separation between the two, which is

also why fake names are helpful and significant!

When it comes to sex, that makes a huge difference. Being a service provider is a very different mindset—all jobs come with a specific frame. We usually don't choose our clients based on attraction. The exchange of money for services means that the most important thing that we get from the interaction is our income.

What can happen in monogamous relationships is a partner telling us that if we have sex with other people (in this case our clients) they should be allowed to do “the same”. When it comes to all the SWers who feel that there is a clear difference and boundary between their private and professional sex life (and sometimes work hard to keep it that way), it can make them feel misunderstood.

Jealousy might also intersect with the bias that says “SW is not a job”. For example, we may have to text clients on evenings or weekends, which is work admin. If you react to it from a place of jealousy, it may indicate some internalized whorephobia which you can work on dismantling. But if you're just annoyed that your partner is working during your quality time together, you can of course discuss boundaries around work and personal time, as with any job!

The jealousy triggered by SW is still jealousy. There are a lot of ways to work on it, and the polyamorous community has created great resources. Let us share some basic guidelines with you:

1. Notice what situations trigger your jealousy the most. Is it when your partner prepares their outfit for work? When you know they are at work? When they don't check in with you after work? When they tell you they enjoyed a client's company?
2. Ask yourself: what stories do I tell myself when this happens? What are the fears behind it? Do I fear being abandoned? Being less good at something or less appreciated than someone else? Am I afraid that my partner will get hurt?
3. What can I do to self-soothe when jealousy arises? Is it better to find a device to work through the feelings (like journaling or therapy), or could you distract yourself with another

activity while the feeling is very strong and come back to it later? How could I nicely ask for reassurance from my partner?

By finding where our jealousy comes from, we can understand it better, and know more about what we need from ourselves and others. We can also recognize which stories we tell ourselves that are untrue, or very unlikely to happen. Being afraid is part of the human experience, but it doesn't have to dominate us and dictate our reactions to others. Only when SWers and non-SWers work together to have understanding can we find peace in ourselves and together.

### *Sex: "doing the dirty"*

Why choose a negative phrase as a title for this section in a sex-positive book for SWers? Sex *isn't* dirty. Sex can be beautiful, fun, spiritual, exciting, useful, and more. Yet as we mentioned before, sex is also surrounded by a lot of taboo. In our society, there is a contradictory message which tells us that sex is important, but also that it is dirty and shameful. This contradiction lives everywhere, including in language, down to the phrases we use: hence "doing the dirty".

SWers are carrying the double stigma of working with sex, which is already considered 'dirty,' and doing it for money, which makes us even more of a target for judgment. Many of us are used to putting other people's desires before our own at work, which is why it's important that we get to do what we enjoy and discover what our preferences are in our personal lives. SWers can have their own moments of embarrassment or shame, their own blockages to get past, and like everyone else, we need an open mind and curiosity from the people that we choose to have sex with.

There's a difference between sex or eroticism at work versus in our personal life. Doing SW doesn't necessarily mean that we always feel sexy, that we have huge personal sexual needs, or that we like 'edgy' sexual practices. There might be certain acts and practices that we do for money but aren't what we want to do in our personal sex life. Each SW is different, some may have quite a low libido, other SWs may be asexual, and some

may have sexual trauma or blockages. All these things will not necessarily affect our capacity to work, because a work frame is different than our personal sexual preferences and needs.

Being a SWer can come with a lot of expectations from others when we're having sex. One of them might be that we're amazing at every sexual practice and willing to do them all the time. Another might be that we don't have insecurities about sex because we have sex for work. Although we might be more comfortable with the topic overall, everyone has insecurities, including us! Make space for interactions beyond the boundaries of expectation. Communication is key to any positive sexual interaction.

There are three specific topics that might come up regarding this topic. First, we might regularly experience comments about our appearance at work, and it can make us more sensitive in our personal life, especially if we have a history with eating disorders for example. We invite you to be mindful of this, and to ask which kind of compliments your partner/lover would like to receive!

Second, a common bias about SWers is that we're more likely to have STIs. This is misinformation that comes from the general whorephobic assumption that SWers are "dirty". In reality, we're often more informed than the general population about safe sex because getting tested regularly is part of our work. There's also a double standard around unprotected sex in SW that finds its origin in anti-SW stigma. We invite you to trust that SWers know what they're doing, and to keep it to the usual conversation about safe sex you would have with any partner/lover.

Finally, using the words "whore" or "slut" during sex can be part of a consensual fantasy, but it's even more important to check with SWers how they feel about using these words during sex, because they're also insults that are often directed at us. BDSM can be a healing way to work through trauma, but everyone has their specific kinks, boundaries, and turn-ons.

The key is: always ask for consent! Ask your partner how they feel about sex and what they would like to do with you, without assuming anything just because they're a SW. This way you avoid making us feel over-sexualized or objectified, which is already a feeling we

experience at work and don't need in our personal life as well.

## *Gender and sexual orientation*

Different genders and sexual orientations create different situations when SWers and non-SWers date!

If you're a cisgender man (a man who is not transgender) in a heterosexual relationship with a SWer, it is possible that you've internalized some sexist biases, and reflecting on them could be liberating for you and your partner. Here are a few examples: cis women are always judged more harshly than cis men for having many sexual partners, or for being actively seductive (ie. teasing and flirting). As the cis man in the relationship, this underlying bias might reinforce your internalized whorephobia.

Another bias is that cis women are fragile and should be protected. As the cis man, it could lead you to be over-protective and not respect your partner's agency enough. A third one is the competition between men that sexism brings: the belief that your self-esteem is connected to how big your penis is and how hard and strong you are during sex. This might lead to intense jealousy when your partner has sex with clients, or lead you to behave differently when your partner works with different genders/people.

When it comes to queer relationships, the first thing we noticed is that some queer people who don't do SW assume that we're not really queer (or whatever we identify as) because we have sex with cis men for work. Another hurtful assumption is that if we present cisgender at work, it means we're not really trans or non-binary. As we've explained before, there is a separation between our work life and persona, which is connected to supporting ourselves, and our personal preferences, likes and dislikes. Some of us may not be into cisgender men outside of work, but still be OK to have them as clients. It is our place to define our own sexual orientation, not anyone else's.

The process is exactly the same when it comes to gender presentation and identity. *We* are the ones who know our gender. The way we express it, or our capacity to portray or play a gender expression that doesn't fit our gender identity is our own private experience.

If your partner wants to share about it with you, great, but they don't have to!

A lot of queer people may have complicated feelings about cis men, and potentially some trauma. Dating a SWer who has sex with cis men for money may trigger some of them. That's very understandable, but in that case, we would need you to share this with us while also doing your best not to project on us that we're doing something wrong by having sex with cis men. Post-trauma, it's often tricky not to project on others and judge their situations through our own painful lens, but doing that work would be an amazing way to support us.

Another trigger can be for transmasculine people. Some transmasc people may have complicated feelings about cis men caused by dysphoria, and their SWer partner having sex with cis men at work might trigger them. Addressing these feelings in a way that isn't harmful to either partner is very important.

Like we said before, some SWers might also have sex-related traumas and SW can be the way that they're dealing with it. Both situations can exist without contradicting each other. Trauma works differently for everybody.

## IN CONCLUSION

The most important skills that are needed in relationships between SWers and non-SWers are skills that are important in all relationships: the ability to communicate and to be open to really get to know another person in their uniqueness, without making assumptions.

More than learning about SW in general, being in a relationship with a SWer is learning the relationship that this particular person has with SW. As with any relationship, it is an opportunity to learn how to love someone better. What are their values? Their desires? Their fears and hopes? Their needs and boundaries?

This communication is an ongoing process, but it's particularly important at the beginning of a relationship, or if your partner begins another kind of SW (for example, if your partner is a stripper and would like now to be also an escort, or if they are an escort and now want to try out porn). Every kind of SW will trigger different feelings, and respectful and open-hearted conversations are needed.

We're all in this together, trying to do our best as human beings and to connect with others in a fulfilling and respectful way.

Thank you for reading! We hope you enjoyed this zine. Feel free to share this guide with your friends, your partners and lovers! If you're a non-SWer person dating a SWer, share it with them to know what they think!

# LEARN MORE

## Written resources

*Let me Explain... What I Do for a Living, Let me Explain... My consent at Work and Super Slut* by Ophelia L. & Emy Phoenix. You can order them at [www.oeteam.com](http://www.oeteam.com) or contact them on Instagram at @theoeteam if you live in Berlin and want to buy directly.

*Revolting Prostitutes* by Juno Mac & Molly Smith

*Playing the Whore* by Melissa Gira Grant

*Whoring in utopia* by Pat Califia

*Jealousy Workbook* by Kathy Labriola

*The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* by bell hooks

*On Sex Negativity and SW:*

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1K5JnyRDGfQa7Tbs4yLemtLhWnCSjLWAn?fbclid=IwAR1WP1IGDkmUmwI4oKhqJM3t2cCs8D7VpzW2mtMmliz3q-Y64Dwi5oCwMUU>

Cypher Sex blog: [www.inventati.org/cyphersex](http://www.inventati.org/cyphersex)

TOS Journal: [www.tosjournal.com](http://www.tosjournal.com)

## Videos and podcasts

*Scarlet Alliance "Every Ho I Know Says So"*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTdBXLCo1Qk>

*Sexarbeit and Beziehung trailer*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j4BB\\_xGoeQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j4BB_xGoeQ)

*EMPOWER, Perspectives de travailleuses du sexe*: <https://vimeo.com/400245435>

*Whores on Film*: <https://www.whoresonfilm.com/>

*Whores of Yore*: <https://www.thewhoresofyore.com/?>

[fbclid=IwAR2OV0zkKVidoisIUoszRyRZfjdjIHfZ1ROZ9T5zZnZyFbjb-hlkriDni\\_w](https://www.whoresonfilm.com/?fbclid=IwAR2OV0zkKVidoisIUoszRyRZfjdjIHfZ1ROZ9T5zZnZyFbjb-hlkriDni_w)

Le putain de podcast: [soundcloud.com/user-496417702](https://soundcloud.com/user-496417702)

Whoroscope Podcast: [whoroscope.eu](http://whoroscope.eu)

## Some SW organisations

*There are so many good organizations all around the world, we focused here on European organizations*

Hydra e.V: <https://www.hydra-berlin.de/>

Hydra's anti-stigma campaign: [StopTheStigma.com](http://StopTheStigma.com)

BeSD: [www.berufsverband-sexarbeit.de/](http://www.berufsverband-sexarbeit.de/)

Berlin Stripper Collective: [berlinstripperscollective.com](http://berlinstripperscollective.com)

TransSexWorks: [transsexworks.com](http://transsexworks.com)

BSWC Collective: [www.blacksexworkercollective.org](http://www.blacksexworkercollective.org)

Career Gxrls: [www.instagram.com/careergxrls/](http://www.instagram.com/careergxrls/)

RedUmbrellaSweden: [redumbrella.se](http://redumbrella.se)

S.T.R.A.S.S: [strass-syndicat.org](http://strass-syndicat.org)

ESWA or European Sex Worker's Alliance: [www.eswalliance.org](http://www.eswalliance.org)

Global Network of Sex Work Projects: [www.nswp.org](http://www.nswp.org)

# A LITTLE BOOK OF EMPATHETIC ADVICE



**Are you curious or confused?**

**Are you afraid to be judged?**

**Do you have questions about sex work you don't dare ask?**

**Do you have negative opinions about sex work that could get in the way of your relationship?**

**Do you want to know how to support sex workers better?**

**In this book, we cover some of the main topics that may arise while dating a sex worker, and share our knowledge and advice.**

**The world is full of stigma about sex work. Our goal is not to judge anybody but to encourage people to understand each other.**