



Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 46
“Sex work: an overview”
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What is sex work? Who is doing it? Two therapists who focus on sex worker support discuss stigma, community, the “whorearchy,” and the ways legal structures like SESTA-FOSTA harm sex workers while claiming to help society.

Host: Karen Yates

Guests: Cassandra Damm, Sarah Hemphill

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Cassandra Damm

We're a very sex-negative culture, and sex workers have these multi-pronged stigmas. So, they're people who typically either don't have resources, or who are choosing to do that work — and either area is terrifying to larger culture.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation, or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates. This week, we're talking about sex work: a big-picture look at perceptions, legislation, decriminalization and support. Keep listening.

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[music]

Okay, folks: there is a big episode in store for you today as we take a look at sex work — the long view, if you will. I'm interested in how we as a society marginalize sex work, especially since it's been woven into most civilizations for millennia. Over the next number of months, in various episodes, we will be examining sex work, and I'm really looking forward to the exploration. The conversation today covers not only sex work in general, but recent legislation in the US that censors online material, the OnlyFans imbroglio, and more. I'll be talking to two psychotherapists who are involved in raising sex worker awareness. They facilitate a sex worker support group in Chicago, which is now currently on Zoom, so if you are a sex worker and want to join, that info is in the show notes. Sarah Hemphill is a psychotherapist and grad professor with a background in social justice and feminist health. Cassandra Damm is a psychotherapist specializing in LGBTQ issues, gender, alternate sexualities, and trauma. Enjoy.

Sarah Hemphill, welcome. Cassandra Damm, welcome.

Sarah Hemphill
Great to be here.

Cassandra Damm
Yeah, thank you. Excited.

Karen Yates
We have a big conversation today on sex work. And I will be speaking with you about your experiences as therapists working with sex workers in support groups, as well as educating the public and educating fellow therapists about sex work, because everyone's got an opinion. So let me start out with the first question: how do both of you define sex work?

Sarah Hemphill
Yeah, I think that's a tough one, because everyone has their own sort of views and definitions of it. But if I'm going broad terms, I see sex work as this really big umbrella with a lot of different types of erotic labor under it. So that erotic labor is any sale or even trade of the erotic. It can be tangible — you know, sex, what we're doing with our bodies; to even just the idea of evoking that in someone. And then it becomes sex work when you're bringing it in for money or something of value, which can look so many different ways. It's almost laughable to put under one umbrella.

Karen Yates

Yeah. Cassandra, how do you define sex work?

Cassandra Damm

Yeah. We generally think of it as compensated and mutual. So we're typically thinking about interactions in which the worker has at least some amount of agency. This can get complicated, because agency and sex work is multifaceted, and it is not always consistent, and it changes over time. But when we think of sex work, the big ones under the umbrella, right, are escorting, professional domination, fetish work, professional submission, camming, erotic dancing... What else am I missing? Sugaring, erotic phone work. And then there's all these, like, gray areas that may or may not fit right under the edges of that umbrella. Is it sex work to do erotic writing? Is it sex work to create pornography if you're not participating in it? Is it sex work to be in a marriage where there's a significant financial differential? And those become a little bit grayer in our umbrella, but for the most part, we look at it as the consensual compensated exchange, even if what's compensated is not specifically money.

Karen Yates

How do both of you look at what is seen more as therapeutic sex work? Like surrogacy, sexological body work, somatic body work — where, say, a client has a particular issue and the person who is either having a session or, you know, attending to the person where there will be sexual contact for the explicit benefit of the client's, say, trauma or the working through of issues. How do you see that? Is that a gray area?

Sarah Hemphill

I kind of think a lot about the overlaps between sex work and therapy, right? Like, I think whores were the original therapists — that sex workers have been holding emotional space for people, have been holding confidential space for people, and that that can be really healing work in a lot of different ways. And then looking at this thing that we've only really done in the past, you know, 100 years, of putting licenses on it, or putting professional labels on it, to say, "Hey, I went up to the big fancy academy and got my certification of this, and so, now my holding space for people, my being in intimacy with people is different." And that's a kind of new thing we're doing as humans, to really put that line of difference there. But the other side I see with it, too, that makes it feel a little bit different — like, my work that I do as a therapist, from sex work — is stigma is a big part of it. And somehow, in the putting a credential on it, in the putting "This is an official type of therapy," whatever that means, on it, it takes off

some of the stigma, which feels a little bit different from most of what's under the umbrella of sex work.

Karen Yates

Yeah, Sarah, I so agree. It's these labels. And then the label exists with, like — I saw it when I was getting trained as a somatic sex educator. There'd be therapists coming in who would be saying, you know, "This is against my licensing and my credentialing, and like, I can't really lay hands on clients for their somatic benefit. But I know that hands-on work is so flipping important." It's this control and management. I like that you see it as stigma. And of course, I think we're just obsessed with credentials and titles in general in our culture right now. I mean, it's just like, anything can be credentialed, or not. I mean, I could give both of you a credential for being on this podcast at the end, right? [laughing] So yeah, I don't know. Cassandra, what do you have to say?

Cassandra Damm

Well, I'm just imagining you coming out from behind the curtain with, like, the Wizard of Oz. With these fabulous little certificates, or whatever you've decided at the end. So I'll be waiting with bated breath for what my certificate will say. So yeah, I've been a little bit — I've been on a fair amount of both sides of this process. I've done professional fetish work, and I've now been a therapist for a number of years. And there are different boundaries, different expectations. It is a different experience that has a lot of parallels, that involves a lot of the same skillset. And I think what's been, you know, really sinking in for me lately, too, is the way in which credentialing is really something that is in the hands of people who have a fair amount of power. This tends to be very patriarchal, very white supremacist, and it includes and perpetuates a lot of the systemic discrimination that makes the healing process more complicated. And I think that a lot of people do get and seek out the legitimizing of knowledge that really is there for so many people who are doing sex work, for so many people who have that experience. And that experience, of course, is stigmatized and delegitimized by people in power — so much so that, you know, my licensure has a morality clause.

Karen Yates

What is that? What the hell is the morality clause?

Cassandra Damm

Yeah — I mean, I don't remember the exact verbiage, but essentially, just that you must act in a moral manner, or they can take your license away.

Karen Yates

Okay. Did not know.

Cassandra Damm

Though we have confirmed that one can be out about past work. And this is not problematic for the morality clause. So that is what I'm going with.

Sarah Hemphill

I'm sitting here thinking about the differences between my therapist role and sex work, and really sitting with... I don't think twice about outing myself as a therapist, where there are a lot of thoughts people hold and outing themselves as sex workers. Like, I'm comfortable here naming that I have done sex work, I've done some things under the umbrella, and also make a really intentional choice not to share the details of those. It doesn't feel safe to put out into the world — for me, for my license, and for a lot of aspects of my life, it doesn't feel safe to name, "Okay, was that legal or not legal sex work? Was it more on the highly stigmatized end, or more on the 'If my parents heard about it, they'd be like, Oh, yeah, we knew about that-type sex work.'" Right? That even just what can be named feels very different between the two.

Karen Yates

Yeah. So talk about — because I think in our correspondence, you mentioned the "whorearchy." And I think that you're in some ways pointing to that as well, because — correct me if I'm wrong — first, what is it? And does it exist within sex workers, but also outside, in society?

Sarah Hemphill

Yeah, very much so. I think the whorearchy as a term, originated kind of amongst sex workers themselves, to describe this idea of almost a hierarchy of where the stigma falls. And, like any group of people holding a lot of stigma and pressure from the outside, some of that gets internalized, and gets stirred up. And I hear a lot of my clients say, "Oh, I do this, but I would never do that." Right? Like, I'm an escort, but I would never make porn that people could see. Or, I'm in porn, but I would never do escort work, right? Someone saying, "Oh, I do fetish, but I would never let somebody touch this part of my body." Kind of this pushing aside — oh, not that. Creating this idea of some areas of sex work a little more trendy and cool, and, oh, yeah, it's fun to be out about that. And other areas, coming out about that, there'd be a lot more, "Ooh. Okay. So that's that type that I have biases against."

Karen Yates

Do you see it as — because it sounds like it's kind of a fluid whorearchy. Is it about internalized shame, the shame that one particular person might have about one aspect of sex work versus another aspect?

Sarah Hemphill

Yeah, I like that idea, of thinking about it as fluid. Because in a lot of ways, sex work is fluid. We all have different shame and bias. While I think it's also really controlled by some very real economic realities, right? Some sex work has a lot of money attached to it, and comes from a real place of privilege. Where others don't. I'm thinking, you know, somebody who is doing much more difficult sex work, doing outdoor work, street-based labor — in certain situations, would probably be viewed by society as a whole, and even internalized stigma, differently than somebody who's able to say, "No, this is a very small area of what I do," or, "No, I can feel very prestigious about it." And that prestige can be felt in different directions. But where it falls in an economic hierarchy, I think also plays into the reality of what it looks like.

Karen Yates

Cassandra — you, I know, kind of swim in looking at the intersectionality and history. And so, what does the whorearchy mean to you, in terms of class and privilege and race?

Cassandra Damm

Yeah, I mean, I think without question, sex work that is associated with folks who are more marginalized is seen with more of a negative light by society and by culture — and also more criminalized. You could argue that street-based workers are more visible, and that's why they're more criminalized, but they're also more visible because they don't have the privilege of doing indoor work. And some of that privilege has also been taken away from a lot more sex workers than would otherwise have it, because of legislation that was absolutely pushed by people who have a lot of power in our culture, and supported by so many people. So, SESTA-FOSTA, that is one of the big pieces of legislation that really gouged space for people to advertise affordably for indoor work. And the impact that we saw, which is absolutely what was expected, was that people who were the most marginalized — so, people of color, people who are the most economically disadvantaged, people who are trans — really shouldered the brunt of that. People who had money could parlay that into figuring out how to pay the websites for advertising, and generally were able to make things work. It was difficult, I think, for everybody, but there's no question that people with the least amount of power, with the most marginalization, really feel the brunt of stigma, overall.

Karen Yates

Okay, so you dropped the bomb — SESTA-FOSTA. Obviously, the three of us know what it is. Not everybody does, because when I go off at parties [laughs] about SESTA-FOSTA, everyone's like, what? Why don't the both of you tag team about SESTA-FOSTA?

Sarah Hemphill

SESTA-FOSTA is a law that was passed under the guise of protecting people from trafficking. I think it's really important in thinking about SESTA-FOSTA to realize trafficking has been this political buzzword because, especially at the time it was passed, especially now with current bills that are coming up, both Dems and Republicans can get on board saying, "We don't want trafficked children." Because let's be clear: nobody wants children kidnapped, sexually abused, and forced into labor, especially not sexual labor they can't consent to. So like, okay, politically real convenient. Now, when we actually look into the nitty-gritty of what trafficking is used to mean, it's shifted a lot over the past 15 years. If we were to go to legal definitions of trafficking 20 years ago, it's a lot more what people envision in their mind, of taking people across federal, across state boundaries, and forcing them into labor. Around the time SESTA-FOSTA was passed, that idea of even moving from place to place was removed from it, and a lot of definitions of trafficking really focused on sex trafficking, which was any idea of coercion and sex. And again, we don't want people doing coerced labor. That's not the goal here. But we have a bunch of people politically talking about this idea of kidnapping and forced labor. And then a very loose definition that says, anyone involved in sex against their will, or involved in sex under pressure, under coercion, including financial coercion, and also expands to anyone under age. And then we have a lot of individual organizations and local municipalities that take it a step further, and assume that anyone involved in any sex for money is doing it under financial coercion. So we really quickly went from this concept we're all on board to hate — the idea of trafficked children, which happens a lot in agricultural settings. It's horribly happened internationally in a lot of places, right? This is where diamonds come from, and it's terrifying — to, okay, a bunch of definitions shifted really quickly for political reasons, and now it's this broad-brush term, that law enforcement can be used to expand judicial, whatever, powers over anyone engaging in sex for money. Because they must be coerced by the money, because then it's coerced sexual labor, and all sexual labor is coerced. So therefore, it's trafficking — which, right, it's been a ripple effect.

Cassandra Damm

And the language of SESTA-FOSTA evolved — arguably, because they absolutely did not consult people who had lived experience with consensual sex work. So it really expanded very deliberately to include more consensual sex work. And only after SESTA-FOSTA was passed did there start to be more openings for sex worker advocates to speak to legislators. And absolutely — I think all but two senators voted for this legislation. When I went with another person who had done sex work, and went and met with some representatives, they actually seemed very open to the idea that they could understand how the passing of SESTA-FOSTA and the language that was used is misguided, and how decriminalization can support sex work. But are you going to get legislators to vote against that kind of legislation? Not without a whole lot of awareness building, and massive shifts among understanding, and probably some very intense personal work among individuals around their relationship with their own sexuality.

Sarah Hemphill

I want to be a slight more optimist. Like, maybe we can get really into the idea of having some sense of freedom of speech in online spaces. Because I think with the EARN IT Act — that's the next one that's up. So EARN IT is taking this idea of protecting the world against child erotic content, which is a shift. It was originally written to say "child porn," and they have shifted to child abuse videos or something, they keep updating it. But in reality, it's an act just saying that you can't have any encryption whatsoever, which clearly would take even the small space that sex workers can be. So there's a lot of pushback saying, hey, wait, we should be allowed to have encryption. There also was some SESTA-FOSTA pushback saying, hey, wait — websites shouldn't be responsible for what happens on them. So like, maybe we could get it down as a civil liberties direction, because that's what it at heart is, is taking away freedom of speech.

Cassandra Damm

There have been some shifts in large agencies. Even now, quite a number of years ago, Amnesty International came out to a lot of pushback as being supportive of full decriminalization of sex work. A lot of anti-trafficking agencies got up in arms around this, and they've stuck with that. And a lot of organizations — World Health Organization, a lot of international organizations, do support the full decriminalization of sex work. HIV organizations, LGBTQ organizations worldwide. There's a lot of ones that do support this. And more recently, I think the Freedom Network — it's newsworthy; it came out as supporting the full decriminalization of sex work, where they previously

did not. So I do believe that there is space for shifts, for people to grow and change, and for communities and minds to grow and change.

Karen Yates

We will continue the discussion in a moment. Are you enjoying this episode and know someone who might want to listen to it too? Send it to them and increase the Wild & Sublime circle. Wild & Sublime is supported in part by our Sublime Supporter, Full Color Life Therapy, therapy for all of you, at fullcolorlifetherapy.com.

We'll now return to our interview with Sarah Hemphill and Cassandra Damm. In the second half, we discussed Backpage, OnlyFans,, and sex worker support. For those of you who don't know, Backpage was a classified ad service in the style of Craigslist that many sex workers used to find clients. It was eventually shut down. OnlyFans is an internet content subscription service where content creators earn money directly from users who subscribe to their content. Enjoy.

Just to get back to, like, helping folks understand SESTA-FOSTA — and it has also really messed up sex education, period. I'm not even talking sex work, I'm talking sex educating the public on how to give someone an orgasm, or how to give yourself an orgasm — or the word "pleasure" is like a flag. The word pleasure is a flag! Okay? If anyone's wondering, how come when I go to a site, it says "s3x," or "s-asterisk-x"?

Sarah Hemphill

[sarcastically] Thanks, SESTA-FOSTA!

Karen Yates

Thanks, SESTA-FOSTA!

Cassandra Damm

Also problematic. In addition to the things that you mentioned SESTA-FOSTA did, they also really broke down sex work community online, information that helps keep people safer while they're doing work.

Sarah Hemphill

These are sites where people would post about blacklists of clients, sites for people to share resources, help support other people in basically being small business owners, taking their work into their own hands — because that all got shut down. Even we can't post about the sex worker support group online without getting taken off of most pages. That's where work can get more dangerous.

Karen Yates
Right.

Cassandra Damm

And even the monitoring — Backpage was one of the first ones to go under SESTA-FOSTA, because they didn't have the financial force to stay afloat, or to believe they could stay afloat. And they had previously collaborated with law enforcement to identify underage trafficking on their sites. And with that gone, I would argue that there's actually less visibility for that underage trafficking. And even if you believe that the police are going to — or if you happen to believe the police are going to do some good — which, you know, I think is questionable amongst most people who've done sex work and been in that world — even that, the capacity for police to get involved if you think it's a good thing, it's gone down.

Karen Yates

Let's talk about OnlyFans, which is the topic of the moment. And recently in the New York Times, there were two articles. The first one was by Spencer Bokart-Lindell, which we'll talk in a moment, but the big hand grenade that that dropped in the past week was from Catherine MacKinnon, very well known old-guard feminist who wrote — let me grab this quote. Here we go. "Sex work implies that prostituted people really want to do what they have virtually no choice in doing — that their poverty, homelessness, prior sexual abuse as children, subjection to racism, exclusion from gainful occupations, or unequal pay plays no role." And then MacKinnon goes on to blast the OnlyFans site — which, by the way, if the listener is not aware, was initially shut down, due to quote-unquote, the credit card companies not liking what they did, and then was brought back online. MacKinnon says that, you know, OnlyFans is a pimping site. And then several weeks ago, Spencer Bokart-Lindell, in a more mannered, balanced piece, made the point that OnlyFans actually put the power in the hands of the individual creators and took it away from sites like Pornhub, so that individual sex workers were really allowed to put their pictures online, and develop an income stream. And that was a safe way of earning income during the pandemic. So I'd love to hear your — Cassandra and Sarah — both your thoughts on the OnlyFans kerfuffle.

Sarah Hemphill

I can tell you the thing that really scares me about the MacKinnon article — it's not MacKinnon herself. She's been being incredibly sex-negative her whole career, has been saying porn is an atrocity. She's got a long history of this. But the part that really struck me is that I think it says something — the same week that the Supreme Court

basically just gives a free pass to Texas, saying, we don't need to protect abortion, women's bodies, they can't be trusted to make their own decisions, is the same way that the top opinion piece of the New York Times, at least on my feed, is somebody affirming basically the same message, of we can't trust people to make decisions about their own bodies. Even just the phrase "prostituted women." The reason we use the word sex work — sex work was coined as a phrase in the '70s, intentionally to say, wait, this isn't just — we've got to put the agent back in the experience. This isn't just something passively happening. And McKinnon's entire article, again, and again, and again, is very paternalistic — as she is. Taking away agency from people. Sex workers are in large part women, including disproportionately a lot of trans women. So I'm really looking at what's happening as a cultural moment about who's allowed to have voice and choice in their bodies. And seeing this article — yes, about sex work, but also a much scarier thing.

Karen Yates

When you made the connection between the Texas issue and the MacKinnon piece, I actually got goosebumps. I'm like, oh, my God. Really, really... Yeah.

Sarah Hemphill

Physically nauseous over it. 100%. Yeah.

Karen Yates

Cassandra, your thoughts?

Cassandra Damm

Yeah, I mean, my knee jerk is, why are we even listening to MacKinnon at this point? She feels like a footnote. And yet, her language is something that you hear all the time. I've been to trafficking conferences, that yes, they have their one table with the folks with their red umbrellas, who have engaged at some point in their lives in sex work that they would deem consensual, and then you have a giant group of folks who refer to people as prostituted people, and really suck the agency out of that. Now, if someone has an experience, and it is horrible for them, I think it is important to acknowledge each individual has their own experience, and has a right to that voice. My concern in the kind of language that MacKinnon has, is that it does erase the voices of people who do engage in sex work consensually. And that goes to our culture. Sarah talked about abortion. I would say the entire medical community really doesn't allow people to be the expert in their own experience. And that causes death. I've at this point now given birth twice, and the way in which doctors and medical folks want to explain to you what you should be feeling, and should not be feeling, in moments in which the

embodied experience is yours, and in which people can, in fact, trust their bodies and their own experiences, in which engagement around a profession — an intimate, intense profession such as sex work — each individual gets to have their own complex, nuanced experience with that. We want to treat it with broad strokes, and we can't. There are people who have amazing, empowered experiences in sex work, and there are people who do not have that experience. And all of those individual experiences are valid. I really rage against this idea, and the language that eliminates all agency from people who are doing sex work and who say that they've done that consensually.

Sarah Hemphill

And I'd go even further with it. I'm a trauma therapist who works predominantly with sex workers. I think one of the real dangers in the MacKinnon piece is when she says all sex work is rape. That actually erases the very real experience of rape within sex work, right? That there is a vast difference between sex work and rape. And by giving this blanket permission — I think in the article she explicitly says "buying the right to rape" — it's there in this one, or a previous thing she's written — which is almost giving a blank check that it's okay to rape sex workers. Which is not right. You can still be raped doing sex work. The idea that somebody is publishing on a public format, erasing people's trauma, labeling people's trauma as traumatic experiences, saying, oh, you have experienced this horrible thing — every piece of the therapist in me is screaming, "No! This is the worst way to support the people have had negative experiences, and had complicated experiences in sex work."

Karen Yates

I would like to talk a little bit about just culture, and the incredible bias. I mean, okay, we can all talk about the bias of sexuality in general, right? But then when you add this layer of sex work, it just gets really potent. What is at the core of this? I mean, we could write multiple volumes on this. But what is at the core of sex plus labor, or sex plus money? What's going on there? What makes it such a hot issue?

Cassandra Damm

We think, to some extent, the labor of sex work is, it absorbs a lot of the stigma that gets bounced around in our culture. We're a very sex-negative culture, and sex workers have these multi-pronged stigmas. So, there are people who typically either don't have resources, or who are choosing to do that work. And either area is terrifying to larger culture, right? We want to say, someone's choosing to do this — what's wrong with them? Or if people do it out of necessity, then there's a whole other layer there. And as a culture, we don't want to acknowledge all of the systemic oppression that happens. So really, at the core, if we lived in a culture that was more equitable, the task of giving

rights to sex workers is the task of dismantling white supremacy, capitalism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny. It is all of those tasks. And Melissa Gira Grant talks about this kind of brilliantly — like, you see in this anti-trafficking world a lot of the time, people want to say, "Oh, the problem is..." It's not the workers, right? It's shifted to "it's the people who buy sex. It's the people who are consuming sex work who have the problem." Well, that's fine, then the problem becomes sexuality, located in what's typically perceived as men, even though men are not the only people who consume sex work. All people of all genders consume pornography, and people of all genders do go to strip clubs, and see escorts, and go to pro Dommies. It's a wide variety of folks. It's typically expensive, so it's people who have money, which takes us back to the patriarchy — but I'm digressing a little bit here. So if the problem is in the buyer, then the anti-trafficking folks don't have to look at the actual ways that they in their own lives might be benefiting from all of the systemic oppression that they would have to dismantle in order to make sex work significantly less problematic.

Sarah Hemphill

Just to reframe what Cassandra said, I think sex workers hold a lot of society's stigma, and not just stigma and biases about sex; stigma and biases about who's allowed to have money, what kind of bodies, what type of lived experiences are allowed to have things, and who's not allowed to have things. But there's often this sort of social catch-all for, like, "Oh, we want fantasies of violence — put this on sex workers. We want fantasies of control — put this on sex workers." A lot of that bias and stigma rolls downhill, and sex workers have historically been the ones to catch it, hold it, not judge it. Much as sex work as a profession says, "Hey, I got you, I'll hold you, I'm not gonna tell anyone about this. Yeah, we can work through it." We've seen this again and again, right? Sex workers held a lot of shame for slavery, when there was this counter-narrative of, "But white slavery!" Sex workers hold a lot of shame for capitalism. Sex workers hold a lot of shame of the patriarchy. A lot of our trans stigma right now, as a culture, is falling on narratives of trans sex workers. It's a thing.

Karen Yates

Let's talk about — you both co-facilitate a sex worker support group every month in Chicago. What comes up in — and I understand a lot probably comes up in the circle. But what sort of support do sex workers need, within the group that you facilitate?

Sarah Hemphill

I want to really differentiate support in that group versus support and doing therapy with sex workers. Because most of my relatives at a Thanksgiving dinner table would assume, "Ah, you're helping these poor women with their issues with their jobs!" And

just to say, "No. That's not it." The support isn't about the pain that sex work causes, which I think is often the outside presumption, that almost entirely in the therapy I do with sex workers, it's the same issues everybody brings. And we see that in the support group, too — that a lot of it's support around the same life issues that would come up anywhere. Right? Having a job is hard, and talking to other people about the work you do is important. Right having space where you can process — process issues with partners, issues with family, issues with finances, issues with changing jobs, issues with being unhappy with coworkers, right? I'd imagine the same things would come up in a support group for therapists, a support group for nurses. And then, specifically in the support group, I think we've had a lot of themes of people talking about holding the stigma and the weight of being in an extralegal profession. So a space where people can actually talk about this stuff without being judged. Talk about support for having to navigate legal systems a little more carefully, support about the pain it is to not be able to be open and out in all parts of your life, or how to soothe your partner's family members who might not know, or might have judgments. Support around the stigma, much more so than the work itself.

Karen Yates

Cassandra, do you have something to say?

Cassandra Damm

I think probably the thing I notice most often, if people do have community. They typically come to the group and might have just an additional extra question, or something else, or might just show up out of curiosity. But people who don't have a lot of sex worker community outside the group really tend to — there's this like, exhale. Like, "Oh, I've never gotten the opportunity to talk to other people who have done this." And not to say that we're experts, right? Like, I have my both privileged and marginalized perspective, from doing sex work and being a therapist. But there is something about overlapping shared experience, and lived experience in something, that creates a sense of camaraderie or understanding that can be incredibly healing. And groups in general give us an opportunity to see ourselves not just through the eyes of one other person, but through the eyes of a group, and a group experience. They do miss being in person with the group. That's one thing — we've been on Zoom, and between COVID and all the things that have come down since then, I certainly miss breathing the same air as other people. I think as many of us do.

Sarah Hemphill

I want to counter that. I like that the group can be open to people from all across the country — really anywhere in the world. That, now that it is on Zoom, we have gotten

some people who are in rural areas, remote areas. If you are hearing this, and you have experience with sex work and want to come to the group, really,, it's open to anyone who's done it. And I love that I can say that, and have that outreach, instead of just the limit to Chicago. So holding that counterpoint for you.

Cassandra Damm

And we will probably get — if, I mean, I don't know, are we ever going to breathe the same air as anyone in a room consistently ever again? Maybe we're starting to do little bits of that. And even if we do do that, we don't have to stop bringing in people remotely, too. So it has been nice to have a little bit more reach there.

Karen Yates

Sarah, you work specifically with student therapists who are former sex workers bridging into therapy; as well as you teach the psychotherapeutic community about sex work, and the, I'm assuming the hidden biases, perhaps? Talk a little bit about both areas.

Sarah Hemphill

Yeah, so I teach graduate clinical psych students. People who are going to become therapists. And I actually started teaching with a course on social justice and examining our own biases. So looking at therapy with marginalized populations — which academic background, my second degree is social justice, so it bridged really well. Coming into that, I don't think I originally had the intent to bring sex work information into my curriculum. But as I was teaching, I teach a lot from telling stories, so it felt really relevant to talk about, "Hey here are experiences of people I know. Here are experiences of clients. Here's this great example of intersectionality." If I'm teaching intersectionality, we're talking about sex work, because it's what I know. And through that, I had, semester after semester, students come up to me after the course and say, "I thought I was the only one here who'd ever had experience with this." Or, "This has never been mentioned in any academic space. You're the first person I've heard say it out loud. Let me tell you." And then just this outpouring of — and in any given class, I'm getting two, three students who come to me and say, "Let me tell you my experience with sex work. Let me tell you how I'm paying to be in this program." And so, I've started building this much more explicitly into naming in my classes that I am a sex-work affirming therapist. That is something you can name as a therapeutic specialty, that sex work is a marginalized population. Extralegal professions in general are marginalized, and talking more about it — and then the more I talk about it, the more I connect with students who have been looking for a place to have those conversations.

Cassandra Damm

And listening to that story reminds me of my grad school experience, in which I sat through a lecture from an employee at End Demand Illinois, who wanted to talk about the giant problem of sex trafficking, and shared some rather robust numbers around how much sex trafficking there is in the Chicagoland area. And when I asked, "Well, how did you get to those numbers? Can you tell me a little bit more about how you get there, what that means? How are you getting this data," et cetera, the response was, "Well, it's so underground, we really don't know the actual numbers." And I was aghast that someone would spout a bunch of numbers and have absolutely no ability to back that up. Yes, I understand that sex work is difficult to quantify and to look at and to see. This is absolutely true. I've worked with researchers on a variety of aspects of sex work. And that speaks to the real problem with how people in power can distort perception that just perpetuates stigma against sex workers, inflates some of the problems of sex trafficking, and then gets in the way of actually supporting human rights that will actually improve the lives of people and sex workers.

Karen Yates

Sarah, you use the word "extralegal." And that's an intriguing word to me, rather than "illegal." I would like to ask you about the word, as well, as I would like to hear both of you talk about what happens if sex work is decriminalized?

Sarah Hemphill

Yeah, so it's an intentional choice as a word. Extralegal doesn't necessarily mean against the law. It just means outside of it, not regulated by. I'm sure someone with a law background could have a much more complex definition of that than I do. But I think intentionally I use that term because remember, not all sex work is illegal. A lot of it exists in this sort of legal gray area, right? What exactly is this? And laws from space to space are different around sex work. The way laws are enforced are very different. But as a whole, we're looking at something that isn't supported by the legal system, right? There's not a great way to file your taxes as a sex worker. There are a lot of great ways you can figure it out. But there's a lot of hesitation and questioning there. So really naming that — my politics on this are, I don't think it should be legalized, it should be decriminalized. So not pulled into being, okay, legal, now controlled, but we need a much more decrim model.

Karen Yates

So what happens if sex work is decriminalized? Cassandra?

Cassandra Damm

I certainly back full decriminalization of sex work. The hope is that the power goes into the hands of people who have lived experience, who understand this, who can make choices for their lives. I do believe that people make the best choices for themselves based on their own lived experience. So people can then report crimes if they want to. It's tragically common that police officers assault sex workers, because there is very limited capacity for people to report that. It is common for people to be afraid to report abuses they see within the sex industry. It is common that power gets abused because of that stigma and criminalization. So the belief is that the absolute best way to support human rights across the board for sex workers is decriminalization. It opens things up; it allows for more transparency. It allows for support to sex workers. It allows for people who have experienced abuses and violence, and what we would look at more as genuine kidnapping and sex trafficking, that they would get resources. And sex workers would be able to support each other. Communities would be robust. There would be awareness and protections built from within the community. And perhaps it wouldn't rely as much on the really problematic criminalization and structures through policing that largely falls on marginalized folks.

Sarah Hemphill

I'm realizing that I probably should have put this my definition of sex work up at the very beginning. But in thinking about decrim, it's really important to remember, I'm opposed to a lot of things that are already illegal. The labor rights activist in me is really opposed to labor rights violations. I'm pretty opposed to non consensual physical violence. I'm pretty opposed to kidnapping, right? But those things are also already illegal. And now we can get into dismantling the punitive justice system — that's a much longer conversation. But to allow those things to just be illegal for sex work, and allow sex work to — I'm not even dreaming big, great utopian, amazing sex workers everywhere. I'm not that optimistic. But to be as neutral, or as not criminalized, as, say, childcare, which is also a really intimate labor experience. That, yeah, I can give somebody money to take care of my kid, or take them to a daycare where someone's taking care of them. I can openly read a book about somebody's thoughts and opinions on childcare, that might be great or might be bad. And yeah, are some nannies in very exploited labor situations? Yes. And that's illegal. They should be paid a living wage. But right, we're not going, "No one should care for other people's children, because nannies can be exploited." Right? Why can't it be like other forms of intimate labor? That, okay, we look at the labor rights violation, not the labor itself as the problem.

Cassandra Damm

It's because the terror of sex!

Karen Yates

Yeah.

Cassandra Damm

That's the core of it. People are terrified of erotic power.

Karen Yates

I would agree, I would agree.

Cassandra Damm

And if we go back to what would be helpful about decriminalization — when you touched on the idea of sexual surrogacy, somatic bodywork that involves sexuality: many of those things can involve so much amazing healing. And some of that work also exists simply within sex work. But I'm not going to make the argument that all sex work is some magical healing process. It is a wide variety of experiences. But as a culture, we don't have a lot of really great healing around sexuality. And in order to free up some of the ability to start to engage around that as a culture, we would have to fully decriminalize sex work.

Karen Yates

Yeah. And, you know, for the listener, all of us are on Zoom nodding. There's a lot of nodding going on.

Cassandra Damm

Oh, can I share one story about my participation, and mostly observation, of a sex work utopia?

Karen Yates

Sure.

Cassandra Damm

So way back in the day, when I had briefly run away to art school. And I met an amazing person, Houston, who did the Crash Pad series, if anyone's familiar with this — this is a very long time ago. So Houston invited me to work on the set of the Crash Pad series. So I was able to be there, and I held the boom, which is really, really not skilled labor. But when I think about people saying that sex work can't be positive, or

can't be enjoyable, there was a whole process around getting a shot, and it took a really long time. And I was holding the boom, this was really hard. The actors were going at it, performing. And finally get to the end, there's the money shots — I mean, in this case, it was all AFAB folks. There's a money shot, and the videographer's like, "I don't know if we got the shot." All of the crew is just, like, so dejected. We just deflate. And I'm thinking, I need a cigarette. And the actors look up, and they're like, "We can do it again." And the rest of us are like, "No, we need a break. We'll come back to you." So in that way, I think there is possibility — anybody who questions that hasn't really, sadly, hasn't actually seen those spaces, or hasn't been able to come to terms with their own connection with their sexuality, and the beauty and the joy that can come from it. And the fact that I can, or that I have, is privilege. And I recognize that.

Sarah Hemphill

I'm glad you said it. Because I think that was my one reflection on this conversation — we talked a lot about the fight that needs to happen, and the like, "Why is the world not better?" But sex work is intimate, and it's powerful, which means some of it is really incredible and wonderful, and actively making the world better.

Karen Yates

Yeah. That's a great place to end. Thank you. Sarah Hemphill. Thank you, Cassandra Damm.

For information on Cassandra and Sarah, the link to the sex worker support group, and other topics and articles cited today, go to our show notes. If you'd like to work with me to help get unstuck and add more ease to your life, consider a biofield tuning session. Biofield tuning gently restores energetic flow and shifts, emotional patterning in the body, bringing greater awareness of yourself, and the choices you can make — and it can be done remotely. Go to karen-yates.com or the show notes to learn more about individual or group sessions.

Well, that's it, folks. Have a very pleasurable week. Thank you for listening. If you know someone who might be interested in this episode, send it to them. Do you like what you've heard? Then give us a nice review on your podcast app. You can follow us on social media @wildandsublime and sign up for newsletters at wildandsublime.com. I'd like to thank associate producer Julia Williams and design guru Jean-Francois Gervais. Theme Music by David Ben-Porat. This episode was edited by The Creative Imposter studios. Our media sponsor is Rebellious Magazine, feminist media at rebelliousmagazine.com.