Disabled Sex Workers

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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**SPEAKERS**

Artist, Dean, Melina, Pauline

**Pauline**

You're listening to Disabled Sex Workers on 3CR: Conversations with Disabled Sex Workers, for International Day of People With Disabilities.

**Dean**

Hi, I'm Dean, I identify as he/him.

**Pauline**

You identify as disabled and are sex worker. I'm curious about how many disabled and chronically ill sex workers there are? Is there any data on those?

**Dean**

There's no data. And I think it's all anecdotal. So when people look at me, in general, I'd look or appear normal, or as a regular member of society, but my disability is mental and from a mental health point of view. So I kind of have a different persona when I'm working. So the working person, Dean is fit, healthy, happy.

**Dean**

The private civilian part of my life is someone who struggles and has challenges in life. So that's the duality of who I am. So I think that a lot of sex workers have that as well, for people who have visible disabilities, versus people who, like myself have invisible disabilities. Just anecdotally, over the years of where, when I've been working, I have come across people who have shared their challenges and disabilities with me in private conversations.

**Dean**

It comes across all sectors of our community. So you can be trans, you can be female identifying, you can be male. It's all sectors of our community. But it's it's not spoken a lot about in public. In private conversations, yes. But not in public. But that would be a great study. I mean, I think that's a good, it would be a worthwhile study to pursue.

**Pauline**

I was thinking about it last night, because in terms of also, you know, there's been a lot of talk about from different industries about how best to support workers. And I was thinking about that intersection of being disabled or chronically ill. And working in this particular industry, which really does, to my understanding has a no support. How much support has the sex worker community, people who work in the industry, received this year?

**Dean**

Pretty much zero. We are one of the most, I guess, stigmatised sectors of society. Also, we are pretty much last on the list of industries to be looked at. An indication of that is regarding what's happened this year, especially in Victoria, with the restrictions and the different steps to opening up the state.

**Dean**

The sex industry is listed as one of the last sectors to open. Yet the information that we're given is extremely ad hoc, and virtually non-existent. It's very hard to get the appropriate updates from any government department, and especially DHHS, which is the government that is supposed to be giving us this information.

**Pauline**

Yeah, DHHS has been pretty appalling this year.

**Dean**

And, and, you know, I realise that they have their own challenges, I realise that it you know, everybody wants information. But it hasn't been very well handled. It's just been a complete mess for for our industry. So we have been able to get information but it's it's literally like pulling teeth, it's been so difficult.

**Pauline**

And how has the pandemic impacted your capacity to work?

**Dean**

Personally I haven't worked. I can't work because I have an elderly parent that I'm in contact with. So I've decided not to work and I probably will return to work soon. But at the moment I haven't been able to work, which has greatly affected my own capacity and my ability to pay bills and rent and all sorts of expenses.

**Dean**

But I've just had to make do and what has come out of this, is that in my community, the male to male worker community, we've become more close knit. So we have regular zoom meetings and phone calls and offers of support to each other, which has been great. I've noticed that in the other parts of the community as well, whether it's female or trans, it's been great that we've all rallied together and to support up, and to support each other in our respective sectors.

**Pauline**

That's great. I also was thinking also about disabled clients, as you mentioned, that you do work with people with disabilities, how has it impacted, sort of client relationships with them? I know a number of people who've really, who are clients, who've really suffered with the isolation during this year, and we can talk a little bit more later about skin hunger, but I just wanted to know of your experience with how it's impacted them.

**Dean**

Oh it's greatly impacted them. Personally speaking, I have a few disabled clients. And they are a mixture of being extremely isolated or being in, for example, I have one regular client who is in an aged care facility. And that facility had complete lockdown, once in March. So that particular facility took very responsible, appropriate measures for the safety and care of their residents.

**Dean**

So he was looked after very, very well. During the course of the last few months, we've been communicating and he has said that, you know, he is okay, he is well looked after and cared for, but he does miss the intimacy and the connection with another person.

**Dean**

So I can understand that. That's also, again, anecdotally what I've heard from clients and disabled clients that, you know, there has been times of isolation and being in their own lockdown of trying to look after their own health. It's been very challenging and scary, and I completely understand and can see where they're coming from. I've been very challenged by this whole situation too and it's affected me in very negative ways, but I'm trying to, I guess, get support from my fellow peers, as well as having professional people in my life and having regular counseling sessions and therapeutic support.

**Pauline**

Yeah, it's interesting, skin hunger is something I really thought about this year, althouh I have disabled friends who have chronic illnesses that affect their skin. And they, I first heard the term from them and reading about it in lockdown, it's, it's an actual thing. It's not just a term people make up for, a generalized term for loneliness. Touch deprivation can cause exacerbated mental health challenges, it can have a negative impact on the immune system as well. So, um, I just wanted to know your thoughts on the idea of sex workers therapy. And there's been a lot of talk about the NDIS, which is the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and conceptualising sex work as a form of therapy and a form of looking at the holistic health of people. I just wanted to know if you had thoughts on that?

**Dean**

I totally agree with that. It is, in a way, a therapy, even though it is an intimate form of therapy. And again, from my experience, the majority of the time I spend with clients is actually talking to people and talking to them. And so the actual, you know, time allocated to sexual intimacy is actually very small compared to the time actually spent talking to them, and connecting with them through conversation and getting to know them and, and developing a friendship that develops over time.

**Dean**

So I've noticed that with all my clients, not just people who have disabilities, but all the clients who say me for whatever length of time, we develop a professional relationship and professional friendship. So that, you know, we get to know one another. And it's about having a conversation and ultimately a connection with each other. And it's been so interesting, that over the over the years that I've been working, it's just observing this.

**Dean**

That it's about almost being like a therapist. Where, you know, you sit down with someone and you go through their day, you go through their week and you do a check in with them of how they are and, you know, we don't talk about the nitty gritty details of their life. But we do actually sort of get to know one another and, you know, share common interests or hobbies, or it's just like having an old friend that you connect with on a regular basis.

**Pauline**

That's really interesting. Yeah. I wanted to know, finally, if there is any way that community members can support sex workers, and particularly sex workers with disabilities as their representative body, that has been set up during the pandemic? Is there a crowd fund that people can support?

**Dean**

There's been various crowdfunding and charity ventures. Again, it's such a interesting time we live in. So in Victoria, we have what's called a legalised model of sex work, where sex workers have to be registered. With this, the laws, we're actually not allowed to work from home, we have to work as a private worker. The majority of us work doing outcalls, which means we visit clients homes. From a practical point of view, that doesn't really happen.

**Dean**

A lot of sex workers, private sex workers work from home. Or work from one location where clients visit us. So it actually perpetuates a lot of stigma and discrimination, and the need for us to literally be invisible.

**Dean**

So it's created this community of people who work, but we work very quietly, we work and communicate with each other in online spaces. So online chat groups, messaging apps, and even Facebook groups, things like that, where we that's how we communicate. So for any individual or organization to reach us have to reach the majority of us, it's actually very, very difficult. My feeling is next year with sex work, decriminalization on the on the books, we hopefully will have it, which will free up that, that stigma that you know, the discrimination that we face, so that we can be more open, and talk about who we are, what our needs are what you know how to best serve the community. At the moment, it's extremely fragmented.

**Dean**

And there are so many different groups and people within our community, that it's extremely fragmented, and there's no one unifying group or organisation. So it's actually very hard to get the message across. And a lot of people do slip through the cracks. Like people with disabilities, migrant workers, especially. People on tourist viass, or student visas. It's been very challenging to get the word out. I belong to a male to male worker group.

**Dean**

And we've been communicating a lot with our members, and there's approximately 300 members. And a lot of the members are isolated, it's been very difficult to actually communicate with our own database already, let alone with people who are, you know, who have slipped through the cracks in our community. I like where you're coming from. I like the question. And I think that that's something that has to be looked at for next year with government. And I think things will change next year. I'm hopeful for change next year. In the meantime, what can be done? I don't know. I think that if people know any six workers just ask, you know, are you okay? What, how can I best support you? I think it's about having a conversation. Trying not to be prejudiced or judgmental towards people's work. Because it's between consenting adults, and its work. And it doesn't define who we are. It's just part of us like any job.

**Pauline**

Perfect way to end. Thank you, Dean.

**Dean**

Hi, this is Dean from Behind Closed Doors. You're listening to Imagining Disability Justice on 3CR.

**Pauline**

Can you state your name and pronouns?

**Melina**

So my name is Melina Viking, and my pronouns are she/her and they/them.

**Pauline**

What is your occupation?

**Melina**

I'm a content creator, sex worker, and overall entrepreneur of the whole industry, and I've been in the industry for 15 years now.

**Pauline**

So how did you get into this area or these areas of work?

**Melina**

I was typically just really interested around the psychology of sex and what intrigued people and got them off and kinks and all that kind of stuff. So like, and the anatomy and all those types of things. So I just did a lot of research. I also wanted to be someone who had no bullshit and no disability in... when I started, I just wanted to be the true me. And so I thought, what can I do, where that allows me to feel my true self without the wheelchair, without the disability? And the adult industry was it, so, yeah! Hope that answers the question. But yeah, I can go into further depth if you need.

**Pauline**

Yeah, if you want to go into further depth, please.

**Melina**

Yeah, so I felt that as I was growing up that I wasn't worthy of pleasure and all those sorts of things. And no one would want me because of the physical exterior of the wheelchair. So I thought I need to kind of put on the mask of a persona of Melina and kind of explore more about myself, because I grew up being baptist and sex was a bad thing. And you didn't do that until you're married. So if you didn't get married, you didn't experience that. So sex was always the reproductive thing. It was never a pleasure thing. So I wanted to learn more about myself. And I thought "what all this hype about, you know, kids having sex and what is this? Because I don't know what it's really about". So I found that as a way to explore more about myself and grow more as a person. And I think I have on that, and also sort of allowing other people to expand that as well through me, if that makes sense.

**Pauline**

Yeah, it does. Absolutely. My brain is going in so many different directions.

**Melina**

Yeah I know right? A lot of people just come into the industry. And they're like, "Oh, I just want to get paid to have sex". But to me, it's such an in depth thing. It's like, you want to enrich people's lives. So you want to educate about, well when I first started it had nothing to do with disability. But now it's kind of like I want to educate people about people with cerebral palsy or other disabilities can be sexual things and creatures and deserve those rights. So yeah, and so there's so many different facets you could explore within what I do now. So it's not just about the sex to me now. It's more educational, exploration and making people happy.

**Pauline**

Yeah so, I didn't write this in my notes. But I do have a question about how the pandemic year has....

**Melina**

Yeah. The, the pandemic, for me has actually been really positive. And I know that's a horrible thing to say. But I was feeling really low before the pandemic, and I thought, maybe it's time for me to leave because works really quiet. And I was stuck in lockdown with my family who I hadn't seen for a while. Luckily, my dad is super supportive. He's like, "the best porn star that you could ever get!".

**Melina**

And so he was like, "No, you're gonna work nine to five every single day". He made sure that I, you know, was stuck to a routine if you like. My audience grew, because I'm a cam performer as well. My audience grew, my base grew, the money increased. What I found was that people were stuck at home and they felt isolated. So me as a cam performer, was there as a essential service if you like. 'Cuz brothels weren't open, strip clubs weren't open. So people would come to me and other performers for that release. So I found it really positive.

**Pauline**

My last question, and it sort of links to what you were telling me earlier about how you got into this area of work. So -

**Melina**

Yeah.

**Pauline**

Last time I knew of you was when I saw you speak at a sexual health forum for people with disabilities.

**Melina**

Yeah, right.

**Pauline**

What are three bits of advice you would give to disabled people regarding their sexual agency?

**Melina**

I think that's what I learnt for coming into the industry and it's not everybody. Not saying "all become porn stars! And you will find your own name and do that, like". It doesn't work that way. Um, but ask questions. If you're not sure about what is available, like services that are available to you. If you're having trouble, if you've been in a relationship and the companies that you're with aren't recognising that, make sure you reach out to somebody that does recognise that and we'll help you fight for those rights.

**Melina**

Because I've heard the story yesterday, but there was a couple that were in a home that weren't able to be together because the management weren't allowing them. They had down syndrome. And they weren't recognised as being able to make that decision. Then being an item for, I don't know, ex number of years, and the management, were like, "No, you can't be together".

**Melina**

That's, but yeah. So I would say, reach out to people that do support you and do understand what your wants and what your needs are, and help them fight with you. Because the more people that fight for your freedoms, the more chance it's going to be heard. And that's really sad. But yeah, it's the way it works unfortunately. I've found anyway, so, yeah.

**Melina**

So you could find me at, through my podcast, which is "Melina's Margarita Sessions". And all the links are there once you go into the episodes. And that podcast is just candid discussions with people who inspire me who have amazing stories to tell. And, you know, I have some funny bonuses in there. Where we play stupid games and things. So that's less explicit than then my website, so maybe go to that instead [giggling].

**Pauline**

Yeah.

**Pauline**

Melina, thank you.

**Melina**

No worries!

**Pauline**

You've just heard Sex Workers with Disabilities. Stay tuned for more International Day of People with Disability programming. First, a short music break.