

Sex Workers' Support Networks

By Lauren Levitt

Even though capitalist ways of thinking have permeated many aspects of life, capitalism is never monolithic. Even from within capitalist spaces like the workplace, new kinds of relationships based on reciprocity rather than competition can emerge. A world where wealth is shared more equally is not just a utopian fantasy. Non-capitalist economic cultures are not only possible, but they already exist. Marginalized people regularly engage in alternative economic practices as a survival strategy. For instance, sex workers at places like massage parlors, dungeons, and strip clubs form rich support networks to share knowledge, resources, and care. These caring and sharing practices are an example of mutual aid. Sex workers also create new queer forms of family with each other, and these relationships directly respond to the precarity and stigma of sex work.

On a rainy Sunday in March 2017, I went to visit Sabrina in the house she shared with several other women in a trendy neighborhood of a large city in the Western United States. Sabrina had moved there several years prior to pursue a career in acting and writing, and she worked as a server at a high-end restaurant downtown. Sabrina grew up in the South, but she moved to a large city in the Northeastern United States to attend a prestigious acting conservatory after college. In 2013, she was working there as an actor and a bartender. Sabrina was a month from being evicted from her apartment for renovations in a gentrifying neighborhood, and she had just been cast in a play that was rehearsing at night. Sabrina needed money to move, and since she couldn't continue bartending while the play was in rehearsals, she needed to find a day job. She had just dated a guy whose ex-girlfriend had been a dominatrix, so when she saw a classified ad on Craigslist for domme work, she decided to apply. Shortly thereafter, Sabrina started working at a large and well-known dungeon, a sex-work establishment providing clients BDSM services for a steep fee. While commercial BDSM occupies a legal grey area, some BDSM services are unambiguously criminalized. All the employees at the dungeon were AFAB by management policy (although not necessarily cis-women), and the vast majority of the clients were men. Sabrina thought that working at the dungeon would be a way to explore

her power and sexuality, but she didn't know much about the job when she started. "I really wasn't experienced with the world [of BDSM], and so going into it I was expecting to learn a lot about it through doing it, through the experience. So, it was pretty shocking and exciting every day because I didn't know what to expect," she said.

Sabrina was surprised that most of the time the women at the dungeon sat around waiting for clients to arrive. "The world of women sitting in these dark rooms for eight hours a day sometimes was not something I expected," she said. "We had a lot of down time. We'd see clients every once in a while. Maybe you'd have one or two a day. Maybe you'd have none. The rest of the time is just spent in these little close quarters with, like, ten other women." Although the women were competing for clients and it could get catty, Sabrina stressed that, since they were constantly putting themselves in vulnerable positions, both emotionally and physically, the women provided one another with intense support.

Sabrina described herself as a shy and introverted person, which she attributed to being bullied as a child, so at first, she was hesitant to make friends with other women at the dungeon. "It was a really difficult thing for me to be around so many people at once. [...] I guess overall I was pretty uncomfortable around everyone for the most part. I tried to kind of stick to myself," she said. "My strategy was to stay as invisible as I could. I wasn't trying to get into any kind of drama with anyone, but at the same time I didn't want to be the one that wasn't liked. I didn't want to be singled out."

However, in time, Sabrina made friends with a few women at the dungeon around whom she could be herself. "I felt like the environment was sort of superficial, and we were playing these characters. There were only a few people who I felt like I could be more of who I really am [around] and not the person that I had to be because of where I was," she said. She described these relationships as "really supporting and really nurturing to me there because they made me feel like I was not alone."

Sabrina was never on bad terms with anyone at the dungeon, but she tried to keep her distance from the women with whom she wasn't close friends. "I just felt that the environment was so volatile that anytime anything could happen, and the scales could tip. So, it was important to me to keep things really even. And in doing so, I kept a distance because I felt like that was the safest place to be in order for things not to shift," she said. Sabrina admitted, however, that she may have missed out on the opportunity to have an even wider support group because of this.

When asked about a time that she received support from a coworker, Sabrina said, “I feel like I received support on a constant basis. I feel like anytime I went into a room [to see a client] and came out of it I was supported, as long as there were people there who were [my friends].” When prompted to give an example of a time that a coworker gave her *emotional* support, Sabrina told a story about a time she received emotional care from a friend after a particularly difficult session: “I had a client, and I went further than I wanted to go with this person. And I knew going into the room that he was a red-flagged person. It was like, ‘Watch out for this person,’ and all of this. So, coming out of it, I remember feeling pretty raw about it or vulnerable about it because I told myself it wasn’t going to happen and then it did.” Since this incident occurred after Sabrina had already been working at the dungeon for a while and felt much closer to people there, she was able to talk about her experience with someone who would understand and not judge her. “I don’t remember who it was, but I do remember coming out of that and being grateful that there was somebody I could talk [to] about it. And I didn’t feel ashamed to talk about it,” Sabrina said. Sabrina also frequently reciprocated emotional support for other women at the dungeon, although she could not come up with a specific example. “I just feel like everything was emotional. I feel like I probably gave emotional support every single day at some level,” she said.

According to Sabrina, material support was also abundant at the dungeon: “Every time anyone really needed something there was always somebody there to offer it. We had lockers, and the lockers were full of whatever you could want: water, alcohol, Band-aids,” she said. Specifically, Sabrina remembered another domme giving her a pair of pants: “I don’t know that I needed pants in that moment, but she gave them to me. She was always giving out gifts, things that she found, things that she had, and there were times when I would need something specific to see a client. And I might not have it, and so she would have it. Or somebody else would have something, and we were always supporting each other in that way.” At the dungeon, the women who had been working there longer would sometimes train the newcomers for free, and Sabrina even remembered a time when she took someone new into a session to train her and then gave her part of her own tip. Although she made nothing of it, this would have been an extremely generous gesture on Sabrina’s part.

Sabrina did not remember being physically cared for at the dungeon, but she remembered other people taking care of each other when they were sick. She did, however, remember

providing others with physical care. “When I started working at the dungeon I was also training in Reiki, which I was really excited to utilize both at the same time, and so there were times when I would do Reiki or massage on some of the women who I worked with,” she said. However, by far the most common and type of support women offered each other at the dungeon, according to Sabrina, was information sharing. This was because they spent so much time sitting around and talking to each other. She said, “I feel like we were constantly sharing information about our lives. [...] That’s one thing. But also, even more we would talk about certain things that had to do with the work itself, sharing information about how to be safe, or how to do things in this way or that way – in ways that bettered each other in terms of our work that we were doing – and specific clients, and how to keep each other safe. We did, I think, especially share information about that.” In this type of information sharing, too, the women were looking out for one another, caring for one another.

Sabrina engaged extensively in information sharing, particularly about what to expect from clients. “I think that was very valuable to new people who would come into the group who didn’t know, and I think it’s something that I really benefitted from initially,” she said. Stressing the significance of this type of information sharing, Sabrina said, “I think generally sharing information in that environment was the most important because there’s a lot of variables, and for new people not knowing how to navigate that world, I think that was the most valuable thing that could be offered to them.”

However, women at the dungeon could also be mean to each other and talk about coworkers behind their backs. “It reminded me of high school, the lockers and the pettiness and the volatility and these cliques that would happen,” Sabrina said. “There were people that were part of certain groups, and people were excluded.” Sabrina herself did not want to be part of any group, but she also didn’t want to be excluded. In the beginning, Sabrina found the dynamic at the dungeon strange. However, eventually, she realized that even these “mean” girls were helping in their own way by teaching her a valuable lesson about working at the dungeon: “It was just so scary. I was scared all of the time, and then, as time went on, I realized what a resource it was, what an opportunity it was to have this. And I understood that you had to be strong to get through it, and I felt like on some level some of the women who’d been there the longest who were part of these cliques were testing everyone else or assisting in this weird way that only they knew how, which was to make you stronger so that you could deal with everything because you

had to be strong to deal with it. And if you couldn't then you should just leave, which a lot of people did." In other words, these senior workers were not only gatekeepers; they were helping junior workers develop the thick skin they would need to handle the intense emotional demands of the job.

Sabrina, who is also a writer, found the dynamic of women at the dungeon so interesting that she would like to write a television show about it. The show would be a dark comedy, she said: "It would definitely be funny because the stuff that we did was ridiculous. Some of it was so silly, like spanking these old men. And I feel like comedy and laughter gets you through the darker moments in life, and I think there's a lot of darkness within that world, people dealing with their trauma." Specifically, many of the clients were dealing with past traumas, and Sabrina, like many who worked at the dungeon, saw herself as a kind of therapist for these men. "You know, some of the stuff that comes up is really sad from people's childhoods and abuse, but I think we get through those moments by releasing the sadness or releasing the darkness and letting some of the life and laughter in," she said. Thus, women at the dungeon saw themselves as caring not only for each other, but also for their clients by helping them heal from psychic trauma.

After working at the dungeon for ten months, Sabrina got a new job at another sex work establishment doing sensual, healing massage. As at the dungeon, her job at the passage parlor was criminalized, but Sabrina preferred working there. "The world was a little bit less dark, let's say [...] It was sex work, but there wasn't a lot of pain or trauma," Sabrina explained. Her work at the massage parlor also had a spiritual dimension. "The intention behind it was to connect with these clients on a more spiritual, open-hearted level. We would do eye gazing, and we would connect our hearts. And, so, the whole world was much more about connecting with the clients," she said. Sabrina also managed to connect with other women at the massage parlor on a much deeper level than at the dungeon because of the more intimate work environment and reduced levels of competition. She said, "What was interesting about this place was: there were only ever two women at a time. It was an apartment with two separate rooms for two separate clients at once, so there were only two women on staff. So, we would be able to have this one on one where there isn't the group dynamic, but we were still connected to the group. We would have these meetings every month, so we were still a group. But on the day to day, we interacted with one person at a time, which created a more intimate support environment."

Every day, the two women on shift would have a meeting where they connected to each other as women. “We would sit together, and we would talk about what we were grateful for. We would talk about what we were really excited about. Like, we would brag and things, so it was a really good support group that was aware of its support, or aware of itself. So, we would come together and be like, ‘OK, we’re here to support each other. You tell me what’s great about your life. And you tell me what you’re grateful for, and I’ll tell you what I [am grateful for],” Sabrina said.

However, there were also some similarities between the dungeon and the massage parlor. “It was a similar dynamic in the sense of: We would have a client. We would have this experience sexually, or this sexual experience, and then afterward we would debrief. We would be there for each other in the same way that I was in the dungeon except there wasn’t a competitive quality,” she said. As a result, Sabrina felt like her personality came out much more at the massage parlor than at the dungeon. She explained, “So who I am came out a lot more in the second place that I worked, whereas in the first I felt like I had a persona. And that’s also the difference between the work, because the dominatrix work was more of a performance and the work I was doing in the other place was much more stripped down, literally. We would only wear underwear. And so, the dynamics were different in that way.”

Sabrina worked at the massage parlor for eight months before moving to the West Coast to further her career. She does not regret working in the sex industry, however, because it led to a sexual awakening for her. “I feel like it was one of the better things I’ve ever done because, when I started, I didn’t know who I was sexually. I didn’t know my power. I didn’t know anything about that part of myself. I had really repressed it. Like, before then I never enjoyed sex [...] Maybe it was just a coincidence that I was opening up in that way. I was 28, a little late maybe, but going through it and coming out of it, I felt like I gained my power in being confident and being seen. And I gained knowledge of my sexuality and what turns me on,” Sabrina said.

Sabrina thought that the support network of women at the dungeon and the massage parlor possibly facilitated her sexual empowerment by providing her a safe and non-judgmental forum to process her workplace sexual encounters. She explained, “Maybe talking about it afterward helped me understand the elements of it that were in my power, were in my sexuality, were things that I wanted, because these were clients that had specific desires and needs. And we were there to cater to what they wanted, but ultimately, I feel that for me, even though I was

there to do what they wanted, I did it in the way that I enjoyed, that was for me a lot of the time. And so, I think talking about that maybe helped me hone in on some of those elements, definitely.”

Moreover, through working at the dungeon and the massage parlor, Sabrina learned how to be friends with women. “Up until that point in my life I didn’t really have any female friends, and I didn’t really know how to relate to women [...] These two worlds of women and these support groups of women taught me how to open up and relate to women in a way that I didn’t know I could,” Sabrina said. Even though it helped her discover so much about herself, Sabrina said that she would never go back to doing sex work.

Talking with Sabrina helped me see how marginalized people like sex workers create new, non-capitalist relationships. Stigma and precarious working conditions create both an urgent need for support and unique opportunities to develop relationships based on cooperation and resource-sharing. Taking advantage of such opportunities, establishment-based sex workers form support networks to meet their physical and emotional needs.

However, in talking to Sabrina it was also clear that not all sex work establishments offer the same opportunities for creating support networks. Sabrina experienced working at the massage parlor more positively, in part because she found the work more suitable, but also because the dynamic between the women there was different. The establishment itself encouraged a workplace culture of support by reducing competition through its scheduling practices and workplace rituals like conference calls, staff get-togethers, and daily gratitude circles. Nevertheless, sex workers at both establishments were able to develop build relationships that allowed workers to care for and share with one another in the absence of support not only from the government, but frequently their biological families and/or romantic partners. In the process, they created new, non-heteronormative kinds of family.



About the Author

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