

Sex Trade: Security & Adversity

By Liz Elytra

I started working in the sex trade in the summer of 2012, about two years after my official diagnosis. In my time as a sex worker, I have read countless narratives from other disabled sex workers that tell a story not unlike my own: that sex work in all its forms gives disabled folks financial security, control over our unique bodily needs, and even important visual representation in the case of visibly disabled porn performers.

For me, a 40 hour work week is not the kind of schedule that my body can handle but is the type of pay I need to survive. I have not seen it talked about often, but disabled folks often have a higher cost of living due to daily medications, treatments, devices, and frequent emergency hospital trips; the things that are not always covered by insurance and can become an ongoing list of out-of-pocket expenses.

As a disabled person, working within the sex trade has been the best decision for me. The strong sense of community, options to work from home (which has kept me particularly safe both financially and physically during the Covid pandemic), and the ability to schedule around my bad health days have allowed me to thrive. At conventional jobs, I have to be concerned about using up sick days and must weigh the severity of my flare-ups in order to ration my allotted time off. Over these last ten years of performing sex work, my fans and clients have shown up to support me by returning for my services and company, even when my disability kept me away for weeks or even months. I have often joked that inconsistency is my niche.

However, disabilities can compound some of the challenges of working in the sex trade. Online policy changes, like those that arise because of SESTA and FOSTA for example, can leave disabled folks more vulnerable than their able-bodied counterparts. When SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) and FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) went into effect, internet platforms became responsible for the media their users posted, which has resulted in ever-increasing censorship of sex workers. This online censorship has deprived sex workers of the means of screening clientele for safety purposes, creating a situation where sex workers become more likely to be exposed to violence. Without these safety measures in place, disabled folks in the sex trade, left without access to work and without the ability to assimilate into conventional forms of employment, are thrust back into poverty. This is just one example of the ways disabilities can compound the challenges of the sex trade.

While sex work has been extremely empowering for me, it is not empowering for all who engage in it, it is just work. Those of us in the sex trade struggle to access similar rights and protections long standardized in other industries. I'm going to end on this thought — the Social Model of Disability delineates physical or mental limitations, called "impairments" as distinct from "disability" which is caused by social exclusion, or said in another way, people with impairments are disabled by society's barriers. When it comes to disability rights and sex worker rights the

two go hand in hand. Services or organizations run by disabled folks in the sex trade are going to have the most appropriate solutions for that group. I think this sentiment is best highlighted by a phrase that has been circulating within advocacy for a few decades, and that is: nothing about us, without us.



About the Author

Liz Elytra is a current disabled sex worker of 10 years and a student of gender, sexuality, and disability studies. She is working on a counseling degree that will help her better serve marginalized sex workers and those in the sex work community. In her downtime, she creates art that showcases sex workers, nudity, and body positivity by displaying a range of gender and body expressions.