



“I hate how some people regard your sex work as your most defining characteristic,”

It's spring cleaning season

I hate stigma. I hate how some people regard your sex work as your most defining characteristic, as though nothing you've ever done, or wish to do, are of equal significance. I hate how you can't see it, it doesn't have a form that you can avoid or dodge, and your five senses cannot detect it. You don't know where it's going to come from, from who and just what it might do to you. Stigma just is – like a cloud pouring rain on you wherever you go, and you walk past people with umbrellas who politely smile and turn the other way.

I didn't know for many years that there was stigma in me. It was shocking when I learnt that I was guilty of carrying internal stigma, the very stigma that hurts my peers. It seemed impossible given my uncontested confidence in myself and how proactive I am on conquering and maintaining my wellbeing. I'm a proud whore but the stigma comes at you as a Trojan horse, a common sense really. It coils around your understanding and interpretation of yourself and tells you 'no, you're a whore, you're not allowed to have the same things as others'. Common sense, I thought it was, the only sense that has the slightest ability to pick up on it.

I've robbed myself of opportunities and hope because I didn't believe myself to be worthy or deserving of these things. Because I am a sex worker.

I grapple for my rights and freedom when others (government, academics, and feminists) intrude on my sense of identity. Hypocritically, I was inflicting similar acts upon myself. I didn't identify as a sex worker in situations I suspected I would be discriminated in. I assumed the stigma of others couldn't be questioned. I didn't have the energy to fight for myself when it was easier to lie and hide under the radar.

It was at the bank where I finally realised internal stigma was having its way with me. I decided to ask for a loan, as a sex worker, and I prepared myself for an argument about how my work was not 'high-risk'. I flatly informed them that I was a sex worker when I was asked for my occupation. I braced myself.

There was no need, in the eyes of the Commonwealth bank, I was worthy of a loan. This was transparent in how I managed my finances. So why did I hesitate for so long, fearful of the rejection and the onslaught of judgements, when I didn't have to. Internal stigma,

that's why. How many years had I wasted doing the 'common sense' thing of hiding my identity in light of the stigma creeping upon me?

I tested the stigma I thought was obvious. I went to the bank again, this time seeking credit card facilities. When they asked me what the nature of my business was, my reply was the same.

'I am a sex worker.' There was no stigma or discrimination on the banks part. My profit boosted since then. Why had it taken me so long to ask for something any other small business would readily ask for? How much money had I lost by trying to evade the stigma?

It was me who had prevented myself from approaching the bank long ago. It was my own internal stigma. So I can't help but now wonder what other opportunities I have fooled myself from pursuing, with the 'common sense' understanding that stigma is impenetrable.

I am beginning to suspect internal stigma doesn't just stop you from accessing services that anyone else would have no problem accessing. I'm starting to think that maybe the stigma paralyses you from approaching natural human desires and activities. Like love.

I wonder if I held myself back from searching and accessing love, under the pretence that love was something incompatible with a sex worker. How long had I thought it would be too difficult, not for me, but for my partner. I spare his feelings by neglecting to address my own needs. I leave the coping to me, one of my

self-inflicted punishment for choosing this course in life. The whore's way moves parallel to the martyr's way, not because of inevitability, but because of stigma.

This isn't fair on me as a human being or as a sex worker. I too deserve the love I wish upon others, sex worker or not. I've seen my peers settle for relationships, thinking second best is best because they're a sex worker. Because sex workers pick up the crumbs of love, not the whole thing. I've seen too many of my peers commit to unhealthy relationship due to their internal stigma.

It isn't right. I hate stigma with a passion, it's ridiculous, a virus that's latched a ride to the present from the past. It's something that shouldn't exist in the 21st century.

But the horrible thing is, I have been practicing the very act I've been trying to be rid of. I want everyone to remember that being a sex worker is no reason to lay low and cop it from others. I want to remind everyone that it's not just okay, but admirable to stand up against the face of stigma. And it takes true bravery to look inward and tell yourself that you deserve better than what being served by others to you. Recently a sex worker was raped by fraud in Canberra, and after four years her rapist has been found guilty and jailed. How many of us would have stood up had that been us?

Not enough. But it starts with one. A legal precedent has been set for sex workers and women across the country. The stigma ends now and it starts with you. It's time to spring clean the mind and attitude.

'OH HEY LOOK IT'S A STUDENT,
but wouldn't you know they're also
under a lot of stress and it might not
be for the reasons that you think'

