

In-between “Sex Work” And “Qualified Occupation”

Minako Suzuki

I am a single mother and currently working as a nurse. Before this job, I was in the sex industry for about 10 years. I entered the sex industry in order to go to university. My family refused to pay my tuition fees based on the principle that “women don’t need education.” So I thought that the fastest way to earn money would be in the sex industry. I began working for “telephone dating clubs” in my teens and ultimately I worked as the “SM Queen” for close to 10 years. It has been less than a year since I began working as a certified nurse, so I still feel that I am between the sex industry and my current job. But what I can tell you now is what I am feeling since quitting the sex industry.

There are two reasons why I quit the sex industry: one, I had earned my goal amount, and two, because it was dangerous. I thought I might get killed. The service I worked for had very bad management. We rented apartments in various places and I would go there on my own with a customer, but some of those customers were there with the objective to rape me. In such cases I had to fight. Once there was a customer who was using drugs so I asked the manager to prohibit this person from entering, but they told me, “What is in the syringe may not be drugs, there’s no certainty so we can’t stop the customer from coming.” Our manager didn’t allow “NG specifications” (to refuse an unwanted customer) and my friends told me that it was too dangerous, but I wasn’t very self-aware.

Still, I eventually began to think about how miserable it would be if I were killed in an apartment room like this.

I also began to dislike the mutual contempt between men and women in this world. There was I, mocking the customers, and then there was the customer, who developed mistrust in the women who never became his own thing no matter how much money he invested in them. In other words, my work became more than a service and romantic feelings would become a means for moneymaking. If the customer left with the feeling of mistrust in women, he would think, “women are just disloyal beings,” and the relationship between men and women would just get worse. I began to think that in this work the only benefit was money and nothing else.

In any case, I obtained a national qualification in nursing and quit the sex industry. I thought I had been “rehabilitated” through vocational training. But to be honest, at least for myself, I can’t tell the difference between the sex industry and other occupations. My actual feeling is that I can’t truly say, “I’m so glad I quit the sex industry.” I even feel like I want to go back!

The reason is that, first of all, I currently work 60 hours a week. My hospital is relatively compliant with labor regulations but even so there is a shortage of personnel. There are three shifts, including nightshift, summer holidays are only 3 days, and we can’t even



take days off for New Years. I also work overtime on a volunteer basis without any pay. I'm physically exhausted and have barely any time to be with my child. We're a one-on-one family and yet I exist only to bring in the money. After paying the people who look after my child (even in the middle of the night), fees for the day care center, and the rent, there's nothing left.

In the sex industry, the workload is about 36 hours a week and I can take the last train home at midnight. Compared to my current job as a nurse, it was physically much easier. Even though there were no bonuses, on an annual basis I made double what I make now. So I would get double the income and be able to spend 4 days a week with my child. I could even save some money. Doesn't that seem like a much better plan for the future? Although, if I were on my own, I might have been satisfied with just being able to get "clean" and may not have had such conflicting feelings towards the sex industry.

Being a nurse is similar to being in the sex industry in that it is an "emotional labor." There is a strong sexual fantasy towards nurses and there is sexual harassment as well. Some

patients tell me, "Let's stay out overnight" or "You're suited for being a 'bar girl,'" and others tell me they like me. I have a colleague who almost got kissed by a patient. But she couldn't tell people because she was worried that people might accuse her of behaving wrongly.

There are trainings and counseling rooms for sexual harassment, but it would require a lot of courage for a rookie like myself to speak up. It would also be cumbersome and there is so little time that I end up thinking that the only way is to get through it by enduring it.

Once I was having problems getting my child into a day care center because we didn't meet the placement standards, and when I asked someone to intercede for me, it worked. Then I thought that maybe this society isn't so bad after all. But you also need energy to spare to get society's help.

In the sex industry, I encountered dangerous situations, especially in private rooms with customers. Yet, in the medical workplace, there are the dangers of radiation and punching, kicking, and scratching by violent patients, and the risk of infectious



diseases through blood and bodily fluids is higher than in the sex industry. So in terms of danger I don't think they're very different. Sexual harassment, being in dangerous situations, and getting half the income for double the work. That's why when I'm exhausted from life in this way, I sense that I may easily return to sex work.

People are prejudiced against sex work, and I was told once "I can't believe you can speak confidently in public." Basically, people treat us as criminals. I did feel guilty for not paying taxes, but the services themselves don't file tax forms. Even if sex work becomes legalized, it may still be difficult to tell people that you are in the sex industry because when you tell a man you're a sex worker, you can be stalked or be in uncertain danger. Being a nurse is certainly socially accepted and I don't have to pretend to be someone else, for example, to a real estate agent. But I also think that, if the sex industry becomes legal, there will be things like identity cards, and so then it should be society that changes its prejudiced views.

Now, working in a hospital, I don't think that I lead a fulfilling life; severe working conditions, cheap salary. In addition, dangers such as sexual harassment and infectious diseases are inevitable. In the sex industry, sexual harassment comes with the job, so I could calculate it off in money and rationalize it. But in my current job, people insult me and it's not compensated by the salary. On the contrary, it lowers my own self-value as a nurse and I don't know how to rationalize it.

Ultimately, if living in society as a woman means facing such circumstances, I can't help but feel that it makes more sense that such treatment is calculated in monetary terms. Also, I now understand that even as a nurse, with age, reemployment becomes very limited. Then, not being able to find the next job due to the blank in one's resume for working in the sex industry doesn't seem so different.

And so I want to ask: What is the real difference between sex work and other work? I quit sex work but if I wanted to go back, how would you stop me? What words of encouragement would you use?

In the end, I earned a certificate, but I realized I hadn't learned anything about the ways of thinking about sex and sexuality. I also hadn't learned about the rights I have. I feel that my mind has not yet quit the sex industry. If I collapse from fatigue in this current job, my reemployment might be in the sex industry. The money is good, I can take care of my body, and I have time with my child. Doesn't that seem more meaningful in the long run? According to the judgment of outsiders, sex work might seem like a bad occupation, but if I think of the fulfillment of my own life, my honest feeling is that I can't avoid thinking of sex work as an option.

But I also think it's important to stress that I don't mean that I want to go back to the sex industry as if it's a wonderful occupation. Even in the sex industry there are good stories. Good stories can come out between kidnappers and their victims, and even in slave labor. In any situation, 1 out of 100 could be a "good" experience. That's why it's meaningless to focus on those "good things."

Before I chose to be in the sex industry, I thought society was telling me I wasn't "feminine" enough. I was feeling frustrated for not being "feminine" because I was too tall or had hair that was too short. In sex work, I could be acknowledged to be "feminine." From one glance, a customer can say "You're a fine woman" and can even validate me, and that becomes visible in money. I think that I was seeking compliments and an affirmation that I am a woman. But eventually, I realized that the image of being "feminine" itself is wrong. That if I think I'm a woman, I am a woman. I came to think that to do something about it through the sex industry was itself



what society wanted from me. I decided I didn't want to go along with that anymore.

In the sex industry, it's compliment after compliment after compliment. Now as a nurse, I haven't been complimented even once. I've even been hit in the head by another staff. I may just be too soft on myself for thinking this, but if "clean work" is a system where you have to endure people pointing out only your faults, I think that the sex industry is superior in nurturing people. What I really want to say is that, whether it's the sex industry or not, I want to be respected as "me," to be given that message through my work. Regardless of which work I do, this society doesn't show me respect or treat me with care as a woman.

In the sex industry, a certain closeness between people is established and some people suggest that these relationships can be used as a place for sex education. But I think that in this world where sex is so confused, I see no meaning in trying to convey the correct message about sex by using sex. I think it's even dangerous to do so. It's the same as not needing to make someone experience drugs to teach the danger of drugs. I think there is potential in sex being used for sex education between people who understand it well. But in Japanese society today, even those working in the sex industry don't receive appropriate education on rights and sex, so I think we need to be more cautious about speaking of the sex industry as a place of learning.

The SM Queen that I've been doing is a world of "the more you talk the better" and I've been told that after only 30 years of age I could stand on my own two feet, so it's a job one can do even in older years. It's also a job that prohibits customers from touching my body, so there is basically no risk of sexually transmitted infections. It's slightly different from the sex work that people imagine where there is contact between sexual organs. So I might be in a particular position where sex work and other work don't seem so different.

But the reason why I compare my current job to the sex industry is because I did work in the sex industry once. I feel that if I'd never worked in the sex industry, I would never have felt this strong pull. Even if I live humbly now, I can't deny the luxuriousness of money I felt when I earned lots more money than I do now. I think that maybe it's a conflict that I will have to continue to work through in doing my "clean work," because of the fact that I did work in the sex industry.

Minako Suzuki (Former sex worker, currently managing Peer Counseling for Sex Workers and Ex-Sex Workers)

This text is a transcription of the talk, "To Work in the 'Sex Industry'," by Ms. Minako Suzuki in a seminar hosted by the Asia-Japan Women's Resource Center.

Ms. Minako Suzuki and her friends have just published a booklet, "Sex Work and STD in Japan - From the sexworkers' perspective -" for the 7th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (1,000 yen). For more information, please contact hahatachi@yahoo.co.jp.