

## Has sex work started to become 'socially acceptable'? This woman thinks so

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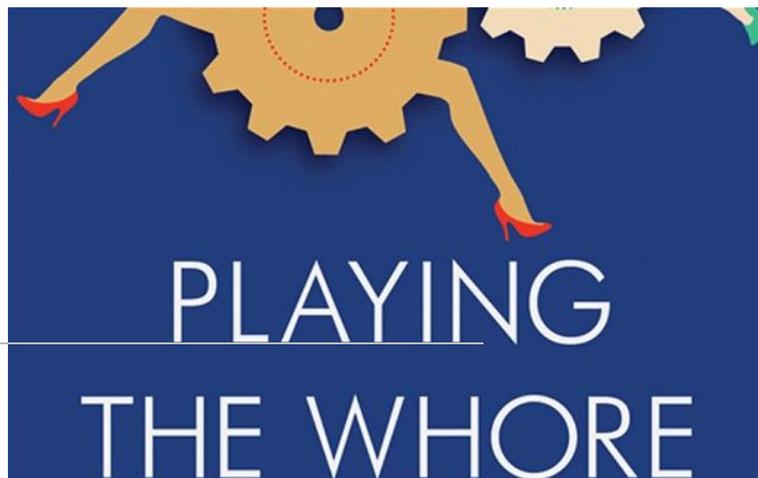
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Melissa Gira Grant, a sex worker-turned-author, has written a book calling for her former colleagues to have employment rights. Nisha Lilia Diu meets her and is pretty frightened - but quite persuaded.



Melissa Gira Grant, author of *Playing the Whore* Photo: Noah Kalina

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Melissa Gira Grant's new book

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Melissa Gira Grant can be quite scary. The fact that she once worked in an S&M dungeon – it was “in a house on a residential block in the suburbs of a major American city,” according to her new book, **Playing the Whore**

<http://http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/sex/10689288/Sex-memoirs-Bondage-daddies-and-sci-fi-sex-work-Tart-lit-definitely-isnt-dead.html>) – is not wholly surprising after you’ve met her.

In the low-ceilinged attic boardroom of her London publishers, rain blurring the view on to the streets of Soho below, her fist strikes the table. She is always, without fail, asked how she became a sex worker and she’s angry about it.

“Why do you want to know?” she demands, blue eyes icy with rage. “Why is this important to you?”

I think people find it hard to understand, I say. Making the decision to sell sex is a step a lot of people can’t imagine taking. I think people ask out of a desire to understand.

“I think it’s a desire to objectify,” she fires back.

Needless to say, *Playing the Whore* is not a memoir. It’s an extremely persuasive call for employment rights for sex workers and, as such, it contains only the barest bones of Gira Grant’s biography: she grew up in Boston and was a sex worker for 10 years. She worked as a webcam girl, in the red light district in San Francisco’s North Beach and in the aforementioned S&M dungeon where several men “would telephone, at least once a day, to ask to come and clean.” (The women would “just turn them loose on the dishes,” she says.)



San Francisco's North Beach red light district (Flickr.com)

She did this work “for money”. When I ask her what makes women *not* sell sex, she answers like a shot: “other employment that they prefer.”

Gira Grant is 36 now and **a full-time writer** (<http://http://melissagiragrants.com/>). She lives in Brooklyn and is a rare voice in the depressingly polarised debate about prostitution laws. She resists being corralled, as she puts it in her book, “onto either the exploited or the empowered side of the stage.” (Is this why we want to know sex workers’ stories? So we can categorise them as tragic victims or feminist heroines?) Instead, she talks about shades of grey.

“There’s a tendency for sex workers to feel they can only say positive things about sex work because any negative thing they say is twisted against them.” But, she says, “maybe someone’s escorting and they don’t like it. Maybe they’re just doing it for now because it’s the best thing in front of them.”

A socially acceptable face of sex work is emerging, she says. “That narrative of, ‘oh, I just love this and it’s so fantastic.’ I think to the extent that you hew to that narrative and are perceived as someone who had choice and power then people will say, ‘well, then I guess I can support that.’ But those same people will say really negative things about people who work on the streets.” Why does she think that is? “Class. Race.” Gira Grant’s view is that all sex workers should have the support, respect and protection of the law regardless of how and why they entered the industry.



Grant's book

In Europe, discussions about prostitution are being dominated by a single question: should we implement the “Nordic model”? This system decriminalises the selling of sex but makes buying sex a criminal offence. Sweden adopted it in 1999, Norway and Iceland have followed suit and a number of countries, including the UK, are seriously considering it. (At the moment our laws allow the buying and selling of sex but criminalise all the surrounding activities: soliciting, brothel-keeping, kerb-crawling and so on.)

I recently spent some time in Germany, where prostitution has been completely legal since 2002. I came to the conclusion that the German model, with its barely-regulated **“mega-brothels”, escort apps and virgin auctions** (<http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/welcome-to-paradise/>) - not to mention a police force hamstrung by the porous line between “managing” prostitutes and “exploiting” them, is enabling more harm than the Nordic one. But it’s a choice between a rock and a hard place.



Pascha,

in Cologne, is Europe's biggest brothel. (Albrecht Fuchs)

“It’s kind of a legal fiction to think we can only criminalise one part of a transaction,” says Gira Grant of the Nordic model. “In Sweden,” she adds, “sex workers aren't regarded as criminal but they’re not regarded as workers either. So they’re not able to access benefits that other workers can. They’re not equal in society because they’re participating in a criminal activity, even if they themselves aren’t criminal.”

Some people feel this is as it should be: that the law should take a moral stand against the buying and selling of sex. “That means killing people,” says Gira Grant. “To say, ‘we’re going to prohibit this behaviour to express our moral distaste for it,’ is also saying, ‘we approve of the violence that will result from criminalisation.’”

It doesn’t take much to realise that sex workers operating under the Nordic model will hesitate to reach out to the authorities, if it means putting their only source of income at risk. And that means people who have been assaulted or want treatment for drug addiction or help finding another job, will slip through the cracks.

In countries where sex workers themselves are criminalised, the indifference to their suffering can be striking. Gira Grant tells me about a sex worker in Philadelphia who was attacked by a customer in full view of a police officer. The officer intervened and took her to the police station, at her request, to report her assailant. “Then he left because it wasn’t his precinct. And the police who actually worked there said to her, ‘you’re the one who we should be locking up for this’. And they refused to take her report. Her attacker went on to assault other people in the community and is now on trial for murder.”

Police film a raid on a brothel in Birmingham in 2013

Earlier this year I talked to Chris Armit, the national police lead on prostitution for England and Wales. “An individual who brutally rapes someone on a street corner is someone who is predisposed to vicious, violent sexual attacks,” he said. It’s a well-established pattern for people

who attack sex workers to go on to attack other members of the population. “These are high-risk individuals and we need to get them off the streets,” Armitz told me.

His force has pioneered what’s become known as the “**Merseyside model** (<http://http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/rt-hon-mrs-theresa-may-mp-make-the-merseyside-hate-crime-model-of-policing-prostitution-law-uk-wide>)”. Instead of arresting sex workers, the police maintain communication with them so they can be quickly alerted to violent pimps, punters and sex traffickers. When sex workers are attacked, the Merseyside police treat the matter as a hate crime and prosecute determinedly.

**Supporters of the Nordic model** (<http://http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10591588/Prostitution-Can-European-Parliament-call-a-halt-to-it.html>) talk about the normative effect it has on society, by establishing the idea that buying sex is wrong. I put it to Gira Grant that the Merseyside model’s ferocious prosecution of violence and trafficking carries an equally powerful message about what society judges unacceptable.

“Yes,” she agrees, “but it’s challenging when the police are themselves a source of so much of that violence. If sex workers’ experience of the police is harassment, it’s going to take a lot – a lot – to turn that relationship around.”

Why, when sex work is so difficult and dangerous, do people still choose to do it? “It’s not usually a choice between sex work and some other great job,” says Gira Grant. “The kinds of service jobs that many sex workers have held before doing sex work are jobs where you do not have full time employment, you have to maintain a flexible schedule, where you are living in a homeless shelter because you don’t earn enough to support yourself. Or maybe it’s someone who is sick and can’t work anymore. Or sex work is the first time they’ve had any control over the hours that they work. And maybe they want that – to actually have a life outside of work.”

Sex work seems like a horrible job to me. Personally I don’t love the idea of people buying and selling sex. But what happens between consenting adults is really none of my business. And besides, we can’t wish away poverty (there will always be people who would rather sell sex than starve) and we can’t wish away human nature (there will always be people who are lonely, lazy, inadequate or paraphiliac enough to buy it).

The question is: what are we going to do about it?

***Playing the Whore by Melissa Gira Grant is £8.99 and available on Amazon. (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Playing-Whore-Work-Sex-Jacobin/dp/1781683239/?&tag=rnwap-20>)***