

An Award of Our Own

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
March 9, 2018

Last week, I wrote about the Academy Awards and the ways in which mental health themes were addressed in certain movies nominated for Best Picture. This week, we had the privilege of presenting an award of our own. The Global Mental Health Program Award for Innovation in the Arts was presented to Tony Award winning playwright and performer Sarah Jones - for her extraordinary artistry that advances understanding and conversation about mental health.



Sarah Jones, in her one-woman show, [Sell/Buy/Date](#), and with many credits as a writer and performer, has been a voice for justice, for women, and for mental health. Sarah Jones is funny, bold, provocative, and insightful. Congratulations and thank you, Sarah!

1. [Sell / Buy / Date](#). In just under 90-minutes, Sarah Jones brings to life more than 15 different characters - slipping into the soul of each one with no costume changes. Relying on minimal use of props, like a pair of glasses or a cigarette, she adopts different postures, voice and message, and seamlessly but dramatically embodies highly distinct characters such that each seems to take over her very being. These varied characters are each invoked to contribute to her imagined futurist class lecture on the sex trade and what selling and buying women mean for the health of those involved. Her performance is masterful and moving.

2. Sex work and sex trafficking. Through her many characters, Sarah Jones captures a multitude of views on this age-old industry. [Today, more than 4 million people are sex-trafficked in the world, nearly all of them women. More than a million are girls under the age of 18.](#) With humor, satire and provocative honesty, she made me think about who, how and why people buy and sell their bodies. Economically and/or socially vulnerable, most [women and girls who are recruited to the sex trade are report histories of poverty, societal isolation, drug addiction, violence in the family, a history of child sexual abuse, family dysfunction, school failure, or a history of criminal behavior.](#)

3. Victim or Right? [The majority of sex workers and survivors of sex trafficking report serious mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and drug abuse.](#) Sex trafficking is associated with extreme levels of psychological stress which is associated with neurochemical and structural changes in the brain. And we know that traumatic environmental exposure directly affects neuronal formation and brain anatomy. The implications cut across all aspects of social and psychological development.

4. Sex work and mental health. With yesterday being International Women's Day, it is a good time to ask

what today's feminists think about the issue of sex work. At first glance, we might think the answer would be obvious. The Feminist Movement was founded on principles of protecting women from exploitation and promoting women's equality, so true feminists would unequivocally oppose the trade. But it's not so simple. Playing Bella (named after Bella Abzug), Jones portrays the emerging voice of some new feminists who want to defend sex work as a woman's choice. It made me cringe in my seat.

5. What would Gloria Steinem say? I had the chance to ask Gloria Steinem what she thinks of this new version of feminism? In her exceedingly wise and gracious way, she fully supported the idea that the feminist voice needs to defend women's rights to pursue meaningful work and purposeful lives as they design them. Without missing a beat, she also said that when women have equal rights, equal access to education and equal economic opportunities that enable them to care for themselves and their families, it would be the rare and unusual case that a woman would opt to sell her body for pay.

From the fast-talking Latina, the Muslim pacifist, and the African-American hip-hop artist, Sarah Jones makes it clear that everyone is part of this story - whether as active consumers or complicit as silent bystanders. What does she think herself? In our talkback session, it was clear that she is in the Gloria Steinem camp, but as she said, we can only advance the subject when we listen to and understand the many opposing perspectives. Really the story of the sex trade is a case example of the failure to protect human rights and human dignity getting played out through the bodies of vulnerable women around the world.

Peppered with poignant lines, searing insight, and sophistication, Sarah Jones' Sell / Buy / Date is a tour de force. It is our privilege to award Sarah Jones with the Global Mental Health Award for Innovation in the Arts.