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Making Sex Work

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Making Sex Work: A Failed Experiment with Legalised Prostitution (Spinifex Press, 2007) by Mary Lucille Sullivan; Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia (University of Western Australian Press, 2007) by Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy.

In the mid 1970s, when I was a young sociology student, my acquaintance with a number of women introduced me to the world of prostitution, particularly in what were then illegal massage parlours. Prostitutes’ conditions of work and experiences with clients, police and parlour management aroused my feminist ire.

As the result of a seminar held at Melbourne University in 1977, attended by feminists and working prostitutes, the Prostitutes Action Group (PAG), which eventually led to the Prostitutes Collective Victoria (PCV), came into being. A direct line can be drawn from that seminar to the inquiry into prostitution in Victoria led by Marcia Neave, and to the legal changes that began in 1984.

Many feminists at the time held the view that prostitution existed because patriarchal society rested on women’s exploitation at all levels, including sexually. For the most part, feminists considered prostitution abhorrent. Yet in a society where women earned less than 60 per cent of male wages, prostitution remained a way of making a living for many women. As a student of sociology I accepted the argument that with legalisation the stigma attached to prostitution would begin to lessen. If prostitution was treated as legal work, then the conditions of employment would eventually improve and the women engaged in it might move on to other less stigmatised jobs. Those of us who argued in this way were mainly socialist feminists, though a sprinkling of liberal feminists and libertarians did too. By contrast, radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin considered heterosexual sex generally to be oppressive, since consent could not be given between two unequally placed individuals. In a strange irony, some prostitutes agreed with her.

These memories were jogged by Mary Lucille Sullivan’s Making Sex Work: A Failed Experiment with Legalised Prostitution. Pursuing the argument that under any condition prostitution is exploitative, she makes the point that neither legalisation nor decriminalisation ameliorates or diminishes prostitution. Instead, it justifies its normalisation and actually increases, rather than decreases, demand. She argues that the distinction between forced and freely chosen prostitution is specious, since all prostitution is violence against women. Choice for the prostituted woman and girl is thus an irrelevant idea.

Sullivan’s historical outline of the events and arguments that led to changes in Victoria’s legal code in 1984 and 1994 (which made Victoria the leader in prostitution law reform in Australia) points out the problems that legalisation to large brothels entailed. The legal problems involving streetwalking remained, and new regulations made single-person operations out of private houses almost impossible. These changes led to the entrenchment of larger business interests, the corollary of women into types of work they did not necessarily want, increased legitimisation of other types of sex work like table-top dancing and stripping, and the development of links to organised crime and people trafficking. In turn, legalisation of brothels did not eliminate illegal (unregistered) brothels or street work. Indeed, brothels have become planning problems, rather than criminal ones. Local government now has the almost impossible task of tracking illegal brothels and massage parlours, while the police are shut out of intelligence about illegal brothels and the women who work in them.

Sullivan goes to great lengths to demolish the argument that treating sex as work will transform sex workers’ occupational health and safety conditions into industrial issues, just the same as in other workplaces and industries. How, she asks, can you deal in such neutral terms when violence and sexually transmitted diseases are taken to be part of the daily fare of work? She quotes various documents produced by OHS organisations and prostitution support groups seeking to educate workers on minimising the harms inherent in their work. One, produced in 2000 by the Scarlet Alliance (a national prostitution rights body), covered such areas as ‘building safety and cleanliness, client screening procedures, violence in the workplace, alarm systems and bedroom lighting, repetitive strain injuries and drugs in the workplace’. The specifics point up the peculiar difficulties of ensuring health and safety in a workplace where danger of one kind or another is endemic: adequate lighting in a room enables the inspection of clients for STDs; a panic button summons help when violence is threatened. Few other occupations, except perhaps some contact sports, pose such problems for health and safety.

The most interesting aspect of the book deals with the capture of prostitution organisations by queer theorists, sexual libertarians, business interests and government. The PCV was the first organisation in Australia to understand the nature of the HIV epidemic. It successfully lobbied for funding for needle exchanges, compulsory condom use and sexual health, constructing a close financial relationship with the state government and health department. However, in the process it lost its autonomy and was superseded by a group interested only in public health, not activism.

The timing was crucial. The HIV pandemic produced an alliance between prostitute groups and gay male support groups and individuals. Women’s interests became aligned with gay male interests, a condition Sheila Jeffreys calls the ‘queering’ of prostitution politics. As a result, critical analysis of masculinity and
patriarchy disappeared in favour of a theoretical interest in sexual practices constructed around dominant and submissive archetypes... celebrated as being at the cutting edge of sexual freedom.

By the 1990s the PVC itself attacked feminism for its ‘victim’ mentality — meaning, presumably, the victimisation of women and children. In the early 1990s, the Eros Foundation (a lobby group for the adult entertainment industry emanating from the ACT) promoted itself as representing sexual libertarianism, free speech and personal freedoms. Neither the PVC nor the Eros Foundation works specifically with or for women, the most disadvantaged and silenced group.

Sullivan's book, caustic in its comments on the ‘pro-prostitution’ theorists, can be interestingly juxtaposed with Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy's *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia*. These books illustrate prominent but very different types of academic literature on prostitution. Sullivan's book contains no prostitute voices at all; instead she uses historical and policy documents to develop her argument. By contrast, Perkins and Lovejoy's book is a collection of women's stories as told to them. Without critical analysis, they describe the lives of private sex workers, also known as call girls. Perkins and Lovejoy seem determined to present sex workers as just 'like us', doing just what Sullivan most despises — normalising prostitution as work. In the process, their wonderfully thick sociological descriptions allow the reader insight into the reasons why some women choose to work as prostitutes well into their forties and even fifties; that it allows them to achieve a financial independence they could never have experienced otherwise. However, the stories also undermine the 'normality' that Perkins and Lovejoy's informants want to present. Almost all of the women describe violence and coercion as part of their stories. While many women outside prostitution experience sexual harassment, rape or other forms of violence, they do not consider it to be part and parcel of their working lives. 'Kerry', however, says that sex work is 'hard, and it's horrible', even if it has enabled her to live a reasonable life with her daughter. Another woman, Roxy, who is an S&M specialist, is regularly 'disgusted with men'. While many women might be regularly disgusted with men few are reminded of their disgust every moment of their working life.

Perkins and Lovejoy's description tends, like previous work on the same theme, to represent call girls (as they tend to represent themselves) as superior to other prostitute women, like street workers and brothel workers. This is emphasised by the comparisons the authors make to a 'control' group of brothel workers. Sullivan might argue that any such sense of superiority is the result of false consciousness. Perkins and Lovejoy, on the other hand, simply present these stories as if they may speak for themselves.

The advent of the global trade in people was not envisioned in the 1970s. Although some men, even then, went to the Philippines or Thailand to buy women's bodies, it was inconceivable that sexual slavery would make a comeback in the West. However, the relationship between the local sex trade and sex trafficking is undeniable. Recent work in the *New Internationalist* shows that the Western countries with the largest domestic sex trades are also those with the greatest number of trafficked women. Thus Holland and Germany have become the primary destinations for trafficked women from Eastern Europe. Australia, as the excellent local film *The Jandak* illustrates, has also become a destination for trafficked women. The movement of women is generally from poor to wealthy nations, with the notable exception of Thailand. While Thailand is a rapidly developing country, it is an exception because an extremely large indigenous prostitution industry exists there. The *New Internationalist* claims that an amazing 73 per cent of men in Thailand buy sex.) Sullivan and other radical feminists argue that the acceptance of prostitution allows sexual slavery to exist in a hyper-consumerist, globalised world.

Interestingly, Perkins and Lovejoy's stories indicate the strength of market forces as a dominating factor in Australian prostitution. A number of the private sex workers (and the authors) remarked on a drop in price for sex, leading to an income decline. A likely cause is the greater supply of sex workers, and the existence of enslaved women who, forced to work to pay off debts to brothel-keepers and traffickers, undercut prices.

Sullivan argues for the Swedish solution to the problem of prostitution and trafficking. It recognises prostitution as a human rights violation, and as violence against those involved. As Sullivan explains, Sweden criminalises the buyer while ensuring that those who are bought are given state help to leave the life. And there is some indication of success: prostitution has been contained, though not eliminated in Sweden, which has avoided the explosion of prostitution and trafficking experienced in neighbouring countries like Denmark, Germany and Holland. With 9 million inhabitants in 2004, Sweden had about 500 prostitutes working the streets. Denmark, by comparison, has half the population, had almost 8,000 women working the streets, roughly 50 per cent of whom had been trafficked. While recent figures show that approximately 600 women are trafficked into Sweden each year, up to 15,000 are trafficked annually from Eastern Europe into Finland alone. Sweden is clearly neither an economic nor desirable destination for traffickers.

At this level the evidence is compelling, but I remain somewhat ambivalent, since experience tells me that the picture is unlikely to be this rosy or straightforward. Australia is not the same as the culturally conformist and relatively homogeneous Sweden. We do not have the same welfare state, nor do we have a population as apparently dedicated to eradicating inequality and promoting social justice. The supporters of such groups as the Eros Foundation would argue that it is a fundamental civil right to do what one wants with one's body, even if that means commercialising it. That does not wash in relation to slavery, and it should not in relation to prostitution. Perkins and Lovejoy remind us that prostitution can be 'good enough' work for some, but Sullivan's point remains: prostitution is male sex-right in action, and this is where we need to start.