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The Privilege of Refusal

A sex-worker's reflection

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ABSTRACT | In this short reflection essay, I examine the conditions that enabled my acts of refusal as a sex worker and activist in Aotearoa New Zealand. Drawing on lived experience and critical reflection across a decade of sex work and activism, I argue that acts of refusal are a privilege that can challenge and transform perceptions of marginalised communities. The privilege of refusal is both deeply personal and inherently collective. My individual acts of refusal — refusing the victim/agent binary, refusing to be hidden, refusing to be isolated, and refusing singular identities — have been enabled by structural privileges, and created ripple effects extending beyond my own experiences. Through this piece, I exercise the privilege of speaking from within rather than being spoken about, working toward a future where such refusals become less necessary.

Keywords: Sex work; privilege; refusal; activism; Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Introduction

I can remember deciding to 'give sex work a go'. I was in my early 20's and running a pizza store, with intentions to buy my own franchise and build my own little pizza empire. My goal was saving for a large deposit for a business loan, but my minimum wage income was a barrier to that; so I decided impulsively to look into sex work as a means to make a $100,000 deposit as fast as possible. After a quick google search 'is sex work legal in New Zealand?', I discovered that New Zealand operated under a decriminalised model. In 2003 New Zealand enacted the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA), meaning sex work was no longer a crime (importantly, it was not legalised either, which would have imposed governmental regulation and control). Without really understanding what that meant, I made a call to a company that advertised sex workers to clients and created my first advert selling—me. My partner at the time took some photos of me in lingerie (face and any identifying tattoos cropped out). In my first night I made more than double that of a week running the pizza store—from here I never looked back.

I knew this 'easy money' was my way to fast track my dreams of owning my own store, so I worked my 'regular' job 6 days a week, and spent my evenings and weekends being a sex worker. But I quickly fell in love with the job. It was flexible, allowed me to explore most of the country, and most importantly to me, it gave me connection to a variety of people (both clients and colleagues) who filled my 20s with experiences and meaning that shaped me into the adult I am today.

I worked mostly from a 'work room' (a spare bedroom in my home), but I often toured: I drove around the country in my station wagon full of supplies, from hotel to hotel. I provided full-service: I had sex with many of my clients, but I also provided sensual massage and dinner date services. Most of my clients were middle aged, wealthy men, who desired intimacy and connection. The day-to-day of the job was mostly having diverse and fascinating conversations with clients and washing towels. I also learned how to make a really pretty bed!

I was raised in a household where conversations about sex and sexuality were not avoided, obscured by discomfort or made to be a topic of taboo and stigma. We often explored themes such as gender identity, bodily autonomy, and power and oppression in relation to the world around us. Perhaps it was this environment that created the mindset for me that sex work is work. My experiences in the industry, however, were privileged. This privilege has impacted my identity and experiences both in and out of the sex industry. Above all, it granted me opportunities to refuse: to refuse the victim/agent binary, to refuse to be hidden, to refuse to be isolated, and to refuse to use singular identities. This short reflection is about all these refusals.

The practice of refusal is an act of resistance to dominant power structures that actively challenges the frameworks and categories we use to understand and engage with the world. The term originates from Black feminist scholar Denise Ferreira da Silvas' work exploring how Black feminists acts of refusal can be more than simply refusing to conform to dominant ways of being and knowing. Refusal can become the driving force behind changes in how we conceptualise identity, subjectivity and social relations.

Rather than working within traditional frameworks — and thus reinforcing them — refusal involves rejecting imposed terms and creating new ways of knowing that move beyond the limitations of those frameworks, toward more

transformative and inclusive possibilities. Within sex work, da Silvas' theory allows us to examine and challenge the fundamental categories and assumptions that structure how society understands sex work.

This essay explores the privileged conditions that enabled my acts of refusal — acts of resistance — through self-ethnography and critical reflection on my decade within the sex work and activism community in New Zealand.

Refusing the Victim/Agent Binary

I remember after a few years in the industry I was working on improving my mental health. I reached out to a few therapists about concerns related to lifelong depression and was confronted with the victim/agent binary. The victim/agent binary assumes sex workers are either victims pushed into the industry out of desperation, or empowered women who love every aspect of their job — creating an illusion that one must either despise every part of the job, or live to an impossible standard of empowerment through every mundane act (I dare you to find anyone who finds paying taxes and booking hotels empowering). After describing my battle with depression my therapist focused her questions on how I became a sex worker, and if I had experienced harm at work. When the answers failed to provide her with fuel for the victim/agent binary she suggested the solution to my depression was to change my job to a 'less stressful, less risky environment'. This person was assuming that my long-standing mental health concerns would be relieved by returning to a safer career — highlighting the victim narrative and the idea of sex work as inherently dangerous.

As far as safe or stressful work environments, my time running the pizza store or working as an animal welfare inspector were both more stress inducing, and more dangerous. I found myself instead leaning into the agent role in the binary — reinforcing it by pushing the more empowering aspects of the job and shying away from anything that might suggest I was a victim. I soon realised the therapist's own stigma about the industry was influencing our time together. I stopped seeing them and have since found people who accept sex work as any other work, providing opportunities for me to explore and resolve my mental health concerns without forcing a binary narrative upon me.

This experience taught me the privilege in being able to refuse this binary — going beyond the victim and agent categories entirely and insisting on a more complex understanding of my experiences that does not conform to societies need to categorise sex workers in simplified terms. My refusal became an act of creating space for new narratives and understanding, acknowledging the multifaced nature of sex work without reducing it to either trauma or empowerment, but instead as labour that exists within the same spectrum of human experience as any other labour.

Refusing to be Hidden

A few years ago, the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) asked if I would like to be interviewed as a sex worker for the 6pm news, for a piece about section 19 of the PRA (the exclusion of migrant sex workers from protections of the act). I agreed and was then asked if I would like my face blurred and voice distorted. By this point in my career, I had been loudly existing as a sex worker in my private and professional lives — discussing my job with curious friends, and advertising 'face out'. Despite industry norms of anonymity, I refused to be censored and used

photos in my advertising that showed my face and tattoos. The choice I made to go on the national news without blurring or distorting myself was an act of refusing to be hidden.

This visibility was also a profound act of refusal against shame and stigma that demand sex workers remain hidden and compartmentalised. Making us anonymous makes it easier to devalue and dehumanise us, in turn making it easier to create policies that perpetrate harm. By refusing to be hidden I presented the sex worker rights issue as I would have any other workers' rights issue. By refusing to be hidden I was fighting against the oppression that pushes sex workers into private spaces and reinforces the power of shame and stigma and the need for anonymity and caution despite the PRA.

As well as advertising 'face out' and appearing on the 6pm news as a sex worker, I have continued to refuse being hidden through my academic studies. When I applied for university entry, I did not have the entry requirements and needed to write a letter explaining why I would make a good student. Front and centre for me was the experiences I had as a sex worker, and I chose to 'out' myself (tell whoever was reading my application that I was a sex worker).

This refusal highlights the privilege of working under a decriminalisation model. I did not have to hide or lie about a resume gap and could instead use my experiences as an advantage. This privilege has followed me through the past five years, as I have been able to critically reflect upon my experiences, weaving them into assignments and projects, having opportunities to guest lecture for an anthropology class, and now having the opportunity to share those experiences with you, the reader.

My refusal to be hidden challenges the notion that sex workers must exist in secrecy to be tolerated by society, asserting instead my right to occupy public space as a whole person. My refusal to be hidden disrupts controlling frameworks, creating space for a more complex understanding that moves beyond these limiting binaries. Through my visibility, I worked toward undoing expectations and challenging norms of who a sex worker is — something I pride myself in continuing to do through opportunities that arise from my privileges.

Refusing to be Isolated

The relationship I have with my best friend challenges traditional understandings of kinship. We met online, through a forum mostly aimed toward clients, but which offered an opportunity for sex workers to connect with each other and potential customers. Our friendship grew as we had many things in common — our customer base was similar, we provided similar but complimentary services, we both advertised 'face out' and we were both in our early 20's. After getting to know each other a little I sought her help and advice on how to work while on my period — industry tips and insider tricks she openly shared with me. It was not long before our friendship blossomed, and we became close friends and colleagues.

We lived on different islands but would work from each other's homes while on tour (travelling around New Zealand working) and toured and worked 'doubles' together — a client with two sex workers. Nobody could deny our chemistry, we got along so well our friendship became part of our brands, eventually moving in together in Wellington. She invited me into her home and her heart — her daughter has become my niece, but traditional labels cannot

describe the familial role she plays in my life. She is more than a best friend, more than a sister, more than a mother — these terms do not express the depth of our connection.

Together we refused the isolation that stigma attempts to impose on sex workers, creating instead a family unit that challenges the normative assumptions about how intimacy, care, and kinship are formed. I will always look back on my 20's with fondness, remembering fits of laughter, the sharing of financial burdens, and the realisation that from the outside we appeared to be a queer family — but that were only 'gay-for-pay' while navigating the world as sex workers.

Another way I refused isolation is the surprise of a shift in the boundaries of relationships with some clients. I had one long-time client who I would see many times a month. Over several years, our relationship evolved beyond its commercial origins into an authentic connection. We have shared hunting trips, birthday celebrations, and family gatherings — refusing the traditional provider/client transactional relationship and rejecting the notion that sex work precludes genuine human connection. While sex work often involved my acting to perform the client's fantasy, it also involved a level of authentic intimacy and in some cases meaningful personal connection between a client and myself.

These relationships both emerged from and enabled my acts of refusal. The support I found in my closest friend and a long-time client gave me the confidence to be face-out, to challenge the victim/agent binary, and to occupy public space as a whole person. In turn, my refusal to hide created opportunities for deeper connections with others who recognised and valued my authenticity. This cyclical relationship between refusal and my community demonstrates how individual acts of refusal can create deep intimate connections and familial bonds, while the community support enables forms of individual refusal. For those not privileged enough to form connections at work, the NZPC always offer a warm space to seek connection and support for sex workers. The privilege of refusing to be isolated is not always available to all sex workers, but when it exists, it transforms not only personal experience, but the broader landscape of what sex work can be.

Refusing Singular Identities

My identity as a sex worker remains something I wear with pride. While my privileged experiences cannot represent the diversity of all sex workers, they offer insights into a world that exists at the intersection of private and public life. Yet, as I have moved deeper into academia, I have felt an unsettling tension — as if I am being pulled between two fundamental parts of who I am, when the reality is that both identities coexist and inform each other in ways that others struggle to understand or accept. This internal struggle intensified during my transition from activist to academic. Years have now passed since I was a sex worker, and I find myself worrying about becoming disconnected from my community, my voice growing quieter where it once boldly declared 'I am a sex worker'. New relationships have formed, where my sex worker identity remains unspoken, creating a compartmentation that can sometimes feel like betrayal.

The tension reached its peak when I was recently invited to guest lecture for an anthropology course. Standing before those students, I felt academic expectations crushing down: would I use the right terminology? Could I answer their questions? Was someone present to whom I had not yet 'come out' to? But

as I began speaking, something fundamental shifted inside me, as I realised that sanitising my experiences by fragmenting my identities was just another form of silencing — another way society demands sex workers hide parts of who they are to gain social acceptance. In that moment, I chose to embrace what self-ethnography has to offer: the researcher and the researched unified in one body.

Instead of discussing sex work as an abstract object of study, I spoke from my dual position as both academic and former sex worker. I shared how anthropological theories played out in my lived reality — how literature on boundary negotiation could never capture the complex moment when a regular client becomes a genuine friend, when professional and personal boundaries blur through authentic connection. Theories of shame, stigma, and marginalisation explain structural exclusion, but they cannot convey the embodied shame of fearing exposure by 'being outed', or the specific relief of finding a therapist whose tone does not shift when you disclose your work.

This moment, shared with these kind and curious students, transformed my understanding of identity and knowledge. Rather than competing selves, I began recognising complimentary sources of insight that together reveal truths invisible to traditional academic research or unreflective experience alone. My academic identity provides access to institutional spaces and theoretical frameworks that contextualise and politicise experiences. My sex worker identity brings embodied knowledge — wisdom earned through washing countless towels while calculating rent money, understanding that lives in the body and resists easy articulation yet contains deep insights about intimacy, labour, and human connection.

Identity, I now understand, is neither fixed nor singular but dynamic — complex layers weaving together to create something powerful and new. My academic journey has not erased my identity as a sex worker; instead, it reveals how auto-ethnographic research illuminates dimensions of experience that remain invisible to conventional inquiry. Refusing singular identity means recognising that lived experience does not need to be reduced to data for analysis. It can stand as a legitimate way of knowing that challenges theoretical assumptions and disrupts social norms. In embracing this multiplicity, I have found not fragmentation but wholeness — a refusal to let any institution, academic or otherwise, dictate which parts of myself are acceptable. By refusing a singular identity, and incorporating all parts of myself into a whole, complex person, I can resist oppression that attempts to push sex workers out of public spaces and into private spaces. My refusal represents my resistance to oppression and hopefully changes and shapes everyday understandings of the sex industry and sex workers. We are, after all, just people.

Conclusion

The privilege of refusal is both deeply personal and inherently collective. My individual acts of refusal — refusing the victim/agent binary, refusing to be hidden, refusing to be isolated, and refusing singular identities — have been enabled by my privileges and created ripple effects extending beyond my own experiences. Each refusal contributes to broader transformation, challenging dominant knowledge and ways of being to create a more inclusive world. Refusing the victim/agent binary reconstructs expectations about what sex workers can experience and how they navigate agency; refusing to be hidden challenges norms

that dictate where and who a sex worker can be; refusing isolation builds supportive communities and creates opportunities for collective resistance; refusing singular identities validates the complexity of lived experience and the power of embodied knowledge.

My journey has shown me that privilege carries responsibility. My ability to be 'out' as a sex worker in academic spaces stems from my citizenship status, my race, my background, and support networks. Many sex workers cannot make those same choices without risking safety, employment, or housing. This reality shapes how I understand the privilege of refusal—it demands using these platforms to create pathways for others and to disrupt knowledge systems that reduce sex workers to victims hiding in the shadows.

The privilege of refusal extends beyond individual identity negotiations to challenge entire knowledge production systems. Through auto-ethnographic research I can question assumptions that might never occur to outside researchers. This represents a fundamental privilege: the ability to speak from within, rather than being spoken about.

Ultimately, the privilege is about transformation that extends beyond individual advancement. Through refusing the categories and boundaries that society imposes on sex workers, we create space for new ways of being and knowing. Through sharing our stories strategically, we invite others to imagine different possibilities. Through leveraging privilege responsibly, we work toward a future where sex workers have greater access to opportunities for refusal — and perhaps, one day, where such refusals are less necessary. The privilege of refusal is not a burden to bear alone, but a tool for collective liberation. In embracing both the opportunities and responsibilities it brings, we transform not just individual lives but the very structures that shape all our possibilities.

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