

The New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) is an organisation founded on the rights, welfare, health, and safety of sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and globally. The collective is committed to ensuring the agency of sex workers in all aspects of life. After years of lobbying by the NZPC to overturn an archaic law founded on double standards, whereby sex workers and third parties were prosecuted for acts such as soliciting and brothel keeping, the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 saw the decriminalisation of commercial sex activities and allowed for third parties to operate brothels. Aotearoa New Zealand remains the only country to decriminalise most commercial sex work and endorse the rights of sex workers. Dame Catherine Healy has been with the NZPC since its inception in 1987. As the national coordinator she is a vocal lead activist and advocate for sex workers' rights. She also publishes extensively on sex workers' rights. In 2018, Catherine was presented with a Dame Companion to the New Zealand Order of Merit in acknowledgment for working for the rights of sex workers. Dr Denise Blake is an academic and the chair of the NZPC Board. Denise has been involved in the sex industry in a variety of roles for a number of years, and also advocates strongly for the rights of sex workers. In this interview, Catherine talks to Denise and Amanda Thomas about her work and the history of the NZPC.

Telling Stories: Sex Workers' Rights in Aotearoa New Zealand

CATHERINE HEALY with DENISE BLAKE & AMANDA THOMAS

AMANDA THOMAS – Thank you very much for making this time and for being willing to chat to us. Could you start by saying a little bit about your journey, how you were politicised, and how you came to occupy such a public role in working for sex workers' rights?

CATHERINE HEALY – When I was a young woman I was really inspired by lots of things that my older sister seemed to be involved in. It was the 70s when I went through high school, so we had people protesting about lots of things. The Springbok tour, in particular, was something that was very prevalent through the 70s and 80s and that had a great influence. Also, the feminist movement was very pronounced and that meant a lot. Germaine Greer, for example, came to New Zealand in 1970 when I was in the fourth form and that seemed to be fantastic really. Not that Germaine Greer is somebody I admire today because she is anti-trans and I think also anti-sex workers. I went on to university and teachers' college simultaneously. I was very shy—I would go to things, but I wouldn't speak; I didn't have that kind of voice. But I was very earnest and when I was 20 I joined a university friendship delegation and went to China on a study tour. I had a great interest in China at that time because when you're 20 you are looking to see what's different. I would go to

little study groups as well because I was quite earnest.

There were two separate campuses, so Wellington Teachers' College was autonomous, and it was a very liberal institution in its day. I went there as a 17-year-old and they were impressive really. Teachers' college is always regarded as a softer kind of option. But it gave me a bit of income, so I could go to university simultaneously; I chugged down there on my motorbike and split my time between the two campuses. But the Wellington Teachers' College I have a lot to thank for because it was very progressive at the time. A lot of us benefited from a very liberal institution; it opened our minds up and the 70s just seemed to be a magical time for that.

AMANDA – So how long were you a teacher for?

CATHERINE – Nine years I taught. My first year was out in Porirua East. I taught in all sorts of contrasting schools so that was interesting. It's a really, really hard occupation, but lots of good memories. The thing for me though was that I felt I would never leave school and I was really pushing to get out. And I always had different parts to my life; I like to travel a lot and got away on those long school holidays and I just thought, 'oh God, going back to teach for another year'. I got to that crossroads really where I was 30 and felt that I had to take a year's leave of absence. By then I had started night work in a massage parlour to pay off the visa bill from the travel, because travel was really expensive in those days; so that's how I became a sex worker.

DENISE BLAKE – How did you first learn about massage parlours? How did you first start working there?

CATHERINE – I think the first time I heard about massage parlours was probably around the mid-70s. In 1978 I was living in a flat. There were nine bedrooms in this flat but I'm sure there weren't nine people. It was massive, one of those big, tiered mansions around the Terrace. There was sort of a bar that was operating in the basement. There were two masseuses living

there and occasionally I would see them, but mostly I would be tootling off to school and teaching and stuff. So that's when I first learned that there were massage parlours. I definitely did not make the connection that they were sex workers. They may not have been because I think people were paid some money for massaging in those days. I also flatted with someone, also round that era, '78, '79, and she was working out on the street and I didn't realise this at first. She had met somebody and she got into injecting heroin and then she started sex work and bringing people home, and so I learnt about her experience as well.

In 1986 when I had been teaching for about eight-and-a-half years, I thought, 'gosh I need a night time job to top up teaching', and it could have been bar work, it could have been anything, but these adverts kept on popping up. The adverts would say things like, 'no training required'; I don't know if they said, 'dollars, dollars, dollars', they possibly did. I saw one for a receptionist in a massage parlour. I was living at the time with my mother, trying to recoup after travelling, and I remember saying to her, 'mum, I think I will go work at a massage parlour'. And she said, 'if you do, I will have to sell up and go and live in Spain'. I don't think mum and I really knew what massage parlours were except that they were naughty, and naughty enough to be a little bit too risqué for my mother.

AMANDA – So that's quite a contrast to the mental image I have of your earnest self as a student.

CATHERINE – Well, that's right. I discovered hedonism and travel for pleasure and credit cards. So that's how I started. I was hired as a receptionist and I didn't quite appreciate where I was working. I thought it really was about massage and I didn't really know what massage was anyway, apart from having gorgeous head massages in Bali. Massages weren't common, I didn't really know what they were about. But I thought perhaps that the woman had to go topless.

But anyway, my job was just to answer the phone and say 'hello, Number 12', fold the towels, do the laundry, run around, and write in

the big book the appointments. The manager of the business said, ‘look if you need anything, I will be over the road at the St George’, which was the pub where she preferred to see creditors, people she owed money to. So they would turn up periodically looking for her and I would be the gormless receptionist on Friday and Saturday nights. I would say, ‘no sorry I can’t help you, I don’t know where she is’. I would book these people in and they would be wanting a 35- or a 45-minute massage, or sometimes a connoisseur, and so I would book them in and introduce them to the women. And the women were really fantastic. I was a dowdy old school teacher with flat shoes and they wore these wonderful gowns that were amazing. They would float around in these silky things and they really were impressively groomed.

DENISE – Sophisticated, smoked inside.

CATHERINE – Yeah, scary!

DENISE – So how long were you a receptionist for?

CATHERINE – Two months. I jumped. I jumped the desk. Well, it was the second night I discovered all was not what it seemed.

AMANDA – It was a bit more than this [head rubbing].

CATHERINE – I got a big telling-off from one of the women because I had booked in a ‘straight’ and I didn’t know that a straight meant somebody who didn’t have money to pay for extras, and that extras were indeed about sex, and if they didn’t make money from extras they didn’t make any money at all.

The women had a lot to say as well—they were eclectic really, all kinds of women. On a shift there were women studying while others were sitting around when work wasn’t busy enough; and they had lots of pressures on them, you know, women with children. It was incredibly diverse. It was busy too. There was a little illicit bar that operated on the ground floor

and that would get chocca, and the women would question, you know, ‘why does she let them in?’ But it wasn’t me; this was when the manager would return. She would have these little parties and all these men would be crowded into the bar and the women would be quite frustrated because they would want the clients to come through for bookings with them instead of drinking.

So we would talk a lot. We would talk about how unfair things were and that became sort of the impetus. There was another crowd who came as a group. They were incredibly cohesive, and they came over from another massage parlour—their one was being renovated. They were known as ‘the women from the Lily’, and so they came over to Number 12, which formerly had been The House of Ladies. And they came en masse. They were living together and to me they seemed to be very cohesive socially and had a lot to say about conditions at work. So it was sort of a backwards and forwards discussion about what we needed to do, and we were all scared about HIV and how that would impact on us.

AMANDA – And then it started to kind of formalise into something more cohesive?

CATHERINE – Well the formality was a really interesting thing. We didn’t actually want to, we didn’t want to bore ourselves rigid and have meetings. We wanted to kind of keep a free thing going, so it formed quite organically. So we were talking and saying we needed to have an organisation, we needed to do something.

In Australia, we were conscious they had sex worker organisations there. We had heard about the Americans, and we had heard about the English, and then we came to hear about the French who of course had kicked off the whole second wave of sex worker rights in 1975. The French sex workers had locked themselves in a church and protested about police violence. So then the English Collective of Prostitutes did the same. There was also a connection to the names. There was the Australian Prostitutes’ Collective and there was and the Prostitutes’ Collective of Victoria. We

were conscious that there were sex worker rights organisations for women. And so we felt it was time for us to organise something. But it was kind of like we would meet in the pub, we would go to a room and we would sit there and come up with these ideas for things that we needed to do. We felt that people didn't have a fair take on us.

DENISE – So you wanted to be really safe and really inclusive?

CATHERINE – We didn't have those words. Yeah, why can't we be accepted really?

DENISE – I was thinking about those women that would be excluded from that because obviously the industry is big and there are different types of women in the industry. What was it about your group that enabled you to be conscious of what was going on? Because my understanding is there's a whole lot of sex workers that don't have any knowledge about what is happening internationally.

CATHERINE – Yes, I think there's a lot in that. I remember when we reached out to street-based sex workers. We were working in a fairly well-heeled situation; there were people who had a whole range of different experiences and education, but the one thing we could all do in these massage settings was hide tattoos. You know, that sounds funny, but it was one of the many things that was used to keep women apart in those scenes.

AMANDA – Like in a classed dynamic that coloured the scene a wee bit? Like the tattoos?

CATHERINE – Well a little bit, yeah. You know, people have records. That was the other thing that kept you out of those places: if you had a drug conviction and that was found out.

DENISE – There was a class distinction aye, amongst the parlours, like

who got into where. Not necessarily from the women though, it's just the way it happened.

CATHERINE – Often it would be how somebody appeared to be as opposed to how they actually were. Bill Crow had a reputation for having really snooty sex workers, the *crème de la crème* sort of situation, and the clients would be explained as if they were the who's who. They quite possibly were the who's who, but the bulldozer driver would come up once a week as well. Some of the women who were working up there were people who had convictions and they couldn't be hired in the downtown massage parlours which were heavily policed.

In 1978 there was an attempt to try and contain and control sex workers and so it was all put into the Massage Parlour Act. There were heavy regulations about monitoring masseuses and anyone who was convicted of anything related to prostitution was evicted. We had a woman who the police said was going to be convicted of possessing marijuana. Someone sent her a roach in the mail. Even prior to her conviction she was going to be tossed out. Well our response to that was to hide her so she could continue to work there. Two of the other workers took her name so when clients would ring up to see who was on shift, they'd say, 'oh you know, Jane, Jane, and Jane'.

DENISE – Yeah, because as much as there were, kind of, class divisions, there was real comradery aye. There was real protection. Everyone protected each other no matter where you came from. Is that your experience?

CATHERINE – Yeah, I think so. I think when we looked there were different personalities related to each of the places. Thinking about people who did have drug convictions, often it was safer for people to work in places where there was a more liberal approach to that, so it wasn't necessarily about class. It certainly could be about perceptions related to beauty. The class thing is kind of an obvious one, but I don't think it's necessarily *the* thing actually. I think it was a bit more complicated.

AMANDA – So with NZPC, lots of solidarity across that space coagulated into something. Tell me from there what happened. I was saying to Denise before that I was really interested that in the late-80s NZPC was getting government funding. She was explaining a bit of the background around that, but maybe you can pick up there?

CATHERINE – From the group that started talking about what we needed to do we branched out quite quickly to reach out to other people. I went out to the street-based sex workers quite early on. At the same time, New Zealand is a small country and somebody in the Department of Health heard about us through personal contacts and rang me and said she was with the AIDs task force. She had heard that I was a sex worker and that we were going to be doing something and would we like to meet to talk about this. Also, there was somebody who was trans, a woman who worked in the Department of Labour and she was aware that probably there was money that was going to be given to sex workers or should be given to sex workers. So she also made contact with us. She had been battling away for trans rights back then and she was also a public servant, so she and I and one other sex worker went to this meeting with the Department of Health. We talked about the reality of sex work and at that point they said, ‘well, would you be interested in doing something, applying for funding?’

And so we went away and talked about that as a group. I think there were about nine of us sitting in a big circle saying, ‘do we want to have government funding, what should we do if we got it?’ They offered \$35,000 and, you know, we were earning big money back then so the money wasn’t the thing for us, it was the independence. So we just thought, okay well if we have that money we could probably set up community places where sex workers could come. We could do a magazine and we started to think about that and thought that would be a good use of the money; and we asked for \$50,000. Somebody said, ‘ask for more’, and the government came back and said, ‘yes, we’ll give you a contract’. We heard about that, I think, in early ‘88.

In October ’88 we got our first community centre and got a telephone line. We decorated the community base with pink cushions. It was a little

cottage. We had to go out looking and that was an exercise in itself to talk and say, 'look we are who we are and we're going to be doing this'. HIV played a huge part in being able to explain what we were about and, you know, people kind of responded to that.

DENISE – What was the connection with the needle exchange?¹

CATHERINE – The needle exchange in Wellington came along afterwards and so we said, 'well, why don't you come in and share with us'. It just seemed to make sense to have the needle exchange come in and they seemed to be having difficulties trying to get a place.

DENISE – So they were formed and approached separately by the Department of Health?

CATHERINE – Yes, but by the same AIDs task force. They were approached, I think, before us, because it was easier to make contact with drug groups than to access sex workers.

DENISE – So of the core nine women you were saying that got together, were any of them crossing over those worlds? To make those connections?

CATHERINE – Yes, definitely. And that was really, really important and useful. I was really a fan of that, bringing those factions together, those different scenes together. The other thing that struck me was that the street-based sex workers were incredibly organised as well, because a lot of them were performing in clubs and were trans workers. When I went out to speak

1 The National Needle Exchange Programme (NEP) began in 1987, also in response to AIDs, as a peer-based service for drug users, after activists from the intravenous-drug-using community advocated for safe injection services. New Zealand became the first country with a national network of exchanges. As well as providing health and education, NEP provides free clean needles and syringes in exchange for used ones. Today, there are 20 NEP outlets, and 180 pharmacies and alternative outlets supplying safe injection equipment.

to them I felt so inadequate—they looked down at me from a great height and I had never met anyone who was trans before so that was incredible. They came into the community centre as a group. I was really thrilled, but some people weren't. There was sort of this separatist issue, from both sides actually, so there was a lot of discussion about trans rights. We listened to what they wanted, and they wanted their own separate space, so we went on to hire another place on Vivian Street for the trans population. But then the police came to us and said we had to close the lease, or they would charge me with brothel keeping because the trans workers were supposedly taking their clients back there.

DENISE – What about the homosexual law reform? Did that feed into the movement as well?

CATHERINE – It did, definitely. We were inspired and encouraged and supported by the New Zealand AIDs Foundation. I mean, we became aware we were coming into something bigger than us, a bigger kind of jigsaw. We had our own particular issues with the perceptions that people had of us as sex workers, the attitudes that the police had towards us and the actions they took against us. We were arrested periodically. You know, that whole sort of stigma around being a sex worker when you didn't feel you were a law breaker. It attacked your integrity and I think that it was what we all felt, that we weren't dangerous people. All these things were bubbling away and we had our own particular thing, but becoming a part of that big AIDs community was really important.

AMANDA – So then what happened after the Vivian Street place was shut down?

CATHERINE – Well, we regrouped. It was a shame it didn't work at that time but all our communities were quite stressed—we had to learn how to do a lot of things that we didn't necessarily have the skills for. We were volunteers for a long time and we didn't have an employment structure, so

we were all volunteers; but quite early on it was the three groups, because we also took on the National People Living with AIDs Union, so there were three groups using the space. We hired someone to open up for all of us and who was our first sort of secretary for all the three groups. And then suddenly you realise that you're a boss and that wasn't what you had signed up for, so you had to learn to grow an organisation.

We kept the informal thing going as long as we could and then the Department of Health said, 'you have to have a structure we can engage with', so we had to go to the lawyer and we had to get a structure in place, and we spoke to the lawyer at the time and said, 'don't bother with too much paper work, we want the very smallest structure that can hold us together'. So we set up as a charitable trust at that stage.

DENISE – What was the kaupapa back in those days? What was the drive for NZPC and how did it become about law reform?

CATHERINE – It became about law reform, I think, with our first submission in July 1989.

DENISE – Oh, so straight away it was about law reform?

CATHERINE – Yeah, it was. I always think we've had three organisations, three parts to it, and for some people it was about sexual health, sexual reproductive health, and HIV and AIDs awareness and prevention. And for others it was about fighting for some understanding, you know, 'see us for who we are beyond those negative images'. And for others it was a place to come and actually work, and that was really important for some people who would say, 'all I have known is sex work and I actually appreciate being able to come to a place and to do a shift, open the doors, distribute the condoms, needles, and syringes'.

AMANDA – So thinking about the mahi to decriminalise sex work; thinking as well about the strategies and the sort of tactics that you all used in the lead-up.

CATHERINE – We just did what was obvious. My least favourite word is strategy. Do what you see and then look for what you can't see. We didn't sit there and plan ever. Do you remember [directed to Denise]?

DENISE – No, I don't remember that.

CATHERINE – It wasn't a matter of sitting down and saying, 'and now we must go and see if the National Council of Women will support us or the Māori Women's Welfare League'. You know, it was the things that presented, that came before us, and the times.

DENISE – Yeah, it's almost like, you know, the business model gets imposed on the grassroots model, and it is really grassroots aye. It's every day. Like got to get the money for the rent; got to distribute condoms; got to get people doing what they are doing; and then this person might know that person and then you might have those conversations. It's much more like that rather than sitting down and going, 'in two years' time this is where the business income is going to be'.

CATHERINE – I think the miracle is we stayed together. You know, the divides that could have occurred; and I think we have, for the most part, stayed pretty well together as an organisation. In the early years there was just so much in front of us that we had to meet. And it seemed to come at us too. I think one of the things that kicked off really quickly was the media interest and that was really helpful. And somebody gave me a sage bit of advice: never ignore them. Speak to them always and it doesn't matter how, just keep speaking to them. That was incredibly useful. It's been a useful way to get messages out and build interest and achieve public opinion.

DENISE – When it came to law reform, why did the organisation choose decriminalisation instead of legalisation?

CATHERINE – We chose decriminalisation because that's a model where

the laws are completely repealed. So the laws that stood in our way stopped us from being able to work safely were taken off the statute books and other laws kicked in, like labour laws. All those laws that protect people from violence became available to sex workers. Because sex workers were scared to report violence to the police it was a problem. So once sex work was decriminalised it meant that sex workers could come forward and report problems if that's what they needed to do. Legalisation is not a model that we favour because it's usually about saying, 'okay you're legal but you're not'. You tend to end up with this population who have to jump through all sorts of hoops only to fail—'you can't be a sex worker, I'm sorry. You have a drug conviction'. What happens is you have people who are sex workers anyway, but they don't have all the protections that the legal sex workers have.

DENISE – So who drove the actual writing of the reform?

CATHERINE – We got a student on placement and we talked out our ideas and he came up with a paper. So that's, sort of, where we started to get ideas down. But, for a long time we thought the law would change and that would just happen if we kept speaking about it. We did know about going to parliament and presenting; we did that. But we didn't really connect all of those dots, we didn't realise we could actually get a thing called a private member's bill into place. We just thought that would happen, politicians would do their thing.

That disconnection probably cost us time, so it took a wee while, and it was Tim Barnett who came through. And so we talked about our ideas, and then a law professor, who is now a judge, came through and helped with the actual law, and we would sit around in committee meetings with all those other groups, like the Māori Women's Welfare League, the National Council of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Federation, and the New Zealand AIDs Foundation. We would all sit there and look at everything and we'd get to call most of the things that went into the bill at that point. After it went into the parliamentary process it became, in parts,

a bit of a run-away train that we have to live with, but in other parts its captured pretty much what we wanted.

DENISE – How much toing and froing was there in that process?

CATHERINE – It got really intense. There were three readings. The select committee had all those people submit; so a lot of people wrote submissions, a lot of people presented, and then it went back to the House for another reading and that's where the debates occurred and different politicians would say that they would support something. For example, the minister of immigration at the time said that she would support it providing there was this clause that said that you cannot come to New Zealand with the intention of being a sex worker because she was lobbied, and people said, 'oh my goodness, there will be people trying to traffic sex workers here', and they came up with that suggestion. We were upset about that because we didn't feel it was necessary, and of course we have this trouble now where people can come to New Zealand and they can work in most other occupations. But if they are working as a sex worker instead of at McDonalds, and they are studying in this country, they can be biffed out, so that causes harm. And people know this about these sex workers and they target them, so we have had a few episodes where people have been attacked or robbed and their status as migrant sex workers has been taken advantage of.

AMANDA – Were there many concessions that needed to be made?

CATHERINE – There were moments we thought we had pulled the wool over Phil Goff who was minister of justice at the time. We wanted the definition of brothel to be different from what it is at the moment—if you're a single sex worker and you're working from home, at the moment that counts as a brothel, and we don't think it should. We were sitting there hoping that the definition would be more generous and that he wouldn't pick up on what we were up too. But he did. So there are a few things that

we would certainly like to change. It's unlikely that we will get a chance to do that without a huge debate and we aren't fans of really having big strong debates and risking losing what we have already. There's stuff that we live with. I don't think it's fair that sex workers can be prosecuted for having unprotected sex. I think that's not the way. Prosecuting people isn't the way. The better way of encouraging people to take part in public health initiatives is to encourage, not to prosecute. But we have that sitting in the act—if you don't use a condom, or take all reasonable steps to use a condom, you can be prosecuted. And that's quite a crime. That's quite a thing to have to carry with you, having to declare that as you fill out a visa.

DENISE – The other thing I was thinking about was who was helping us? There wouldn't have been a lot of money, so did you just rely on the generosity of people, or did you get specific grants?

CATHERINE – No. I mean what did it really look like? It was phone calls at night, it was getting off to meetings. We didn't have any money to rub together. The only thing we had was common sense really. We knew it had to happen. We would be at a meeting, it would be a public health meeting around HIV and AIDs, and there would be an opportunity to say, 'look, sex workers are still having their condoms used as evidence. Where does that sit in the AIDs strategy or public health strategy?' It's very hard to say that there was any distinct action that was purely about law change. A lot of the time it was about building support.

DENISE – I was just thinking, in terms of the stories around who did the research, all that day-to-day mahi that goes into that—we didn't get funded for that.

CATHERINE – No. We contracted an early evaluation because it was put on us by the Department of Health. They said, 'you need to be evaluated because we get asked about your organisation a lot'. So we had to find that money within our budget and from that we formed a relationship with the

University of Otago, Christchurch School of Medicine. They did a lot of the research, not specific to law reform but specific to the circumstances that we were trying to operate in around HIV and sexual and reproductive health. It was specific to that. And, of course, immediately you run across hot wires: our literature that is designed to educate sex workers is being used to achieve a prostitution-related conviction. It's been funded by the Department of Health and it's been used as evidence by the police. Come on! There's a tension here that's got to be worked out.

We did throw our toys out of the cot actually. We offered to give our funding back in 1993 and also after a series of police raids. We had a part-time employee and I spoke to her at the time and said, 'do you know it's going to affect you? You're going to lose your job and you know we are deadly serious'. We needed the police, the Department of Health, Women's Affairs, and Justice, to think about this tension. We said, 'listen, we are going to give our funding back unless you set up a deeper departmental committee to review the laws governing prostitution and the context of what we are trying to do around HIV and AIDs'. And they did that. So that was sort of a modest request. Something that they could achieve and that they did.

AMANDA – It's really interesting hearing about some of the processes around legislative reform. You were talking about health and narrating a lot of this as a health issue, whereas lots of recent literature talks about it as a workers' rights issue—sex work is work, and sex workers are workers. I don't want to be too post-structural about it, and I'm thinking about you saying there was no strategy, but is it that you could gain the most political ground if you narrated it as a health issue?

CATHERINE – True, and we felt, 'this is our work, this is our job etcetera', but that didn't seem to win us allies actually. People found that hard to follow. And so we didn't use that as much. I mean, amongst ourselves we felt it. We would talk union. We'd say, 'it's our job damn it', but it wasn't something that would be as palatable out there.

AMANDA – And in terms of the landscape of solidarity, most of your solidarity came from health groups rather than unions?

CATHERINE – True, until later on when there was a bit of intersection, but certainly health was the big avenue.

DENISE – And that's because it came off the back of the whole AIDs issue, and then hepatitis C, and all of those.

CATHERINE – Yeah, it did. And some of the human rights stuff. In 1993, when the human rights legislation was amended to cover sexual orientation, thinking back on that, we should have been in there getting anti-discrimination protection. But you see its horse and cart because we didn't have decriminalisation. It's ludicrous that sex workers aren't protected, and you know we're victims of hate crimes. And I remember talking to a politician and he was quite taken by that and hadn't thought about it and said, 'but you can stop being a prostitute'. That was interesting because all the other groups that are covered by anti-discrimination legislation can't stop really. I think definitely we need protection under the Human Rights Act. We'll be watching that hate crime legislation, because people have been murdered in this country because they have been sex workers, no other reason.

AMANDA – I'm from Christchurch and I remember that spate of murders of sex workers and how they were reported.

CATHERINE – We had a student who did a study on the media and looked at sex work images and reporting. And he did it after 2003 so it would have been around the time the women were murdered. They have been disgusting in their depiction of sex workers.

DENISE – Because it's interesting with all the discussion around Ōtautahi, Christchurch, and the hate crime and the hate ethos down there. Sex

workers are still ignored in these current debates aye.

CATHERINE – It's just not in people's consciousness. You hear it said, 'well you know I don't want, didn't want to prostitute myself'. And it's just in the most tame settings, on radio interviews. People just say it, liberal people. They don't even imagine there's a person sitting there thinking, 'oh I'm a sex worker'.

AMANDA – Yeah growing up in Christchurch, Manchester Street was seen as funny; as kids we would drive down there to look at sex workers. And I think in a lot of mainstream New Zealand culture sex work is seen to be 'funny' and a lot of sex workers aren't seen as people.

DENISE – Still today. Still today, even with our law reforms. It's still a stigma that is so embedded in a lot of us.

CATHERINE – How many sex workers are 'out', not even just in this country but globally? That tells you about something. Gay men had to come out, the queer community had to come out and it was terrible. But sex workers aren't out.

DENISE – So how does it feel for you, because there are lots of people that still struggle to have a voice and be 'out', as you call it? What is it about you that you're able to be out?

CATHERINE – I've got this organisation and credibility with this organisation. But if I was just me as a sex worker speaking out, that would be really, really hard. You're alone, you don't have the buffer of an organisation.

AMANDA – Yeah, I have a friend who's a sex worker and it took a long time for her to tell me that was her work and her parents still don't know. She said they would disown her if they knew. There's still a long way to go to create a society where sex workers can be out and be safe.

DENISE – It's also about the children; there's a lot of sex workers that won't come out because of the risk to their children who have to live with the ongoing stigma and that's pretty tough.

CATHERINE – That's right. Adult children have come forward and spoken about that, the times they've been teased in the playground and so on. But I'm smiling because I had a lovely encounter with someone at one of those official things where the governor general was. A woman came up to me and said, 'my mother was a proud member of your organisation' and it was so lovely to hear that. She was talking about how after her mother had died they found condoms and they knew. She was just absolutely pleased to make that connection.

AMANDA – I'm thinking back to your mum saying she would have to up sticks and move to Spain if you worked in a massage parlour. What have been some of the costs to you as a person in this mahi?

CATHERINE – You know, my mother, of course, died feeling very proud of me; that was 22 years ago. My family is proud of me. The cost? I'm not sure of the cost. I'm not sure there has been a cost; I think it's been a gain. I think it's certainly been an amazing time.

DENISE – I know that you becoming a dame last year was really, really important. Not just to you but to all of us involved in this organisation and in this space. So are you aware of that? Are you aware of what that meant? Just like the law reform.

CATHERINE – Oh, you know, people come in and touch me and it just makes me want to cry. It's lovely, it's that history you know. I know that around the world it's had its ripple effect amongst the sex workers' rights organisations. And, of course, there are young ones too who have said, 'but you threw the migrant sex workers under the bus', with the expectation

that when you go in to change a law you have total control. Perhaps we made the wrong decision not to pull the bill at the time because of that issue. So we are accountable, I have to be accountable for what's happened in the past. And people say, 'you accepted a damehood? That's so colonial'. That's quite a hard thing. There's no comeback really.

I know that my peer group of sex workers' rights activists here in this organisation are proud of it. I think they are pleased about the damehood. I know that internationally, same thing, the people who have been around. It means a lot. I think it means recognition and respect. It's sort of an embrace, it's bringing together.

DENISE – Yup. It's about that 'as good as'. It's like, 'we are okay because someone amongst us is okay and society has said they are okay, so therefore it makes it okay for us'. People are so proud. Like, I am not that lowly stigmatised person that society thinks I am because I am a sex worker. And it's put it back on the map as an issue that we need to keep thinking about, and it's fantastic. I know there's all those other arguments, but when you're inside the circle, for many of us it's been really moving, just like the law reform. As much as there are holes, it's like, 'wow, society's actually given us a tick or something, or changed how they feel about it', so that's what's really important.

CATHERINE – I think you're right. I mean the damehood wasn't for working in the context of HIV and AIDs, it was actually given for working for sex workers' rights.

AMANDA – From the 'outsider' perspective to that as well, your mahi and the mahi of this collective carved out a space within the legislative sphere that the Left generally can be proud of, that builds a better, more inclusive community. It's like a gift to New Zealand; that sounds so cheesy, but it's something for us all that we can all feel proud of.

CATHERINE – Do you think? It is a Left splitting thing though isn't it,

because there's been criticism that comes from the Left.

AMANDA – Yeah and there are differences within the Left. There's the stuff about migrant sex workers, and then there are 'radical feminists' who criticise sex work who would say they are 'of the Left' but many would say they're not. Decriminalisation is about equality and justice, and they are denying the existence of, and rights to, a good life for sex workers and trans people. I don't think that's very Left.

DENISE – What difference has NZPC's work made internationally? You've been doing a lot of international collaboration, talk circuits—do you want to talk a little bit about that?

CATHERINE – Yes, NZPC is part of NSWPP, the Network of Sex Work Projects, and we value that network a lot. There's been work that's been carried out throughout that network that has resulted in us going to CEDAW, the Committee to Eliminate Discrimination Against Women, and taking the case of migrant sex workers there and having that included in the report that came back to the government, recommending that the government should have a look at the treatment of migrant sex workers. And we have been working as a part of that network around the status of women.

There's also a really strong push to export the Swedish model of law which really cripples the circumstances of the sex workers, makes their circumstances really reduced; it creates harm, causes problems. So sex workers across the globe are trying to push back. New Zealand, and New South Wales in Australia, have models based on the principles of decriminalisation. We're called on a lot to contribute and I think it's our responsibility to do that. It sounds a bit grandiose, but we are living these experiences and I know when we were looking to find our way in terms of law reform it was really hard to find anywhere that was useful except our mates across the ditch. We are fighting for people's lives in that regard.

We are at a pivotal time and Aotearoa New Zealand needs to play a special role here. We have a good working model here. There are, of course,

serious issues in relation to migrant sex workers that we are addressing. In the main, we are respectful of the rights of the sex workers. As a country we need to lift it up and say that we have a model for other countries to use and to remember that this country has come up with really interesting responses historically to the plight of women and now has stood up for the rights of sex workers.

DENISE – I feel quite emotional. I remember in 2003 I was sitting on my couch when the law reform went through and I was alone—there was no one with me when it was passed. I just started crying but there was no one to ring. But the next day I bought some flowers and I came in and saw you. We all came out of the woodwork to go, ‘wow, this is amazing, really amazing’.

We need to keep telling these stories rather than saying, ‘oh they didn’t get this right or they didn’t get that right’. And it’s the same with the dame-ing, it was just as significant for all of us. I just wanted to say thank you, I guess. Because it’s a really hard life being marginalised, being an activist. People don’t think about what it has cost you. It’s that constant battle, you’re battling every day against this world that is saying, ‘you’re not good enough. Shut up and go into the corner. Don’t exist. We are going to use you’. It was so significant for so many of us that that law was changed because we lived in so much fear for so long. That story needs to keep getting told because we’ve forgotten, people have forgotten what it was like for many of us to live under so much fear. You know nothing is ever perfect aye, but we have to remember how much it all meant.