

My Body, My Business: New Zealand Sex Workers in an Era of Change

By Caren Wilton, with photographs by Madeleine Slavick

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Sex work is often a topic of lively debate, both in academic and public settings, with discussions around morality, laws and exploitation often creating a noisy discursive space. What is often missing in these discussions is the voices of sex workers themselves, particularly such a diverse range of voices as those found in Caren Wilton's collection, *My Body, My Business: New Zealand Sex Workers in an Era of Change*. This book is a collection of eleven life stories from current and former sex workers in New Zealand, based on a series of oral history interviews conducted by Wilton (an oral historian) between 2009 and 2018, framed by simple yet evocative photographs taken by Madeleine Slavick.

The book begins with a concise introductory chapter which outlines the history of the New Zealand sex industry, including the decriminalization of sex work in 2003. In 2019, New Zealand remains the only country in the world to have decriminalized sex work. Apart from this brief introduction and a short epilogue, the book is devoted to the participants' life stories, told entirely in their own voices. One of the most striking things is the diversity of these voices: the storytellers range from young to old; there are men and women, cisgendered and trans people; some participants are Māori, some are Pākehā; and some are middle class while others grew up poor. These stories also capture the diversity of experiences for people who work in the industry. The work itself varied: some people participated in street work, some worked in brothels, some worked for escort agencies or as independent escorts and one woman, Mistress Margaret, worked as a professional dominatrix. The narratives of this diverse range of people challenge the assumptions, which underlie many accounts of the industry, that sex work is either inherently empowering or inherently exploitative, with participants having wildly differing experiences of their time in the industry. At the extremes, Anna Reed, the former regional coordinator of the Christchurch branch of the *New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC)* whose narrative is the subject of the first chapter, observed that she liked her job because "I like loving people and having sex with them" (57) while Jeanie, a former brothel and street worker, observed: "At times I felt a bit unclean or soiled" (232). But for most people whose stories are told in this book, sex work was experienced as just a job, a way to earn money, a means to an end.

While the experiences were diverse, there were some recurring themes. While there were a few exceptions, financial struggles marked many entries into the sex industry: for some, this was related to employment discrimination based on gender presentation or identity; for several others, their financial struggles was related to the difficulties in supporting children as single mothers. Broader social forces and the gendered nature of the industry were acknowledged by many participants. As Jeanie put it: "I felt it was sad both that man needed to buy sex, and that there weren't jobs, there wasn't work I could do that involved a better use of my talents and skills" (231). Yet these narratives demonstrate that while financial imperatives may draw people into the industry, this in itself doesn't define their experiences. Many participants described their work as therapeutic, as rewarding, some even described it in spiritual terms. But one of the most striking aspects of the stories is not just the diversity of industry experiences, but rather how well both the participants' richly detailed accounts of their lives, and Wilton's evident talent as an editor, work together to provide the reader with a complex

picture of individual lives that expanded well beyond their sex industry work. These are stories told by people in the sex industry, but in these stories they are not *just* sex workers, but also parents, partners, friends, lovers, artists and activists, with sex work often enabling participants to pursue other life goals.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, these narratives explore sex work in New Zealand throughout an ‘era of social change’. Certainly technological shifts have impacted on the industry, with a shift towards private escort work which has been enabled by the possibility of online advertising (as opposed to street-based work) apparent in the chronology of the overlapping narratives. One of the valuable contributions of this book, for a broader understanding of sex work, is the inclusion of trans workers, who described a shifting terrain of gender identity and social acceptance. While the broader academic literature on sex work has often included trans people as part of larger studies, there is little qualitative research that has engaged specifically with this group of workers, whose stories and experiences add different perspectives to the intersections between sex work, gender identity and social structures. There were four trans people among the storytellers – whose own self-identification reflects the shifting articulations of gender identity in the contemporary era, from the late and iconic Dana de Milo (a famous activist and community worker who passed on shortly before the publication of the book), who self-identified as a “queen”, to Stevie, a young person who defines themselves as a “non-binary takatāpui transsexual”. While discrimination against trans people is undoubtedly still an issue in contemporary New Zealand, the stories of trans participants also indicated the increasing acceptance of trans identities that activism had brought about. Poppy, who worked in the 1960s, describes the trailblazing efforts of her generation in being openly trans on the streets of Auckland: “We were stubborn Māori girls. Very stubborn Māori girls in those days. And thank goodness for us (...). We were tough girls. The 1960s was a tough world, you know?”(272).

The impetus for decriminalization in New Zealand was brought about in large part by the tireless work of NZPC, and the law change was implemented with a key focus on the human rights of sex workers. The importance of this law change was rendered apparent in deeply personal ways throughout the book. While research since 2003 has clearly shown that decriminalization has benefitted workers and improved police-worker relationships, the impact of the law change in individual stories was a powerful reminder of how laws impact on lives. Those who had worked prior to decriminalization described, at best, being ignored by police when they were victimized and being repeatedly arrested for prostitution-related offences. At worst, they described police harassment and violence. As Shareeda, who was arrested eight times while working, put it, “Decriminalization is the best thing that ever happened” (77). Allan observed that while he would not have before decriminalization, nowadays he would feel entirely comfortable calling the police if he were in danger, but furthermore, he argues that decriminalization has changed the entire experience of working in the industry: “as a worker you’re so much more empowered (...) It doesn’t have to be all dodgy. It changes the energy immediately of what you’re doing” (212).

Many of the voices in the book spoke of NZPC: some sought support from the collective, others were volunteers and activists, some waged employees, and there were interviews with some of the most prominent personalities in sex work activism, such as Anna Reed, and Dame Catherine Healy, a founding member and the national coordinator of NZPC. This aspect of the history of sex worker activism will also be fascinating to anyone interested in the path to decriminalization in New Zealand. While broader forces and multiple voices all impacted on

decriminalization, these deeply personal stories show the powerful role that individuals can and did play in effecting social change. The personal stories of family and community that underpin the well-documented history of NZPC's fight for law change add a needed richness to the history of sex work law reform in New Zealand.

While *My Body, My Business* offers new and nuanced accounts of the changing New Zealand sex industry, it is also an engaging read simply in terms of its storytelling. These brief memoirs capture the lives and personalities of the 11 people interviewed, with each storyteller distinct and coming across as a full, complex character. Past eras of New Zealand history are richly described. The depiction of 1970s and 80s Wellington in the accounts of Dana de Milo and Shareda, two transgender women brings this era to life beautifully. De Milo and Shareda's accounts incorporate street slang and snapshots of fascinating characters to portray a time period that may have been a challenging in terms of discrimination and law enforcement, but was also a time when a lively subculture blossomed in the gay-friendly bars and cafes of Wellington. These richly detailed accounts make this book a must-read not only for those interested in sex worker rights and activism, but also those interested in the recent history of New Zealand.