

No Country for Whistleblowers: A response to the culture-wide promotion of prostitution in New Zealand

Renée Gerlich

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Renée Gerlich is writer based in New Zealand. Her book *Out of the Fog: On Feminism, Politics and Coming Alive*, is due to be published by Spinifex Press in 2022. In 2021, she founded Dragon Cloud Press to release her Brief Complete Herstory, a history of the world from the Big Bang to present day neoliberalism, written from a female-centred perspective. The books are available at dragoncloudpress.com. The essay below was originally published on reneejg.net, with the following preface:

In October 2017, a request to write a critical article for the [Women's Studies Journal](#) was passed on to me. I was given a rather open brief to write a piece looking at the violence in prostitution in New Zealand, at short notice. The editors had done a call out for their "[sex work](#)" themed issue back in February, and were lacking in critical material - unsurprisingly, given the bias implicit in the theme. They did however have a very enthusiastic [submission](#) from the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective which, among other things, outright denies that sex trafficking takes place in New Zealand. So, I worked hard to write my response in the short time I was given - and then, funnily enough, the editors changed their mind about requiring it. This is the piece, amended for my blog: a comprehensive overview of trafficking, violence and silencing in New Zealand's sex trade.

Abstract

This paper responds to the culture-wide promotion of prostitution in New Zealand taking place under the government policy model of full decriminalisation. In New Zealand, prostitution takes place in a context of widespread violence against women; yet violence in prostitution is often glossed over. This is partly due to the “sex work” ideology that underpins a full decriminalisation policy model, as well as local lobbying by the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC), a member of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP). According to NSWP, “sex workers” can include “employers”, or pimps. This means that by design, “sex work” ideology has the power to drown out the testimony of prostitution survivors implicitly, by intimidation, and through the false attribution of violence in prostitution as stemming from “stigma” produced by critical testimony and analysis. The promotion of “sex work” ideology and suppression of industry critique and survivor testimony contributes to a culture of grooming and male entitlement, sanitises the realities of prostitution, and encourages journalists, university academics and the wider public to turn a blind eye to murder and rape in prostitution, as well as child prostitution, sex trafficking, post-traumatic stress, the criminalisation of victims and the need for exit services.

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New Zealand's sex trade is an especially high-risk place to be for any woman. For a start, globally, the rate of sexual violence against women in prostitution [is higher than](#) that committed against women in any other context. This, it would seem, is the reason that New Zealand's Ministry of Health funds the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) to the tune of \$1 million per annum: for harm reduction purposes, if none other. What's more, New Zealand's rates of male violence are comparatively high among OECD countries – it follows that the likelihood of

assault for women in prostitution in New Zealand is very high. It would be absurd to believe that men who purchase women in prostitution are less violent than the general male population.

In New Zealand, prostitution takes place in a context that feminists call “rape culture”. This phrase describes the way that male violence remains epidemic not incidentally, but through institutionalisation and promotion. While one in three New Zealand women are sexually assaulted in our lifetimes, for instance – according to Statistics New Zealand, only thirteen percent of reported cases resulted in a conviction in 2015. At the same time, on a per capita basis, Pornhub's 2015 market research ranked New Zealanders as the fifth most regular visitors to the website, behind the US, the UK, Canada and Ireland. Much of mainstream media, too, capitalises from pornographic objectification. Many women’s magazines, such as Dolly and Cosmopolitan, are actually [published by pornographers](#). This culture-wide collaboration is what we call “rape culture”.

As Carol Heldman [argues](#), these systemic trends are not best captured by the flippancy of the phrase “sex sells”. Sex is by definition mutual, and these trends are about male dominance. “It makes men feel powerful to see images of objectified women everywhere,” Heldman says. On the flip side, “women are being sold this idea that this is how we get our value; and this is the way to become the ideal sex object.”

It is pimps, and especially traffickers, who stand to [profit most](#) from male entitlement, from rape culture, through prostitution. So it is pimps who promote objectification most aggressively.

Any individual or organisation who claims to have the best interests of women in prostitution at heart should be critically examining the relationship between the phenomena that constitute rape culture: institutionalised male violence, objectification, and prostitution – including child prostitution and trafficking. Yet if we were to believe NZPC – widely seen to represent the interests of prostituted persons in New Zealand – prostitution should be one of the most sought after vocations for women in the country. If the experience of prostitution was really as the sex trade lobby makes it appear, though, then it is left to be explained why the majority of prostituted people are poor women of colour, with Māori and Asian women overrepresented in the trade in New Zealand, and the [numbers](#) of women who have experienced homelessness and abuse as children high.

What constitutes bias?

It is feminist researchers who tend to make these connections, leading us to critique prostitution as an instrument of capitalist [patriarchy and colonisation](#). This often results in accusations of bias, and for that reason, this article includes a reflection of what constitutes bias.

Since all research has a purpose, having a motivation for research – even a feminist one – cannot constitute bias. To be bias, a motivation has to overwhelm a researchers' capacity to weigh evidence fairly. Not only that, but the blind spots and silences that result should have implications significant enough to discredit the researcher. Then, where preconceived ideas are deemed both evident, and dangerous, leaving silences of serious consequence – it becomes time to follow the money. Does the researcher have vested interests, or any motivation to protect profits– either their own, or on behalf of associated parties? Could they be ignoring or fudging certain facts, or manipulating language, to protect these interests?

Feminism is a movement to protect the interests and inalienable human rights of women and girls, including the right to live free of violence – and therefore to dismantle institutions that bolster male entitlement. To this extent, feminist researchers can be seen as 'having an agenda', but none

more dangerous than the Bill of Rights Act. As far as vested interests go, even when compensated financially, feminists largely conduct their work at serious personal cost. While every woman stands to gain from research motivated toward ending male violence, more immediately, feminist research is likely to get the author [bullied, silenced and threatened](#), a particular risk for women who are exited from or still in prostitution.

By comparison, the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC) is funded by a government invested in promoting its policy of prostitution decriminalisation. There are not only gaping silences in NZPC's advocacy – particularly relating to rape, sex trafficking, and child prostitution – NZPC actually distributes what one survivor calls “[grooming literature](#)”. Its booklet *Stepping Forward*, for instance, distributed among women in prostitution, instructs women on how to tolerate anal penetration. “Using chemical assistance to help relax is not advised,” this Ministry of Health-funded publication states, “as it seldom means the body is actually relaxed but that you are less inclined to register the pain or trauma.”

If your anal/rectal muscles are relaxed and entry is on the right angle there should be no pain. It is not uncommon for it to take 20 minutes or longer for the anus and rectal passage to expand and embrace the length of the girth of a penis or object (porn actors have years of experience...) The anal/rectal relaxation process involves getting the sphincters to work in-sync with each other... This has to do with body memory and the more your body becomes familiar with something going in and learns to relax with the sensation, the easier it will become (NZPC, 2010, p.37-9).

The fact that NZPC distributes instructions to women on how to tolerate anal penetration – while it remains largely silent on rape, sex trafficking, child prostitution and the need for exit services for prostituted women in New Zealand – this represents the kind of serious bias that indicates vested interests.

Now to follow the money.

From bias to monopoly

The New Zealand model is the global sex trade lobby's [preferred model](#) of prostitution policy. NZPC is a part of this lobby, called the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), which employs the red umbrella symbol worldwide. In 2010, NZPC programmes coordinator Calum Bennachie wrote an [article](#) called *Their words are killing us* for the NSWP newsletter. The article blames feminists, specifically, for violence in prostitution – a sure fire way to suppress dissent among women. Bennachie claims that it is the descriptions of prostitution written by the likes of Janice Raymond, Sheila Jeffreys, Melissa Farley and Andrea Dworkin – a prostitution survivor – that are objectifying, and not prostitution itself. The NSWP's vice [president at the time](#) was Alejandra Gil, a now-convicted sex trafficker. The irony has not been lost on feminists.

On the NSWP website, Gil continues to encourage women in prostitution to “[call ourselves whores](#)”. It is unsurprising, then, that Victoria University's student magazine *Salient* featured an [article](#) in 2017 subtitled *The taboo of the unrepentant whore*, written under a pseudonym by an author who claimed to be a 'sex worker'. Traffickers certainly have vested interests in promoting this approach to prostitution among women, particularly those who in turn [have access to female students](#). Students are in increasing financial strife and therefore susceptible to considering prostitution as a viable option, and NZPC has been [found actively recruiting](#) Chinese students in particular with its Chinese language pamphlet *Working in New Zealand*.

It seems silly to weigh the bias of feminists, a relatively powerless group of women who aim to end sexual exploitation at a cost to themselves, against the bias of sex trade lobbyists who represent those who stand to profit from one of the most lucrative and exploitative industries in the world.

What the power of the sex trade lobby allows is not only the unchecked maintenance of bias, but the monopolising of public discourse at the expense of women. Over the last fifteen years, NZPC have developed an impressive monopoly on the discourse on prostitution in New Zealand. Not only does the government tend to defer to NZPC on prostitution, but universities and media typically do the same. This is a global phenomenon, which Julie Bindel examines in her book *The Pimping of Prostitution*. The ratio of references to “sex work” as compared to “prostitution” in the UK Press between shifted in favour of the sex trade lobby from one use of the term “sex work” for every 20 references to prostitution in 2005, to 1:9 in 2013. In New Zealand today, even commentators and journalists who take a stance that in New Zealand's climate, is relatively critical – Lincoln Tan, Natalie Thorburn – still rely almost exclusively on the legitimising and sanitising language of “sex work” (“survival sex”, or “transactional sex”).

As Kat Banyard [notes](#), the NSWP – which campaigns for pimping to be recognised as legitimate work – takes credit for popularising the term "sex work" as a substitute for prostitution, including as the preferred terminology of groups like UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation. NSWP protects pimps with this language, [stating that](#) “Sex workers can be employees, employers, or participate in a range of other work-related relationships”. This allows the owner of England's largest escort agency, Douglas Fox, to call himself a “sex worker”, [for instance](#) - meaning prostitution survivors are invisibly drowned out of the conversation. [Sabrinna Valisce explains](#) why she does not call herself a “sex worker”:

I'm a person who actually did the sucking and fucking in the sex trade. I'm not one of these pretenders who is using the words “sex work” or “sex worker” to cover the fact that I've never spent a day of my life in the actual trade. This is what the opposition does, and it's an obfuscation tactic.

The normalisation of 'sex work' terminology is part of the intensifying culture of grooming described in the opening of this article.

Blackmailing, including of survivors, is one of the means by which this language has taken hold. Encouraging women, prostituted or not, to believe that it is critiques of prostitution that create the “stigma” that causes violence constitutes such blackmail. This blackmail comes with direct threats, of which Melissa Farley was at the receiving end after producing a preliminary report on prostitution in New Zealand in 2003, after which time NZPC programmes coordinator Calum Bennachie attempted to have her American Psychological Association registration revoked. Survivors who contributed to the book *Prostitution Narratives*, launched in 2016, also experienced the kind of [backlash that illustrates](#) why many survivors critical of decriminalisation and prostitution itself might stay quiet for their own safety. Activists from Scarlet Alliance, the Australian branch of NSWP, came to book launches with the intention to disrupt and shout down contributors.

Pornography, of course – filmed prostitution – is also a fundamental part of normalising and promoting the sex trade, ensuring plenty of male consumers are invested in it, and in defending it. Many prostituted women have experienced men re-enacting violent porn scenes on them, like Jade, who recounts her experiences in *Prostitution Narratives*:

There's no 'how to' when learning to be a prostitute. I was at the mercy of the clients who would take advantage of my lack of personal boundaries. I would be left with bruises all over my body from the rough sex, men always wanted to imitate hardcore porn, acting out the sexual violence they were feeding on. The drunker they were, the angrier they would get until they were in hateful rages. Those were the times my vagina would bleed from the trauma. I had no-one to tell or to help me as we (the girls) were experiencing the same thing.

Punters

Pornographers and pimps have worked to bring porn out of the shadows, and into the mainstream media, [since the postwar period](#). What this destigmatisation of objectification does, ultimately, is shape public opinion and, more threateningly, male attitudes to women. A climate generally sympathetic to the sex trade lobby is enabling to sexism and to male entitlement. As far as the impact on prostituted women is concerned, a [2009 U.K. study](#) found that to 27% of all men interviewed, the concept of rape as applied to a prostituted woman is "ridiculous" - a prostituted woman cannot be raped.

Punters constitute one of the vast silences in the prostitution debate for this reason – because their discussion of women in the sex trade discredits any notion that the industry is 'empowering' for women. One only needs to visit a punter forum, read Caitlin Roper's essay *The Men Who Buy Women For Sex* (in *Prostitution Narratives*), or hear testimony from survivors like [Valisce](#) to understand that punters do not purchase women out of love and respect, or indeed, because of their much-mythologised 'loneliness':

The men who come in, come in in ones, twos, groups – but there's something that's changed. They used to want to come in the back door, and not be seen by anybody in the public. It was embarrassing to them. Now it's so normalised I have even seen on Facebook, "Going to the brothel tonight, who wants to come?"...

So, I'm going to tell you about something that actually happened. Man walks into the lounge and he says, "which one of you cunts wants to suck my dick?". And he bellowed this, he didn't say it quietly... Nobody batted an eyelid... The receptionist didn't even bother looking up. That's the way men talk to you in those places... "She's got no tits on her"... "She's got a good rack but, does the old girl get thrown in for free when you book her daughter?"... If you were at your place, and someone talked about you like that, you would have options to deal with it. We didn't, because it was normal and decriminalised.

Chelsea, who has experienced sixteen years in New Zealand's sex trade after entering – like Valisce – as a young teenager, [testifies](#) to how these attitudes have changed since the PRA in 2003:

It used to be that men knew the sex they did to us was unwanted, that we just needed the money. This didn't make them feel like helping us out with some money and leaving without raping us, but it did make them feel at least a little bit guilty about exploiting us, which made them treat us a little bit gentler, and they aimed to get their jollies and leave a little faster with a little less inconvenience to us.

Increasingly, with the current decriminalization legislation and pro sex-work propaganda saturating the media, more men are convincing themselves that we are having consensual sex with them, and charging them not for any hard work nor for any victim compensation, but only because we can. This makes men feel ripped off, "if we are two consenting adults

why do us men have to pay while she just collects?” It makes them even more angry, more violent. They are expecting more and more, and willing to pay less and less.

Violence and its reframing

At least five prostituted women have been [murdered in New Zealand](#) since 2003. In 2005, a 24-year old woman who has name suppression, was strangled, bound, raped and run over after an argument with a john resulting from his refusal to use a condom. That year, Suzie Sutherland was also strangled to death. In 2008, Ngatai Manning was stabbed, strangled, raped and beaten with a pole before being thrown into the Avon River, and the following year, Nuttidar Vaikaew was murdered in her own home. Gordon Hieatt, who murdered Vaikaew, continued to purchase women in prostitution after leaving her body to decay before it was discovered.

There were no rallies or protests to mourn the loss of any of these women, or to demand reassessment of the laws that enabled their lives to be taken so brutally. The advice NZPC offers women in *Stepping Forward*, in terms of “dealing with violent clients” is to:

Make as much noise as possible to attract attention. Try calling FIRE, a passerby will probably pay more attention. If you wear a whistle around your neck, blow it in his ear.

NZPC later says that “getting loud” can “backfire because some clients are just wanting you to do this so that they have an excuse”. It is also not clear why they expect women to wear whistles around their necks when [strangulation is a common form](#) of violence against women and prostitution according to NZPC is not inherently violent. NZPC also leaves it to women to help their peers (“Please look after one another!”), despite testimonies from women like Jade, cited earlier (“I had no-one to tell or to help me as we (the girls) were experiencing the same thing”).

Not only does NZPC unhelpfully leave women themselves to tackle violence in prostitution, but by 2016, the murder of Renee Duckmanton and reports of sex trafficking were [framed as a public relations issue](#) by a group of sex trade lobbyists who organised the exhibition *The Art of Stripping* at Wellington's Thistle Hall. NZPC itself continues to cover up violence, encourage women to simply fend for themselves, and still claim that women worldwide “are really envious” of New Zealand's laws and protections for prostituted women. While frequently representing themselves as a pseudo-union (a “collective” “run by sex workers for sex workers”), [in 2015](#) NZPC even wrote a letter of support for the Chow Brothers while women were testifying against them in court. This kind of action is in keeping with NZPC's stated aims, since the NSWPP would endorse classification of the Chow Brothers as “sex workers”, but it should preclude NZPC from being able to leverage a reputation as a union or grassroots collective rather than a lobby with vested interests.

The reframing of violence is an inevitable part of the promotion of decriminalisation. While murder is said to result from “stigma” supposedly created by feminists (as Bennachie claims), and the need for exit services is [downplayed](#) – rape is seen as mere theft. As Rachel Moran, author, prostitution survivor and founder of SPACE International, writes in *Prostitution Narratives*:

If sex is just a service, rape is just theft. If sex is to be equated with any other service, then we cannot complain about the rape of a woman in prostitution any differently than we could complain about someone having their sink fixed and not paying the plumber. Rape is disappeared here. In 'sex work' ideology, we are dealing with theft, not rape.

Child prostitution too, is [adamantly separated](#) from the sex trade itself by organisations like NZPC. This in spite of the injustice the false distinction does to the stories of women like Ngatai

Manning, whose life, sexual abuse from childhood, difficulty exiting prostitution, and murder in the trade demands that we examine the inextricable correlations between child abuse and prostitution. [Miriam Saphira's work](#) also demands this correlation not be separated, as does each Trafficking in Persons report that names New Zealand as a source country for child prostitution. Survivor Jacqueline Lynne says that “incest was the boot camp for my prostitution” in *Prostitution Narratives*, and [Moran explains](#) why she made a point of telling punters her age, when she was in street prostitution at fifteen years old:

They got off faster, and I got out of the car faster. It was a major turn-on for them. And that really cuts to the heart of the nature of what prostitution is. Because the nature of prostitution is one of despoilment... the sexual equivalent of picking a lovely young bloom and pissing on it. What I found when I operated the phone lines when I was in indoor prostitution for quite a few years – for every ten times that phone rang, eight or nine times you would be asked, 'How old is the youngest girl on today?' It was always that... It was a particularly creepy question to have to listen to, because I usually was the youngest girl. So it was me they were talking about.

Prostitution is not only about despoilment, it is inherently paedophilic: based on the paternalistic eroticisation of dominance and submission. To eroticise the submission and infantilisation of women is, by extension, to sexualise children. This is why so many women enter prostitution at such a young age, and why the average age for entry into the sex trade is twelve to fourteen years old, according to the U.S. State Department. This is also why, [in 2010](#), the police identified at least thirteen girls between twelve and fifteen years old being prostituted in downtown Auckland – in the course of only six weeks, on one main street; why [in 2017](#), an Auckland couple were charged with child sex trafficking; and why researcher Natalie Thorburn has exposed widespread child prostitution in New Zealand. This is the nature of demand, and the nature of the industry. Yet NZPC and sympathisers continue to undermine these important connections, though they do so only by remaining wilfully blind to a mountain of testimony and to the lives of women like Ngatai Manning, and Jade, who writes in *Prostitution Narratives*:

Arriving in Auckland, my friend gave me her identity card (because I was underage) and dropped me off at a brothel while she went to another. The madam was an overweight middle-aged woman who talked with me at the bar as I sucked on a lollipop. She barely glanced at my I.D. She seemed pleased with the fact I looked about 14 and put the word out I was young.

My first client in the brothel was into pedophile fantasies. He was in his 50s and wanted me to recount things from my childhood so he could get off, such as my first sexual encounter. The younger I pretended to be when I lost my virginity the more he enjoyed himself. From then on I had night after night of pedophile types.

In the same way as the paedophilic nature of prostitution is collectively ignored, sex trafficking is ignored – both anecdotally, and as part and parcel of the sex trade. Trafficking is reframed as “migrant sex work”, “[working holidays](#)”, or simply “not happening”, even when it is reported to include bribery, coercion and threats of deportation, debt bondage, passport confiscation, overcrowding, and 16-hour shifts.

In the year ending April 2015, Immigration New Zealand reported 42 cases of sex trafficking. Naengnoi Sriphet was sentenced for sex trafficking that year, and The Trafficking in Persons Report has named New Zealand a source and destination country for sex trafficking consistently. These reports, alongside work by Lincoln Tan and [Christina Stringer](#) show that women are being trafficked to New Zealand from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan, Korea,

Latin America and Eastern Europe. There are also reports of the domestic and international trafficking of Pacific islanders. Chinese women constitute the largest number of trafficked persons in New Zealand. In the [words of one survivor](#), “there is a hell of an operation the Chinese have got going on in New Zealand”.

Lincoln Tan [has reported](#) how one Korean woman “had 196 customers, including 58 customers that she gave unprotected oral sex and six who paid extra to ejaculate in her mouth” over a 20-day period, at a Hobson St apartment. Tan published a photographed note that same year, which read “Help me! I want to go back to Korea.” It had been handed to a punter by a prostituted woman. Still, NZPC flatly denies the existence of trafficking in New Zealand. The issue also does not receive public attention anywhere near proportionate to its urgency because, in the words of Kat Banyard, “As the euphemism that is 'sex work' takes root in everyday speech, its power to lobotomise listeners grows”.

We need look no further than the PRA for the reason why NZPC would respond to such realities with such barefaced denial: trafficking constitutes a breach of the Act. Their suppression of this conversation becomes especially ironic when one considers the extent to which lobbyists for decriminalisation rely on suggesting that criminalising pimping only drives prostitution “underground”. NZPC's denial of sex trafficking certainly helps to protect pimps by keeping them out of the spotlight and in the shadows of New Zealand's sex trade.

Evidence of trafficking barely needs to be found, though, for it to be understood that decriminalisation makes it likely. As one survivor, [Kimmy, told](#) the *New Zealand Herald*, New Zealand's prostitution policy makes it a “popular choice” for traffickers because it is “low risk” and the laws are more “relaxed”. One only need understand how global capitalism works to expect this: capitalists, in any industry, are driven toward risk and cost reduction – including labour cost reduction – to maximise profits. As Siddharth Kara points out, this makes sex trafficking one of the most lucrative international trades. “Drug trafficking generates greater dollar revenues, but trafficked women are more profitable. Unlike a drug, a human female can be used by the customer again and again.” He continues:

Only 4.2 percent of the world's slaves are trafficked sex slaves, but they generate 39.1 percent of slaveholders' profits. To benchmark the astounding profits generated by the exploiters of sex slaves, one need look no further than the fact that the global weighted average net profit margin of almost 70 percent makes it one of the most profitable enterprises in the world. By comparison, Google's net profit margin in 2006 was 29.0 percent, and it is one of the most profitable companies in the United States.

If NZPC believes that prostitution is a 'job like any other', it cannot deny that any pimp is motivated to traffic women to save costs and maximise profits, because this is how industry works. And if johns are merely 'clients' or 'buyers', then at the very least, they bring the “more for less” consumer mentality – that Chelsea described above – with them to the brothel, and apply it to women. Suzie, a Korean woman prostituted in New Zealand [testifies to](#) the racist implications of this: “her clientele were mainly Pakeha... who told her they preferred Asian women because they were cheaper and “prepared to do more””.

The sex trade lobby deals with these inconvenient truths with denial and language sanitising. NZPC's Calum Bennachie is currently involved with a Kingston University so-called “Sexual Humanitarianism” project, which states on its website that “Its main aim is to produce new emic (subject internal) concepts and data needed to develop innovative theorisations of migrant agency”. Innovative theorisations of migrant agency: this means we are about to see even more

elaborate sanitisation of sex trafficking from the sex trade lobby. Siddharth Kara makes the motivations for this all too clear.

Police – friend or foe?

The sex trade lobby tends to shift its attitude toward police depending on the policy model under consideration. Discussing the criminalisation of pimps and punters tends to surface fear and opposition to police brutality and state intervention among sex trade lobbyists. However, when speaking of the New Zealand full decriminalisation model favoured by the international sex trade lobby, the police could hardly be more helpful, nor have a more friendly and cooperative relationship with women in prostitution according to NZPC.

This is contradicted by the fact that under a “sex work” policy and ideological approach to prostitution, it is prostituted persons who are held accountable for adopting “safer sex” practices. Women can be fined \$2,000 for not meeting industry regulations, and if punters use refusal or bribery to avoid condom use. NZPC appears to “assist” women to adopt these by offering discounted condoms and lubricant, and distributing very small, black-and-white, badly photocopied images of common sexually transmitted infections as they appear on men's genitals. The Department of Labour [advises women](#) in the sex industry that in the event of condom breakage, they should squat, squeeze, and scoop. As stated, a 24-year old prostituted woman was murdered in 2005 in New Zealand for attempting to insist on condom use.

The legitimisation of prostitution under full decriminalisation makes women not only vulnerable to, but also accountable for, abuse; and if we are looking for a model that engages the de facto if not explicit criminalisation of women, we need look no further than the New Zealand model of full decriminalisation. After all, with “choice” comes responsibility.

The notion of positive relationships with the police is also contradicted by the 2008 Prostitution Law Review Committee report, when it says 'a majority of prostituted persons felt that the decriminalisation act “could do little about violence that occurred”’, and clearly shows that women in prostitution prefer to report to other parties than the police. It pays too, to remember that under full decriminalisation, men in the police force are no less likely to be punters than the general male population. [In 2009](#), ex-Christchurch police officer Nathan Connolly was convicted for “inducing sexual connection from the sex worker by means of a threat”, meaning the threat of arrest.

In a context where violence is persistently reframed by NZPC – and the culture on which it bears remarkable influence – we cannot reasonably believe that police are somehow, independently of this context, becoming more and more sympathetic to victims and highly responsive to reports of violence coming from women in prostitution. We cannot reasonably believe that the legal system, which secured convictions for only thirteen percent of reported sexual assaults in 2015, is nevertheless increasingly victims' side specifically when they are prostituted – and then still also believe what sex trade lobbyists like to suggest, that if we criminalised the pimping and purchase of women, we would suddenly face an irreversible outbreak of police brutality targeting women.

As suggested in the introduction, our legal system is not a place where women access justice. It is a place where women do more uncompensated labour in order to have their rights recognised and to set precedent for other victims. There is no justice after rape, only recovery to the extent that that is possible in a complicit society. The experience relayed below can barely paint a more telling picture:

I went to court today. Ben's lawyer tried to paint me as some kind of BDSM freak by referencing my past in prostitution because he's made up a story that I got the bruises on my neck from weird but consensual sex with him instead of the truth that he assaulted me by strangulation... I think it's pretty shitty that he can bring up my past as a hooker to try make me look bad like some lying bitch who was asking for it, but I wasn't allowed to bring up any his past convictions for bashing his girlfriends or that he's been held there for the past month for breaching his bail conditions. Doesn't seem very fair. Thanks libfems for decriminalising prostitution so it can be brought up in court unlike past criminal behaviour as evidence of sexual deviancy instead of poverty and thanks for popularising BDSM so that violent men have the perfect story to tell when they're arrested for assaulting their girlfriends.

Trauma in context

The account above suggests an alternative interpretation of the nature of trauma: that it is not pathological in nature, but a consequence of confrontation with culture-wide complicity that not only prevents recovery from harm, but deepens the wound. Perhaps it would be possible to recover from the experience of sexual violence in prostitution through genuine assistance by, for instance, lawyers, judges and counsellors – but not only does this not typically happen in this culture, most public institutions are sold on the notion that women “choose” prostitution. This intensifies victim-blaming.

NZPC barely acknowledges trauma or cultural complicity. The organisation instead refers euphemistically in its “starter kit” booklet *Stepping Forward*, to “sex worker burnout”:

You are your business's best asset and without maintenance you can become a liability. This does not mean you should spend more on superficial trappings like clothes, but quality investments like getting a massage, eating good quality food, using good quality products from shampoo and skin care to linen on your bed and even the bed itself. Join a gym, take Yoga or Pilates classes... the options are endless. Working in a dimly lit environment for hours on end is not the same as regular exercise... all you need is a pair of comfortable shoes. Don't start with “what about the kids, partner, disabled dog, housework, no energy, allergy to sunlight” excuses. It's sad but true, energy creates energy.

This culture, which responds to violence against women by condoning it and lodging it deeper, is the same culture in which every girl is socialised. It is what Gail Dines calls a “perp culture”, and it grooms women for susceptibility to pimp tactics. Because of the power of the sex trade lobby, it is these tactics that we have come to see employed society-wide as prostitution, pornography and objectification are sold to us using a language of “empowerment” and “liberation” that appeals to women as an oppressed class. It is these tactics too, that are used by traffickers to lure women into countries where they are vulnerable to exploitation, only to have reporters believe that “it's not trafficking” because “she consented”.

Conclusion

This brings us full cycle: to the opening description of rape culture. This is the cycle we all live in, where misogynist cultural norms lead to escalating violence, which is in turn normalised, further entrenching misogyny. It is time to [break this cycle](#), and to do this one thing we require more than anything is a critical conversation on prostitution and prostitution policy=. If academics are serious about their role as critics and conscience of society, this is the work they will begin to undertake more seriously.

If, as NZPC suggests, it is up to individual women in prostitution to ward off violent men by making “as much noise as possible to attract attention” – or by blowing a whistle, in spite of the risk of backlash and potential futility – then it is up to journalists and academics to address the systemic violence of prostitution by doing the same, in proportion to our own platforms. We should do this with as little apology, compromise or trepidation as we would expect from a woman alone in her bedroom with a punter, facing the threat of being raped, murdered and left to decompose while her perpetrator goes on to the next brothel. This is what Gordon Hieatt did to Nuttidar Vaikaew, under our watch; and it is our own voices that we owe to Vaikaew, and all women and girls being prostituted in New Zealand, right now. We owe these women and girls the clearest possible amplification, made loud enough to repay the most impossible debt there is - the debt of stolen lives.