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Prostitution Survivors: Backlash in Australia

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Abstract

This report is a personal account of prostitution survivors facing harassment from representatives of the sex industry in Australia. At events to promote a new collection of stories by survivors of the industry—Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade—speakers were intimidated and insulted. The survivors describe their experiences and their determination to speak-out against prostitution, even in the face of opposition.

Keywords

Prostitution, activism, backlash, sex trade, sex-industry lobbyists, Australia, violence against women, decriminalized prostitution

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Prostitution Survivors: Backlash in Australia

Melinda Tankard Reist

Author, Speaker, and Advocate for Women and Girls

ABSTRACT

This report is a personal account of prostitution survivors facing harassment from representatives of the sex industry in Australia. At events to promote a new collection of stories by survivors of the industry—*Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*—speakers were intimidated and insulted. The survivors describe their experiences and their determination to speak-out against prostitution, even in the face of opposition.

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I LIVE IN AUSTRALIA where the sex industry is deregulated in five of the eight states and territories. Deregulation takes various forms, including complete decriminalization of the industry's activities in some areas, and government registration of its businesses in others. New South Wales has an estimated 100-200 brothels within 20 kilometers of the central business district (Donovan & Harcourt et al., 2012). Many more operate under the guise of massage parlors employing mostly Asian women and women of non-English speaking backgrounds. New South Wales is called a “pioneer in the decriminalization of prostitution” (Donovan & Harcourt et al., 2012); however, Caroline Norma has described it as “an unregulated minefield of exploitation, abuse, and an ever-expanding illegal sector associated with other criminal activities” (Norma, 2015). Victoria is similar to New South Wales in its lack of governance of sex industry operations. Requirements for licensee holders have mostly not been checked or enforced (Norma, 2015). Legalization in Victoria led to the expansion of licensed prostitution businesses by an estimated 100 businesses. However, the illegal sector continues to outrun the legal with 400 unlicensed businesses (Sullivan & Jeffreys, 2016).

Confronting this powerful, protected industry which operates mostly with impunity is no easy task. In two decades of activism, I had never witnessed such a backlash against sex industry survivors and their supporters as took place when our new book was published.

Last year, international feminist publisher Spinifex Press released *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, which I co-edited with Caroline Norma, an international expert in the sexual enslavement of women. The book was a collection of 20 first person accounts by women from seven industrialized coun-

tries, who had left the sex industry. Their stories testified to violence, maltreatment, trauma, abuse, and ongoing suffering, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disassociation, depression, and anxiety. We gathered these stories to counter the myths of prostitution—that it is a job like any other, and no different—probably better—than flipping burgers at a fast food restaurant. The intensely personal accounts exposed a multi-billion-dollar sexual exploitation industry built upon the backs of the bodies of real women and girls.

As soon as the book was published, the sex industry started attacking it. Sex industry leaders criticized everyone connected with the book, heaping abuse, insults, and vilification upon us and, in some cases, making threats. Of the ten book-related events around Australia, seven were disrupted by pro sex industry groups. Security escorts were provided for me at the Melbourne Writers Festival due to a protest organized by the Australian Sex Party. They were protesting two books about the harm of the sex industry, that between them documented the lives of 85 women, 65 of whom were murdered (Tankard Reist & Norma, 2016; Fox & Wykes, 2016). The protestors from the sex industry demanded their own session, and got it—but they still protested ours. Groups representing the interests of the sex industry, including Scarlet Alliance and the Australian Sex Party, protested the first ever gathering of Australian survivors at the *World's Oldest Oppression* conference in Melbourne—where the first launch took place. They carried placards with slogans, such as “Why be poor?” They were protesting—and recruiting—at the same time.

While testifying to the violence they experienced within the industry, contributors to *Prostitution Narratives* were confronted with intimidation outside the event. They endured torrents of verbal abuse and were forced to run a gauntlet of pro-prostitution forces.

Some survivors faced accusations about the truth of their testimonies. Accusers said that their mental health problems pre-existed their experience in prostitution or were caused by another unrelated trauma.

Survivor Rae Story who was in prostitution for a decade in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, describes what it is like to face this denial of her experience, which included being called a liar. “The most insidious was the accusation that any mental health problems I suffer from are a result of personal failings or weakness and are not endemic to the industry. This is a form of political gas lighting that pathologizes dissenters” (Sporenda, 2016). Gaslighting is a term used to describe the use of psychological techniques to manipulate a person into doubting their own sanity. It is designed to de-stabilize the person and make them doubt themselves.

The worst demonstration of the sex industry’s contempt for women who don’t repeat the “happy hooker” mantra was in Townsville, Queensland, last August 2016. We planned on holding an event at the city’s domestic violence service. However, the local sex trade lobbyists told the manager that their group “could not be held responsible for the actions of some of their more radical members should they allow us to use the space” (Rawlinson, 2016). The irony of veiled threats being made by a group called RESPECT toward a service supporting women victims of violence was not lost on us.

With mere hours before the launch time, our local organizer (on staff at the domestic violence service) rushed to find another venue. We ended up in the corner of an outdoor bar with a live band next door and no privacy for our contributors to share their stories. Although our opponents were successful in having our first

venue cancelled, they still turned up to harass our speakers and disrupt our event. One very well-known activist, who has a long history with Scarlet Alliance, climbed up on a stool and stood over us, booing, hissing, and calling out.

She also approached the youngest and most recently exited survivor, Alice, aged 28, who wrote as “Charlotte” in the book, and tried to re-recruit her into the industry. Alice had just finished sharing her story of suffering and torment after first being sold at the age of five to a pedophile ring—where she was groomed for her life in prostitution. Minutes later she was approached by the same pro-sex trade lobbyist, who told her there were great opportunities for young women like her, especially in New South Wales, and that she really should give sex work another go (Rawlinson, 2016; Davoren, 2016; Rawlinson, 2016).

Alice was shaking and distressed. She had just described how hard it was to leave the sex industry, how determined she was not to return to it, and how she was in treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and dissociative identity disorder. However, at this event, she found herself being preyed on once again. Alice described the impact:

I couldn't believe that not even ten minutes after speaking about the trauma I went through – and have been left with as a result of working in the industry – here was this person suggesting I go back! I thought it was completely disrespectful towards me – she doesn't know anything about where I am now in life. I have no need to go back and never would (Rawlinson, 2016).

Alice also tweeted:

I was/still am totally disgusted by it. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Disgraceful behaviour by that woman. Completely dismissive not only of me as a human being (that she knows nothing abt). Even more disgraceful given I'd just delivered a speech about the trauma I went through whilst in the sex industry (Rawlinson, 2016).

Alice knew the well-organized brothel/pimp protestors were trying to scare her off speaking out. She told *Feminist Current* that because many survivors are still fragile, any conflict could “make that person crumble and retreat back to where they come from.” She continued:

[Then] you're never going to hear from them again because they have been invalidated and [told that] what they have gone through is normal and part of the job, just get on with it. Speaking out is hard enough... [People representing the sex industry] know survivors come out so damaged and fragile it doesn't take much to make them fall apart. But there are some of us who will put up with any stones they throw, we're not going away, and we won't be silent (Murphy, 2016).

The level of organized abuse by the pro pimp lobby demonstrates how determined the prostitution enterprise is to keep up appearances and to control the narrative. The backlash has highlighted how important it is for the sex trade to shield the public from the reality of the violence, violation, and misery within it. The sex industry does not want these women to be heard. They want business as usual, to

keep their industry unregulated with no transparency or accountability for the routine violation of women's lives on daily basis. The women in our book have challenged this spin by recounting their lived experience.

These survivors have provided a new narrative. A narrative filled with deep pain and striving to find a new life. They have exposed how violence is devastatingly common. That's what makes them so dangerous to the sex industry.

Autumn Burris from California, who is now the director of *Survivors for Solutions*, told her story in a chapter entitled "No life for a human being":

When a sex buyer rents your body, he often demands more of you than agreed. If you reject him, more often than not, violence ensues. It is common for sex buyers to act out violently against prostituted women. Upon entering prostitution, it is immediately clear that there is no such thing as respect for human rights or physical boundaries as soon as a client buys power over you (Tankard Reist & Norma, 2016, p. 137).

Jade, a young New Zealand woman, wrote:

There's no "how to" when learning to be a prostitute... I was at the mercy of the clients ... I would be left with bruises all over my body from the rough sex; men always wanted to imitate hard core 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 all experiencing the same thing. We fixed it by numbing with drugs and alcohol (Tankard Reist & Norma, 2016, p. 45).

Tanja Rahm from Denmark wrote:

There are so many aspects of violence in this industry. It's not just being kicked, hit and raped. It is psychological and verbal: name calling, insults, humiliation, intimidation, threatening behavior and body language, threatening to reveal your identity. It is physical: pushing, pulling, spitting, throwing things at you, pulling your hair, choking you. It is material: He can rip your underwear into pieces, rip your stockings, or break your necklace on purpose. It is financial. He doesn't want to pay the price, and systematically manipulates you to do things you don't want to, or into giving him a discount" (Tankard Reist & Norma, 2016, p. 80).

The health impacts of prostitution on women are severe and enduring. They include sexual violence, being beaten up, bleeding. The prostitution system is exploitation that must be dismantled.

However, we have had support from surprising quarters. For example, Madison Missina, well known Australian porn actress, bravely joined us in speaking out against the abuses she witnessed within the industry on her blog. She described sexual harassment, exploitation, and rape as just part of the "job" she was expected to do. She listed shocking injuries. When she was forced to shoot porn scenes without being paid, had her home address published to intimidate her, and suffered a breach of contract, she sought help from the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP), the Eros Association, and the leader of the Australian Sex Party. She wrote: "all organizations who hold the ethos around consent and professionalism within the

Australian sex industry, the organizations that speak about how they care about sex workers, well they turned a blind eye.” Missina has also said:

I’ve also experienced firsthand how when a supposed “happy hooker” speaks out about the exploitation within the current Australian Sex Industry she gets excluded, ignored if she’s lucky. If she’s not well, it will escalate to bullying, abuse, and violence. The price I’ve personally paid for speaking out is the exclusion from the ugly mug list [a list of Johns who have been violent, committed crimes against women in the industry, refused to pay, etc.]; I’ve had my legal name, personal phone number, and home address published. I’ve been stalked, verbally assaulted publicly twice, been threatened with physical violence, had the locks of my front door removed, and the front door to my building smashed in... (Missina, 2016).

Even within the sex industry, prostituted women are silenced by a failure to represent and defend their interests. Around the world, most so-called sex industry unions like Scarlet Alliance operate as industry fronts (Ekis Ekman, 2016). Madison Missina has helped reveal how the organizations which claim to “care about sex workers” only care about those who toe the line. They won’t help you if you want to get out.

At the *World’s Oldest Oppression* conference, a woman who worked for Scarlet Alliance described her experience. She was contacted by large numbers of women in the industry wanting to get out. She was told she had to tell them that Scarlet Alliance couldn’t help them—that its role was to help women stay in, not get out. She couldn’t cope with the emotional distress of not being able to help the women, so she left.

Jade was prostituted in New Zealand. She describes how she wanted to get out but was given no help.

After five years, I wanted out of the sex industry. Twice I tried to go to school... I wanted to be a youth worker. But I couldn’t study due to drugs and sex work. None of the sex work advocacy agencies ever offered a contingency to get me out of the sex industry. They supplied lawyers, health checks, lube, condoms, and dams but nothing to help me get out (Tankard Reist & Norma, 2016, p. 47).

Women who have exited the industry see right through the spin perpetuated by the industry. Survivors are getting organized, transforming personal suffering and trauma into political action. They have recognized that their personal stories can be harnessed in the service of an emerging new international movement. They are speaking out against the sex trade in all its forms and calling for the adoption of the Nordic model and exit programs.

Led by survivors, the abolitionist movement is growing. *Prostitution Narratives* is giving them strength and hope, validating their lived experiences, and helping them recognize they are not alone. Long-time Australian indigenous abolitionist Simone Watson said:

To be offered the opportunity to contribute with other survivors was perhaps one of the most important and validating experiences I can think of (Davoren, 2016).

On being asked by Meghan Murphy at *Feminist Current* how it felt to tell her story, Alice replied:

It has definitely been empowering. Genuine empowerment. It gives me hope. I'd like to believe I'm opening people's eyes to what is really going on. I'd like to believe I'm maybe giving some women still in the industry ...maybe I'm getting through to some of them that there is a life after this, you can get out and start changing things and bringing some light into your life. Some days it's hard because it can start bringing some of the trauma back. Overall it has been a really positive experience despite anyone trying to silence me. It just fuels my fire and my passion to speak out more (Murphy, 2016).

This “fire and passion” is bearing fruit. A young woman turned up to protest my appearance at the Melbourne Writer's Festival. She got into a conversation with Alice, one of the survivors, afterwards. Recently she contacted Alice to say that after hearing us speak and following Alice's engagement with her, she got out of prostitution.

Another survivor approached me at our Adelaide, South Australia, book launch at which protestors were also present. She said she wanted to encourage us, and for us to know that we were making a difference. She said she was originally in the trade and was part of a group sent to disrupt events like this in her state. But she said every time she heard industry critics speak it became “harder to turn a trick,” and she eventually left. She attended our book launch as a supporter.

The protests of our events added to the publicity we received and gave an opportunity to women in the industry to hear our message and, in some cases, decide to leave. Just as I was finalizing this piece, an email dropped into my inbox. Lynette writes:

I just wanted to say thank you. I escaped the victorian sex industry in February with the help of a friend. I thought I was the only one to experience rape, violence, and pedophilia. You made me feel like I am not alone. I cannot express how much that helped me and meant to me. I am starting to get better but I still have PTSD from the industry... Your book has cemented what i want to do with my life - educate the public about the truth of the australian sex trade and empower young girls in the hopes that they don't end up where i was. I am sure if someone did that for me i would never have entered the sex trade (personal communication December 15, 2016).

Our opponents can shout and scream and rail and vilify us all they like. If only one woman leaves the industry, it's worth it.

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Melinda Tankard Reist (www.melindatankardreist.com) is an author, speaker, media commentator, blogger, and advocate for women and girls. She is best known for her work addressing sexualization, objectification, harms of pornography, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and violence against women. Melinda is author/editor of five books including *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls* (Spinifex Press, 2009), *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry* (Spinifex Press, 2011, co-edited with Dr. Abigail Bray) and her new release (Spinifex Press, co-edited with Dr. Caroline Norma) *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*. An opinion writer, Melinda is also a regular on radio and television news and current affairs programs. Melinda is co-founder of the grassroots campaigning movement, Collective Shout: for a world free of sexploitation (www.collectiveshout.org) exposing corporations, advertisers and marketers who objectify women and sexualize girls to sell products and services. An ambassador for World Vision Australia, Compassion Australia, HagarNZ and the Raise Foundation, Melinda is named in the Who's Who of Australian Women and the World Who's Who of Women.

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