

Former prostitutes call for ban to industry

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At Rhiannon's* lowest point, she agreed to sex for money with a man who found her drunk, high on prescription drugs and crying on the street outside the strip club where she worked.

Back at his home, she cut her wrists in his bathroom and stuck toilet paper on them.

"The man felt it was worth paying a hundred dollars to have sex with a woman who had a tearstained face and bleeding wrists," she said.

"I insisted on clutching the cash while he used me."

She told him she was going to kill herself and he should call an ambulance. He shrugged, so she went outside and did it herself, staring at Brisbane's Story Bridge and thinking that if it didn't arrive in 10 minutes, she would jump off.

It was the start of her journey out of the sex industry.

Profession or abuse?

Her story is just one of the graphic first-person testimonies in *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, a shocking book that will be launched at an anti-sex trade conference at RMIT University in Melbourne this weekend.

Former prostitutes and other women across Australia are coming together to talk about the "oldest profession in the world" in a different way. They don't use the words escort, call girl or sex worker, because they say these legitimise men paying women for sex as a service or a career. Instead, they call it abuse.

Last weekend, prominent high-class call girl Samantha X gave a talk in Sydney to around 50 female fans. She spoke about her choice to leave journalism for highly lucrative sex work at 37, having quick sex and long chats with three men a day in hotels, and the safety of working for a reputable agency like hers, which screens its clients.

Many agree with her. But a growing group of survivors and abolitionists say they are disturbed at pro-sex trade lobbyists painting the industry as a profession, chosen by autonomous women because it makes them feel empowered.

Simone

"I was groomed very young by society, a neoliberal culture," former prostitute Simone Watson, from Western Australia, told news.com.au. "I came from a pretty lovely family. I called myself a feminist.

"I was about 23 and I needed money. I'd had sex with people I didn't like very much before, why not get paid for it?"

"Like the women around me, I took different kinds of medication. Then they can do whatever they want with you. You need to disassociate and leave your body. I used diazopenes. You couldn't drink on the premises but I made up for it at home.

"I was in the higher end of prostitution, massage parlours and illegal brothels, as well as some street prostitution. People say [street prostitution] is dangerous, but women in brothels have about the same amount of time to gauge if a man is going to be violent - and you get to keep all the money."

Simone, 48, is now national director for the Nordic Model Australia Commission. The model, which has been successful in Sweden and was introduced in France this week, sees prostitutes decriminalised and those who pay for sex criminalised.

"What can police do is sexual harassment is part of your working conditions? You can report rape, but it's already a form of rape," said Simone. "You get lonely johns, aggressive johns, creepy old men, mundane middle-aged men and uni students who are incredibly rude.

"It's all on the paradigm of male violence against women. It isn't a job like any other. Men who buy women for sex have no respect for women."

She said many of the prostitutes she has met have been single mothers or students looking for money. More than half of sex workers have been sexually abused as children or teenagers. Others have been raped, neglected or

harassed. "Many women are trying to escape abuse or domestic violence," said Simone. "They have nowhere else to go."

Simone has been left with PTSD, anxiety and agoraphobia, so her advocacy work and travel has been challenging, but she's desperate to create change.

Since the Nordic Model was introduced in Sweden, she says, there's been a cultural shift. "Young people grow up thinking the idea of buying sex is abhorrent."

Rachel

Stories like that of Samantha X - of attractive, high-class escorts, who love their work and live a glamorous lifestyle - are often recounted by the media. Many women in the book say they once claimed the same.

The survivors gathering this weekend say the experiences they recognise are about violence, exploitation, drug abuse and self-harm. Yet they say the blame fell on them, rather than the men who paid to have sex with them.

One had regular sex with a priest, who would "forgive her" afterwards.

They say most clients didn't care if they were tired or in pain. Their detachment is clear on review sites such as PunterNet, where men make comments like "I can't do this with real women," or "It's like going to the toilet," or "She wasn't as young as I thought she'd be, but I f***ed her anyway."

Figures suggest at least 90 per cent of sex workers want to get out of the industry. The laws vary across Australia, but campaigners say places like Canberra, Victoria and New Zealand legalising prostitution simply means more trafficking and more acceptance of it, and decriminalisation in NSW saw people with criminal records able to run brothels.

Rachel Moran, author of *Paid For, My Journey Through Prostitution*, recalls having just come out of juvenile detention in Dublin at 16 and looking after her 13-year-old sister.

"I remember telling her, 'I wouldn't be able to come in here and buy dinner if I wasn't on the game' ... It didn't occur to me either that the trading of my dignity might be better defended by the example of something other than a chicken curry.

"I couldn't negotiate my own life in any sense without making that trade off: prostitution for poverty.

"What shocks me these days is listening to grown women frame the same basic argument I was framing almost 25 years ago, without ever having moved from the conclusion, 'This is the world as we experience it' to the question 'What do we intend to do about it?'

"Sex work' ideology acts as a dehumanising force on numerous levels.

"There has perhaps never been an ideological framework in history that so thoroughly condones and emboldens the practice of oppression by the oppressed. It says, simultaneously, 'Continue to abuse us please' and 'Be at rest that there is no abuse going on here.'

"Women who espouse this view owe it to every other woman to abandon it. They are traitors to their sex and to themselves."

*Names changed to protect identities.

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=11618980