

## The Great Divide: Views on Sex Work

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Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy: *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers in Australia* (UWA Press, ISBN 9781920694913, \$39.95)

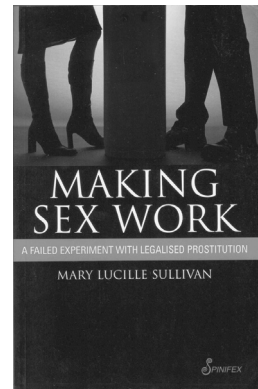
Mary Lucille Sullivan: *Making Sex Work: A Failed Experiment with Legalised Prostitution* (Spinifex Press, ISBN 9781876756604, \$34.95)

Feminists have long debated how gender, sexuality and labour are implicated in women's oppression. While virtually all have seen these as core questions, how to respond politically has been a matter of much debate. Opinions on the exchange of sexual services for money is a repetitive feature of these debates.

The two books discussed here represent two stereotypical poles of a long-standing feminist divide and are limited because of this. Mary Lucille Sullivan's book represents the 'anti-sex work' radical feminist position of sex work as violence. Her methodology assumes the reader will agree with this theoretical presumption, and therefore is problematically uncritical. The book is based on her PhD thesis at the University of Melbourne. Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy represent the 'pro-sex work' liberal feminist approach, of pro-choice and individual freedom. Their book is the result of a UNSW Health and Medical Research Council grant in 1996, and includes workers' own critiques of sex work.

Sullivan's book can best be described as an unimaginative, ideological and poorly researched attack on the partial legalisation of the sex industry in Victoria and the print resources and political strategies developed from the collective organising of sex workers over the past thirty years. Perkins and Lovejoy's collection of interviews with private (independent of a brothel or agency) female sex workers interspersed with data from 1990s qualitative research is limited by its scope and lack of up-to-date information and its intimation of risqué Hollywoodesque portrayals of sex work that are largely alien to the Australian experience, as its title *Call Girls* suggests.

Both books use the term 'prostitution', rather than 'sex work', but from very different political positions. Perkins and Lovejoy seek to continue earlier reclamations of the term 'prostitute', with an argu-



ment that it "reflects a positive attribute, referring ... to those women who chose independence over being controlled by men in the Roman patriarchal family". Sullivan prefers the term 'prostituted women', describing (female) sex workers as victims of an all-pervasive system of male sexual domination. Workers in the industry themselves prefer terms that refer to their labour – 'sex work' and 'sex worker', terms coined by Carole Leigh, a prominent San Francisco sex work activist, in the 1970s and widely adopted by sex workers internationally.

Like her PhD supervisor, Sheila Jeffreys, Sullivan largely ignores the arguments of people engaged in sex work. In setting up a narrow and binary political divide between 'liberal feminists' who argue in favour of sex work, and 'radical feminists' who see it on a continuum of rape and child sexual abuse, she places "the views of the alleged prostitutes rights movement" outside the feminist framework entirely, largely ignoring thirty years of sex worker organising and theorising in Australia. Sullivan posits sex work not as work, but as violence: "Sexual harassment and rape are indistinguishable from the sex the buyers purchase". She dismisses politically active sex workers as ill-defined 'liberals' who uncritically demand a "right to alienate their bodily property and ... choose the way in which this occurs".

In stark contrast, Perkins and Lovejoy did two years of field work with sex workers, quantitative research with ninety-five private workers and a comparative group of 124 brothel workers, and lengthy interviews with seventeen women private workers. Long excerpts of interviews are printed verbatim and make up seventeen separate stand-alone chapters of *Call Girls*. These chapters are by far the most enjoyable reading of the book. The workers describe their work in very different ways to the

negative slant taken by Sullivan. Take, for example, the words of 'Venus', a worker in Canberra:

Because I enjoy all aspects of my work, and I especially enjoy difference and a challenge (I guess this is common to all workplaces), I offer a wide variety of services ... Given the full extent of the sexual potential, it is not surprising that clients have very diverse sexual tendencies.

Sullivan, however, thinks there is a "core inequality and subordination underpinning prostitution" and nothing any worker says about it will change her mind.

Sullivan also fails to account for the experiences of male or transgender workers in her analysis, denying legitimacy to transgenderism generally, even referring to Roberta Perkins as "he". Sullivan attempts to cover all sex work issues, while rendering male sex workers invisible from her theoretical approach: "[male sex workers] are abused because they are less powerful, that is, oppressed because of class/and/or race, unlike women and girls [sex workers] who are raped because we are female." Perkins and Lovejoy conducted extensive research with male and transgender sex workers in the 1980s and 1990s, and across the sectors of the industry: street based, brothel private and escort. In this book they focus on women working privately.

Perkins and Lovejoy conclude that "an approach grounded in human rights and social justice is the only one that considers call girls [private sex workers], as well as sex workers in general, as the main players and not as an afterthought". Sullivan, however, is little interested in thinking about workers' accounts of either the laws or their lives as she analyses the Victorian reforms of the 1990s.

Early 1980s Victoria was a state where the sex industry, though illegal, ran busy operations with the apparent blessing of the Victoria Police. The Victorian government needed to put spin on its attempts to disentangle their boys in blue from the girls and boys in scarlet, and thus placed the 'problem' onto the sex industry, claiming that law reform would contain the (apparently) expanding industry. Sullivan has chosen to reinforce this government spin rather than critically place it within the cultural context of widespread police corruption, blatant disregard for the law, and a government that needed an electorally palatable solution.

Victoria's sex industry reforms were remarkably radical for their time, introducing a licensing

framework that would be eventually be exported to many states and territories, and in the process giving workers some protection from police harassment. To Sullivan, however, legalisation was all about giving men legal access to women's bodies and providing income for "sexual exploiters", "pimps" and "organised crime". This argument only stacks up because she systematically ignores the sex workers who were and are at the centre of these laws, and does not recognise that legal rights potentially provide a range of protections.

Sex worker organisations have been active in Victoria for many years and Sullivan spends a chapter discussing the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria (PCV), a group of workers who made significant gains for sex workers. Sullivan argues that PCV and other sex worker organisations endorse the rape and abuse of women. To support this, she quotes sex workers out of context, and argues that sex work organisations are working on behalf of 'pimps' and 'brothel owners'. By contrast, Perkins and Lovejoy worked closely with and acknowledged state and national sex worker organisations "for their invaluable assistance in monitoring the prostitution laws across Australia". Perkins and Lovejoy are in favour of decriminalisation of the industry, and in that respect are in partnership with sex worker organisations and groups in Australia. Sullivan directly opposes this.

While both books have flaws, Sullivan's analysis is by far the more dangerous because it reduces the industry to crude stereotypes of violence, rape and male dominance. In advocating for criminalisation, she provides a critical productive role in creating the industry conditions that she rails against. As Noah Zatz has argued in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*:

criminalisation does not simply 'repress' a pre-existing thing called 'prostitution', nor is it irrelevant to a practice instead wholly determined by underlying features of male sexuality and/or capitalism. Instead, it aids in the production of a particular mode of sex work. Critics who overlook this productive role are at risk of getting their analysis precisely backwards. Concluding from current characteristics of prostitution that it is a bad thing, they may conclude that efforts should be made to deter and eliminate it. But if existing efforts to deter or eliminate sex work are themselves the causes of its oppressive

characteristics, then the appropriate response might be to eliminate those efforts, not commercial sex.<sup>1</sup>

The Perkins and Lovejoy text, while giving sex workers a voice in the seventeen chapters of interviews, maintains a liberal line of individual choices and freedoms, similar to their 1994 book *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia*. By focusing on private sex workers in *Call Girls* they have added depth to their earlier generalist work. Sullivan repeats the oft-put position of ‘sex work equals exploitation’, trying to revamp it with contemporary information about law reform in Australia. Her logic, however, fails to convince.

Anti-sex work feminists like Jeffreys and Sullivan are far from radical. Their positions only reinforce the power of state agencies to intervene in the lives of people – sex workers, clients and others. In doing so, the result is increased secrecy and exploitation, and a much higher chance of real harm coming to sex workers.

The International Union of Sex Workers argues that “when feminism denies sex work as labour it forces us to spend our time defending the existence of our work instead of struggling for its transformation”. As sex workers have argued for decades, the first step in that transformation is the complete decriminalisation of the industry.

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