

WAHINE TOA RISING &  
COALITION AGAINST  
TRAFFICKING IN  
WOMEN AUSTRALIA

# Busting 16 myths about the sex trade

16 days of activism  
against  
gender-based  
violence

#SexTradeMyths

What can I do, I **hear** you ask?  
I am just me, merely a small drop in a large, vast  
ocean.

Courageous Woman  
There are so many hidden talents out there  
Hidden away from eyes and hearts, too far to see  
Now is the time for you to **rise**  
Rise higher than you have ever thought to rise before  
It's time, time for you to share your gifts with the  
world.

So, writers take your pens,  
Poets hear your **hearts**  
Artists feel your brushes  
Singers sing your songs  
And Dancers, dance to the beat of your own drum.

You may just be one drop in a vast ocean  
But the effects of your creativity will ripple far and  
wide  
So please, feel your souls stirring,  
And shine your **light** with the world.

Women and Children need you to shine  
Your light will gift **hope**,  
Will gift **love**  
Will gift **change**.

**Ally-Marie Diamond**  
**Survivor Leader and Co-Founder**  
**Wahine Toa Rising**

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## About

WTR and CATWA have come together to answer some of the most common myths you've heard about the sex trade. Our aim is to start a conversation and kick off a change in cultural consciousness about the harms of the sex trade.

### Wahine Toa Rising (WTR)

In 2020, Wahine Toa Rising came together because they saw an urgent need for our Wahine (Women) and Tamariki (Children) voices to be heard in Aotearoa NZ, and Wahine Toa Rising was born. Wahine Toa means Warrior Women, and Rising symbolises the heart-led, survivor-led focus of women lifting each other, while still being autonomous. Wahine Toa Rising is survivor-led and supports Wahine Toa (Warrior Women) and Tamariki who have and are being exploited in the sex trade in Aotearoa New Zealand. Like us they deserve to know they are WORTHY, VALUED, HEARD, SEEN AND LOVED.

### Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA)

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) is the Australian branch of CATW International, a Non-Governmental Organization having Category II consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. CATWA was formed in Melbourne in 1994 and is a secular and feminist organisation. We work locally and internationally to end all forms of sexual exploitation of women, especially the violence of prostitution, trafficking and pornography.



**“WTR and CATWA dedicate this booklet to the thousands of women who have been and are being exploited in the sex trade while remembering our sisters who have lost their lives as a result of exploitation, throughout the world”**

WTR and CATWA recognise the unique role of Māori as Tangata Whenua and embraces Te Tiriti o Waitangi, recognising tino rangitiratanga of Maori Aotearoa/New Zealand while embracing the three guiding principles of the Treaty – Partnership Participation and Protection. We will endeavour to implement policies and practices that incorporate and value Māori cultural concepts, values and practices

WTR and CATWA acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands this booklet was primarily produced. We respectfully acknowledge their Ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where WTR and CATWA undertake our work. These lands were never ceded, and are therefore stolen. We also recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are leaders in working to address the disproportionate levels of violence enacted against them, their children and their families.

# #1 “Uncomfortable with the sex industry? You must be a prude”

This is a common misconception, and one that is used to easily dismiss very important criticisms of the sex trade. Let's unpack what we're uncomfortable about...

What kind of sex do male buyers tend to seek out in the sex trade?

Numerous studies, survivor testimonies and outreach organisations note that buyers are actively seeking to enact practices that harm, dehumanise or degrade women in the sex trade, often based on racist, classist and misogynist views.<sup>1</sup> These are not the mutually pleasurable and healthy sexual relationships they teach you about in 'respectful relationships' classes.

As a result of the attitudes buyers bring to the encounter, those who sell sex — predominantly women — experience noticeably elevated levels of physical and sexual violence and psychological trauma. Those who buy sex — almost exclusively men — have been found to exhibit higher rates of sexual aggression and 'hostile masculinity', and to see women in the sex trade as less than human.<sup>2</sup> Women are seen as simply objects through which to gain sexual pleasure, regardless of their feelings, safety or personhood.

Often, women of colour are understood by these men as particularly expendable and inferior. Racist stereotypes mean buyers may also think women of colour will be more compliant

when it comes to sexual acts or abuse.<sup>3</sup> Poverty disempowers women in the sex trade, ensuring that buyers know the women they are purchasing have little bargaining power.

**So, are those who oppose the sex trade uncomfortable with violence against women, racism, dehumanisation and sexual abuse? You bet we are!**

Calling us 'prudes' is simply a way to discredit the political arguments we make, but it doesn't hold up to scrutiny. More than this, it perpetuates troubling beliefs that the sex practiced within the sex trade is a desirable form of sexual intimacy, while simultaneously shaming asexual people, or anyone whose sexual practices don't mirror the violence of the sex trade. Ultimately, if being concerned about these issues makes us prudish, then we'll proudly clutch our pearls.

“

**If being uncomfortable with men's violence against women makes me a prude, then I'm OK with that**  
— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor of the Sex Trade



## #2 “Sex work is a job like any other”

We're sure that some of you have nodded uncomfortably when hearing the phrase “sex work is a job like any other”. You may have even tried to justify it, conceding that “if some women choose a life in the sex trade, then why is it any of my business anyway?”

But the sense of discomfort you feel about the sex trade is an important one, because it points to serious questions about what ‘sex work’ actually involves, and the role and value of women in this hugely profitable ‘industry’.

The physical and psychological risks of being in the sex trade include “violence, harassment, infections, bladder problems, stress, depression, alcohol or drug addiction” and the threat of rape and death.<sup>4</sup>

Some people argue that full decriminalisation — the legislative approach that decriminalises women, sex buyers and pimps — will make prostitution safer for women. But, in what ways does this legislation guarantee a change in sex buyer entitlement? In Australia, male sex buyers actively encourage and praise each other about pressuring women into unprotected sex acts, such as oral sex without a condom. Some men even claim that brothel owners are complicit in this, by posting notes on walls advertising CIM (come in mouth) ‘services’ for an extra price. These things are happening in both legalised and fully decriminalised states.<sup>5</sup>

Unwanted sexual behaviour directly contravenes workplace discrimination and harassment laws in most jobs in Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand.

In the sex trade, however, sex buyers justify their unwanted sexual behaviours towards women as part of the ‘service’.<sup>6</sup> In Victoria, Australia, prostitution falls under the remit of Consumer Affairs, which reflects the idea that sex buyers are merely ‘consumers’ of a disembodied sexual ‘service’, rather than men who pay women to sexually tolerate them.

When we hear people say that “sex work is a job like any other”, it’s important to ask ourselves and those around us:

**Is being pressured to accept unwanted and unprotected sex in the workplace simply ‘a job like any other’? We don’t believe it is.**

The sex trade appears to be fundamentally incompatible with a safe and equitable working environment for women.

“

**The johns just got worse and more abusive towards me. I was their property for the time they had paid for. I was attacked in every hole they could get their penis into and if I didn’t want to, I was beaten. I went to the parlour owner, but they told me, “It’s their time, their money, get over it!” — Sara Smiles, Survivor of the Sex Trade**





### #3 “Sex workers love their work and are highly paid. What they do with their bodies is their choice”

Debates about the sex trade tend to focus on the choices of women, but let's remember that there are other people making choices, too.

**What about the choices sex buyers make to demand access to women's bodies on their terms? What about the choices of governments when they turn a blind eye to the violence, racism and misogyny inherent in the sex trade?**

Or when governments choose to reduce the social safety net and fail to address women's unequal opportunities in the labour market, which narrow low-income women's employment choices? As you can see, women aren't the only ones making choices.

But if we do want to talk about women's choices, let's talk about them in context. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scarlet Alliance — a staunch 'pro-sex work' organisation — admits that women in the sex trade “don't get sick pay and holiday pay, and many have no superannuation or savings”, impacting on their ability to obtain basic necessities.<sup>7</sup> These hardly sound like the markers of a high-flying, lucrative occupation.

It's strange that for such a supposedly desirable industry, the sex trade relies on trafficking — the opposite of choice — to meet demand.<sup>8</sup> In many cases, women are pushed into the sex trade via poverty and disadvantage, and around 90% report that they would leave if they could.<sup>9</sup> When you can't feed your children, you make difficult choices.

While some women may choose the sex trade and don't experience coercion, these women are the minority. We need to meet the needs of the most marginalised in the sex trade, who are coerced into selling sex due to life circumstances such as poverty. Most importantly we need to STOP, LISTEN, and show vulnerable women our respect by HEARING them, and SEEING them.

Let's focus on the choices of men and governments, and think about whether an 'industry' that exploits those with few other choices is one we want to see flourish.

“

No, we don't want to have sex with you. We work our asses off catering to you, and we suffer all the same physical and mental consequences of rape as in any other rape case, only for us the trauma is repeated, again and again 'til we have rent money; again and again until we have food money; again and again until we have babysitter money; again and again until we can pay back our drug dealer for the substances we've learned to depend on to cope with the reality of enduring repeated sexual abuse

— Chelsea Geddes, Survivor of the Sex Trade



## #4 “Sex workers aren’t just women. This isn’t a women’s rights issue”

This myth is a particularly dangerous one, so let’s clear some things up from the start: Yes, the sex trade is deeply gendered, and yes, its existence is a women’s rights issue. While boys, men, trans and gender diverse people are also exploited in the sex trade,

**the vast majority of people being sold for sex are women and girls. By contrast, sex buyers are almost exclusively male.<sup>10</sup> Is this merely a coincidence? No, it’s political.**

Some have called prostitution the world’s “oldest profession”, but prostitution can more accurately be described as the world’s oldest oppression. Throughout history and in most societies, men have ensured that women are available for sexual use. This has been founded on a cultural message that remains strong to this day: women choose to participate in the sex trade, so therefore, it’s not a problem. But ‘sexual services’ are not disembodied acts, and male demand for

these ‘services’ fuels the sex trade and the trafficking of women to supply it.<sup>11</sup>

The existence of the sex trade is clearly a women’s rights issue — it is men abusing their social, economic and political power over women. Ultimately, those who support the sex trade are also implicitly supporting men’s right to women’s bodies.

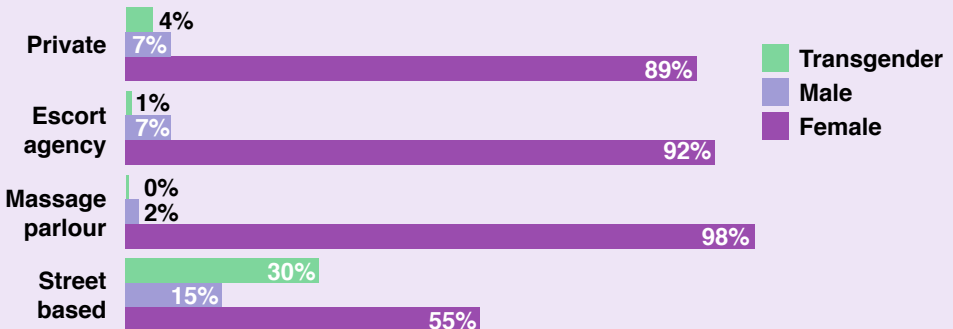
In what way is the sexual objectification and assault of women not a women’s rights issue?

“

**I was not allowed to turn any john away or turn any john down. The johns were gross. I felt like crap. My vagina hurt and I was still made to work even when I was bleeding**

— Sara Smiles, Survivor of the Sex Trade

**Proportion of female, male, and transgender people in prostitution in New Zealand<sup>12</sup>**





## #5 “Sex workers are important to people with disability”

The argument that people with disability (PWD) need access to ‘sexual services’ is often framed in gender-neutral language, but let’s not forget that it’s mostly men seeking sexual access to women’s bodies. In fact, women with disabilities are often denied their sexuality entirely.

It has been argued that paid sex is the only way that PWD can experience intimacy or love. But we need to ask:

**why do we believe that PWD are incapable of forming intimate, loving and sexual relationships in a non-commercial setting?**

The idea that PWD ‘need’ the sex trade is an ableist assumption. It also equates paid sex with intimacy or love, which is clearly untrue: love can’t be bought. But the pressure to ‘create’ such intimacy places extra emotional burden on women in the sex trade.

The belief that sex is a need is based on regressive gender roles and entrenched ideas of masculinity and male sexual entitlement, which have been recognised as major drivers of violence against women.<sup>13</sup>

The fight for disability rights is crucial for all people living with disability. But the ‘rights’ of PWD to access commercial sex should not infringe on the rights of other marginalised groups, such as women in the sex trade.

This is especially important, because we know that women in the sex trade experience high levels of violence, and face higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than war veterans.<sup>14</sup>

Those who advocate for PWD to access ‘sexual services’ place men’s perceived needs ahead of women’s basic human rights. This is selling both the rights of PWD and the rights of women short.

“

**[The] assumption that somehow disabled men... comprise the core demand for commercial sex is not only a lie, but falsely places the sex-trade into a position of almost charitable social necessity that provides the only experience of intimacy disabled people can have. This is the kind of condescending garbage that men across the political spectrum use to convince people of the sex-trade’s inevitability**

— Tom Meagher, pro-feminist ally (2016)





## #6 “Sex is a human right”

While human rights arguments in relation to the sex trade have often been made about women's rights to consent, lately the focus has turned to male sex buyers and their rights to access women's bodies. Recently, Amnesty's international secretariat claimed that, “sexual desire and activity are a fundamental human need. To criminalise those who are unable or unwilling to fulfill that need through more traditionally recognised means and thus purchase sex, may amount to a violation of the right to privacy and undermine the right to free expression and health”.<sup>15</sup>

While the rights of the sex buyer are clearly defended here, what is unclear is why women should cater to the demands of men who are ‘unable’ to receive sexual attention without money involved, or ‘unwilling’ to treat women as sexual equals? How does this ‘inability’ and ‘unwillingness’ automatically transform sex into a human right? And whose rights to privacy and health are really being violated here?

Some researchers have suggested that narratives of sex as a human right actually preference “the rights of the male orgasm” over the rights of women and girls who are prostituted around the globe; rights that still haven't been properly acknowledged or addressed.<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Barry describes the cultural prioritisation of women's human right to ‘consent’ to prostitution, over the rights to dignity and freedom from violence, as “the misogynist paradigm”; one that turns a blind eye to the sexual inequalities inherent in the sex trade.<sup>17</sup>

In a global context, where women and girls are trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation,

**don't we think it's about time to prioritise the rights of those who are negatively affected by the sex trade, rather than those of men who choose not to believe in women's equality?**

“

**If we had decent careers which paid at minimum a living wage, free from sexual harassment, where we received equal pay for equal work to men, we would not be letting you touch us. If we lived in a society where we were treated as full human beings with full human rights, we would not be letting you touch us. If we were not oppressed through sexism and classism, and often racism as well, we would not be letting you touch us!**

— Chelsea Geddes, Survivor of the Sex Trade

## #7 “Criticising sex work stigmatises sex workers”

Stigma in the sex trade is a serious issue, and a gendered one, too. Unfortunately, stigma is typically attached to those who are exploited in the sex trade (mostly women), and rarely attached to the men who buy sex.

Criticising the sex trade is not a criticism of those in it, and acknowledging the harm and violence of the trade is not the cause of stigma. In fact, women in the sex trade are routinely stigmatised by sex buyers through objectification and other harmful attitudes.

Studies in both legalised and fully decriminalised parts of Australia show the discriminatory attitudes of men who purchase sex. A sex buyer from Victoria, Australia where prostitution is legalised, writes:

“I knew this one was a jizzgargler so I thought I'd add to the collection. Fucked it in the arse, fucked its mouth then gave it something warm to taste”.<sup>18</sup>

This quote shows how sex buyers dehumanise women in the sex trade and see women as objects that exist for their sexual use.

**Why should women who face the brunt of violence and exploitation in the sex trade at the hands of men be the ones who are stigmatised?**

It is argued that legitimising the sex trade as “sex work” through full decriminalisation or legalisation will reduce stigma. Yet in jurisdictions where the industry has been decriminalised for decades, there is no evidence this has occurred. Women in the sex trade face stigma and discrimination including harassment, physical and sexual abuse, and coercion and manipulation by sex buyers, brothel owners and others — regardless of the kind of legislation they are governed by.

The way to address stigma is by addressing male demand for commercial sex. Addressing demand in this way works in concert with broader gender equality goals, and questions men's entitlement to women's bodies.



## #8 “What consenting adults do behind closed doors is none of my business”

Consent plays an important role in our society, and in feminist campaigns. So, it's understandable that feminists and other decent people might be concerned about it. We hear you — but let's unpack this a little further.

The consent model assumes that the sex trade consists of two individuals, who enter into an arrangement equally, out of free choice. This idea involves several assumptions.

Firstly, it pretends that the sex trade is not a multi billion-dollar global industry.<sup>19</sup> The industry has huge coercive power, which it uses to exploit and pressure those who sell sex. A woman in the sex trade is not a free-floating individual.

Secondly, consent in the sex trade is bought with money, and fueled by poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, exploitation and violence.<sup>20</sup> In any other context, we would recognise the pressures and coercion involved in this type of sexual encounter. Why don't we give women in the sex trade the same courtesy?

Thirdly, while consent is important, it doesn't define right and wrong. People can consent to things that they do not want, enjoy, or that may even have a negative impact on themselves or others. The sex that happens in the sex trade is usually unwanted. That's why money is exchanged and 'consent' has to be purchased.

**If an individual is repeatedly subjected to unwanted sex, whether they are understood to have consented or not, shouldn't we think about why this is happening? Is this part of the free and equal society we want to create?**

Men who buy sex are able to consent to the encounter, but women 'consent' because they need the money. If women are experiencing unwanted sex, and if male buyers think it's OK to coerce consent with cash in order to buy access to a violent, racist and misogynist experience of sexuality,<sup>21</sup> this is our business, and we think it should be yours, too.

“

**I think they're getting consent and coercion confused. Women who have been coerced behind closed doors are our business**

— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor of the Sex Trade

## #9 “Men need sex work — it’s an outlet that prevents violence against women”

Is sex — and by extension, the sex trade — really a need for men? And what are the social consequences of believing that it is?

Sex can more accurately be described as a *desire* rather than a need. Early theories that described the biological need for ‘coitus’ (penis-in-vagina sex) were found in what is now considered to be outdated research on sexuality. This research conflated our need for things like food and going to the toilet with our desire for sex.<sup>22</sup> There are many problems associated with confusing men’s desire for sex with their ‘needs’. One problem is that these ideas feed into rape myths — or “prejudiced, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape”<sup>23</sup> — that place women and girls at risk of violence.

A common idea is that when men are aroused, it is physically dangerous for them to be stopped from having sex (otherwise known as ‘blue balls’). This is an outdated myth that has been used to pressure women into unwanted sex for decades.<sup>24</sup> Myths that refer to men’s ‘need’ to have sex serve to justify men’s demand for access to women’s bodies, and the violence that is perpetrated by them when they do not get their way.

Unsurprisingly, rape myths play a part in how men treat women in prostitution. Some researchers have found that sex buyers hold four types of rape myths about women in the sex trade: they are “unrapable”, “no harm” is done to them “when they are assaulted or harassed”;

that they “deserve to be raped”, and that all women in the sex trade “are the same”.<sup>25</sup>

### Do these sound like attitudes that lead to the prevention of violence against women?

In the #MeToo era, we cannot sit back and allow these ideas to go unchallenged. Socialising boys to believe that their sexual urges are more important than women’s safety and dignity is irresponsible.

Saying that men need sex or they’ll take their sexual frustration out on other women justifies, rather than challenges, violence against women. And why should women in the sex trade be sacrificed for the ‘protection’ of other women? Let’s make men’s so-called ‘need’ for the sex trade — like the myth of blue balls — a relic of the sexist past.

“

**I’m afraid the brothels won’t reopen before next year... there will be more sexual assaults on women, since a lot of guys can’t get rid of their pressure. A lot will change. Maybe there will be a lot of fresh meat**  
—German Legal Sex buyer

## #10 “If you’re not a current sex worker, your opinion is irrelevant”

Some argue that only people currently working in the sex trade are entitled to speak about it, but it’s important to hear a diverse range of voices on the topic. If we don’t, we leave those who profit from the sex trade to control the public discussion. After all, sex trade proponents have a financial interest in maintaining a positive image of their ‘industry’ and don’t adequately represent those exploited in it.

Survivor voices are important. For women who have exited the sex trade, revealing the harms of prostitution is a difficult process.<sup>26</sup> Survivor voices are often left out of discussions about the sex trade in news articles, in favour of stories about women happily choosing prostitution, stripping or pornography.

**How often do you hear from the women who have survived violence in the sex trade and exited? And why do you think you’re not hearing from them?**

The voices of survivors must play a central role in informing discussions about how we understand and legislate the sex trade. As sex trade survivor Fiona Broadfoot has explained:

“I’d like to ask anybody would you see it as a career for your daughter? All these people, professionals in their ivory towers, who promote it as a job, get yourselves down there, do it and then

come back and have a conversation with me about it”.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Irish survivor Rachel Moran argues that the sex trade has remained a blind spot for the #MeToo movement, and says that “you simply can’t buy consent”.<sup>28</sup> Beyond amplifying the voices of survivors, thinking critically about the sex trade is everyone’s business. The sex trade is a site of violence against women, and pushes the narrative that men have the right to sexually access women on demand. This means that the existence of the sex trade is an issue of equality for all women.<sup>29</sup>

As women, as feminists and as allies, we should be able to have a dialogue about whether the sex trade promotes the kind of culture and beliefs about women (and men) that we want in our society. In fact, we urgently need this discussion. We must listen to the voices of those who have exited the trade and be prepared to hear the reality of their experiences.

“

**Even if only one woman out of the thousands was raped and coerced we should be listening**  
— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor of the Sex Trade



## #11 “How is sex work different to other professions that involve physical contact?”

Imagine you were looking for work... what kinds of attributes are valued in the sex trade, and what kinds of occupational hazards might it include?

The sex trade privileges those with less experience, and the younger the better. This is the inverse of most professions, where expertise is valued and you progress in your career over time.

The physical contact in the sex trade primarily involves things being enacted upon the ‘worker’, rather than the woman being in control of the contact, as in the case of a physiotherapist. Often what is enacted is unwanted, or harmful. Often, it leaves physical or psychological scars.<sup>30</sup>

Women in the sex trade are expected to handle bio-hazardous waste without protective equipment, and health advice to women in the industry often warns against, for example, over-using numbing agents on the genital region, as this may mask more serious injury.<sup>31</sup>

The job entails being penetrated orally, anally and vaginally with a variety of objects, not limited to penises, but also including other body parts, objects, or even weapons. Work may take place in a brothel, a hotel, somebody’s house, a car, a park, a public toilet, or many other places. Wages are negotiated with every new ‘client’, and payment is often dependent on ‘client’ satisfaction. Brothel managers tend to skim 50% or

more of women’s wages, and there is no recourse if women contract sexually transmitted infections in the course of their ‘work’.<sup>32</sup>

To land a job, you will often be required to parade in front of men in your underwear, because the choice of ‘worker’ is primarily based on sexual objectification. You will be more likely to land the job the more you compromise your sexual boundaries, accept a lower price, and the younger and less experienced you are. If someone takes a ‘service’ from you against your will, you experience rape.<sup>33</sup>

What happens in the sex trade would be understood as sexual harassment and assault in any other profession.<sup>34</sup> The level of risk and harm in the sex trade would not be accepted in any other context.

**Why do we think it’s OK for women in the sex trade to take on this risk, and absorb this level of misogyny, when in any other workplace this behaviour would be unacceptable?**



“

“There were six rooms down that dark, seedy hallway – each fitted out with emergency buttons, showers, and a bed. All the rooms had old carpets and peeling walls, and that distinct smell that would eventually become normal, and less nauseating. The buzzers hardly got used, there was never time, and if we did press them – well no one would come

— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor of the Sex Trade

## #12 “Sex buyers are just lonely men”

We’ve often heard that men who buy sex are just lonely and in need of companionship, but research suggests that this isn’t the case.

In a number of studies, **sex buyers articulate the reasons why they buy sex: control, domination, and entitlement.** Most men who buy sex are aware that women in the sex trade come from backgrounds of childhood abuse, limited career choices and homelessness.<sup>35</sup> Many know of the relationship between prostitution and sex trafficking, yet this is not a deterrent.<sup>36</sup>

Some researchers have found that sex buyers are typically already in relationships:

66% of sex buyers in Glasgow were married or living with a partner.<sup>37</sup>

50% of sex buyers in Aotearoa, New Zealand were married or living with a partner.<sup>38</sup>

54% of sex buyers in London were in a relationship.<sup>39</sup>

Sometimes men cite that their reasons for buying sex include a belief in a ‘biological imperative’, or a ‘natural’ need for sex, and in men’s right to have sexual access to women.<sup>40</sup> Let’s take a closer look at the other things that sex buyers say:<sup>41</sup>

**“My favourite experience in prostitution was when she was totally submissive”**

**“Just like going to a public loo”**

**“Just like using a slot machine”**

**“Selecting and purchasing has something to do with domination and control”**

Buying sex is clearly not motivated by loneliness, but by male entitlement and the belief that women should be sexually available for men’s use. Men’s ‘loneliness’ is not an adequate excuse to justify the ongoing trauma experienced by many women in the sex trade.



## #13 “Sex work is safe if it is fully decriminalised”

It is argued that the sex trade is safe if it is fully decriminalised. Yet this is not the case — and the experiences of women in Aotearoa, New Zealand’s sex trade post-decriminalisation are evidence of this. Since full decriminalisation in 2003 under the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA), violence and sexual assault within prostitution have remained, and some women have even died at the hands of sex buyers.

A report by Aotearoa, New Zealand’s Prostitution Law Review Committee, noted that women in the sex trade were still vulnerable to “exploitative employment conditions” and that there were “reports of some sex workers being forced to take clients against their will”. The report went on to note that “the majority [of women interviewed] felt that the PRA could do little about the violence that occurred”.<sup>42</sup>

This same report also refers to the sexual assault that women routinely experience in prostitution as “adverse work experiences”.<sup>43</sup> The risk still inherent in this decriminalised sex trade is underscored by advice offered by the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective document “Stepping Forward”. When

“dealing with violent clients”, the document advises:

“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”.<sup>44</sup>

Decriminalisation promotes women and girls as objects to be purchased, fuels men’s entitlement and contributes to societal misogyny. A society that enables this is not ‘safe’ for any woman. In contrast, the Nordic/Equality Model, a system which has been adopted by Sweden, Norway, Israel, Canada, Iceland, Northern Ireland, Ireland and France, decriminalises people selling sex and supports them to exit the sex trade. It also criminalises sex buyers, pimps and procurers and aims to inform and raise awareness about the harms caused by prostitution.<sup>45</sup>

**Don’t women deserve better than a system that normalises men’s sexual entitlement and abuse of us?**

“

**Increasingly, with the current decriminalisation 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 hard work or 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 more angry, more violent**

— Chelsea Geddes, Survivor of the Sex Trade

## #14 “Sex trafficking doesn’t happen here”

There is a lot of confusion about what trafficking is and what it looks like. People usually imagine a woman chained to a bed with a gun held to her head, but most women who are trafficked are controlled through subtler forms of force, fraud and coercion. This can often make signs of trafficking difficult to identify.

The United Nations (UN) defines trafficking in persons as:

“the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation”.

The UN also makes it clear that “[t]he consent of a victim of trafficking in persons” is irrelevant if any form of “coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability” is used.<sup>46</sup>

**Sex trafficking is the main type of human trafficking that happens in Australia, occurring in both licensed and unlicensed brothels<sup>47</sup>, and New Zealand has recently been described by the US State Department’s 2019 Trafficking in Persons report as a “hot spot” for sexual exploitation.<sup>48</sup>**

In one sex trafficking case in Australia, 20 Thai women were kept in debt bondage conditions, where their passports were confiscated and they were told that they had to pay off debts of over \$AU35,000 to their traffickers. Investigations showed that women were forced to do this by “servicing 500 buyers, working six to seven days a week” while they “were imprisoned in the upstairs rooms of a hotel in squalid conditions, windows barred and shuttered from outside view”. This story is one of many stories of sex trafficking happening in Australia.<sup>49</sup>

In societies where the sex trade is seen as inevitable, how do we prevent the exploitation of the most vulnerable to meet demand?

“

**Sex trafficking happens everywhere, but you can only see it if you’re looking**

— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor and Sex Trade  
Survivor



## #15 “Criminalising sex buying polices our sex lives”

The sex trade has become so culturally normalised that some people can't even imagine what sexuality would be like without it. For this reason, we sometimes get a strong reaction when we tell people that sex buying should be criminalised.

Just because the sex trade has become increasingly acceptable through the rise and normalisation of pornography and stripping, this doesn't mean we can't ask questions about it. In fact, we should be asking more questions, precisely because it has become so commonplace.

Other legal industries that are considered harmful have not escaped scrutiny, and many things that we now consider to be crimes were once legal. Marital rape, for example, was only criminalised in Australia in the 1980s after sustained research, activism and community push-back. Before it was criminalised, it was justified on the grounds that women became their husbands' property when they signed (and therefore, 'consented' to) the marriage contract.<sup>50</sup> When community attitudes change, laws often follow.

When sex involves the exchange of money, and is part of a multi-billion-dollar industry, we are not talking about the private sex lives of individuals. When this 'industry' fosters attitudes that support violence against women, and men's sexual entitlement to women's bodies, this becomes a political issue

that we desperately need to address. Regulation is one part of addressing the issue. Education is another.

Let's have a look at why we believe that sex buyers should be criminalised. A study of UK sex buyers found that:

50% knew the woman they used in prostitution was under the control of a pimp

55% believed that a majority of women in prostitution were lured, tricked or trafficked

47% believed the woman had no rights

27% of men believed they were entitled to any act they wanted<sup>51</sup>



Decriminalising those exploited in the trade but criminalising the exploiters challenges men's right to sexually access women and girls. In countries where sex buying is against the law, demand for sexual services has reduced and rates of pimping and human trafficking have fallen.<sup>52</sup>

Criminalising sex buying is about changing the behaviours and attitudes of men towards women, and of women towards themselves. In fact, 77% of sex buyers in one study said they would be

deterred from buying sex if there were greater criminal penalties.<sup>53</sup>

**We have the power to shape attitudes about women and men based on what we collectively accept. Let's ask ourselves: what can we do to change these attitudes for the better?**



## #16 “Lots of jobs are dangerous. Why is sex work the only one that needs exit services?”

Bella Te Pania was a 34-year-old mother of a young child when she was murdered on the streets of Christchurch, Aotearoa, New Zealand, in December 2019.<sup>54</sup> Bella was the 5th woman in the sex trade to be murdered in Christchurch since the New Zealand Prostitution Reform Act introduced full decriminalisation in 2003. Bella wanted to exit the sex trade and succeeded while pregnant with her daughter, but returned soon after. She was not alone — it is estimated that over half of women in the sex trade stop working but eventually return.<sup>55</sup>

The sex trade is widely known to be dangerous to women. The majority of women who exit the sex trade<sup>56</sup> experience PTSD, regardless of how long they have been in the trade. A study of women in street-based prostitution in Sydney, Australia found nearly half met the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis at some point during their lives, making this the highest occupational risk for PTSD in Australia.<sup>57</sup>

It is well known that women find it difficult to leave violent domestic situations, and that leaving is the most dangerous time for women. Escaping violence in the sex trade is no easier, and presents many barriers for women.

These barriers include fear of reprisals from managers, brothel owners, pimps, buyers and even family. Shame and stigma can prevent women from accessing government financial support, as can a lack of confidence and trust in dealing with

authority figures, social workers, and organisations. Social, educational, physical, emotional and mental health issues can also be major barriers in seeking support and making informed choices.

Sex trade advocates say that women have a right to choose what they do with their bodies. Therefore, it is only right we ensure all women in the sex trade have real choice to begin with. This is why exit services are crucial. The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes ‘Freedom from Fear’ as an important right.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, regardless of law, it is essential that countries provide funded services to give women and young people who are being sexually exploited in the sex trade a means to safely exit, and live free from fear.

**In what way can you help to make exit services a reality?**

“

**So, what supporters of the sex trade are really saying is that vulnerable women and children’s lives who are being coerced, forced and trafficked should be sacrificed for the few women who feel “empowered” by being bought and sold for sex?**

— Ally-Marie Diamond,  
Survivor of the Sex Trade

## I've read the whole booklet... now what?

Now that you've busted these common sex trade myths, it's time to share your knowledge with the world! We've thought of a few ways to get you started...

1. **Share** this booklet on social media using the hashtag #SexTradeMyths
2. **Talk** about the problems associated with legalised and fully decriminalised legislative approaches that are undertaken in places like Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand on social media. Attach this booklet and use the hashtag #SexTradeMyths
3. If you're a bit shy, **ask** somebody you know to read the booklet and get them to pass it on to someone else. Keep the chain going! The more people who dispel these common myths, the better.
4. If you want to talk about this issue with more people, you can **organise** a small group of your friends and colleagues. Ask what you can all do to challenge these myths.
5. Chat to your local community groups, neighbours, family, friends and social groups. Bring up one of the myths over coffee or dinner and **start conversations** wherever you can!
6. Are you part of an organisation, association or group? **Raise** the sex trade myths you've read about in this booklet with your group.
7. Know any people in positions of power? Lawyers, people working for NGOs, your local Member of Parliament? **Send** them a copy of the booklet. Better still, organise to **meet** with them in person and chat to them about some of the myths that have been busted in this booklet. Ask them how they can help.
8. **'Like'** our organisations on Facebook and Twitter to keep up-to-date with the latest news, stories, or posts in relation to the sex trade.
9. Lastly, don't be afraid to **discuss** this issue with the people around you. These myths thrive in awkward silences — your voice matters.

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