

Article 5: The Whorearchy

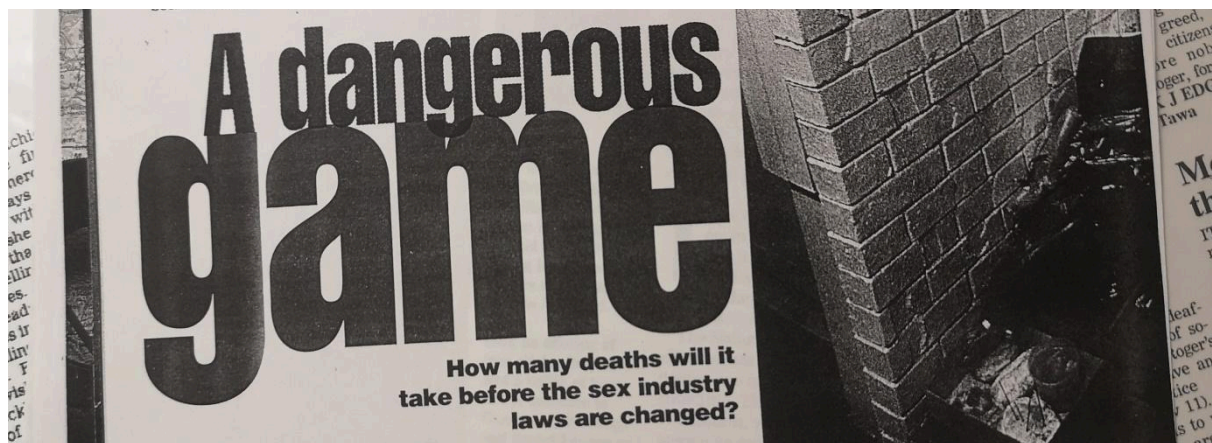
The history of capitalism is one of hierarchies, which is a legacy that bled through to the sex industry. Its legally grey status left it largely unregulated and situated outside the purview of Aotearoa employment law. As a result, it is unsurprising that wide margins existed between the extremes of the industry, both in terms of pay and working conditions. This inequality made employment in sex work largely reflect the wider neoliberal labour market.

The commercial sex hierarchy in Aotearoa consisted of three main branches (in ascending order): street work, massage parlours, and escort agencies. Other groups existed in the upper echelons, such as independent and fetish workers, albeit in smaller numbers. There was some porousness between the branches, but in many cases, workers were somewhat limited in where and how they could trade. This created a structure that sex workers in the 1990s coined the ‘whorearchy’ – a stratified pyramid that closely resembled the broader societal class system. Generally, an individual’s place in the whorearchy was determined by the industry and its pre-existing capitalistic biases. My final article concludes my research by examining the differences between these ‘classes’ and asking why some workers had safer, more profitable, and more sustainable experiences in commercial sex. This is why the sex industry is still not equitable, particularly since the late 1980s.

A discriminatory framework

In forceful reflection of wider societal trends, the illegal sex industry of the 1980s-1990s was rife with racism and inequality. Although sex work has historically provided a space for marginalised identities to procure economic freedom, the sector is not immune to the realities of systemic inequity. Pre-existing biases around identity and

appearance continue to bleed into commercial sex, playing a significant role in determining a worker's pay, employment options, and safety. The industry was highly stratified along ethnic and socioeconomic lines: women who were poor and/or Māori were more likely to be in high-risk, low-paid work.¹ A survey from the New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective (NZPC) in 2003 found that Māori workers were over-represented on the street,² which is known to be the most dangerous and financially unstable space to work.³



Violent crime against street workers was consistent through the 1990s.

Estelle Sarney and Melissa Lee, "A dangerous game", *The Listener*, November 16, 1996.

At the other end of the spectrum, "up-market" brothels and independent escorts targeted clients with money,⁴ with call-girls being the top 1% earners of the industry.⁵ Businesses on this tier often catered to specific desires with explicit marketing, and clients paid top dollar for discretion and exclusivity.⁶ This was so successful that the police often had difficulty tracking them, affording the workers a degree of immunity from police raids and

¹ Jan Jordan, *The Sex Industry in New Zealand: A Literature Review* (Ministry of Justice: 2005).

² Prostitution Law Review Committee, *The Nature and Extent of the Sex Industry in New Zealand: An Estimation* (Ministry of Justice: 2005).

³ Deborah Telford, "The oldest profession in the world", *Sunday*, May 30, 1990, Folder "Media 89/92", NZPC Auckland.

⁴ Annah Pickering, email to author, February 9, 2024, NZPC Auckland.

⁵ Jan Jordan, 2005.

⁶ Caren Wilton, *My Body, My Business: New Zealand sex workers in an era of change* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2018).

the dreaded soliciting conviction.⁷ Naturally, these workers tended to be young, thin, European, and cisgender – a preference that trickled down throughout the industry.⁸ This was not always the case: Rainton Hastie led a post-immigration reform boom of businesses specialising in Asian women. However, for every ‘Superstar A Go Go’, there was a ‘Penthouse’ club that rarely hired workers of colour. In other elitist businesses, cis-gendered Pākehā workers were marketed above BIPOC.⁹ For this reason, the majority of sex workers employed at lower-end businesses and on the street were people of colour (predominantly Polynesian) and workers with criminal records for soliciting. As such, the elitism of sex work – that had always existed – fully crystallised alongside the real-time, hyper-commercialisation of sex work in the 1990s, and became known as the “Whorearchy”.¹⁰

The top income bracket

Before the proliferation of the internet, self-employment was a privilege in sex work. The trend toward independence began to grow from the early 1990s,¹¹ eventually reaching several hundred in Tāmaki Makaurau by the turn of the millennium¹² (a police survey from 2001 estimated around a quarter of all workers were independent).¹³ While some operated alone, for the most part, these workers shared expenses by entering into cooperative arrangements. This allowed more freedom and independence, higher pay, greater safety, and “better clients”.¹⁴ The only significant risk was a conviction for brothel-keeping (the legal definition of a brothel included private homes). To avoid this and operate successfully, these arrangements required access to resources, including the finances to rent a dedicated space to

⁷ Ann Howarth, “Keeping prostitution under control”, *The Dominion*, July 22, 1987.

⁸ Wilton, 2018.

⁹ Pickering, 2024.

¹⁰ Pickering, 2024.

¹¹ Diana Dekker, “Tarting it up”, *Evening Post Magazine*, July 13, 1996, File: “P.U.M.P. Information”, NZPC Auckland.

¹² Tim Wilson, “The whore next door”, *Metro*, December 2000.

¹³ Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2005.

¹⁴ Lynn Grieveson, “Sex for sale”, *Scope*, June/July 1991.

work from. As a result, private work remained out of reach for most until decriminalisation. Those who did go independent in the 1990s were workers with privilege who could charge higher prices – in some cases more than \$200 an hour¹⁵ – and were largely white, attractive, educated, and financially secure, with some maturity and organisational skills behind them.¹⁶ Additionally, a small but notable number of marginalised workers turned to private practice due to discrimination from business owners based on age, gender, size, and ethnicity.¹⁷

The most well-compensated employment in private commercial sex was in more niche pursuits such as domination and fetish work.¹⁸ These workers were predominantly self-employed and traded from home. This independence was not necessarily out of preference – specialised businesses like the House of Dominance were not commercially viable.¹⁹ Like the industry as a whole, there was a dip in dominatrix work following the 1987 crash, as explained by Xaviera Hollander: “...when the stocks drop, then the cocks drop.”²⁰ Independence came with some risk, and combined with the hefty price tag attached to outfitting a dungeon, made domination largely a mature woman’s game.²¹ Renee Chignell – a young dominatrix who worked at the House – went private when the business closed.²² Chignell gained a higher profile than most in this niche of the industry, becoming infamous after being acquitted for the death of cricket umpire Peter Plumley-Walker, which happened during a bondage session at her home in Remuera. Apart from the higher earning potential, there were other benefits to this tier in the whorearchy, including combating ageism. In an industry that prizes youth,²³ dominatrix work provided an avenue for women to age out of

¹⁵ Sharon Stephenson, “Sex in the suburbs”, *Next*, January 1996, File: “P.U.M.P. Information”, NZPC Auckland.

¹⁶ Annah (TBA)

¹⁷ ‘Submission to Auckland City Council: Implementation of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003 and Proposed Bylaws’, New Zealand Prostitutes’ Collective, MS-Papers-0652-054, Series 5: Local Body regulation issues, Box 4, Tim Barnett: Papers relation to the Prostitution Law Reform Bill, 2002-2008, LAGANZ.

¹⁸ Nicola Legat, “Money can’t buy me love”, *Metro*, 1988; Wilton, 2018.

¹⁹ Legat, 1988.

²⁰ Legat, 1988.

²¹ Legat, 1988.

²² Donna Chisholm, “Dominatrix: The Renee Chignell story”, *Metro*, July 15, 2018.

²³ David Burke-Kennedy, “On the Game: The Sad, True Stories of Auckland’s Prostitutes”, *Metro*, April 1984.

direct sexual encounters while maintaining the economic freedom of their craft. Mistress Margaret, who became a dominatrix to support her family after an accident left her husband unable to work, was still practicing at age 65.²⁴

The middle class

Making up the bulk of the sex industry was the ‘middle class,’ which was comprised of parlour workers and escorts and was relatively porous between establishments and branches of work. The parlours were manned almost entirely by cisgender women, while agencies were the only business model available to male workers.²⁵ Records of prices across time can be somewhat inconsistent. The evidence suggests escorts were marginally better paid than parlour workers in the late 1980s, with the gap closing gradually throughout the 1990s.²⁶ Variations in pay were prevalent, and largely depended on location, type of business, act performed, and reputation of the establishment. For example, in 1988, JR’s and Club Lilys – both exclusive parlours housed in the same Auckland building – charged a \$40 entrance fee, with “extras” being negotiated directly between client and worker. This could potentially be a highly paid service, but the process was inconsistent across parlours and often ran lower than agencies. On the other hand, an escort typically enjoyed a slightly higher but more consistent flat rate, with the agency fee up at \$50 in 1988.²⁷

Because the parlours almost exclusively featured cisgender women servicing heterosexual male clients, male and transgender workers were excluded from the middle class to varying degrees. Male sex workers had some dedicated and co-ed escort agencies available to them, but options were still limited due to the relative scarcity of queer male clients. After the decriminalisation of homosexuality, queer men also had sex-adjacent businesses that

²⁴ Wilton, 2018.

²⁵ Prostitution Law Reform Committee, 2005.

²⁶ Pauline Swain, “Lee takes girls firmly under her wing”, *The Dominion*, April 7, 1990; Phil Keating, “Street business”, *Evening Post*, May 15, 1991; Legat, 1988; Grieveson, 1991.

²⁷ Legat, 1988.

flourished at this time.²⁸ These included clubs, saunas and ‘wellness centres’ that facilitated casual sex²⁹ and somewhat suppressed the demand for male sex workers. Consequently, these men turned to private work much earlier than their female contemporaries, aided by their relative ease in achieving financial security and access to resources.³⁰ By 1995, the majority of male workers were independent or escorting in some capacity.³¹ Conversely, transgender workers were almost entirely shut out of this tier, and instead ruled the ‘lower class’ on the streets.³²

Karangahape Road

K’ Road was never a mecca for sex businesses, but its reputation was spelled out across the pavement: the bulk of Tāmaki Makaurau’s street workers traded on and around K’ Road.³³ While the economic hardship of the 1990s did fuel a rival scene in South Auckland, it was on a smaller scale and did not impact business in the centre.³⁴ Street workers faced different challenges to their parlour and agency counterparts. Safety was a pressing issue, and led to the “Ugly Mugs” list – an NZPC initiative that documented and distributed the characteristics of dangerous clients through their magazine, *Siren*. Many workers in this tier also had prior convictions for soliciting, which excluded them from parlour work for ten years and made leaving the industry challenging. In addition, harassment from the police could be persistent, particularly in light of the vice squad’s homophobia and transphobia.³⁵

²⁸ File: “Tony Katavitch Papers – Accounts 1989-2004”, MS-Papers, LAGANZ.

²⁹ Calum Bennachie, ‘The Male Sex Workers’ Handbook’, 1999, New Zealand Prostitutes’ Collective, MS-Papers-0652-061, Series 5: Local Body regulation issues, Box 5, Tim Barnett: Papers relating to the Prostitution Law Reform Bill, 2002-2008, LAGANZ.

³⁰ Roberta Perkins & Garry Bennett, *Being a prostitute* (Sydney: George Allan & Unwin, 1985): 19, Jack Goodwin Collection, 197.71, LAGANZ.

³¹ Shannon Lindsay, ‘My own private male prostitute’, unknown publication, 1995, File: “Articles 95/96”, NZPC Auckland.

³² Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2005.

³³ Lynsey Morgan, “Capital sex industry”, *Evening Post*, September 5, 1991.

³⁴ Karyn Henger, “Prostitutes give out free condoms”, *Manukau Daily News*, July 16, 1998; Wilson, 2000.

³⁵ Howarth, 1987.

Another challenge was undercutting, which was more prevalent on the street, causing infighting and fiercer competition for business. Street prices were generally lower, although without a boss to extract wealth from their labour, workers retained 100% of their fee. This meant that real wages for street work could vary and depended on what the worker advertised. The occasional pimp surfaced over the years, but anti-procurement laws that prohibited “living off the earnings of a prostitute” meant this was never common practice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Kiwi street workers, like their establishment siblings, were exceptionally independent by global standards.³⁶

K’ Road itself was run like a market, strictly segregated into different areas for clients to peruse based on their preferences.³⁷ This was so crucial to the Auckland street scene that *Siren* published advisory articles warning new workers about where they were permitted to trade.³⁸ The regimentation was maintained by transgender workers, who were disproportionately represented on the streets. While transgender women comprised around 5% of the total industry, they made up roughly 50% of the street trade.³⁹ They ruled the area and enforced segregation – occasionally violently⁴⁰ – but did make some exceptions and extend protection to a select few.⁴¹ Generally, male and younger transgender workers were kept off the main road, and were instead relegated to side streets and public toilets. Cisgender and older transgender women divided K Road at the Newton overpass, demarcating turf between the east and west respectively.⁴²

³⁶ Caitriona MacLennan, “Soliciting, Aids and the law: pros and cons”, *New Zealand Herald*, March 4, 1992.

³⁷ Lauren Quaintance, “Danger stalks sex on the streets”, *New Zealand Herald*, October 23, 1996.

³⁸ “Street scene”, *Siren* no. 16, New Zealand Prostitutes’ Collective, June/July 1999.

³⁹ Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2005.

⁴⁰ Julie Hill, “Dark side of the rori”, *North and South* no. 356, November 1, 2015: 83-98.

⁴¹ Wilton, 2018.

⁴² Quaintance, 1996.

An inverted pay gap

Where “straight” work (employment outside commercial sex) valued male labour above all else, in the sex industry, income rates were – and remain – reversed.⁴³ In “straight” work, cisgender women still earn less than men, a disadvantage of 8.6% in 2023.⁴⁴ Intersectional discrimination only pushes transgender women further down the ladder. Commercial sex flips this: male sex workers generally earn the least, despite being more likely to work in agencies or independently.⁴⁵ There was very little business available for male sex workers from female clients,⁴⁶ and as a result they were almost entirely dependent on queer men. Naturally, this was a far smaller chunk of industrial clientele, with comparatively little demand.⁴⁷ Male sex workers also tended to be younger than female, with a shorter shelf-life (unless they specialised into leather work, for example).⁴⁸ This reflects the broader tendency for queer men to focus on youth, but also the specific marketing of Aotearoa’s male sex industry.⁴⁹ It further reveals the gendered privilege at play: male workers find it easier to leave the industry and re-enter “straight” work.⁵⁰ For them, sex work was typically a temporary pursuit, an occupation they could ‘mature’ out of earlier because they had access to far more economic options.⁵¹

Transgender women are seen as a more niche market, similar to domination and fetish work, and are subsequently higher paid than their cisgender counterparts.⁵² As a result, despite street prices trending lower, transgender workers benefitted financially from this

⁴³ Annah

⁴⁴ “What’s my Gender Pay Gap?”, Ministry for Women, 2023, <https://www.women.govt.nz/tools/whats-my-gender-pay-gap#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20the%20national%20gender%20pay%20gap%20was%208.6%20percent.>

⁴⁵ Lindsay, 1995; Annah

⁴⁶ Wayne Ruscoe & Jody Hanson, “Sex work”, *Nexus* no. 10, May 5, 1998, File: “Newspaper Articles 97/98”, NZPC Auckland; Wilton, 2018.

⁴⁷ Perkins & Bennett, 1985: 19.

⁴⁸ Perkins & Bennett, 1985: 23; Lindsay, 1995.

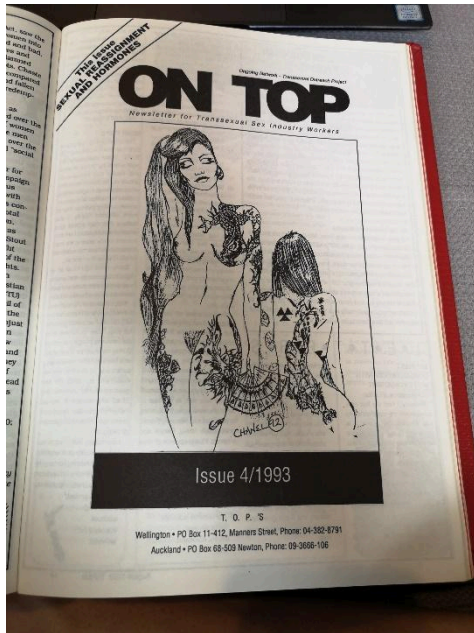
⁴⁹ Lindsay, 1995.

⁵⁰ Perkins & Bennett, 1985; Lindsay, 1995.

⁵¹ Perkins & Bennett, 1985: 19, 27.

⁵² Annah

perceived specialisation and relative scarcity. In 1996, street prices for transgender women could be as much as 30-50% higher than cisgender women,⁵³ a figure supported by oral



histories from the 1980s.⁵⁴ Despite this, limited options meant greater economic pressure and a stronger likelihood of engaging in higher-risk arrangements.⁵⁵

Transgender workers were also predominantly Māori and Pacific women, and as a result of their exclusion from the whiter and wealthier trans groups like Hedesthia, many found chosen whānau and community on the street.⁵⁶ This was nonetheless a

tough existence. Trans workers were more severely targeted by the vice squads, particularly in Tāmaki Makaurau. The influence of Carmen Rupe and her progressive sex businesses made Wellington the

“Queen City,” attracting transgender women from across the country.⁵⁷ Auckland had no such equivalent, causing many workers to leave due to the discrimination. This created a depression in supply, with trans workers in Tāmaki Makaurau earning more than their sisters in the capital due to scarcity.⁵⁸

ONTOP, the newsletter for transgender workers, was introduced swiftly after *Siren* began publishing.

“ON TOP”, *Siren* no. 9, New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective, August 1993: 13.

⁵³ David Fisher, “They mourned Natacha and went to work”, *Sunday News*, October 27, 1996, File: “P.U.M.P. Information”, NZPC Auckland.

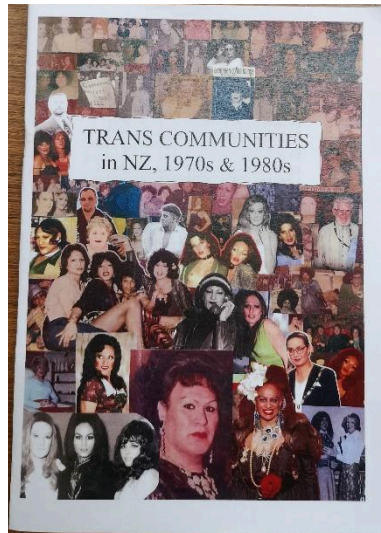
⁵⁴ Burke-Kennedy, 1984; Wilton, 2018.

⁵⁵ National Council on AIDs, “Discussion Paper: Conference”, *Siren* no. 3, 1989.

⁵⁶ Will Hansen, “Trans Communities in NZ, 1970s & 1980s”, July 2020, File: “PAM 6610”, LAGANZ.

⁵⁷ Hansen, 2020.

⁵⁸ Wilton, 2018.



Will Hansen, "Trans Communities in NZ, 1970s & 1980s", July 2020, File: "PAM 6610", LAGANZ.

Sex work was one of the few avenues for transgender women to achieve economic independence.⁵⁹ Finding a "straight" job was possible but difficult, and only realistically attainable for women who were "unspring" (could pass for cisgender).⁶⁰ Social benefits were insufficient to live on or to save for gender affirmation surgery, which was prohibitively expensive. This resulted in a high proportion of transgender women entering sex work both as a means to survive and for self-actualisation and identity. When understood in these terms, it is unsurprising that transgender women fought to maintain their pay and prime position on the street – they were defending their access to self-determination.

Conclusions

Sex work is a topic that can be contentious and is usually accompanied by pre-existing ideas about the people who engage with it. It is these assumptions that have often clouded perceptions of the sex industry. They are also not borne out in the research, which instead reveals a diverse plethora of experiences that deserve to be preserved as part of Tāmaki Makaurau's history. As a foundational economic sector in this city, the sex industry is

⁵⁹ National Council on AIDs, *Siren* no. 3, 1989.

⁶⁰ *Siren* no. 3, 1989; Hansen, 2020.

a crucial part of our heritage. These people left their mark by engaging in and around our lived environment, helping to shape the Tāmaki Makaurau we know today.

The sex industry struggled to recover from the 1987 stock market crash, simultaneously attracting more workers while losing cash-strapped clients. Nonetheless, commercial sex boomed in the 1990s, spreading out into the suburbs and away from the traditional centres of K’ Road and Fort Street. The financial benefits of this proliferation were generally not enjoyed by the workers, but were instead absorbed by their employers. As a result, workers began to abandon sex businesses for independent work executed online, a shift that was exacerbated by the Prostitution Reform Act 2003. Throughout all these changes, different workers were entering, leaving, and moving around within, the sex industry for their own individual reasons. Although, as we have seen, many were limited by the realities of the whorearchy and its accompanying inequities.

The central conclusion we can draw from this project is that sex workers’ experiences of economic restructuring were strikingly similar to those in “straight” work. The new settings made wider societal macroeconomics more challenging for many, intensifying existing inequality. For the sex industry, as an unregulated market in a state of quasi-legality, these issues were similar, albeit more severe. And yet, fundamentally, the sex industry still functioned as a path to freedom, a way for economically marginalised people to carve out their financial independence. While the economics of the profession in the 1990s did not make this easy for most, it was for some an attractive choice when faced with the alternatives available at the time.