

The New Zealand women challenging the neoliberal narrative of 'empowerment' in prostitution

JO BARTOSCH talks to two activists who are facing a major battle in taking on the sex industry – against the grain of both their government and mainstream opposition movements



IN NEW ZEALAND, pimping and the keeping of brothels is considered a normal business. Renee and Chelsea are women who want to change that.

The passing of the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) in 2003 made New Zealand one of a minority of countries to fully decriminalise prostitution. Renee campaigns from outside the industry, and Chelsea as a woman who makes her living within it.

Renee first began to protest against full decriminalisation of prostitution in 2015, when she worked with a woman named Rosalie Batchelor, a prostitution survivor, who was trying to set up a safehouse for other women wanting to exit the industry.

For Chelsea, it was anger at the “happy hooker” media narrative that drove her to “vent online about the realities of the sex industry as a prostitute.”

She explains: “The environment within the brothels is one which doesn’t allow self-expression. You are pressed to ‘play the game’ and tell men what they want to hear, go along with their fantasies, not be a real person.”

Renee and Chelsea are unusual; few people in New Zealand are prepared to speak out. The mainstream media and even the majority of the university-led feminist movement are supportive of the line touted by the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) that “sex work is work.”

Renee and Chelsea agree that those who sell sex should not be prosecuted, but they go further by advocating for the implementation of the Nordic model.

Chelsea explains how she came to understand that the Nordic model would be the best option for women like her and wider society: “I began researching prostitution online and reading more radical feminism, and when I understood the solution, the Nordic model reform, I started collecting female supporters, and I started getting louder.”

The Nordic model is a legal system that decriminalises all those who are prostituted while retaining criminal penalties for those who buy sex.

It has been implemented in Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Northern Ireland and, most recently, Israel.

As part of the approach, support is offered those who want to exit prostitution. The aim of the Nordic model is to support those who are prostituted, reduce demand for prostitution and prevent trafficking.

Chelsea vehemently rejects the label “sex worker” as a sanitising euphemism, arguing that the term makes it difficult to distinguish between those who are prostitutes themselves and those who profit from their abuse.

Chelsea explains: “Even as prostitutes ourselves, when we reject the term ‘sex worker’ we will be immediately dismissed, abused, and deleted, by people claiming to do so in order to support us. There’s a deadly irony there.”

Renee agrees, noting reframing prostitution as “sex work” technically “allows the owner of England’s largest escort agency, Douglas Fox, to call himself a ‘sex worker’.”

Since the PRA was passed, New Zealand has become a haven for sex traffickers, with an increase in associated illegal activity such as the commercial sexual abuse of children.

Groups like the NZPC deny that there is any link between adult and child prostitution. Testimony from survivors belies this, with reports from international researchers and non-governmental organisations showing that the majority of street prostitutes enter the industry as children.

Prostitution is not a choice made in a vacuum, and Maori women and those of Pacific Island origin, who on average tend to be poorer, are over-represented in the industry. The anti-trafficking organisation ECPAT notes of New Zealand: “An inexorable relationship exists between poverty and the commercial sexual exploitation of children, driving a small percentage of impoverished youth to prostitution in order to support themselves and their families.”

The sex industry has become embedded in New Zealand society and there has been a marked rise in very severe acts of domestic violence.

While it might be ill-advised to imply this is the direct result of decriminalisation, the correlation is worthy of investigation. Instead the government has committed millions of dollars into programmes to reduce the stigma of selling sex, as if it were “stigma” that killed, traumatised and injured those in the industry, not abusive men.

Chelsea is keen to see an investigation into the NZPC. She says: “They present themselves as a group for prostituted people in NZ, something like a union for us, if you will. But they have no interest in listening to or serving women who question or oppose their full-decriminalisation stance.

“They haven’t ever done anything unions normally do such as work for better pay for prostituted women and less oppression from management and brothel owners.”

Renee notes that the power and tactics used by groups like the government-funded NZPC, stifle dissent from the “sex work is work” line and the neoliberal narrative of “empowerment” and “free choice.”

“Blackmailing, including of survivors, is one of the means by which this language has taken hold. Encouraging women, prostituted or not, to believe that it is critiques of prostitution that create the ‘stigma’ that causes violence constitutes such blackmail.

“Survivors who contributed to the book *Prostitution Narratives*, launched in 2016, also experienced the kind of backlash that illustrates why many survivors critical of decriminalisation and prostitution itself might stay quiet for their own safety. Activists from Scarlet Alliance [the Australian branch of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects] came to book launches with the intention to disrupt and shout down contributors.”

New Zealand is a cautionary tale, and increasingly governments across the world are recognising full decriminalisation as a failed experiment paid for with the lives of vulnerable women and girls.

Renee and Chelsea are working in a hostile environment, against the grain of both their government and mainstream opposition movements.

Undaunted by the scale of the task ahead, Renee reminds all of us: “If, as NZPC suggests, it is up to individual women in prostitution to ward off violent men by making ‘as much noise as possible to attract attention,’ then it is up to journalists and academics to address the systemic violence of prostitution by doing the same.”

Chelsea ends with a message to women across the world: “Never shut up, our voices are powerful that is clear by how hard patriarchy is working to silence us.”

For more information about the Nordic model, visit nordicmodelnow.org.

<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/new-zealand-women-challenging-neoliberal-narrative-%E2%80%98empowerment%E2%80%99-prostitution>