The Process Of Change In Queensland: A Worker's Perspective

Kris Anderson
President
Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry

This paper does not aim to provide an academic analysis of change in Queensland. Much of the material used for the paper, apart from historical references, has been gained from personal experience and from talking to other workers who were working in the sex industry at various times in Queensland. Thus the paper refers almost exclusively to female prostitution. There are two broad aims of the paper. The first is to discuss significant changes which have occurred in the industry in Queensland over the past century, and to examine how and why these changes occurred. The second aim is to explore the process of change for sex workers who have become involved in Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry (SQWISI) and to examine this very personal change.

The whole picture which emerges from this historical perspective is one in which the independence of the women in the sex industry is frowned upon and repressed. This repression is delivered either from bosses, the police, the law or from the health authorities. Repression has occurred at various times and in various ways in Queensland and has often been severe enough to create a backlash among workers who have begun to resist. This has happened recently in Queensland with the clampdown following the Fitzgerald Inquiry (Queensland 1989).

In Queensland, prostitution is regulated under the Vagrants, Gaming and other Offences Act 1931 and the Criminal Code. Technically prostitution is not illegal—however, a number of associated activities are. As in other states the following are illegal:

- using premises for the purpose of prostitution;
- allowing premises to be used for the purpose of prostitution;
- living off the earnings of prostitution;
- keeping a premises for the purpose of prostitution; and
• keeping or managing a bawdy house.

**Historical Overview**

Early evidence suggests that, in the late 1800s, sex workers were prevalent and a number of brothels operated in the inner city in run-down tenements in lower Albert, Charlotte, Mary and Margaret Streets of Brisbane. By August 1880 police noticed prostitutes moving into suburban areas such as Boggo Road, Red Hill and Paddington.

In 1885 the newly formed Social Purity Society observed that there were 'fallen' women everywhere. In rural Queensland, a controlled number of Japanese prostitutes were imported to service the needs of 'coloured' male labourers in towns adjacent to sugar plantations or pearl luggers.

In 1897, more than 100 of these women were reported to be acting as prostitutes at Childers, Innisfail and Cairns. Within the next two years there were more than a dozen brothels operating in Mackay, Bundaberg and Thursday Island. Aboriginal women around this period were kidnapped from their families and dragged from campsite to campsite with itinerant travellers until they were so riddled with disease they were deserted; whilst other Aboriginal women were paid for their sexual favours with a few tobacco leaves (McIntosh 1984).

By the early 1900s, part of Brisbane's red light district had moved to South Brisbane. The presence of prostitution was seen as a necessary evil. It was not possible to uncover much information from the early 1900s to World War II. It is safe to assume, however, that prostitution did not cease to exist but rather it continued throughout the years of World War I, the 1920s and 1930s in a tolerated environment.

During the years of World War II, most of the sex workers were street workers. They would pick up the clients and take them to one of a few rooming houses where the client could pay for a room for them to use. It was also not uncommon for the workers to go to the American Canteen in Adelaide Street and pick up servicemen from there.

It was the practice of the Criminal Investigations Bureau to police the street workers, and it is believed that many were physically and verbally abused. It is reported that workers were frequently bashed in the cells. 'Once a copper, never a man' was a quote from one worker from the time. She and a girlfriend, who also worked on the streets, were tapped on the shoulder one day and taken away on the suspicion of having an infectious disease. They were detained in the 'Lock Hospital' for venereal disease patients behind Boggo Road Gaol. While detained they were given weekly health checks. During their incarceration they climbed a ten-foot galvanised iron wall and ran away. They were then apprehended and sent to Boggo Road Gaol for three months (although they only served a few weeks). Neither woman had any diseases.

The Act under which they were originally arrested was the *Suppression of Contagious Diseases Acts* of 1860 which required no trial, and indeed no proof of disease for a 'suspected prostitute' to be taken away. As with syphilis in the early part of the century, the issue of public health was again used as a means of controlling women who did not conform. It could be argued that women such as these street workers simply became too independent by hiring their own rooms and breaking out of their stereotype of the time.

From information gained about the late 1940s and early 1950s, it seems that there was a reversion to a more controlled and predictable type of prostitution, in much the same way as women, generally, were expected to abandon the work they had undertaken during the war and revert again to their roles of wife and mother. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, five brothels were operating in Brisbane. These were located at Knott, Claredon, Earnest and Albert Streets. Sex workers at this time frequented the streets and the Grand Hotel was reputed to be 'rotten with them'.
The brothels were referred to within the sex industry as 'houses'. There were usually two girls working in the daytime shift and several during the night shift. The workers did not live on the premises but were responsible for maintaining their own rooms and keeping the establishment clean. Some houses employed as many as eight workers at a time and would take 25 per cent of their earnings. Well-known and tolerated brothels in Bundaberg, Cairns and outside Innisfail would employ only one worker at a time and take 50 per cent of the worker's earnings. The worker would live on the premises and stay there for varying periods of time. A cleaner maintained these houses and the worker's meals were provided. They were only allowed to go into the town to do their personal shopping and usually they were in the company of the madam. If they went drinking late at night they were forbidden to mix with any of the menfolk. In most of these tolerated brothels workers were not allowed to have boyfriends. Boyfriends would have threatened accessibility by clients, and they would also perhaps have threatened the control which the police exercised at the time.

All the houses at this time were owned and operated by women and a man's presence was not tolerated, as he would be promptly charged with 'living off the earnings' by the police who constantly visited the houses. If the workers did not have a douche can visible in their room or could explain to the police a lawful means of employment, they would be charged under the Vagrancy, Gaming and Other Offences Act. Health checks were compulsory and were performed on a weekly basis. The women working in the Brisbane brothels were checked each Wednesday by a female doctor (the same doctor who checked the workers in the Lock Hospital). The doctor would monitor their attendance and contact the owner of the brothel if the workers were due for a health check. In the event of their contracting any diseases, they would be stood down until the doctor had given them a clearance to work.

There is currently little information from a worker's perspective on the early 1960s, although hotel work was still popular at this time. There were a couple of notable brothels such as '$2 May' from Paddington and 'Manhattan Walk' in South Brisbane. During the mid-1960s came the advent of the photographic studio. The first, most well-known was Cathy's Photographic Studio at New Farm. Another opened near the Police Station on Coronation Drive, but was closed down because it was too close to the Police Station. More of these studios opened and some were later converted into massage parlours as that concept became more popular. They were run by owner/operators and some employed up to three girls.

During the mid-1960s many workers would travel to New Guinea and work for a few weeks. Another source of income that was tried by many workers was to take a caravan and a couple of workers to 'do the mines'. Workers would travel to the remote mining camps and sell sex to the isolated miners. Although this seems to be an innovative and independent exercise, it was usually organised with the permission of the local constabulary and the foreman at the mines. It was often undertaken in lean times and was organised by madams and pimps.

The early 1970s saw five small places operating as massage parlours: The Roof Garden in Edward Street, Brisbane City (owned by a male and operated by a woman); the Valley Therapeutic Clinic, Wickham Street, Fortitude Valley (owned and operated by a woman); Glencrag, Spring Hill, (owned and operated by a woman); The Vienna (owned by a male and operated by a woman); and the Elizabethan (owned and operated by two women). Some sex workers came from the southern states, worked for someone for a short time and then opened up for themselves. 'Home Massage' services—the equivalent of escort services today—were also available.

The police were rarely seen, but around this time they began to prosecute workers under the Physiotherapy Act 1964 for advertising massage when they were not qualified under the Act. It was only a $40 to $60 fine and did not particularly worry anyone in the sex
industry. However, some of the workers looked up a thesaurus and started to advertise 'body rubs and rub-downs' instead.

In the early 1970s it was easier for a worker to set herself up in her own small business than it had ever been. It was not necessary to purchase or own suitable premises but rooms in a commercial area could be rented and this caused no nuisance value. All equipment required to open a massage parlour could be rented. It was also possible to advertise for clientele in the daily newspaper, albeit under the guise of massage.

Over this time period there had not been a lot of activity with police and parlours, as the police were used as agents but they were not allowed to remove their underwear. Therefore, if a client was clothed during the massage the workers simply did not offer any sexual services. One other way of prosecuting was if the worker made admissions of having broken the law. Very simply, if one made no such admissions or was not 'caught in the act' then it was extremely difficult for the police to convict a worker.

There was an explosion in the number of parlours at this time and some owners operated a large number of places. These operators came to an arrangement with the local Licensing Branch to 'cop pinches' or be charged by arrangement, at regular intervals. Obviously the heightened visibility arising from this increased number of parlours contributed to the need for the police to be seen to be policing prostitution.

Working conditions varied. The smaller operators usually split the earnings on a 50/50 basis. The cleaning and reception work was either shared or done by an ex-worker or someone who was unable to continue selling sex for either personal or health reasons. The parlours which belonged to a chain, however, charged the workers a set amount of money per client with a $30 base charge whether they earned any money or not. The independent operators started receiving a great deal of police harassment and were unable to keep their staff, with their clientele also being frightened off. They too, came to accept being prosecuted and convicted by arrangement.

By the mid-1970s, escort services were flourishing and being run by male operators in a large and competitive manner. Any parlours owned and controlled by male investors had a female to manage the day-to-day running of the parlour. These women also 'copped the pinches' for the owners. By the end of the 1970s in Brisbane, only five or six independent women operators were still in business. An interesting cycle also occurred during this period with the prosecution of the workers and operators in the small places owned and operated by sex workers and ex-sex workers.

Originally, when all the independent operators agreed for themselves and their staff to 'cop the pinches', they were proceeded against with a summons and received a fine in the mail, but the girls started 'shooting through' without paying their fines and also used false names. The police then started to lock the workers up overnight so they would appear in court the next morning. The workers then started to refuse to cop pinches, which resulted in the police raiding places, kicking in the doors and harassing both the workers and their clients. This resulted in the independent operators getting large, strong security gates fitted on the main doors in their premises. The police responded to this by lugging huge oxywelding gear up the stairs in order to break through the gates. Needless to say, by the time they actually gained admittance to the premises everyone was behaving in a lawful manner. In some cases a solicitor was actually paid to sit on the premises to ensure that the legal rights of the people involved were respected. Finally an agreement was reached between the independent operators and once more they were to be prosecuted by summons. The workers, however, were expected to carry proof of identification.

The cycle is a clear demonstration of the ability of the industry to 'roll with the punches' and to make adjustments according to police policy at the time. It also demonstrates that there is considerable power available to the workers even within the current system of laws.
and that workers and owners will use this power when they are pushed to a point where
they cannot work.

In the late 1970s, a private tug-of-war developed between the Licensing Branch and
the Consorting Squad who decided to start going into parlours and blackmailing the workers
for information. This caused a lot of confusion and the Licensing Branch instructed the
workers in the industry not to cooperate or talk to the consorting branch. Things soon
returned to 'normal' under the control of the Licensing Branch.

Around this time and in the early 1980s, a certain sergeant seemed to believe it was his
job to close down parlours in Brisbane and the Gold Coast. He introduced the system of
charging landlords. While this made life increasingly difficult, it was not successful. There
were few landlords actually convicted and most referred the matter to their solicitors and
again, due to the largely unenforceable laws, the solicitors were able to delay proceedings
long enough for the matter to blow over and enable the parlour to continue operating.

The early 1980s were chaotic. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a syndicate of male
owners had been formed. This syndicate largely used women as receptionists and managers,
and their control over the industry increased steadily. It has been revealed by the Fitzgerald
Inquiry (Queensland 1989) that corruption existed on a significant scale and that police were
being paid, not only to not prosecute syndicate parlours and workers but also to assist the
syndicate to discourage competition. The whole industry was highly visible. However, unless
one was already established in Brisbane or was linked to this syndicate of owners, the police
harassment was so much that new places were unable to stay open. The police would
arrange with Telecom to have phones disconnected, which made it impossible for an escort
service to continue to operate.

In places such as the Gold Coast and larger country cities, it was still possible for
independent sex workers to operate, although most of the houses operating at the Gold
Coast were actually controlled by a few operators. Many private workers on the Gold
Coast were able to keep working alone or with a friend without receiving too much attention
from the police.

Police policy was not easily determined during the early 1980s. The Fitzgerald Inquiry
revealed that while the police partied in some establishments, others received a lot of
attention. The most common practice was to come around to places on a regular basis,
sometimes twice a week and other times twice a day. A book was kept with all the workers
names and periodically they were charged then returned to work approximately two hours
later. 'Set ups' where police agents were also used occurred intermittently, despite the fact
that everyone was well trained to 'cop their pinches'. Some owners did not even have to be
on the premises or even in Queensland to be charged. As unsavoury as it may have seemed
for the dozens of police who used many disguises and assumed personas to gain evidence, it
was a thoroughly humiliating experience for a sex worker to provide sexual services and
then be charged. Having the money taken back was a final insult.

By 1986, there were only three independent operators left in Brisbane and they had
been operating before the syndicate monopoly was established. The majority of sex workers
were employed mainly by this syndicate of male owners. As a result of the situation with the
police, the independent workers 'copped more pinches' and good workers were actually
advised by the police to go and work in one of the syndicate establishments where they
would get less, if any convictions. The working conditions in these places were not as fair as
the smaller owner/operator establishments. Robbery and violence were also used by the
syndicate to control workers as was the practice of phoning through bogus bookings to
other parlours so that they would be unable to take genuine clients. Condoms were not
allowed to be used in establishments at this time and this did not change until the advent of
AIDS. The role of the public health authorities at this time seems to have been
minimal—except for the clinics and doctors which provided evidence of attendance for
sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) checks on a regular basis. Indeed, the industry was so controlled at this time that a worker was virtually unable to work unless they had a clearance certificate.

The workers received less than 50 per cent of the total monies earned. At first there was a 50/50 split. Then, if they were involved in escort work, they would have to pay a percentage toward the driver's fee and, after they had earned a certain amount, they would be required to pay a 'shift' levy.

Often workers were charged a bond when they first started working. This could be up to $200 which was rarely refunded. Workers would be fined for an array of things—for example being late or having days off without notification. Often when they left a particular establishment they were not paid for their credit card bookings which were normally paid to them on a weekly basis.

Shortly before the Fitzgerald Inquiry started, the Licensing Branch served section 8 notices on all of the parlours giving them seven days notice to close down. All the parlours except for three closed down in Brisbane. Initially, the parlours in large tourist towns (Cairns and the Gold Coast) fared a little better as it seemed the local police rarely showed any interest unless their nuisance value was disturbing the community. The large country towns, including Cairns and the Gold Coast, were then subject to large raids by the now infamous Licensing Branch. This resulted in very few massage parlours remaining open. Most of the workers went into escort work, some left the state, while a lot of the Brisbane based workers moved to the Gold Coast where they could operate freely from Tweed Heads. Advertising in the daily newspapers was stopped. It is interesting to note that one of the tabloids in Brisbane had a special rate for advertising parlours and escort services which was three times greater than any other advertisers were charged. There was also a required minimum $20 advertising fee.

During the Fitzgerald Inquiry, the industry continued to operate in a low-key, underground fashion. The media continued on their witch-hunt, searching out places to remind the police that the industry continued to exist. More and more workers started to work privately and discreetly. More people were charged under the criminal code and landlords were being threatened with prosecution. This was the beginning of one of the few serious attempts this century to enforce the laws relating to prostitution in Queensland. Tens of thousands of dollars were spent in attempting to secure convictions of owners and workers. Agents were used, with minimal success, surveillance and 'questioning' of clients leaving premises was undertaken. As with all such attempts its success has proven to be limited. The easiest convictions were workers rather than owners and several of these workers decided to contest the charges against them and won their cases. Again decisions had to be made as to who the police would target in this campaign. Workers working on their own, in flats or units were largely left alone, although they were technically breaking the law in relation to advertising and other peripheral offences. Private workers were contacted at this time and police were aware of their activities. This selective attention raises the thorny question of the point at which corruption occurs. It was in this climate that our organisation SQWISI commenced.

By the time the Fitzgerald Inquiry ended, the 'sisters were indeed doing it for themselves'. Most were discreetly working in small situations or by themselves. Most workers' reactions to the outcome of the Fitzgerald Inquiry were that they felt disappointed and 'ripped off'. Many workers who gave evidence at the Inquiry and who were promised police protection did not believe that they received this protection. There was also a strong sense that Mr Fitzgerald had turned the spotlight on prostitution and the exploitation in the industry at the time and had then backed off from the obvious conclusions and recommendations. As one worker put it at the time 'Fitzgerald opened up prostitution to the public gaze, stuffed it for the workers and then walked away'.

128
With the change in government in 1989, the Labor policy of removing victimless crimes from the statute books gave a sense of hope within the industry that prostitution would no longer be criminalised. This has again been put off, however, this time to the weighty and lengthy deliberations of the Criminal Justice Commission. Meanwhile the industry has been left in some sort of vacuum. Heightened police interest continued for a time after the Fitzgerald Inquiry until the final disbandment of the Licensing Branch. Conditions are now ripe in the industry for a re-establishment of syndicate type operations and corruption.

There are clear parallels between the 1990s and the early 1970s. From small establishments run by workers and ex-workers employing a few people, and many workers working privately, larger organisations are beginning to emerge. Many male bosses are now in business. The industry is becoming highly visible again. The media is still taking the ambiguous position of pushing for a change in the law while continuing on their witch-hunt and exposing establishments, no matter how discreetly they are operating, by publishing the names and addresses of sex workers, receptionists and operators when they are charged.

Overall, the picture is one of informal influences acting on the industry rather than consistent formal influences such as the law or changes to the law. The role of the law in changes relating to prostitution is almost irrelevant. The prostitution laws have remained virtually the same since the turn of the century and yet, as is clear from the preceding picture, the industry has changed enormously in this time.

The significant influences which have affected the practice of prostitution for a worker are: the visibility of the industry and the resultant police policy; the involvement of organised crime and its relationship with the police; the extent of repression and control of workers in the industry; AIDS and other STDs and the media. With official inquiries such as the Fitzgerald Inquiry and the Criminal Justice Commission, it is as yet difficult to determine the long-term results for workers. Certainly, short-term they have not been of assistance to workers.

Other informal influences which are probably most significant in the sex industry have been the unintended consequences of policing practices, extreme control and repression. Many of the workers currently working in Queensland have had two decades of experience of living with, fighting with, and learning about the law, the police, and organised crime. Some of the unintended consequences from this are the heightened consciousness of the women in the industry in terms of their potential; an increased knowledge of the law and their rights under the law; and a decreased likelihood of settling for half-hearted reform in the area of prostitution.

Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry

After two unsuccessful attempts to start a prostitute's rights organisation in the 1970s, SQWISI became possible through the involvement of a few sex workers and concerned citizens efforts. The catalysts for this were the AIDS epidemic and the attempted clampdown on the industry in 1988.

SQWISI began with a few sex workers and a couple of people from the Health Department. The original intention was to educate the workers in the industry about AIDS and other health problems. Almost immediately it was realised that criminalisation of workers in the sex industry continually surfaced as a major obstacle in educating the workers.

Our attitudes to common issues has evolved with contact with other sex-worker organisations and community based organisations. The following examples highlight this evolution:
Initially a cottage industry concept was supported by SQWISI. However, we now realise that to partially legalise the sex industry only serves to create a two-tier industry as has been evident in other states.

Registration (or some kind of licensing system) seemed an easy way of controlling our industry and we now feel registration is most unacceptable and damaging for personal anonymity. If clients of workers can enjoy anonymity then surely the worker is entitled to the same right.

Compulsory testing is another common issue that was widely acceptable within the industry. After years of having to conform to a regulatory approach by brothel owners it seemed reasonable. The realisation has come, however, that it is quite valueless—as a sex worker is only as clean as her last client.

One of the dilemmas which SQWISI must face is that many of these attitudes are still held by many sex workers. Those ‘enlightened’ by their involvement with SQWISI are having to grapple with these issues on a day-to-day basis and often find it difficult to persuade a sex worker that registration is not desirable. Many sex workers simply see that a legal registration system is better than what they have now.

Involvement of sex workers in the running of SQWISI is, of course, essential and many problems occur in attempting to do this. Initially there was considerable fear of being identified with SQWISI and police attempted to deter workers from joining SQWISI. An assumption of unlawful behaviour was made by police when visiting various premises and finding a copy of the Hooker's Herald there. A number of meetings and representations have been made to the police who are now less suspicious of SQWISI's role and aims. Now, sex workers are more inclined to come forward and join but many are still apprehensive about supplying an address to be on a recorded file.

As many community organisations have found, time and motivation are a problem in getting workers involved. Whilst members are supportive of what is being done through SQWISI, the actual toil is left to a handful of volunteers and two full-time staff. A lack of success at encouraging workers to attend workshops at SQWISI premises has forced the staff at SQWISI to take the information to workers and input is often gathered in the same manner.

Our experience has also been that workers who wish to make the transition from full-time sex work into full-time SQWISI employment have had great difficulties in coping with changes such as: living on a set wage; working set hours; working within a team; and divorcing personal and work relationships. Considerable learning has also resulted from this for those workers and others on the management committee of SQWISI. In spite of any of these difficulties, the overall conclusion is that having workers who have experience in the sex industry is invaluable as a SQWISI worker. Other skills such as office skills, training and education are teachable.

Personal changes which have occurred for workers involved in SQWISI, to a greater or lesser degree, include:

- becoming aware of legal rights and knowing that one does not have to accept continual convictions on the basis (and whims) of changing police policy;
- truly recognising and believing that sex workers have legal rights too;
- a building of trust in self-organisation. Key initiatives which have assisted with this have been services provided by SQWISI such as the ‘Ugly Mugs’ descriptions which help sex workers to identify potentially violent clients;
The Process Of Change In Queensland: A Worker's Perspective

- the development of skills from being involved in running the organisation;
- learning about the political process—political lobbying and mechanisms for seeking support for SQWISI's position on a number of issues;
- media skills—which have often been learned at considerable personal cost to members;
- safe sex is now a non-negotiable issue for most workers whereas before, the client would attempt to bargain with the worker. The supply of condoms and lube has greatly facilitated this change and has reduced their reliance on owners who may or may not supply condoms; and
- sex workers now have a larger network of support.

The challenge for those sex workers in Queensland who now have a much broader perspective and understanding of many issues is to spread this perspective among fellow workers who have not had such involvement in the change process. Our exploration of this whole process of change in the beliefs of sex workers who have had considerable exposure to discussion and argument about issues raises serious questions about current research done, and research that will be done by the Criminal Justice Commission in the near future. Unless there is some process of education which accompanies the research, the workers will not be aware of the full implications of the answers that they give. For example, simply asking a worker about whether or not they would like to see legalisation, most workers would see this as an improvement on their current criminal status and would not be aware of the full implications of a 'legal' system such as in Victoria. SQWISI is attempting to provide this type of education through its most effective outreach tool—the *Hooker's Herald*.

**Conclusion**

As in the past, the industry is responding to influences such as demand, police policy and worker preference. At the moment just about anything is possible in prostitution in Queensland. It is likely, however, given the vacuum described earlier, that there will be an increase in organised control of the industry. Ultimately, this is not good from a sex worker's perspective as any increase in control diminishes an individual sex worker's independence. The Criminal Justice Commission needs to take account of this in their deliberations and any reforms which they introduce must be done as quickly as possible. Significant cooperation would be more likely to be forthcoming from sex industry workers if there was an amnesty from prosecution at this time of change.

**References**
