MY CAPACITY AS FIELD WORKER FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES' project on prostitution includes visiting many brothels and communicating with hundreds of sex workers. A composite view from the perspective of many sex workers in many different working situations will be presented, and it will begin with a discussion of the clients from the girls' point of view. An attempt to distinguish between clients of the street, of the brothels, and of private sex workers will be made.

Sex Workers and Clients in New South Wales

There are three types of professional sex workers common to New South Wales. Firstly, there are the street workers who solicit business in public on certain Sydney streets. These are the smallest group, numbering no more than 10 per cent of all sex workers. Street clients as a group tend to be younger and often from working class backgrounds. But there are many exceptions to this, such as a girl who has a regular client of five years who is old and wealthy. Many street girls will also tell you of the numbers of clients who are young executives, media personalities and middle aged 'yuppies'.

The brothel workers are by far the largest group in New South Wales. They work in what are commonly known as 'parlours' across the state. The term 'parlour' is derived from the old concept of 'massage parlour'. A brothel is convenient for men who want sex without having to make a prior appointment—they can walk straight in off the street. Brothel clients come from all classes and are all ages, whereas street clients tend to be more spontaneous and will often stop when they see a girl on their way home or decide to visit a house after they have arrived home from work. Unlike most street clients who pull-up when any girl catches their eye, brothel clients tend to go to the same place, usually in their own neighbourhood, and see the same girls. They often prefer an environment that is familiar and feels secure, while many street clients are excited by the unknown and what they perceive as dangerous. Brothel clients prefer girls who threaten them the least and those who most resemble the 'girl next door'.

Private prostitution refers to the work of 'call girls' and 'escorts' whose clients are seen in the worker's home and apartment or on a date by appointment only. These girls represent
about one-quarter of professional sex workers. Private clients are often looking for a mistress or the 'other woman'. They tend to scan advertisements seeking the most exciting woman with an exotic or mysterious persona. They are often older and middle class. The private client is usually not so concerned with having sex with a younger woman as fulfilling their fantasies of the 'other woman'. Often young clients visiting private workers seek out an older woman to satisfy their mother fixation or other fantasies.

Many girls find they form close and lasting friendships with other prostitutes. Sometimes these can be their first friendships with other women. On the street these friendships with other women are not so likely as girls do not have the opportunity to spend time together because they are always looking out for the next client. They also work in territories, which tends to keep them apart. The situation in a brothel is different due to the fact that girls are at work for eight to twelve-hour shifts, often with very little to do between clients. This can lead to boredom and to increased smoking or excessive alcohol and caffeine consumption. Most friendships form quickly and are based on shared work experiences rather than the girls' background. Although these friendships are strong at work, they usually do not extend beyond the workplace and are only ongoing while the two friends remain in the same brothel. In some brothels, friendships are discouraged or not allowed, as competition between girls is better for house profits. As in any working situation where staff need emotional and physical support from each other, it would be an advantage to management as well as to the workers if these friendships were encouraged.

**Brothel Management**

The role of the receptionist in the brothel is to manage the brothel for an absentee boss. Therefore, her first loyalty is usually to her employer, who, after all, has the ultimate power of dismissing her and the other staff. As a woman and an employee, she has more in common with the workers than the boss. She may develop close friendships with some of the workers but her duty to the boss is to enforce his or her rules, which places her in the unenviable position as the proverbial 'meat in the sandwich'.

Other duties of the receptionist include scrutinising visitors, making up the weekly roster and processing the clients. This can place her in an awkward position with the workers, such as when she has to turn away their friends at the door or give them unpopular roster times. The receptionist also has to decide whether a girl should refuse a client on the basis of obnoxious behaviour. Finally, due to the fact that the receptionist works in a brothel, clients assume that she is as available as the workers. She has to deal with this situation as pleasantly as possible without hurting their feelings or driving them away.

There are as many female as male brothel owners and managers. The position of the boss is omnipotent. There is no power greater than the boss and, with no union or arbitration commission, there can be very little staff solidarity. The authority of an irrational or prejudiced boss is likely to be unchallenged. The manager may impose whatever rules suit them and dismiss whomever they wish at a minute's notice. However, most bosses are reasonable people. In many cases where a girl has been working in one place for a long period of time, the boss will grant her privileges in recognition of her loyalty. There are also impossible tyrants among brothel management who can make working in their brothels unbearable. However, it is always easy for a worker to get another job quickly in this industry. The management is usually quite happy to have a high staff turnover, as this gives clients a greater choice and gives the brothel a greater profit. With omnipotence and no unionism, the brothel manager—like 19th century industrial capitalists—may treat the workers as dispensable items. One girl commented: 'The only thing I dislike at the moment is management. Everything else about my work I really enjoy'.
Occupational Hazards

Occasionally a girl may have problems with clients who become abusive or even violent. Most workers consider having sex with misogynous clients, drunks and aggressive men unpalatable. However, since these men form a large part of a prostitute's clientele it becomes a matter of economic necessity to endure them. In prosperous times prostitutes can be choosy, but during a recession they have to put up with the obnoxious and the repellent among men as well as the pleasant and respectful. Problems usually occur when the client is too drunk or nervous to perform sexually. A street worker can just walk away or, if she thinks the man may become violent, she can often call on a hired male 'sitter', whose job it is to deal with a nasty situation. Many street workers are street wise enough to deal with potentially explosive situations by quick thinking, a quick tongue and a witty repartee.

In a brothel most problems are not really serious. For instance, clients can be a nuisance by their petty complaints in the vain hope of getting a refund. Usually the receptionist deals with this quite capably. The main objective is to calm the man down and get him out of the door. Most girls are quite used to explaining why there are no refunds in brothels.

Private workers have to deal with some of these problems and, if they work alone, they are also more vulnerable to violence. Women who work alone choose to take this risk because they can make more money and are not controlled by management. But, there have been tragic occasions when all their skills have failed to calm a violent man and serious or fatal injury results.

Other problems with clients include a client becoming obsessed with a girl and wanting to spend all his time and money on her. This may sound good for business, but most girls have a full life outside the brothel and are not interested in having relationships with clients beyond work. In addition, some clients may try to force an unwanted sexual practice on a girl in the room. But most girls are expert at maintaining control over their clients during these occasions. Speaking about her sex work experiences, one girl said:

You do have a degree of autonomy in prostitution. Within that whole realm of men selecting women with its notion of female passivity, there is a strong input of sexual control by the women.

Another girl agreed:

In my personal experiences I found it was a total role reversal to the usual positions of power and dominance by men with women subservient to them.

In New South Wales the police rarely bother the girls because most are not contravening any laws. Occasionally though, police are obliged to visit brothels on departmental orders to count heads and check that minors are not on the premises. Invariably they will ask for names and addresses, though they know that often the girls give them false information. It is a game of power without substance. However, on certain residential streets of Sydney, street workers are constantly harassed by police for soliciting within view from a church, school, hospital or dwelling. In states where laws exist making prostitution activities illegal, the girls have a constant and antagonistic relationship with the police.

Common to all prostitutes is the stigma attached to their work. This effects some women much more than others and obviously those in love relationships or those closely attached to their families, where the other parties are unaware of their occupation, are under a greater strain of secrecy than those who are concerned only for their neighbours' opinions. The stigma of prostitution often leads to paranoia and low self-esteem among many women.
Only the emotionally strong are able to withstand community prejudices and misinformation about prostitution, and even among these only a handful of the most courageous with the least to lose will 'come out' politically and socially as whores.

One area of particular dislike for prostitutes is the demand by clients and bosses for workers to dress in accordance with the popular images of high-class whores and cheap tarts. It not only elaborates mythology but is also expensive, impractical and uncomfortable for the workers. For instance, clients often have a sexual fetish for women's legs, so workers are pressured into wearing extraordinarily high-heeled shoes that are both dangerous and physically unhealthy. Of course, girls can choose not to wear this kind of clothing, but they would soon find a diminishing clientele and possibly without employment in brothels. There are some women who enjoy the charade of dressing-up as an opportunity to feel feminine and attractive. Others find it gives them an opportunity to change their identity and is a convenient way of separating the whore persona from the real person. These workers then feel that they are able to cope psychologically with the stigma attached to being a prostitute. However, a large number of prostitutes are resentful of having to cater to male sexism.

Other areas of discontent include working conditions, such as confined space, uncomfortable furniture, poor lighting and inadequate temperature control in rooms allocated to staff. Television sets dominate most common rooms and in some places these feature endless hard-core pornography for the benefit of clients.

Matters such as workers having to pay half the monies they receive from their clients to the management and a lack of concern for their welfare at work are issues which sex workers feel very strongly about. Likewise, having to pay a bond to some houses as assurance of their reliability is a major resentment amongst workers, particularly when few ever see their bond again. These, along with other matters, such as lack of holiday pay, sick leave, workers compensation and job security, are all issues for the union movement. Prostitution, in fact, is one of the last industries yet to receive the benefits of awards, wage adjustments and unionism. For example, one girl slipped and broke her arm at work—and she was not even partially compensated for six weeks loss of income following her fall. If the staff had been insured, as in most workplaces, such a situation would not have been allowed to happen. The following comment by one girl gives us an insight into the differences in working conditions:

I left the East Sydney brothels to work in the parlours because winter was coming on and I didn't fancy standing in the open doorway in a short skirt. But I didn't like the parlour I went to work in because their rules and regulations were a bit heavy. It's not that I can't abide by rules and regulations, but when you consider that we girls were doing all the work and the owners were getting half our earnings, having to start at a particular time, finish at a particular time, can't do this, must do that, you must see everybody, and don't force them to use a French letter. That was the worst part. I ended up getting gonorrhoea twice because of the doctor visiting the parlour being so slack. I never had a disease in all those years in the East Sydney brothels. I had seven weeks off before I started back working in a brothel in Palmer Street. But it was closed down by the City Council a few weeks later. Next I went into a brothel in Bourke Street and was there only two months when it was closed down as well. So the only alternative for me was the streets.

Advantages of Sex Work

The main advantage of prostitution is the high financial rewards. However, in the present depressed economic climate, like many other businesses, earnings are considerably lower than they were just a few years ago, with every girl complaining that their business has
dropped by between 25 per cent and 50 per cent. Many people believe that prostitutes make thousands of dollars a week, but this has not been true for quite a few years; and even then 'one had to literally work their butts off' to make such an income. At that time there were a lot of men seeking prostitution as a sexual outlet. In 1991 though, most girls are lucky to make much above the average national wage. Nevertheless, this comment by a worker in a Sydney North Shore parlour probably expresses the sentiments of a lot of girls:

Doing prostitution feels like the amount of money you're paid gives me a sense that my labour is valued, from a purely monetary sense. Other work I've done felt to me to be particularly under-valued, most especially in nursing.

Another advantage for most prostitutes is the freedom and flexibility of their work. For instance, a single mother working a day shift can deposit her child at a local creche at 10 a.m. and pick the child up at 6 p.m. This can mean the difference between poverty and a comfortable lifestyle. For women without family commitments, the job flexibility and the financial rewards provide them with a more luxurious lifestyle. For this private worker, prostitution gave her a jet-set living:

I greatly enjoy my freedom. If I want to go somewhere for a month I can just go, when I like and for as long as I like. It has allowed me to travel and I have travelled a lot due to prostitution. When I travel to Europe I can go to work in an apartment with two girls. If I work there for a week I can travel freely anywhere afterwards. That's what I like about prostitution.

An additional advantage often expressed by girls is the self-confidence they develop through prostitution. This next girl's comment sums it up nicely:

When I started working I was quite frightened of men. Whenever I found myself alone in a room with a strange man I'd get scared. Now I'm no longer frightened of men and I'm learning a lot about them. I mean they are no longer as mysterious or revolting as I imagined them to be. When they come into the parlour they tell us these terrible secrets about themselves and you get to know them intimately very quickly. My work has given me confidence to communicate with men and has taken away my fear of them. It's also given me confidence physically and I'm no longer self-conscious about my body. It doesn't worry me that I'm not perfect and I really do think that I'm attractive to some men but not to others, whereas before I used to have this very bad physical self-image.

Conclusion

Prostitution is like any other business, it has its good points and its bad. The nature of these issues are different from other work but every type of work is unique. The disadvantages include situations the girls dislike and hazards such as violence and arrests. It is surprising to note that most girls do not list sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS amongst their dislikes and hazards of the profession. This is not to imply that they are not concerned for these, because the scrupulous use of condoms and medical checks strongly suggest otherwise. The research at the University of New South Wales indicates that most girls do not get diseases, and the diseases they do get seem to occur more often in their private lives than in their working lives.

The advantages of sex work are not publicised to the same extent as the disadvantages. There is a good side to prostitution, otherwise there would not be as many girls involved in
sex work, regardless of the financial rewards. Two quotes from girls in the business indicate this. The first girl works in a Kings Cross parlour:

> It was the best thing I have ever done, because it has developed a strong character in me. Before prostitution I was just another clinging, obsessive female. Now, I am my own person—Independent.

This next comment is from a girl who is a street worker:

> What I like about what I do now is I can start work when I want to and finish when I want to. I am virtually an independent person. Overall, prostitution offers me much more money than I could get anywhere else, and the hours are more flexible than in any other kind of job.

This paper will conclude with some recommendations. The first recommendation is that the legislators in all state governments decriminalise prostitution, totally. Prostitutes are ordinary women doing sex work as a matter of survival. They are not sick or disease-ridden, nor are they criminals. They do no harm to society or to the community, so why should they be punished for doing what everyone else does privately, with the only difference being that they get paid for their efforts?

The second recommendation is to the police departments. Prior to 1991 in New South Wales, prostitutes have endured many problems with police. Police should respect prostitutes as citizens, with citizens' rights like anyone else. For instance, in Sydney, even though working in a brothel is no longer a criminal offence, some police still swagger into the place unannounced, without warrants, and demand the names and addresses of all the workers. They certainly would not dream of behaving like this with any other law-abiding citizens. So, as prostitutes are law-abiding citizens, they should be treated as such, and the police in all states—even where prostitution activities are criminal offences—should treat the women with the respect they deserve.

Finally, the last recommendation is for social workers and health workers who are in constant contact with prostitutes. In this age of HIV/AIDS, many more health workers are eager to communicate with prostitutes, ostensibly to assist them in the fight against the dreaded disease. This noble gesture, however, is sometimes tainted by the attitudes of health and social workers who have no previous experience with prostitutes. Some of these health and social workers need to improve their attitudes if they are to gain the confidence of the sex workers.

Do not patronise and treat prostitutes as though they were dummies or lepers. Most prostitutes are responsible, practical professionals who have been taking care of themselves for years. They can probably teach most health workers something and the communication between prostitutes and the health and social workers should be a mutual learning experience between two equals. Stop believing the newspapers, act on your instincts in dealing with other women, and think of sex workers as women and not whores. Most important of all, change the attitude inside your head before speaking to a prostitute.