



Way Back in 1978

I work at RhED in the Hustling to Health program and also do brothel outreach with RhED workers. On outreach, I had a conversation with a worker (Theresa*) who has been in the industry for 30+ years. It was interesting having a conversation with her to find out what it was like in the earlier days – in other words pre The Sex Work Act (1994) and talking about the differences. I thought it would be good to let the industry know about these differences and asked Theresa if we could do an article.

So a big thank you, Theresa.

In 1978 a young mother started work in a massage parlour.

In 1978 sex work was illegal. There was no receptionist, three sex workers were in the building on shift and Theresa worked the night shift between 7pm - 2am. How it worked was whoever was available answered the door and the client went with that worker – there were no introductions. At this establishment, the worker doing a straight massage would receive \$2 and the house would take the \$10. A topless massage was charged at \$15, the house took \$10 and the worker received \$5. The worker could then negotiate extras in the room and keep that money. The house paid the workers on a weekly basis which on average was \$250 per week. The average wage for an Australian male in 1978 was \$215 (Australian Bureau Statistics). There was no record of women's wage earnings available. A basic grocery shop would cost on average \$25. Median house prices in Melbourne in 1978 were \$37,600.

Two years later, in 1980, a full service which included massage, oral and penetrative sex for half hour was \$50, the house received \$10 and the worker kept \$40. Condoms were supplied by the worker. However workers could not carry condoms and always stashed them in a secret hiding place. This happened so that if the police raided the establishment workers could not be arrested for sex work and use condoms as evidence. Condoms were flushed down the toilet which did sometimes require visits from the plumbing services.

In those days, the workers wore white coats – similar to what doctors wear. There were no beds, just massage tables and the sex (if full sex took place) was on the floor. There was one shower and toilet on the premises so it was sometimes fun and games with a merry-go-round atmosphere of clients and workers using the facilities. Alcohol was also brought in by some of the clients, particularly the Europeans and often there was a party atmosphere. Despite the fact that there were no reception services, cameras or panic buttons, there were not many concerns about safety apart from visits by the police.

STI testing was not mandatory back then. However workers would have random checks. It was very difficult to find a doctor who would do a check. Melbourne Sexual Health Centre was in Little Lonsdale Street and was the only confidential place where STI testing could take place. A major attitude change in sexual health, STI knowledge and condom use was the advent of HIV in the early 1980s.

I asked if there were any differences in the men's attitudes today to when Theresa first started. Theresa said that in 1978 men were very

appreciative of the service given; they were more generous leaving a tip and not expecting any extras for the service. Nowadays, men expect and/or demand a lot more in the service, an example being that anal sex is requested more. Back in the late 1970's-early 1980's, men would discreetly come to the brothel by themselves; today clients often travel in groups. Although clients have more choices of sex workers in an establishment than ever before, Theresa notes that they are walking away more often than booking. This is a major change from 1978. Another change that has happened in recent times is an entry charge made to men who visit the brothel on Friday and Saturday nights. This fee is then taken off if the client books a worker.

One of the major changes that occurred once sex work and brothels became legal was the sense of relief at not being arrested by the police. Having a manager/receptionist to keep the house running more smoothly meant that the house was more productive and the bookings less likely to run over time. When legislation came in, condoms, lube and other supplies were provided by the house.

Theresa said the money earning capacity has declined over the years. A major impact was the casino in the early 1990s and also the change in social habits. Examples include extended hospitality industry hours and there is more sex apparent everywhere (eg the internet, etc). In addition, women are now more open with their own sexuality and needs (eg more women may perform oral sex than in the 1970s, generally women are more aware, maybe due to Sex in the City). However we discussed the fact that although women may be more liberated; there is still a need for sex workers as many clients are looking for not only sex but intimacy, safety and "the girlfriend experience".

I asked Theresa if I had a magic wand how would she like the industry to change. Theresa said that the one of the main problems that remains is the stigma and discrimination that sex workers experience. Today, compared to when Theresa started, the working conditions are safer with no harassment from police hence no risk of arrest. However, stigma and discrimination by the general community continues to demean those who work in this industry. Theresa says that the industry has come a long way but no funding or education has been done to break down the barriers and educate the general community to acknowledge that sex work is a legitimate and real job. Theresa commented that she felt the worst critics of sex workers are women in the general community.

I asked her how she had survived for so long in an industry that is hard work with often long hours and a job that involves working with body, mind and emotions. We also discussed that for some in the industry if they cannot be "out, loud and proud", this job can be isolating. Theresa said "Firstly, no drugs, secondly, the support of my family and friends and not having to hide from them what type of work I am involved in and paying taxes" have enabled her to have the energy and endurance plus the enjoyment of staying in the industry.

Today, Theresa's concerns are for women who are joining the industry. She feels the lack of professionalism is really changing the face of sex work, and there is a real need for mentoring of new sex workers. Also, she said that a change in attitude towards clients may help lift this industry and make it more lucrative. A major difference today is that although clients have more access to the sex industry by way of the increased number of brothels, the internet, the dating services, etc, there is still a market for sex workers if sex workers can show kindness, warmth and empathy and provide a professional service. "If you genuinely care for your client, they will come back for more." We all agreed that the regulars are the bread and butter of our work.

Theresa's final advice to all sex workers is "Make the industry work for you and walk away with something to show all the hard work you have put in".

Shirley

***Name has been changed to protect identity**

