

Times have changed

I turned my first trick at eighteen years of age out of sheer desperation and found it to be one of the most interesting and exciting jobs I was ever to encounter in my life. However, not everyone saw it that way as it was dangerous exploiting women and our sexuality etc!

Women who worked in this industry were not to be trusted as we all were drug addicts and hustlers, who in their right mind would choose to be a prostitute? I did as I do now, but that was the eighties and stigma was rife. Unless you were on the game, you could not understand what this job entailed so talking to your "straight" friends was not an option. Keeping it under wraps was the golden rule.

So in my early years, the women you worked with were the people you turned to for advice, friendship and the occasional cry. We were comrades in an industry that was the lowest even though we made as much money then as a lawyer or a doctor would – they have clients too.

Make no mistake; we are professional ladies regardless of what people think. I used to think back then how wonderful it would be to have some outside support, a collective that we could connect with and was recognised by the state government, an organisation that could help with health issues, free condoms, syringes but most of all a voice that could bring this industry out of the dark ages.

Bear in mind that back then it was illegal and condoms were used only if the client was ok with it. It was pre-HIV days when our biggest fears was herpes or gonorrhoea. Clients held all the cards and if you worked on the street and even in some of the houses and were assaulted or ripped off; going to the police was not an option which left us vulnerable and at times very alone.

By the middle eighties, my dreams were coming true! At last, the first mobile needle exchange service was up and running in Perth. After leaving Melbourne and working the sex industry in WA (where you would register with the vice squad and have to be age twenty one and over), you could work and pay tax and you were legitimate. No more hassles from the police and the free sex clinic where we got our certificates from were nonjudgmental. The fact that we were always treated with respect was a light at the end of the tunnel.

It was amazing. The fact that we had to have these certificates in order to work was peace of mind for me as looking after our health was our problem as were the costs back in the day.

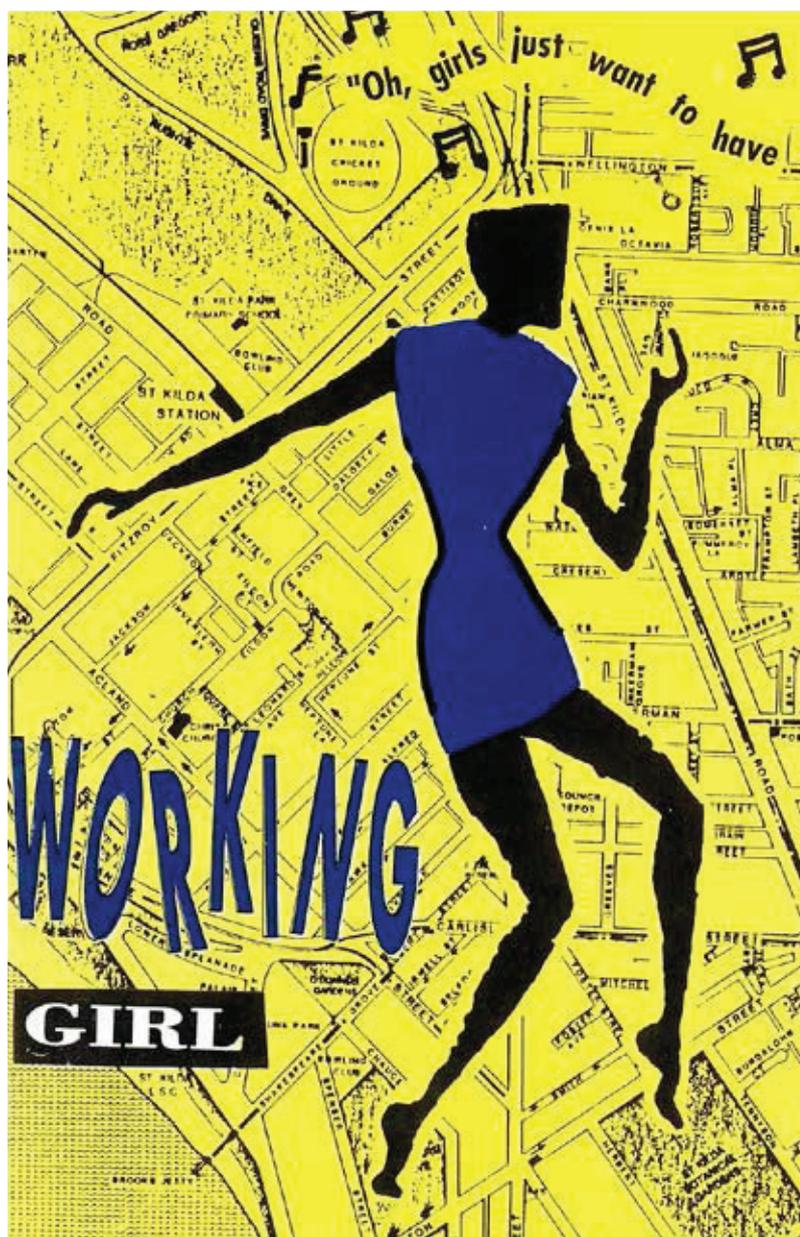
By the late eighties-early nineties, we had collectives starting up in most states. The threat of HIV spreading through the community, forced the government to fund needle exchanges as well as collectives that were forming to assist the sex industry. The collectives promoted safe sex and to use condoms at all times.

What came from those humble beginnings turned into so much more! Industry workers started contributing ideas and stories, they made it their own, the phrase, "if it's not on, it's not on" was famous in promoting safe sex everywhere and who came up with that catch phrase? A sex worker and more were to come.

After leaving WA in 1990 and making the decision to leave the industry but still remaining proactive in the collective we had in Perth, my first born son and I headed back to Melbourne.

I was keen to see what Victoria had to offer now that things had changed. What and how was Victoria reaching the street workers in St Kilda? They needed something really strong as I had done my time there too and knew how hard they were doing it.

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PIC: WORKING GIRL. PVC 1988

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I went straight to the streets to see what had changed and to my surprise and delight I found the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria (PCV) with an office walking distance from the strip where workers were encouraged to drop in, have a coffee and participate in all that was PCV.

It started with spreading the safe sex message but became so much more, a mobile needle exchange, referrals, counselling and the best part, the ugly mugs list! It was our voice at last, the momentum and energy was intoxicating.

Sex workers all over Melbourne were becoming informed and empowered and I and others started to feel pride in our craft. The tides were turning in our favour, finally.

I spent a short time working with PCV and then moved on to Queensland where I had two more children but kept seeing the changes for the better in our industry even as far north as Cairns.

We could never go back into hiding after organisations like Scarlet Alliance and the State and Territory Collectives like PCV were up and running.

At fifty years of age, children grown up and moved on, I chose to go back to the sex industry with the hope of not being too old. Could I still do it after such a long break?

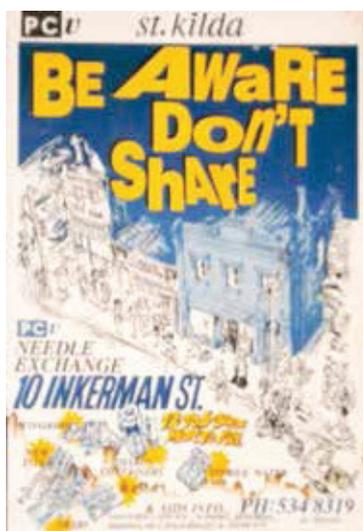
Turns out I can do it and better than when I was young. I now have a better understanding of men and my own sexuality. Not only do I make money but enjoy my job immensely. My regulars are great and in all honesty, I get more from them than just money!

Things are very different these days with the legalisation of brothels and the wonderful work that RhED does makes life easier in this industry!

We still have a long way to go but these days I can talk openly about my work and feel pride in the service I provide. Sure, I get the odd look but peoples' attitudes are different now, we are no longer seen as a threat to society but a benefit and I thank all who made this happen!

I was there at PCV when we felt the power, when we came together as one voice and for that I am truly grateful.

Nicolletta



RhED welcomes delegates to the Interational AIDS Conference



RhED has a long and proud history working in the HIV sector in Victoria. As we celebrate the 25th edition of RED and welcome the International AIDS Conference to Melbourne, we look back on some highlights and what's happening now.

RhED, previously Prostitutes Collective of Victoria (PCV) was the first sex worker organisation in the world to receive government funding to work in HIV prevention. Back in 1987, the Victorian Department of Health funded the AIDS Prevention Program (for sexual health education to brothels.) To this day, RhED receives ongoing funding from the Department of Health.

In the early 1990s, PCV ran the first needle exchange in the southern hemisphere, as a rapid response to HIV prevention. Condoms were also distributed. A Needle and Syringe Program still operates from 10 Inkerman Street.

The 'Sex Work and HIV Project 1993/1994' was the first project of its kind in Australia. It worked to change community and industry attitudes towards positive sex workers, fighting the discrimination positive people faced in the sex industry.

RhED has worked with culturally and linguistically diverse sex workers for many years. Sex workers from Thai and Filipina (1993) backgrounds produced 'We Deserve to be Safe' – HIV/AIDS prevention audio tapes in their own languages. Chinese followed in 1998. RhED continues to provide translated HIV information for migrant sex workers in Chinese, Korean and Thai.

In 2001, RhED showcased the successes of HIV prevention messages by offering brothel tours for visiting international delegates to the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific.

Since the beginning at PCV, RhED has supported peer education, recognised as the most effective way of passing on information about HIV. Due to the work of community based sex worker organisations and projects, Australia has one of the lowest rates of HIV amongst sex workers in the world. To date, there has been NO recorded transmission of HIV from a sex worker to a client in a legal setting.

RhED is represented on a number of HIV/AIDS bodies, attends sector forums to stay up to date with research and has contributed to all National HIV Strategies. RhED regularly conducts workshops about safer sex and HIV.

"Australian... sex workers... mobilised early and effectively to the emergent crisis, providing care and support and educating each other through peer education and community based organisations about safe sex. The long-standing success of Australia's HIV response among... sex workers also needs to be maintained." – National HIV Strategy 2010-2013.