

# **Sex Work & Study:** **The new demands facing young people & their implications for health and well being**



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# Research Questions:

1. What are the new demands facing young people?
2. How are young people responding to these changes?

# New Demands facing Young People

Research continues to reveal...

- Rapidly changing environment - technology, education, work, globalisation etc.
- Previous 'indicators' of developmental 'success' are now (becoming) redundant;
- Decline of opportunity for the uncredentialed;
- A growing mismatch between actual credentials and employment outcomes

# **New Demands** facing Young People

- Overlap between study, work & leisure
- Increase in part-time, flexible, insecure employment outcomes for graduates
- 'Life-long' learning/Credentialism
- Increase in part-time employment

# Changing Social Indicators

Age	1970s (%)	1990s (%)
Women (20)	33	6
Married (25)	83	42
Women (25)	66	25
Mothers		

# Changing Social Indicators

<b>Age</b>	<b>1970s (%)</b>	<b>1990s (%)</b>
Men in (15-19)	49	22
full-time (20-24)	86	64
work (25-34)	95	81
women in (15-19)	46	13
full-time (20-24)	52	48
work (25-34)	27	41

# Methodology

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- **Contact with 40 students (1999 – 2002) from a range of post-secondary education institutions in Victoria (Universities, TAFE's, Natural health education institutions)**
- **20 University of Melbourne students participated in a 3 year longitudinal study, with a minimum of 2 interviews each year.**
- **Methodology informed by Participatory Action Research Project – on *being* reflective & responsive.**
- **Mixed Methodological approach – interviews; observation; field work; memory work.**
- **Recruitment – Student Unions; Inner South Community Health (formally PCV) and worker referral**

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**‘In contemporary society, prostitution, for some women, offers a good enough standard of income for shorter working hours and some degree of autonomy and independence for those working for themselves’ (O’Neill, 1997:3)**

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**20% of the 321 Victorian sex workers surveyed, or one in five, were currently studying: 10% were studying at University, 4% at TAFE, 6% in other areas of less formal study such as massage and personal development and 0.7% were at high school.**

*(Pyett, Haste, & Snow, Profile of Workers in the Sex Industry, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1995:9)*

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**‘...[students] earn all of their income from or supplement low earnings or welfare benefits with prostitution’  
(Weiner, 1996)**

**‘...students were working to pay their way through college or university’  
(Perkins, 1991)**

# Who are participants?

- Worked in a variety of settings: Street work, Escort Agencies, Massage Pallor's, Brothel, Live, sexually explicit venues – Table Top, Exotic, Lap-dance & Fantasy workers.
- Aged between 18 – 31 year old
- All participants are women
- 5 international students
- 26 participants worked between 2-4 days per week.
- The youngest starting age was 16 and the oldest was 26.
- 32 participants are single; 6 have a regular partner; 1 is married; 1 is separated.
- 6 participants have children.

# Routes into the sex industry

## **Primarily driven by financial need:**

- i) lack of, or ineligibility for government income support;
- ii) University fees and charges, including ancillary, HECS and upfront fees;
- iii) the inability of the family unit to financially support them;
- iv) the impact of changes to the youth labour market which is driven by flexible, insecure work practices and;
- v) visa restrictions for international students.

# Routes into the Sex Industry

**Ali...**

‘My parents know I strip. I started about two years ago. They’re not happy about it and we don’t talk it, but they also know that I wouldn’t be going to University without this job’.

# Routes into the Sex Industry

## Wanda....

**‘I usually subsidise the youth allowance [government income assistance] I get during semester by working occasionally in bars, or massage parlors or something like that. I’ve been doing it since I started Uni, and I usually pick up more work during the holidays so I don’t have to work so much during the semester’.**

# Routes into the Sex Industry

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# Ling...

**SARAH:** Do they [your parents] know that you work in the sex industry to pay the rest of your fees here in Australia?

**LING:** No, no, they wouldn't like that. But I can't ask them for any more money because I know they're struggling themselves, my sister tells me. But I thought, I can do this for a couple of years without them knowing, then I'll get out because I'll have a good degree and then I'll work in some corporate job or something that they'll be proud of.

# Routes into the Sex Industry



## Charlie...

**‘I love working in strip clubs because I meet so many interesting women. Many who are also students like me...It’s like they’ve figured out what to do about University fees .... Take the money’.**



Most participants do not disclose to significant others that they work in the sex industry.

**Why?**

# **Non-disclosure**

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**Reasons participants provide for non-disclosure of working in the sex industry:**

- **Social stigma (mythologised, pathologised, demonised);**
- **Moral panic;**
- **Persecution (humiliation, coercion, ridicule, manipulation, rejection, violence);**
- **Legal sanctions.**

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# Wanda....

**‘Some of my friends at school know that know I’m a sex worker ask me that if I’m not ashamed of what I do, then why do I lie about it? They ask me why I don’t just tell everyone what I do? I try to explain in to them - that it’s just not that simple. I wish it were. I tell them that I lie because it makes it easier for other people to deal with. And so other people don’t treat me negatively or with violence or disgust...Telling people I’m a sex worker often has the same effect as telling them I have a fatal disease...and that they’re going to contract it from me. They grimace and either look away or look at me with disbelief and disgust’.**

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# Susie....

**‘People become uncomfortable around me when I disclose that I work in the sex industry – like my old friends at Uni. It’s like I’ve developed some disease or sickness and they recoiled away from me. Some even get a little threatened by me, like I was going to lose control and grab their boyfriend or something...’ .**

# Health & Safety Issues

Non-disclosed means increased health and safety risks:

- Burnout and exhaustion
- Violence & psychological trauma
- STI's
- Depression and mental health issues
- Increased substance use, particularly alcohol & smoking & prescription drugs such as Benzodiazepines (sleeping drugs)
- Isolation

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# Cath....

‘Burnout is definitely an issue in the industry. It can leave you drained...you give and give and give and work long hours, then you leave feeling drained’.

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# Charlie....

**‘I was constantly juggling work, study, relationship, my family and friends. It was difficult to keep them all separate and sometimes it all got mixed up and I didn’t know who I was. It didn’t help that I was always so tired...working at night and studying during the day either. Eventually I left because the pressure to constantly negotiate everything was too hard’.**

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# Susie....

**'I do a performance every-time I see a client. It's rarely ever 'wham-bam thankyou ma'am'! Sometimes I'd probably prefer it that way. The lies...the changing names...the always being aware not to slip up... it's really stressful sometimes. *[pausing]* Come to think of it though, it's not just at work, it's also maintaining that at home, with my lecturers and friends as well... it's all the time'.**

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# Su Li...

**‘Most of the time I don’t mind creating a new ‘me’ every time I see a client...but sometimes it gets confusing because I’m so tired and I feel strained. Sometimes I forget who I am and why I’m doing this job. I get really resentful. My life priorities get all mixed up....’.**

# Concluding themes...



## **Identities**

- **Juggle multiple responsibilities and demands simultaneously (usually successfully)**
- **Have fragmented and multi-dimensional identities**

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# Charlie....

**‘Well, it’s like this. One night I’ll feel totally alive and empowered when I’m dancing. I love the feeling of being in control of my body, deciding who I dance for; what I do and I love that I can milk it for all its worth and all the money I want from those poor pissed blokes. But on other nights, the venue looks drab, clients are sleazy and pathetic and I feel like I’m a doll on the stage. But I think it’s like this for everyone...no matter what job they do. I think that’s life’.**

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# Bell....

**‘Sometimes I love the work. It’s good money and flexible. And other times I hate it. I get bored or just tired of constantly performing. But I guess that’s the same as everything in life’.**

# Concluding themes...

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## **‘Choices within Choices’**

- **Participants are proactive in the face of uncertainty & change;**
- **Make pragmatic, contingent and reflexive choices in their lives;**
- **Challenge notions of the mainstream and ‘at risk’.**

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# Charlie....

**‘I’m no different than any other student, I make choices within choices –we all do that in life. Some people have just got more choices than others have’.**

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# Donna....

**‘It’s not like I have the choice between being a CEO of a corporation and being a stripper. It’s more like working in McDonald’s on minimum wage and long hours or being a stripper’.**

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# Donna....

**‘At least I have choices, even if they are only in how I respond to any given circumstances that come my way’.**

# Concluding themes...

- ❖ **Challenge traditional linear transitions of youth into adulthood;**
- ❖ **Emphasise personal authority amidst unpredictability and unexpected pathways;**
- ❖ **Take individual responsibility (*and blame*) for their actions;**
- ❖ **Have high aspirations;**
- ❖ **Optimistic about their futures.**