

Resisting Division: Migrant Sex Work and “New Zealand Working Girls”

Abstract:

While New Zealand’s Prostitution Reform Act has decriminalized sex work for citizens and permanent residents, migrants on temporary visas are still not permitted to work in the sex industry. In 2018, a series of news media texts documented complaints about migrant sex workers put forward by Lisa Lewis, a prominent sex worker. This article considers how the figure of the migrant sex worker was produced through comparison to contingently acceptable “New Zealand working girls”. This was partly achieved through a discursive link between sex work and the alleged economic impact of Asian migrants to New Zealand, with the argument that migrant sex workers were impacting the earnings of domestic sex workers. Lewis’ claims were subsequently publicly rejected by other domestic sex workers, who rejected attempts to position them within this discourse. This media event offers evidence of changes to the figure of the sex worker in public discourse post-decriminalization: first in the way that some sex workers may be offered conditional acceptance and recognition of their jobs, and secondly in that it displays active resistance to the stigmatization of prostitution by a group of sex workers.

Keywords: sex work, prostitution, news media discourse, migrant workers

Introduction:

New Zealand’s Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) was passed in 2003, decriminalizing sex work for citizens and permanent residents. However, Section 19 of the act restricts anyone visiting New Zealand on a temporary visa (including work and student visas, which permit work in other industries) from working in the sex industry. This imbalance caused by partial decriminalization been criticised for several reasons. One is that it is discriminatory against sex work as a vocation – barring migrants from doing sex work is intended to prevent trafficking, but trafficking can occur in other industries which are not regulated in the same way; another is that it may make migrant sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation as they cannot confidently access the same rights citizen and permanent resident sex workers can; and finally because it functions to other migrant sex workers, marking them as “fundamentally different from other sex workers” (Armstrong, 2017, pp. 73-74).

In 2018, Lisa Lewis¹, a sex worker from Hamilton, New Zealand, received news media coverage for her comments about migrant sex workers, initially voicing complaints to Immigration New Zealand and the Ministry of Health. She subsequently sent an open letter to the New Zealand Government, calling for the appointment of a Minister for Prostitution, rejecting the role of the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) as a representative body, and claiming migrant sex workers were “taking money off legal sex workers” (Tan, 2018a). The open letter, and complaints to Immigration New Zealand about the advertisements of migrant sex workers (Tan, 2018e), were denounced by some domestic² sex workers. Several sex workers were reported as saying that Lewis’ comments did not reflect their own views, while others used the hashtag #NZPCSpeaksForMe on Twitter to demonstrate their support of the organisation (Plays, 2018; Tan, 2018b).

This particular media event is interesting because of the way that migrant sex workers were constructed by some media texts as, among other things, a threat to the livelihood of other sex workers (Neyland, 2019). This production of them as an economic threat specifically to domestic sex workers is distinct from most existing representations of migrant sex workers in media. Migrant sex workers are often represented as either exploited and vulnerable, or as dangerous vectors of disease (Agustin, 2007; Gould, 2010; Doezema, 1999), but the framing of sex workers specifically in terms of their economic impact on other sex workers is relatively uncommon. This understanding relies on sex work, at least when carried out by citizens or permanent residents, being acknowledged as genuine work. Some evidence of migrant workers being criticised because of the perception that they would impact the income of domestic sex workers could be seen in news media texts published around the time of the 2011 Rugby World Cup (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018).

¹ Lisa Lewis gained a public profile when she ran across the field at an All Blacks versus Ireland rugby test match in 2006 in a bikini. When the interruption to the game was reported on, it emerged that she had been working at a local strip club. Since then, she has unsuccessfully made two bids for the mayoralty of her hometown of Hamilton, and worked as a full service sex worker (Lines-McKenzie, 2019). As “arguably the country’s most famous call-girl” she is often cited in news media texts about the sex industry (Keith, 2020). Armstrong, Abel and Roguski refer to her as a “vocal sex worker” (2020, p. 123).

² In this article I have used the term ‘domestic’ to describe the citizen and permanent resident sex workers who are protected by decriminalization of the PRA. I have avoided using the term ‘local’, which Lewis employs, because of the nationalistic implications in how it was deployed in the analysed news media texts. I considered and rejected the phrasing ‘non-migrant’ because it is not wholly accurate – migrants with permanent resident status are protected by New Zealand’s decriminalization of sex work.

As this paper will discuss, in this instance migrant workers are produced as a threat through their comparison to a contingently created acceptable sex worker. This production draws on xenophobic discourses about migrants to New Zealand generally, as well as about migrant sex workers specifically, indicating some changes to how sex work may be discussed under decriminalization. However, the establishment of a sex worker who is acceptable only by comparison is not the same as destigmatization of the industry. The willingness of lobby group Family First to assist Lewis in drafting the open letter is arguably indicative that demonizing migrant workers is not a tactic which is beneficial to the sex industry as a whole; with the group not historically having championed the rights of sex workers to be treated with respect (Family First, 2016).

Some domestic sex workers rejected Lewis' attempts to co-opt them into her campaign to target and further marginalize migrant sex workers. Tan reported that "at least a dozen" people involved in the sex industry contacted the *New Zealand Herald* to express that Lewis' views were not representative of their own, with some quoted speaking in support of migrant workers' rights (Tan, 2018b). Another sex worker wrote an op-ed which defended their colleagues and decried the racism of the anti-migrant discourses (Plays, 2018). The expressions of solidarity with migrant workers from domestic sex workers is consistent with recent findings reported by Armstrong, Abel and Roguski, who found that of 20 non-migrant workers interviewed "the majority were supportive and did not resent the presence of temporary migrants" (2020, p. 125).

This solidarity and resistance is discussed as the second major aspect of this media event. It demonstrates a rejection by some sex workers of attempts to impel them into a discursive position which would grant them acceptability by shifting the stigma of sex work more heavily onto others in the industry. It adds to existing research into movements by sex workers in New Zealand to change the dominant narratives about the sex industry in recent years (Armstrong, 2019). The language used by domestic sex workers, of support and safety, echo the language and demands of sex worker rights movements (Mac and Smith, 2018), suggesting a shift towards these views being introduced, if not yet integrated, into mainstream media discourses.

This production of an acceptable sex worker through comparison builds on prior work which has examined this acceptability by considering who is permitted to occupy a position as contingently respectable (Easterbrook-Smith, 2020b). The specific mechanisms by which migrant workers were produced in this media event draw on well-documented attitudes to Asian migrants to New Zealand, perceptions of migrant sex work specifically, and an emerging conception of sex work as an occupation (under some conditions). The resistance to attempts to produce migrant sex workers as the ‘other’ by domestic sex workers demonstrates an ability by sex workers to at least partially redirect narratives about them, refuting characterisations which they view as inaccurate and damaging.

Existing Research:

Sex work in New Zealand has now been decriminalized for almost eighteen years, and the protection of sex workers under the law has made it possible for them to assert their rights in interactions with clients and brothel managers to a greater extent than was possible prior to the passing of the PRA (Abel, 2014). However, the respectability of sex workers in New Zealand is often highly contingent. Typically, respectability is more likely to be extended to sex workers who are able to make their work invisible by working indoors, and who inhabit other relatively privileged or normative subject positions (by being many or all of pākehā/white, middle or upper class, able-bodied, cisgender, neurotypical, and slim) (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018; Easterbrook-Smith, 2020b). This restricted access to acceptability suggests that while sex work is still stigmatized, the stigma of the work can be partially mitigated through adhering to normative identities and behaviours. In other words, the stigma still exists, but it is unevenly distributed. Decriminalization of sex work is “vitaly important but hardly sufficient for normalization” (Weitzer, 2018, p. 722).

Sex work’s position as acceptable or unacceptable is often established through its discursive production in news media texts. Media representations are a key site where the stigma of sex work is produced, negotiated, and may be resisted (Weitzer, 2018), particularly as it is often where non-sex working members of the public draw many understandings of the industry, in the absence of personal interactions with it (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips and Benoit, 2006). Media coverage of sex work often uses frames which emphasise different concerns and understandings of the work to those which are expressed by sex workers themselves (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006). News media texts in New Zealand have been identified as

creating distinctions between indoor and street based sex work, often drawing on the visibility of particular groups of sex workers as a proxy for their acceptability (Farvid and Glass, 2014; Easterbrook-Smith, 2020a). Although much of the reporting on sex work in the years following the passing of the PRA was neutral and descriptive, the moral discourses underpinning some texts have been identified by sex workers as contributing to their ongoing stigmatization (Fitzgerald and Abel, 2010).

Migrant sex workers in New Zealand, as previously mentioned, are not afforded the same rights as domestic sex workers under the PRA (Armstrong, 2017). Research drawing on interviews with sex workers and representatives from the NZPC has established that this situation is understood as problematic, leaving migrant workers “more vulnerable to experiencing exploitation and violence” (Armstrong, 2018, p. 73). Migrant sex work is often conflated with trafficking, with women who travel to other countries to engage in sex work frequently produced as exploited and in need of rescue, ignoring their own decisions and stripping them of agency (Agustin, 2007; Doezema, 1999). In a specifically New Zealand context, migrant sex workers have sometimes been produced in ways which rely upon specifically anti-Asian migrant sentiments (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018). They are discursively “othered” as Neyland (2019) demonstrates, and the language used to describe them in news media texts (the frequent use of ‘illegal’ for example) is evidence of the way anti-migrant discourses are deployed against them.

Migrant sex workers in New Zealand travel from various different locations, but a great deal of attention has been paid in news media to migrant sex workers from Asia, particularly Chinese sex workers, with their ethnicity highlighted in news media texts about migrant sex work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018). The policing of migrant sex work is racialised, with Asian women comprising the majority of people declined entry to New Zealand on the suspicion they intended to engage in sex work, and those deported for engaging in sex work (Armstrong, Abel and Roguski, 2020). There is little empirical evidence about the exact numbers of migrant sex workers in New Zealand, but they are commonly understood to be a minority within an already fairly small population of sex workers (Armstrong, 2017; Armstrong, 2018). Profiling of sex workers at Australian borders has been found to be a process which is both gendered and racialised, suggesting visibility as a sex worker is

amplified by other subject positions (Ham, Segrave and Pickering, 2013). At the same time, which migrant sex workers are made visible *as migrants* in New Zealand media also appears to be a strongly racialized process: a text published in a similar time period about a British migrant sex worker, for example, does not mention her visa status and uses markedly different terminology to discuss her work (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018, pp. 140-141; Olds, 2016).

The establishment of a respectable domestic sex worker against whom the figure of the migrant sex worker is contrasted can be seen in some earlier media. Around the time the Rugby World Cup was held in New Zealand (in 2011) there was evident media interest in the possibility that there would be an increase in the number of sex workers travelling to New Zealand to work – the suggestion that large sporting events will attract sex workers to the host city or country is reasonably common (Richter et al., 2012; Agustin, 2007; Gould, 2010). One of the concerns expressed about a forecast increase in the number of migrant sex workers was that they would affect the income of domestic sex workers, however the individual domestic workers allegedly set to be affected by this tended not to be interviewed – instead they were spoken for by brothel owners (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018). Such concerns were often presented alongside discussion about New Zealand's preparation for 'hosting' the World Cup, and appeared to consider domestic sex workers as partly representative of 'the nation', as part of a broader concern about how the Rugby World Cup was a site of contested national identity (Sturm and Lealand, 2012).

The media event sparked by Lewis' open letter, however, allowed this figure of the domestic sex worker, produced in opposition to migrant sex workers, to be more fully realised and detailed. The shift from discourses which discussed migrant sex workers' supposed impact on a generic "taxpayer" to discourses which alleged their impact on a specific and historically marginalised group, that of other sex workers, suggests the possibility of a changing conception of the figure of the sex worker in New Zealand. However, as clearly understood and articulated by many of the sex workers who spoke out against Lewis' claims, this new production of the sex worker is not necessarily one which is any more accurate or which promised to achieve a meaningful decrease in the stigma of sex work for the profession as a whole.

Methodology:

The texts for analysis were collected primarily via hand searches of the websites of individual media outlets (some texts came to my attention when they were published, prior to beginning formal research on the topic). Hyperlinks within later texts would often point towards earlier coverage of the story, enabling it to be traced backwards. The bulk of the texts were published by the *New Zealand Herald*, authored by their diversity, ethnic affairs and immigration reporter, Lincoln Tan. Tan frequently reports on the topic of migrant sex work, and has done for some years now (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018; Neyland, 2019). In total, eleven texts were examined, six from the *New Zealand Herald*, three from *Radio New Zealand*, and one each from the *Otago Daily Times* and *The Spinoff*, spanning from April 2018 to June 2018.

Prior research on media coverage of sex work typically begins by identifying discrete narrative themes within the analysed texts (Hallgrimsdottir et al, 2006; Van Brunschot, Sydie and Krull, 2000; Farvid and Glass, 2014). In this instance, recent work on these and similar texts (often authored by the same journalist) have already identified specific discourses which migrant sex workers are situated within, including as vectors of disease; as exploited victims; as the deceptive 'other' (Easterbrook-Smith, 2018; Neyland, 2019). This article aims to further examine these discourses to consider how they have continued to develop through comparison to a constructed figure of the domestic sex worker.

As previously mentioned, media texts are a key site where the general, non-sex working, public draw their understandings of the sex industry. In many cases, they may have little to no interaction with sex workers in their day-to-day lives, or, realistically: they may not *know* that they know a sex worker, as the pervasive stigma encourages many sex workers to keep their work hidden (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2006; Weitzer, 2018). Media texts, and the sources whose voices are amplified by them, therefore, play an important role in "claimsmaking" about issues which are positioned as social problems, and in influencing the negotiation of who and what may exist within the realms of the normative (Van Brunschot et al., 2000).

The framing of migrant sex work both as a problem and from there, a particular *type* of problem, implies specific solutions to it (Van Brunschot et al., 2000; Entman, 1993). The manifest intertextuality or "interdiscursivity" of these texts can be examined, considering

which existing discourses are called upon to give meaning and legitimacy to the figures of the migrant and domestic sex worker, and what knowledges the audience are being presumed to already have (Fairclough, 1992). In many of the texts, migrant sex work is constructed such that the problem is constituted as one related to immigration, and the threat of the migrant 'other' as a polluting vector of disease, by offering unprotected sexual services, posing a threat to clients and domestic sex workers. The solutions which are presented, through the decision to interview representatives from Immigration New Zealand, and in terms of which quotes from Lewis and other sex workers were given prominence and salience, are of regulation and governmental control: registration and tighter monitoring of borders. The news media here are reproducing dominant knowledges about sex work and migration which present them as needing particular control and discipline, however they use a discursive trick of hiding these calls for closer monitoring within a surface-level acknowledgement of sex work as a form of work, although not work like any other.

Limitations:

This analysis examines a small number of texts (eleven) in relation to a specific media event. This article finds evidence which suggests some shifts in how sex work was conceptualised and constructed in New Zealand's news media in this specific instance. The scope of the paper means it is not possible to say if this shift is representative, or if it exists in other recent news media coverage, but it identifies characteristics in the reporting which differ in important ways from more dominant media narratives about the sex industry.

Analysis:

The first of the analysed texts was published in late April 2018, beginning with a video interview with Lewis (Phibbs, 2018) then an article by Tan, published the same day, which reported that some domestic sex workers had lodged complaints with Immigration New Zealand (INZ) about advertisements from migrant sex workers on a local directory website (2018e). In the video, Lewis complains that advertising websites who host the advertisements from migrant sex workers are not being held accountable for "profiting from illegal activity", saying that the impact on "legal sex workers" is that "a lot of girls aren't making their normal quota...because there are so many international illegal sex workers coming over". Lewis' comments produce migrant sex workers as an economic problem,

which has been “getting worse” over her ten years in the sex industry. She claims that domestic sex workers have been forced by economic pressure to offer unprotected sexual services in order to draw in more clientele, and says this is a risk to their health and safety, as well as their clients and clients’ families (Phibbs, 2018). This point is misreported in Tan’s article from the same day, where he instead claims that it is migrant sex workers who Lewis was accusing of providing unprotected services (2018e). Both Lewis and another sex worker, Amber O’Hara, are quoted as calling for harsher punishment of businesses associated with migrant sex workers, and more stringent regulation, with O’Hara suggesting “a sex worker registration system similar to the one in Victoria, Australia” (2018e). In the video, Lewis specifically mentions workers visiting from Brazil, Columbia, and Korea, but the subsequent reporting tended to focus particularly on Asian migrant women in the sex industry. Lewis and a small number of other workers attempted to cement a more respectable position, by distancing themselves from workers who were already more marginalized, and thus an easier target for additional stigmatization on account of their work.

Three more texts were aired or published on May 31st 2018. One reported that migrant sex workers sometimes accessed the support and healthcare programs provided by the NZPC, which was referred to both as a “taxpayer-funded healthcare programme” and a “taxpayer funded sex programme” (Tan, 2018d). The other two texts focused on the alleged economic impact of “foreign prostitutes... flooding the market” (RNZ, 2018a), saying a “wave of foreign prostitutes” were “taking work from locals”, and reporting that Lewis had called for a “crackdown” (Bonnett, 2018). On June 11th, Tan reported on the open letter authored by Lewis, and signed by 25 other sex workers, which she wrote with the assistance of Family First director Bob McCoskrie (2018a). On June 20th, a further article was published in the *New Zealand Herald*, reporting that a number of sex workers had distanced themselves from Lewis’ views, while on June 22nd an op-ed by a sex worker was published further refuting her claims, with the author saying of the sex workers she knew “not one shares Lisa Lewis’ vitriol towards migrant workers” (Plays, 2018).

Many of the texts reproduce existing xenophobic and racist discourses about Asian migrants to New Zealand generally, applying them in this instance to migrant sex workers in particular. The migrant workers and their jobs were often referred to with the attached descriptor “illegal”, as in “illegal prostitution” (Tan, 2018d; Tan, 2018c), “illegal prostitutes”

(Tan, 2018c), and “illegal sex workers” (Tan, 2018a, Tan, 2018b; RNZ, 2018b). In one case, Lewis is quoted as referring to migrant sex workers simply as “illegals” (Tan, 2018d). Elsewhere, the workers are described as being in New Zealand “unlawfully” (2018d; 2018a), despite INZ’s Peter Devoy being quoted saying that for migrants “working in the sex industry is not a criminal offence, even though it is a breach of temporary visa conditions” (2018d). The effect here is to turn migrant sex workers breach of their visa conditions into “illegal” activity, and then to extend this to their job encompassing their entire identity: they are no longer a migrant who does sex work, contrary to their visa conditions, instead “sex worker” becomes what they are, not just what they do. The use of the term ‘illegals’, an anti-migrant slur, functions intertextually to locate the story within narrative frames about migration, and by raising the spectre of criminality suggests frames about the policing of sex work, which assists with establishing migrant sex work as a social problem (Fairclough, 1992; Entman, 1993; Van Brunschot et al., 2000).

Migrant sex workers were often positioned as an economic threat, both by making use of services funded by “the taxpayer” and because they were allegedly “taking” work from domestic sex workers. These references can be connected to existing and well-documented anti-Asian migrant discourses which exist within New Zealand media texts, which have emphasised both an alleged connection between Asian migrants and crime, and economic anxieties (Hannis, 2009; Baker & Benson, 2008; Sibley et al., 2011). Sibley et al write: “there has been considerable furor in recent years about Asian immigration, and perceived economic competition with Asian peoples” adding that “[m]uch of the discourse surrounding immigration... seems to reflect the sentiment that increased numbers of educated Asian immigrants coming into the country will lead to less available jobs for other New Zealanders” (2011, p. 28). Migrant sex workers were often reported on in ways which catastrophised their arrival and suggested their numbers were overwhelming, that they were “flooding the market” (RNZ, 2018a); Lewis’ claim that the number of migrants advertising sexual services had doubled in the last decade (Tan, 2018e), or that they were arriving in “a wave” (Bonnett, 2018). Another sex worker, Amber O’Hara, called for tighter regulation to “wipe out large numbers of illegal ladies” (Tan, 2018e), using language which positioned migrant sex workers as something akin to an infestation. This use of highly

emotive language positions migrant sex workers as both a problem, and as a problem which required urgent attention because of the contention it was “getting worse” (Phibbs, 2018).

It was sometimes claimed both that migrant sex workers now outnumbered domestic sex workers (RNZ, 2018a; Bonnett, 2018), and that they were directly impacting the earnings of domestic sex workers. This was similarly reported on in emotive language, that migrant workers’ presence had “hit local sex workers in the pocket”, or in a quote from Lewis the even stronger suggestion that “every dollar these migrant prostitutes make is a dollar taken from the back pockets of New Zealand working girls” (2018e). Elsewhere they were characterised as “immigrants taking New Zealanders’ jobs”, “taking work from locals”, or “taking money off legal sex workers” (RNZ, 2018a; Bonnett, 2018; Tan, 2018a). Lewis claimed that the NZPC’s support services being offered to migrant workers occurred “at the detriment of legal and local sex workers”, suggesting that migrants accessing the services were causing domestic sex workers to go without (Tan, 2018d). This framing is one which implies a scarcity of the NZPC’s services, despite Catherine Healy, the NZPC’s national coordinator, emphasising that the collective’s programmes serve to all sex workers, and it would be “irresponsible to ignore migrant sex workers” (Tan, 2018d). Her comments were further paraphrased by Tan, who wrote that the NZPC’s programmes are “accessible to all sex workers - including those unlawfully here”, further conflating a breach of visa conditions with criminality (Tan, 2018d).

The “foreign prostitute” established in these texts is made legible with reference to existing racist and xenophobic discourses about migrants (particularly Asian migrants), and is argued to be ‘taking’ what rightfully belongs to domestic sex workers, in addition to claims she is unfairly accessing services funded by “the taxpayer”. The domestic sex workers being figured in this are not imagined to be Asian New Zealanders: one text presents the fact that a major advertising website categorises sex workers as either “Asian” or “non-Asian” (Bonnett, 2018). The implication here is that the Asian sex workers are interchangeable with migrant sex workers, rather than taking this fact as an indication of the structural racism within sex industry advertising. The experiences of individual migrant sex workers are absent from the texts: only one migrant sex worker is used as a source at any point (Tan, 2018c).

Conclusion:

Within the texts, the migrant sex worker is sometimes presented as a risk to the broader, non-sex working, community, either as a vector of disease (Tan, 2018a) or through her use of services paid for by “the taxpayer” (Tan, 2018d). More commonly however, she was constructed as a risk specifically to domestic sex workers: both their livelihood and to their ability to occupy a position of relative dominance within the sex industry. This development is interesting for what it suggests about changing notions of the figure of the sex worker in media representation. Women are sometimes considered “patriarchally sculptured symbols – of the nation” (Enloe, 2011, p. 87), while Doezema identifies that women are sometimes treated as representative of a nation’s honour although historically this symbolism has not been extended to women who are ‘impure’ or ‘unvirtuous’ (1999, pp. 45-46). The production of the migrant sex worker as a threat to domestic sex workers calls into being a New Zealand sex worker whose work is considered legitimate enough for it to be threatened by migration: a development which understands the work as more than deviance or *prima facie* a social problem. The domestic sex worker may also be being presented as a kind of symbol of the nation, suggesting that sex worker is no longer so discrediting an identity that it places women as the deviant ‘other’ in all circumstances – on the condition that they can be compared to an even more marginalized ‘other other’.

The sex workers who were quoted as objecting to the presence of migrants would often call for harsher regulation and policing, indexing themselves within regulatory regimes (Tan, 2018e; Phibbs, 2018; Bonnett, 2018). The contingent respect for the work as work, however, appeared largely dependent on the usefulness of the figure of the domestic sex worker for furthering anti-migrant sentiments. It functioned to hierarchize sex work by drawing distinctions between different groups of workers which reproduced existing hegemonies, rather than engaging in a genuine project of destigmatization. This was evidently understood clearly by a number of domestic sex workers, and at least two brothel managers, who spoke against Lewis’ comments, refusing to be made party to attempts to create a ‘respectable sex worker’ if this respectability came at the price of other sex workers’ rights and safety (Tan, 2018b; Plays, 2018).

The stigma of sex work has historically been evaded by hiding the nature of one’s occupation (Weitzer, 2018), or by making use of “strategic invisibility” that is, hiding an

engagement in sex work as a protective strategy (Ham and Gerard, 2014). The rejection of Lewis' attempts to divide the industry into acceptable and unacceptable is arguably evidence of something else: active resistance to stigma, rather than an invisibilising or attempt to distance oneself from areas of the industry considered disreputable (Weitzer, 2018; Spivey, 2005). Active resistance and challenges to stigma, rather than invisibilising, have also been documented as a strategy employed by some street-based sex workers in New Zealand, and by individuals involved with the NZPC (Armstrong, 2019). Armstrong identifies these attempts to change the narrative around sex work under decriminalization as acknowledging that while sex workers have different experiences of the industry, they universally deserve safety and respect (2019).

In the analysed texts, many sex workers "unequivocally" said the rights of decriminalization should be extended: that "migrant workers should have those rights too" (Tan, 2018b; Plays, 2018). Relocating the debate into this register expressed a cohesive support and solidarity, and this was reflected by commentators in at least one further text who rejected the notion that migrant sex workers should be denied access to the NZPC's services (RNZ, 2018b). The rejection of the contingently available acceptance by parts of the sex industry (including with the #NZPCSpeaksForMe hashtag on Twitter) suggests resistance from sex workers to attempts to move the stigma of the work around, instead expressing their position as part of a community which included migrant workers.

I argue that this resistance is important in part because it demonstrates a marginal shift in the way news media discourses about sex work develop: Hallgrimsdottir et al. have previously identified that news media frequently report on aspects of the work which were not especially salient to sex workers, while this event suggests an increased ability for sex workers to determine the narrative (2006). It also utilizes mass media in a manner identified by Weitzer as useful for the project of destigmatization, particularly in the form of an op-ed by a sex worker (2018; Plays, 2018). The push back from some sex workers suggests an ability to influence the way that discourses about the sex industry develop in the media, although it should be emphasised that migrant workers were still not permitted a voice in a debate which was, after all, about their livelihoods.

This resistance by sex workers enforces a different frame on the discussion, effectively refusing to permit the discussion to be located wholly within discourses about immigration or crime. Instead the sex workers speaking in support of migrant workers tended to discuss the necessity of “support” and protection from discrimination (Tan, 2018b; Plays, 2019). This tone constitutes sex workers as a community: subverting the notion of ‘sex worker’ as an identity category historically related to ideas of deviance, and instead reimagining it as an identity which is associated with a movement for rights and respect for the profession. This understanding has, of course, been present for decades in sex worker rights movements (Mac and Smith, 2018). Its presence in mainstream media outlets, however, suggests the possibility of developments in public discourses about sex work in New Zealand: away from the sex worker as a rhetorical symbol and object who can be shaped and deployed as necessary, and towards a discourse where (some) sex workers are speaking subjects, permitted to respond to discourses which attempt to impel them into positions they reject.

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