2 Women's work conditions and sexual services

Prostitutes have an unusual feature: it is well paid despite being low-skill, labor intensive, and, one might add, female dominated. (Edlund and Korn 2002: 182)

The centrality of money in women's decisions about sex work cannot be overstated (Prasad 1999, Weldon 2010). It operates as most research attests as the key factor for most sex workers in their decisions about working in the industry. The ways in which money is organized and distributed in all societies and internationally forms the background context for women's options and choices. The exchange of money between the client and worker is understood to taint both sex and self-sovereignty since sex should not be exchanged for money. This assumption impacts on the money earned and on how women workers can use it; for example access to longer-term loans require employer statements and tax returns that are often difficult for these workers to provide. Yet, the money to be earned is the key driver for women's participation. The ratios of hours worked and money earned in sex work are set against and speak to the conditions of labour markets in developed and developing countries. In general, women's work is consistently undervalued, market segregation favours male-dominated industries, and feminized occupations, while vital, are ghettoized at the bottom of the marketplace. It is in this context, as Dewey and Kelly have observed, that sex work offers many women social and economic opportunities they could not otherwise access. Sex work is seen as part of their individual self-improvement strategies (Dewey and Kelly 2011: 3).

In this chapter, we look at women's work and earnings, placing the sex work as work debate in the context of women's other paid and unpaid labours. The workers in our research outline their financial and labour market considerations in deciding to work in the sexual services industry. This localized approach allows for a fuller exploration of how women workers decide to undertake sex work in light of their other local employment options. By focusing on the voices of these women from Victoria we hope to illuminate the intersections of sex work opportunities and other employment options as they ground these women's work decisions.

Public sex work discourses and regulatory responses rarely directly connect women's decisions about sex work to extant labour market conditions. Discussions of 'forced' sex work often focus on coercion in individual relationships: on coercion in relations between women workers and pimps, between house workers and managers, between 'people smugglers' and migrating women. Trafficking responses often emphasize border-related issues and organized crime depicting individual vulnerable women as caught up in these processes. In our view, it is vital to position women's choices and decisions in terms of employment conditions and monetary reward. This is how women workers in our study, and in many other studies, locate their own decisions, as sex work is undertaken in relation to general labour market conditions and options. When we explore arguments about whether sex work can be defined as work, those arguments need to extend beyond whether we can effectively characterize the exchange of intimate sexual services as work to account for the devaluation of all feminized labours (such as care, education, service) in national and global labour markets. We need to consider how this devaluation shapes women's work in local and national contexts and influences contemporary patterns of women's migration. At the very least, as Munro and della Giusta argue, a focus on autonomy and self-determination requires engagement with the terrain of agency in circumstances in which social and economic constraints restrict the freedom to choose any viable alternative (Munro and della Giusta 2008: 4).

Sex work as work? Reframing the question

The endeavour to define sex work as work has shaped recent decades of sex work activism, created extensive debate in the academic literature, and gained some limited footholds in regulatory regimes in a range of countries, mostly in the developed world. As we noted earlier, this is a defining question in any discussion about sex work. These 'sex work as work' discussions often centre on human rights, on the extent to which a given society is comfortable about the alienation of intimate embodied labour, and on questions of women's agency, safety and gendered exploitation. These debates focus on power and the commodification of bodily labours and intimacy between women workers and male clients. Yet discussions about sex work as work require attention to women's employment opportunities and constraints in the wider labour market.

The past several decades have seen phenomenal changes in women's employment patterns in both developed and developing countries. In Western countries, changes in women's education have intersected with changes in the organization and meaning of work. Women, especially mothers, have moved into the formal labour market in ever greater numbers, which has driven transformations in family life, especially in relation to the
care of children. The work women have accessed in this period, however, has some important distinguishing features. Service work has grown exponentially in developed economies, as demand has expanded and manufacturing activities have moved to the developing world. Casual, part-time and precarious forms of work have expanded. These forms of work have absorbed much of women's increased contribution to the paid labour market in developed countries.

Yet this increased formal work commitment among women has not resulted in a convergence of women's and men's access to sustainable wages or to wealth. Gendered wage inequalities have not diminished and in many Western countries have intensified. Recently in Australia, the gendered wage gap has returned to its 1981 level, despite three decades of intensifying female commitment to paid labour. This pattern of women's wage disadvantage is repeated across Western countries in professions in which women dominate (education, nursing, and all service sectors) that consistently command lower wages. Women's presence in formal labour markets has not delivered sustained economic benefits.

This wage disadvantage consistently intersects with the failure to provide support for women's other social obligations, most particularly in relation to care for children. In 1999, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) stated that care is an important input for the development of human capabilities. It is also a capability in itself ... Without enough care, individuals do not flourish' (UNDP 1999: 7). Women's work in unpaid care is crucial to functioning societies, but most employment structures do not support or facilitate care-giving in conjunction with paid labour. Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003) have commented on the failures of neoliberal states to renegotiate how care can be provided as the allocation of adult women's time has changed. Women's increased participation in paid labour in the recent decades has not resulted in like changes in men's commitment to care (Bianchi et al. 2000; Hook 2006), and governments have not developed adequate supports for women's dual commitments. This has both local and national implications and is important in understanding how women's work is drawn across borders. The intersections between the organization of feminized work in developed and developing countries is a key factor in women's migratory movement. The particular conditions of globalization, whereby women's work has been drawn away from home and family into the labour market in both the Global North and the Global South, have intensified the movement of women's labour. There has been increased movement of women across borders to provide service labour that cannot be sourced nationally (Parreñas 2001).

In the Global South, changing economic and industrial conditions have similarly transformed women's employment opportunities without changing economic structures of reward or care obligations. Labour sending states often have 'deliberate labour recruitment programs [that] activate and maintain international migration' (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007: x), generating value for both sending and receiving states out of women's labour. Yet these same states do little to ensure that families left behind are supported (Heymann 2006). International debt burdens have compromised programmes of support for women as repayments draw economic resources from community support programmes: the UNDP (1999) has observed that tax revenues in poor countries declined throughout the 1980s into the 1990s and public services deteriorated markedly, in part due to structural adjustment programmes. Eisenstein (2005) argues that conditions imposed on indebted governments forced the privatization of essential services, which intensified women's poverty and disadvantage. So women's potential economic contributions have been drawn on by these indebted developing states while gendered labour market deficits in the Global North are being addressed by the transfer of women's labour from the Global South.

The centrality of women's work in developed and developing economies has not delivered sustained economic reward or security to most women. Sassen (2006) has highlighted that women's participation in global circuits has not necessarily delivered all of the promised or potential benefits for migrating women. While transnational remittances and migration are making differences for some, stark wage inequalities and the low value assigned to women's work in different national contexts contributes to the ongoing feminization of poverty. The movement of women and the interlinked redirection of women's labour have alleviated state burdens, but not women's burdens.

This brief survey of the conditions of gendered work in a contemporary globalizing context is central to how we think about sex work as work and the decisions that women make in regard to such work. The pressure points in this global labour market: the low wages women are paid for work considered suitable for them; the failure of contemporary labour markets to create structures to allow women to discharge their other obligations especially in relation to unpaid care (OECD 2002); the intensifying global inequalities, which create feminized labour deficits in the Global North and draw women from Global South, constitute the conditions that frame sexual service work. Sex work is feminized labour (mostly done by women, both intimate and embodied), operating most often at the borders of the formal and informal labour markets. It draws women across national borders as they seek to negotiate better outcomes for themselves and their families. For marginalized populations, these opportunities are often the only ways in which individual workers can ensure 'survival or social mobility' (Dewey and Kelly 2011: 8).

When we begin to examine disputes over whether sex work is work, these broader labour market conditions must be mobilized in accounting for women's decisions to work in sexual services. For our purposes the debate about women's sex work which often privileges heterosexual relations should be targeted more towards gendered labour market disadvantage, as we argue below. The impact of work organization and reward on how work is valued,
the consequent labour market disadvantage for women generally and how this disadvantage is negotiated by different groups of women, are all central to understanding sex work. As Wolkowitz has observed:

Decriminalization of prostitution is necessary to reduce stigmatization, and might make it easier for women to access help with leaving the trade. However, it would do nothing to change the inequalities that, in many cases, lead women to opt for sex work in the first place.

(Wolkowitz 2006: 143)

Determining whether sexual service labour entrenches and intensifies women's already established employment disadvantage requires that we consider labour market conditions and what sex work delivers to women. It requires attention not only to questions of whether individual workers are empowered or enriched by their labours in sexual services markets, but also to the broader work environments in which these decisions about and negotiations of sex work labour are conducted by women. We must locate sex work employment decisions in the context of women's other life obligations in order to evaluate the meaning and impact of this work. In the following sections of this chapter, we outline key elements of the sex work as work debate, seeking to position sex work more directly in relation to the actual labour market options available to women. We use our primary study in Melbourne, Australia as a targeted case study through which we integrate an analysis of labour market conditions and decisions about sex work. The women we interviewed emphasized that questions about whether sex work was or could be work were less significant for them than considering this type of labour in relation to other employment opportunities they could in fact pursue. To illustrate this, we focus on two particular groups of workers who face sustained labour market disadvantage, women with caring responsibilities and students.

In conventional formulations of the 'sex work as work' debate, gender inequalities are at the centre of academic, policy and activist forums. The fact that the majority of sex workers are women and the majority of clients are men focuses attention on how gendered roles, attributes and interactions shape sex work, its practices and women's experiences as workers. The emphasis in these accounts is often on hierarchical hetero-sexual gender relations as they are transferred to the commercial sex work labour market. As Bell observes, 'the sexual exchange between a prostitute and a client is, in the majority of cases, a heterosexual exchange. Heterosexual exchanges have more potential to reflect and reproduce gender inequalities of the social structure' (Bell 1994: 95).

Many critics of sex work as a viable form of labour for women focus on these gendered differentials in their analyses. Accordingly, the unequal conditions under which women and men experience desire, intimacy, sexual autonomy and heterosexuality mean that sex work is an inherently exploitative exchange. In this line of argument, the heterosexual structuring of most societies is understood to mean that women's engagement in heterosexual sex may be inflected with elements of violence and coercion. When this exchange is commercialized in sex work, there is potential for enhanced coercion (Sullivan 2007). When sex work is regulated, this adds a further layer of potential exploitation (Jeffreys 2010). As Hubbard et al. have commented, when critically discussing this approach, for anti-sex work scholars and activists, 'prostitution [is identified] as a form of gendered violence' (Hubbard et al. 2008: 138). These 'analyses suggest that masculinist sexual practices - including rape, sexual harassment, prostitution and ... pornography - are instrumental in both creating and maintaining women's oppression' (Sullivan 2007: 4).

An example of this can be seen in Coy's assessment that women may concurrently 'experience ... selling sex as violating, even where they also feel that they are exercising agency' (Coy 2009: 62). She suggests that 'at the core of this [question] is women's capacity to maintain sovereignty over the body that is embedded in socio-cultural norms' (ibid.). This idea of sovereignty over one's body reinforces the centrality of sex in notions of personhood and reenforces the idea that the alienation of sexual intimacy in unequal heterosexual exchanges poses particular risks for women. Questions of social context, other work options (which may be alienating in other ways), or pragmatism surrounding this type of body work matter less in these analyses than do the sexual exchanges that occur between the predominantly female workers and their male clients. As Scouler critically commented, in this cluster of sex work scholarship, anti-sex work scholars often conclude that 'sex work ... [is] an activity which reinforces the dominant norms of heterosexuality and femininity' (Scouler 2004: 348).

Critical analyses of the inequalities of heterosexuality in sexual service work are crucial; as Pateman (1988) and others since have argued, women's ownership of and autonomy over their own bodies are best understood as provisional in the heterosexual contract. However, focusing attention primarily on issues of heterosexuality and gendered intimacy in sex work may serve to diminish critical attention to the employment considerations relevant to this sector and to women's consequent decisions. This approach may also obscure recognition that women's employment options are always compromised by sex-segregated labour markets in which feminized work is devalued. Women are constrained by the ways family life and the burdens of unpaid care are organized. The work considerations that drive women's decisions to undertake sex work are less central in the sex work literature than discussions of sexual subjectivities and heterosexual inequalities in terms of sex itself.

In her review of sex work research in the 1990s, Vanwesenbeeck observes that 'the literature about prostitution is still much more about sex, notably sexual victimisation and risk, than it is about work' (Vanwesenbeeck 2001: 279). Sanders (2005a) has suggested the 'work' aspect has been the
least well-examined part of sexual services work. Bernstein (2007a) argues
for the need to attend to diverse and complex sexual service markets as they
relate to changing labour market patterns, since the sexual services labour
market is as complex and segmented as any other sector. In the existing
reported research on sex workers’ views, these work aspects and contexts of
sex work are central. Brewis and Linstead (2000b, 2000c) in their review of
extant qualitative studies of sex work, found that most sex workers
focused on their work rather than the sex. Workers argue that this type of
work is like all other types of work, where there is emotion, affect and
intensity (characteristic of many forms of paid labour) but contend it
is not necessarily work that engenders more of these elements or challenges
than other types of feminized labour. O’Neill (2001) found that workers
refused to accept that sex work was more defining for them than work is for
other workers. The student workers interviewed by Lantz (2003, 2005)
in Melbourne argued against privileging sex work in understanding their
lives. Day observes that “time and time again ... , women described
their work, made comparisons between different types of work and
explained carefully and patiently that work had nothing to do with sexuality
or anything that lay beyond the workplace” (Day 2007: 35).

The refusal to centralize the sex in sex work suggests that workers focus
on the conditions of their labour; what benefits are delivered, what
risks and opportunities are there, what parts of the work they like and do
not like. Women workers in these studies are reported as having actively
generated the available labour market conditions, seeking to optimize the
financial and other benefits, including flexibility, available through sex work.
Sanders (2005a) found her study participants to be flexible in responding
and adapting to changing sexual service labour market conditions.
Bernstein’s (2007a) account of the geographical and organizational
movements of contemporary sex workers in San Francisco illuminates how
these shifts shape women’s working practices as they renegotiate what they
do and how they do it. Examining the indoor sex work markets in
New York, Murphy and Venkatesh argued that the women they interviewed
had created their own professional structures to manage their work.

The women in our sample who have moved indoors come to view sex
work less as a means of short-term survival - even if participation is
originally driven by impoverishment - and more as an open-ended
source of income generation. Stated succinctly, the indoor-based women
we interviewed have developed a ‘professional and careerist’ orientation
to sex work.

(Murphy and Venkatesh 2006: 131)

In each of these studies, employment considerations and work practices
were central to workers’ concerns and shaped their sex work. In each,
women operated as labour market actors, responding to opportunities,
constraints and downturns by rethinking their work practices. While, as
Brewis and Linstead observe, the sexual services industry is a ‘site
where work and leisure, production and consumption, naturally intersect’
(Brewis and Linstead 2000b: 84) for workers and consumers, the fact that
there is a ‘permeable line ... between sex as leisure activity (as required
by clients) and sex as work (as performed by the prostitute)’ (Brewis and
Linstead 2000b: 86) should not distract us from seeing how workers in
sexual service markets engage with sex work as a market for their labour.
Rather than focusing only on the sex at the centre of the exchange, this
approach allows for closer investigation of the labour market conditions that
underpin women’s decisions. These are the elements that will determine
whether the work is good or bad for workers (Outshoorn 2001).

The tendency we examined in Chapter 1 to position the intimacies and
affects of sex at the centre of sex work labour analyses limits thinking
about sex work in a number of key ways. The first is the artificial distinction
created between this type of work and other types of body work. Recent
analyses of transnational care labour (Anderson 2000, Hondagneu-Sotelo
2007, Parreñas 2001) demonstrate that a binarized account of intimate paid
labour, where the spheres of work and emotion are seen as separate, does
not capture the realities of women’s employment as they give love to those
in their paid care. Barbara Pocock’s (2009) examination of the caring labour
of low paid workers in Australia who conduct home visits emphasized the
intermingled nature of the labour they were paid to deliver (direct care)
and the additional intimate affective labour they provided as part of their
working identities and practices. Nursing literature reiterates again and
again the additional care commitment nurses give to the patients in their
charge and their refusal to distinguish this emotional care from their
professional obligations (Bolton 2000, Bullock and Waugh 2004). As in sex
work, nursing involves direct and sometime challenging intimacies between
subjects and bodies.

Thus the question of how women might ‘negotiate intersections of
economic activity with intimate social relations’ (Zelizer 2005: 32) does not
apply only to sex work. When sex workers talk about their labour, they
speak of the blurring of these boundaries of public/private, market/personal,
inimate/commodified in ways that are resonant with other feminized labour
markets rather than distinct from them (see West and Austrin 2005 for a
discussion of markets and the constitution of public/private spaces).
In Chapter 3, we explore the intimate work women do in providing sexual
services and explore the links they draw between their work and other types
of care and intimate embodied labour.

The other outcome of the intense focus on bodies, sex and the hetero-
sexual exchange in sex work is diminished attention to the specific work
contexts. There is less account of how women’s decisions about sex
work employment are made and how their employment is experienced and
understood. Considering sex work primarily in terms of heterosexuality
and the bodies involved in intimate contact essentializes the sex work exchange since there is an assumed constancy in practices, meanings and activities across a range of workers and across a range of locations. This lessens the attention we give to the stratified and diverse forms of sex work, to the particularities of different sex work contexts and geographies (Hubbard et al. 2008) and to the complex mobilities of women workers within the sex work labour markets and across the boundaries of sex work and other forms of employment. Weitzer makes the following comments about legal prostitution.

Working in such a system does not affect the participants monolithically: Individuals differ in their feelings about the work, in the ratio of negative to positive experiences with customers and relations with managers, and in satisfaction with rules and regulations. (Weitzer 2010: 23)

The same comments about complexity and variability are applicable across all sectors of the sexual services industry and beyond it. In our primary study, we focused on one geographical location and recruited through one sector of the market – licensed brothels. Yet, we were struck again and again by the diversity of work practices and histories as women changed and re-organized their sex work to suit their preferences and changing life circumstances. Some workers in our Victorian study stressed that the informal sector (massages with a happy ending and unlicensed brothels) provided money and working conditions that suited them best, though they also worked in licensed brothels. Others found licensed brothels to be the best option and always worked in that context. Still others used brothel work as a recruiting ground for their own client lists (see Pickering et al. 2009). Most of the workers we interviewed reported positively on licensed brothel conditions in Melbourne, but Murray (2003) argues the legal Victorian industry is beset by restrictive conditions that disadvantage workers. All of these complexities and contradictions reinforce the need to attend to the particularity of women's sex work experiences, the fluidity and mobility that characterizes women's sex work histories, and the range of outcomes and meanings of sex work in women's lives.

In our study, we identified a broad range of sex work employment histories among workers, and no single pattern of employment dominated. Some workers worked primarily in the licensed brothel sector and had done so all of their working lives. Others moved between different sectors of the sexual services industry on a regular basis, combining brothel work with work in unregulated premises and with independent private work. Some women had participated in adult entertainment work. There was a group of workers who used sex work as a supplement to other career trajectories and moved into and out of the sex industry on that basis.

These workers indicated that the financial benefits and ready availability of sex work were key reasons for their continued participation in this form of employment, even though they had other steady work. Their attention to these elements of their labour meant they were ready to change forms of sex work employment and move around to achieve the best outcome: as Sanders (2005a) also found in her UK study, these were highly adaptive and mobile workers. In the following sections of this chapter, we draw out the working patterns of the women we interviewed and how they made decisions about sex work. To do this effectively, we first locate the concept of mobility in the sex work literature and as a key characteristic of how the sex work labour market in Victoria operates.

Mobile workers

Throughout our research, we were struck by the complex work histories of the workers we interviewed and the ways in which they used work transitions to manage other life events or demands. These women moved in and out of the industry very frequently, with few workers indicating they had never had time out of sex work. Many workers indicated that they used sex work as a supplement to other forms of employment and other life activities, rearranging their sex work to suit changes at home or elsewhere. Yet this mobility co-existed with long tenure; 32 of the workers had been employed in the sexual services industry for more than five years. There was considerable mobility between different sectors, including movement between licensed and unlicensed premises, and into and out of private and/or escort work. Few workers operated solely in one sector. Approximately half of the workers had worked in at least three sectors. Movement into private work was common, with 19 of the 55 workers we interviewed indicating that they did private work, where they set up their own lists and managed their own work conditions, as well as undertaking brothel work (from where we were primarily recruiting participants). The one constant in these women's work was their ongoing commitment to continue renegotiating conditions and contexts to best suit their current aspirations and circumstances.

Day found similar mobilities among her UK cohort as 'almost a third of the women ... contacted at the end of the 1990s had worked in all sectors of the industry while a minority had remained in just one sector' (Day 2007: 64). She also identified the same lengthy and complex tenures in the industry.

Roughly half the women I knew in the 1980s who I met again a decade later were still working or had returned to the industry. They still moved between one type of sex work and another, and combined sex work with other jobs.

(Weitzer 2010: 23)
While we did not find the same intersection between street work and other forms of sex work, as was identified by Day (very few workers we interviewed did street work), the complicated patterns of mobility across different sectors within the industry, and between sex work and other work, were similar.

This concept of mobility is increasingly recognized as central in sex work scholarship even though its meanings and applications vary. Sanders suggests that the 'old order of prostitution was said to be fading' (Sanders 2005a: 163) with changing social mores, changing communication options and changing regulatory schemas creating 'a new economy of sex work' (Sanders 2005a: 177) in which mobility was a defining factor. By contrast, Murphy and Venkatesh argue for a limited construction of mobility in the industry, emphasizing the settled nature of the work undertaken by the women they interviewed.

There is little writing on mobility within sex work. Within our own sample, the few women who spoke of prospects for upward mobility considered only seeing regulars, earning greater amounts of money, and being able to have their own website or advertise in certain publications to be an achievement and status symbol. For them, mobility was thought of in monetary terms, rather than as positions or types of work. In other words, women sought to make more money by either expanding or redefining their client base, but not by changing their positions within the industry necessarily. (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006: 13)

For the women we interviewed, mobility, including across national borders, was a central element of their working experiences and histories. Yet, all of these different forms of mobility emerged in one location – Melbourne, Victoria – and were shaped and defined by the state regulatory framework for sex work (where some types of sex work have been decriminalized), the geographic location of Melbourne in relation to Southeast Asia, the cultural diversity of Melbourne's population, Melbourne's large international student population, and a wide range of other factors. In understanding mobility in sex work, and in exploring what Boris et al. have described as 'the labour processes of sex work' (Boris et al. 2010: 136), we recognize our local context as integral to the complex and mobile sex work experiences of women. Following Mountz and Hyndman (2006), specifically their argument about the co-constitution of global and the local, we seek to draw out as fully as possible the specificities of this local market in order to contribute insights about sex work on a broader canvas.

In the following discussion drawn from our study with workers in a range of different sectors of the sexual services industry, we locate women's work decisions in the Victorian labour market context and emphasize how labour market options shaped women's decisions. Benoit and Shaver have argued we need research that creates an intersectional analysis of employment conditions in relation to sex work.

The bulk of the research to date separates sex work from other occupations, an approach that refines the assumption that the former represents an identity category, rather than an economic activity pursued for a variety of reasons. (Benoit and Shaver 2006: 250)

By emphasizing the extant working conditions in Melbourne, we hope to illuminate more fully how women decided to engage in sex work and what they valued in it. In the remainder of this chapter, we focus specifically on student workers and women with care responsibilities, as these groups of workers face particular disadvantages in the broader labour market that make sex work attractive. By addressing more closely the experiences of two specific groups of workers, we can position their work decisions far more effectively: We can see women's sex work decisions in relation to the specific constraints they face in work and in life. In the next section, we outline the legal and regulatory environment for sex work in Victoria in which these work decisions were made.

Sex work in Victoria

In Victoria, as in most other Australian states, there are certain forms of sex work that have been decriminalized. While street sex work remains illegal, brothel owners and escort agencies are able to seek licences from the state government. Once a licence has been obtained and the relevant planning hurdles have been cleared, the brothel or agency can operate as a legitimate business and can advertise services, although it is prohibited from advertising for staff (whether sex workers or ancillary workers). Most of the licensed Victorian brothels operate in the capital city of Melbourne. Independent workers can also register, although as we suggested earlier, there are no clear benefits of registration for such workers.

The principle statute governing sex work in Victoria is the Sex Work Act 1994 VIC. This legislation emerged initially from the recommendations from the Inquiry into Prostitution: Final Report 1985 (Neave 1985, hereafter the Neave Report), which argued for decriminalization and increased oversight and regulation of the sex industry, especially in regard to the licensing of brothels and the safety and working conditions of workers. At that time, it was called the Prostitution Control Act 1994 VIC. The recent change in terminology (2010) does not indicate a fundamental shift in the legislation originally passed in 1994 (see Chapter 5 and Crofts et al. 2012 for further discussion). The Sex Work Act imposes strict criminal controls to prevent child and forced prostitution. Overall, Victoria bases its approach on harm minimization, and promoting public health and amenity. The legislation
and unlicensed private work. This insight resonates with other sex work research, which has argued that while street work is extensively studied, it represents a very limited and potentially more disadvantaged section of the sex work industry (see Weitzer 2009a, 2010, Hubbard et al. 2008).

Our interviews collected data on participants’ current work and prior experience in the industry; key demographics; entry, tenure and exit experiences; movement between licensed and unlicensed sectors; experience with health services, drug related issues and interface with the criminal justice system; taxation; and social indicator questions (concerning financial security, housing security, health status and social support). An important characteristic of this sample group recruited from within legal brothels was the average length of tenure in the sexual services industry, as we noted before, of more than five years. This length of tenure in the industry, reflected in other recent research into indoor sex work in particular (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006, Pyett and Warr 1999), support the need for recognition of these workers as workers operating in specific labour markets. A majority of the workers worked at least three shifts of 8–12 hours in the industry each week, committing a considerable amount of their working lives to sex work.

In the following discussion, we quote directly from the interviews wherever possible. We offer some vignettes that illustrate the diversity and complexity of women’s working histories. We give the fullest account we can of women’s circumstances, but have sought to minimize risks to women’s privacy and confidentiality by altering specific details that could identify them.

Misty

Misty works concurrently in two legal brothels in Melbourne and as an independent worker. Prior to being a sex worker Misty worked in beauty therapy, real estate and in a medical clinic. She has been in the sex industry for ten years. For approximately one week per month she travels interstate to work independently. She believes the money is better when you work for yourself and she likes the opportunity to travel and see Australia. Misty is originally from Malaysia. She likes the flexibility and being able to control her work in terms of hours and clientele. Over time she has developed a regular client base. A disadvantage of being an independent worker is the added pressure of having to pay expenses in advance, and the safety risk of working alone.

The stigma attached to sex work is a significant burden for Misty. She says she hates the fact that she cannot tell people what her occupation is for fear of their reaction. To cope with this mental toll she sees a counsellor. As a single mother of two and a grandmother, Misty highly values the financial independence made possible by working in the sex industry.

The need for flexible work that pays

For the majority of workers interviewed, flexibility coupled with adequate remuneration was nominated as the key reason for working in the sexual services industry. While a significant number of workers indicated that they enjoyed their work and talked of their professional approach and aspirations, most emphasized the intersection of flexible conditions and pay in describing why they did sex work and what was best about it for them (see also Groves et al. 2008, Woodward et al. 2003 for other similar findings in the Australian context). Two types of flexibility were identified as particularly important in satisfactory employment in sexual services; first was the flexibility to nominate shifts that fitted with other life commitments; and second was the flexibility to cease and resume employment in sex work, including the ability to move between different types of sexual service work in order to achieve the best work/life fit at any given time. These different but intersecting forms of flexibility may be responsible for the prevalent trend identified in our study of workers leaving but subsequently returning to sex work, even after professional qualifications and/or experience in alternative industries had been obtained.

Many workers found that employment outside the industry offered conditions and remuneration that were considerably less desirable than those offered in the sex industry. The participants described hospitality, nannying (highly feminized casual work) and clerical work as offering less beneficial conditions than sex work. Around 20 per cent of these workers maintained other significant employment concurrently with sexual services work (financial services and clerical and administrative roles were nominated by a number of workers), but found the additional money without a significant time commitment to be very attractive. While many workers in the study had quite regular employment patterns in brothels – a majority worked at least three shifts and maintained connections to particular licensed premises or licensees – they attributed considerable value to the ability to change shifts around according to their needs. Employers who allowed for shift nomination and were willing to be flexible about the length of shifts and other potential variations were highly prized. Workers used networks, word
of mouth, industry organizations and trial and error to identify these employers.

The second form of flexibility, the ability to stop, start and relocate employment in sexual services, was also highly valued. Only seven reported unbroken employment in the sexual service industry; most workers had taken advantage of the relative ease of moving in and out of this form of work in order to combine sex work with other forms of employment and other life commitments. As Mira (a worker with one child) observed, 'there are few workplaces where you can say “Hey yeah, it's Mira from like two years ago, can I come back?”', and receive the response, “Yeah, not a problem, come and start tonight. Fine”. Similarly, Liza (a worker currently undertaking postgraduate study) noted,

University students come and go more frequently. They would turn up and start working when they've obviously got something they've got to pay, they've got a set goal and then yeah as soon they've achieved what they were doing they would move on.

Both Mira and Liza identified the ready availability of sex work, and the potential to withdraw from the market at any time, as the most valuable aspects of their employment. Their comments are typical of many in our sample, with patterns of stopping and starting sex work as it suited workers dominating these women's work histories. These patterns were combined with mobility across sectors within the sexual services industry, including movement between licensed (registered brothels) and unlicensed premises, into premises offering add-on sexual services and into and out of private and/or escort work. Fewer than ten workers had worked in only one area of the sexual services industry and 23 had worked in at least three sectors. Nineteen of the participants indicated that they had undertaken private work (where they set up their own lists of clients) often in conjunction with employment in brothels. Despite the prevalence of mobility between sectors, few of these workers reported street work as a key area of activity. This may reflect the 'indoor' recruitment context of our study.

These varying forms of employment flexibility – shift nomination and control of working hours and entry and exit – enabled workers to meet certain short-term or long-term financial goals and other aspirations. Many workers talked of the flexibility of sex work as enabling them to combine work and travel opportunities in Australia and overseas:

I arrived yesterday from Hobart and I'm going away next week as in a small holiday in Queensland. On the way back I'll stop and probably work three days in Coffs Harbour or somewhere on the coast. [In that time] I'll make the money I will normally make in a parlour here in two or three weeks.

(Shanti, independent worker)

Shanti combines regular work in a brothel with independent hotel-based activity in other cities. Many workers described using these forms of flexibility, especially exit and return, to support specific financial goals and sometimes as a permanent avenue for financial management or to attain a desired level of financial security.

I keep steady jobs, I do my normal thing. I do this on my day off just for my extra spending money. I told my mum because she's going to find out sooner or later, you can't lie to your mum. Mums know these things and like I said we grew up in St Kilda, mum grew up in St Kilda as well so she's like, 'Just don't take drugs and you're right'.

(Melanie, worker, employed outside the industry concurrently)

I had a house which was paid off but I decided to buy a Mercedes instead of investing in something. So I'm hoping that I can invest in some more property so later on in life I don't have to do that. So properties I'm going to invest in ... will give me enough money to be able to work a normal job and not have to do this.

(Rhia, single worker, brothel and escort)

Both Melanie and Rhia are cognizant of the potential risks in their decisions to work in sexual services and both identify limitations in the security offered by sex work – Melanie also maintains a 'steady job' and Rhia aspires to a 'normal job' – but both emphasize the financial benefits that are offered by the flexibility of sex work and the relatively good remuneration.

Qui

(This interview was conducted at a legal brothel using a Chinese interpreter.)

Qui began working in a legal brothel in suburban Melbourne three years ago. She has family in Australia and in China. She sends remittances back to China to support her parents, daughter, two grandchildren and other relatives. She says her family responsibilities led her to work in the sex industry.

If you ask me from the depth of my heart, I don't think there is anything good about working here. But, I can't speak English and I have a family to support and I have responsibilities.

Qui plans on working in the sex industry for as long as it takes for her to save enough money to invest. She would like to open a grocery store. She works five days per week, sometimes doing a double shift, starting at 10am. and finishing at 8pm. at the earliest.
Women with children are less likely than other Victorian workers to consider they achieve work-life balance and childcare needs were the most common prompt for requests to change work arrangements (ABS 2010), although the metropolitan area of Melbourne – the site of our study – offers more opportunities than regional and rural areas (ABS 2010).

Students too face particular financial challenges in finding adequate flexible work. In the US, Haeger and Deil-Amen have identified that contemporary economic pressures for students connected to the combination of rising tuition, increasing debt burdens and low wage work available as the impetus for working in the sexual services industry (Haeger and Deil-Amen 2010: 2). Roberts et al (2007) suggest that in the UK and elsewhere, students are using sex work to manage difficult economic conditions while studying. While Australian domestic students generally do not face the same type of tuition costs as US students, both the costs of education and student poverty are increasing in Australia. James et al (2007) argue that many Australian students are currently facing very difficult financial conditions while they complete their studies. Available government supports are set at very low levels. Low wages in most forms of service work that can be managed alongside study mean that many students work long hours and may not be able to meet costs of study and living. Lantz’s (2003, 2005) study of Victorian students working in the sexual services industry found the reductions in state and federal support systems for students were reasons for their involvement in sex work. For international students studying in Melbourne, who do incur significant tuition costs, these stresses are intensified and sustainable work may be even more elusive, given language and cultural barriers (Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2008).

These conditions were highlighted by our participants as significant factors in why they engaged in sex work. They identified the lack of gendered wage parity and lack of access to flexible conditions that would allow them to adequately manage care and other responsibilities alongside paid work in their decisions to work as sex workers.

Sex work and student life

Almost half of the workers who participated in this study had completed or were currently enrolled in tertiary study. However, the following data focuses on the participants who identified themselves primarily as students at the time of interview and were using sex work to cover study expenses. This represents close of 30 per cent of all participants, which is a higher proportion than other recent estimates in Australian studies of sex work. For example, Quadara (2008) estimates student participation at 16 per cent, Groves et al. (2008) found 12 per cent of workers surveyed were students and Woodward et al. (2003) found the proportion to be around 13 per cent. The higher percentage we found may reflect something specific about
our sample: the high ratios of international students at Victorian universities or continuing changes in the acceptability of sex work in contemporary Western societies among students. Roberts et al. (2007, 2010) found students in the UK were more aware of the options for sex work and were more willing to entertain the idea of using sex work to manage the costs of study. Bernstein argues that we may be entering ‘a brave new world of commercially available intimate encounters that are subjectively normalized for sex workers and clients alike’ (Bernstein 2007a: 7), which will change people’s perspectives about commercial sex and ‘sexual commerce’ (Bernstein 2007a: 13).

While many students do work in other forms of flexible employment such as hospitality, the low hourly rates of pay may make these options more difficult for students, since the number of hours they must work to provide adequate money to live interferes with study. As the comments below show, sex work provided a viable employment solution to these intractable conditions for both local and international students.

I study full-time so these hours suit me because I get good working hours and the pay is really good. I’m not limited.

(Merry, local student worker)

I have a few days free, like I only have classes two days a week. It’s a lot of work for two days because you have so many subjects to keep up with, but then I look at the brighter side … it gives me time to sort of do my assignments during the day and work in the night and things like that.

(Fleur, local student worker)

For these full-time domestic students, the relatively good rates of pay offered by sex work gave them the flexibility to successfully pursue study by balancing paid and study-related activities. Student workers in our study emphasized the intersection of education costs and the lack of other viable alternate employment options as key reasons for their decisions to work in sexual services. Sex work was seen as enabling rather than inhibiting their studies (see also Lantz 2003, 2005; Woodward et al. 2003).

I really liked it and I just like the freedom, the independence, the money … I would never have gone to uni if I wasn’t doing sex work. I would never have finished it in a million years.

(Jess, local student worker)

The freedom, independence and money Jess describes as available in the sexual services industry are particularly salient for international students. These students face the additional pressures of international tuition fees, higher than expected living costs and visa conditions that limit them to 20 hours paid work per week while in Australia (Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development 2008), conditions that influenced both Ezara and Aliyah.

My Masters is a professional qualification. I have no scholarship for it so the fees are expensive. It is a coursework programme. This work fits in well with the university schedule.

(Ezara, international student worker)

I mean I knew that there was going to be things that I wouldn’t be able to support and afford and things like that, but I hadn’t planned to enter sex work. And when I came here and with time it was hard finding jobs and I went through issues of racism … I just needed to have an easy life. And I didn’t know I can do this, but when I did I just thought ‘you know what, this is what I want to do’ and there was no looking back. It was about being happy and enjoying yourself I guess. I didn’t work, I didn’t look at myself as a worker, but this is something I enjoy doing.

(Aliyah, international student worker)

Aliyah’s comment illuminates the intersection of pressures facing international students that may make sex work particularly attractive. One of the other workers we interviewed, Trudy, observed that the international student workers that she met really struggled to make ends meet while studying in Australia.

It’s very hard for them because a lot of little girls have come from overseas and poor backgrounds, you know, not all of them but most of them are from poor backgrounds.

(Trudy, independent and brothel worker)

While domestic and international students face different financial pressures, the consensus among our participants was that the demands of study in conjunction with the costs of living made other available types of flexible or casual work unsustainable. Eva’s comment about the relationship between time spent and money earned in the sex industry neatly sums up the decision-making process for this group of workers.

Yeah, yeah, there was no way I could have lived the student life [doing other work], you know? I travelled a lot, I studied … I did volunteer work. I was doing heaps of stuff that other work doesn’t give you the time or the money to do.

(Eva, former student worker)
Sex work and caring responsibilities

Danielle

Danielle began working in the industry at age 21. At the time she was homeless and living in her sister’s lounge room with her young son. As she says:

No money, no qualifications, no choice.

She has worked in the industry for the past 11 years, four of them in unlicensed massage parlours and the past seven years in the same legal parlour. She finds working in parlours more convenient and more lucrative than massage. Danielle says she notices that nowadays there are many young women in the industry and fewer older women. She says the financial incentive is significant but also recognizes that the amount you can earn makes it hard to leave the industry. She has left the industry twice to pursue two ‘normal’ careers but returned to sex work for financial reasons. She is a single mother and has supported herself to study while employed in the industry.

For Danielle, the advantages to sex work are as follows:

Freedom all round. I can go for a smoke when I want. If I’m going to do prostitution, Australia’s the best place in the world even though I’ve done it nowhere else but Australia. But I watch movies and hear things and see documentaries, sex slavery and whatever and I think, ‘Oh my God, I have so many bloody rights.’ It’s wonderful, I love my rights, I like all that. Of course I like the money side of it.

The social stigma makes sex work difficult, however. Danielle would like to see more respect for workers and consideration given to this being one of the oldest professions. Danielle has the support of her family so can talk about her work with some people. She thinks the work can be mentally and emotionally draining because of the stigma.

The second group for whom broader workplace conditions and trends emerged in the interviews as a key impetus for working in the industry were parent carers. Nineteen female workers were parents, 17 of whom were caring for dependent children; 14 of these women were single parents. This number accords with most recent Victorian and Australian research which has found that around half of sex workers are parents (Groves et al. 2008, Pyett and Warr 1999, Woodward et al. 2003). For these workers, lack of flexibility and lack of comparable pay in other industries were key factors in their decision to maintain sex work. When other employment options are constrained, sex work offers clear benefits because of the rates of pay and worker control over shifts.

For a single parent, one of the biggest drawbacks is the fact that you can pick and choose your hours, like around Christmas or New Year or whatever. My family’s always juggling, who can work, who’s at work, who’s not, what day?

(Marika, sole parent, two children, worker)

The workers we interviewed were able to nominate day shifts only, to determine which days of the week they would work, and in some cases to work shorter shifts in order to fit in with their childcare arrangements. Night shifts allowed some workers to maintain responsibility for most daytime care of children. This flexibility enabled workers to balance their work in the industry with their family responsibilities and to optimize their capacity to financially support children and family members.

My son just started school this year and ... and I was freaking out what I’m gonna [sic] do for like school holidays and she goes, ‘Well why don’t you do days here because I can tell you right now, look my son’s sick, I’ve got to go.’ You know, and they’re quite fine with that, and even two weeks you know, ‘I’ve gotta [sic] take two weeks off, I’ll see you in two weeks’. That’s fine. I’ll see you then.’ It’s so easy and it’s flexible. There’s not one job I can think of that would allow me to do that four times a year.

(Elsie, sole parent, one child, worker)

Flexible is good yeah ... I only do day shift. It makes it easier. Say if my daughter had something on like a parent teacher interview or something or a day off school, I would find it quite easy to change my shift, without losing a shift. ... Plus you don’t have to work the amount of hours to make the money. So especially being a single parent, having the responsibility for running the house, ... looking after the child and working. It just makes it easier than having a full time job.

(Tamara, sole parent, one child, worker)

Tuesdays and Fridays I don’t have them at home anyway so I don’t have to worry about picking them up from school. And Wednesdays my ex picks them up and that’s why I finish early on Mondays and Thursdays, so I can take my daughter dancing. You’ve still got motherly things you’ve gotta [sic] do.

(Marisa, sole parent, three children, worker)

As Marisa’s comment suggests, sex work can be understood as supporting family life. This did not mean there were not difficulties for these women: one woman worried about giving an emergency contact number to her son’s school; another said that her son now asked where she was going at night-time. Yet the participants emphasized that the benefits of flexibility and pay outweighed these barriers. Romaine argued that women working to
make families function and look after their children were well-supported in the brothel sector of the sex industry.

I think anything you're doing for your children is the most accepted. That's almost seen that that's perfectly okay and everybody understands and nobody would look down on someone who was doing it for their children, which there is a lot.

(Romaine, single, no children, worker)

A number of workers from Southeast Asia were remitting money to support family members back home. Shalia is 38 and came to Australia to study English. She has two grandchildren that she needs to support in Thailand. Although she didn't plan on working in the sex industry, it seemed the best option once she arrived. Alena, too, has a son, parents and a sibling to look after. She is comfortable with her current employment, saying that 'this brothel is much better than other places' in the industry she has worked. She is clear that this type of work is both necessary for family support and acceptable on that basis.

This is normal for Thai people. You have to help maternal/paternal aunts. It's not like in Australia where you move out when you are 17 or 18. You have to look after your grandchildren. When I think about my parents, I'm happy about what I'm doing.

(Alena, single, brothel worker)

By contrast, Qui, whose story was presented above, recognizes the same family responsibility but doesn't feel comfortable engaging in sex work. Qui's dilemma speaks to the particular barriers faced by immigrant workers resident in Australia. A tight and inflexible labour market becomes more difficult when language barriers and cultural expectations are added. Whether here on short-term visas, as some of the Korean workers were, or resident in Australia like Qui, who planned to buy a grocery store to run with her two young children, for these women sex work offered viable employment. Mai's (2010) report on migrant sex workers in the UK reflected similar findings as sex workers found the conditions of work less exploitative than other work they could access. 'By working in the sex industry, many interviewees are able to maintain dignified living standards in the UK while dramatically improving the living conditions of their families in the country of origin' (Mai 2010: 1).

Kilvington et al. (2001) have offered similar observations about parents, students and refugees living in Europe who undertake sex work. Parents, especially sole parents, and students who have other non-negotiable commitments are likely to continue to find sex work an attractive option, since flexible paid work that meshes with other life commitments is in short supply in Australia. For these sex workers, questions about attachment to the sexual services industry, in our view, should be framed in relation to a more critical analysis of the broader employment opportunities, especially for marginalized workers.

**Sex work in a working life**

The workers in our study undertook sex work because the employment flexibility offered in conjunction with the financial reward for hours worked matched or exceeded the benefits available from other work contexts. They spent extended periods of time doing sex work because of these benefits. For two particular groups of workers, carers and students, whose opportunities to gain sustainable employment are particularly constrained in the existing Victorian labour market, this nexus of flexibility and pay was even more critical. While some independent sex workers were focused on financial goals such as travel and investment, carers and students focused their attention most on the fact that sex work was an avenue for sustainable employment. The accounts of these women emphasize the centrality of general employment conditions in how we understand and locate women's decisions to engage in sex work. When asked why they laboured in the sexual services industry, the key relevant issues for these workers were gendered inequalities in labour market conditions, where flexible service work or caring work is often feminized (just like sex work) and where remuneration is simultaneously feminized and therefore much less. The entrenched issues for Australian women workers are pay inequality (Whitehouse 2001), the high level of sex segregation (OECD 2002) and low comparative levels of pay in highly feminized industries (Pocock et al. 2008). This meant for the women in our research that sex work, in which the rates of pay and possibilities of flexibility are good, was a viable and attractive option, especially for workers who faced the constraints of other life responsibilities such as children or study, as Groves et al. (2008) found in Victoria and Woodward et al. (2003) found in Queensland. The working conditions of the work, rather than the sex aspect, were the key.

Arguing that employment conditions such as flexibility and pay are critical to considering decisions about sex work is not to suggest that sex work is not a specific form of employment. Specific questions of worker health, social support and social stigma in sex work are important (Pyett et al. 1996, Quadara 2008, Sanders 2005a). Sanders observes that even when we define sex work as work, we must recognize that 'it is different to other work' (Sanders 2005a: 40) for a range of reasons. In the following chapters, we focus on the specifics of sex work as it experienced by women workers in the rooms where they work. We explore how women workers manage their bodies and the bodies of their clients. Locating women's sex work histories in the context of their local labour markets, emphasizing 'the struggles of workers' (Boris et al. 2010: 132) rather than the sex involved,
allows us to see women's work decisions in context and to better understand how women are responding to the available work options.

Labour markets nationally and internationally offer limited and sometimes hostile spaces for women workers to access adequate monies to survive. Local, national and international labour conditions are crucially important to women's decisions around work, as they evaluate work options and sometimes find sex work to be the best option for them. Yet sex work is often investigated without reference to these broader contexts, as Agustin argues:

Recent work has demonstrated how people who sell sex are excluded from studies of migration, of service work and of informal economies, and are instead examined only in terms of 'prostitution', a concept that focuses on transactions between individuals, especially their personal motivations. (Agustin 2005: 619)

In this chapter, we have looked at the decisions about sex work made by the women we interviewed as they linked to the women's lives. We positioned these decisions in relation to broader labour market conditions and the types of flexibility women felt they were able to negotiate in the Victorian context. Our focus on two particular groups of workers offers an insight into the social and economic conditions some women must negotiate as they make decisions about engaging in sex work. Bringing into view particular elements of sexual services markets cannot illuminate the whole, but can reveal the significance of wider employment contexts for understanding women's decisions. Thinking about how women negotiate sex work helps us to recognize women's mobility and responsiveness in the context of their local conditions.

Sanders reflectively describes women's active transitions from other social spaces into their working lives as sex workers, 'from motherhood to domi-natrix, from suburban community to the shuttered fronts of the massage parlours' (Sanders 2005a: 32). She emphasizes the adaptive and responsive work and skills of women, the acquisition of work-based competencies among her cohort. 'Women [are traditionally portrayed] as avoiders of risk' (Sanders 2005a: 43), but this did not hold true for the mobile market actors presented in her study who changed their work and work practices in response to their needs. We would similarly argue for the need to acknowledge women's agency and thoughtfulness as they negotiate difficult labour market conditions. For example, the women recognized that changing locations offered clear commercial advantages, as Oso Casas (2010) has also observed. 'New' workers were often more profitable in houses; thus movement could enhance women's earnings.

There's a lot of money coming in, wherever you are, you're the new person and you're getting work. You're being heavily promoted by the owners as new, so for six months, you can almost live off just seeing the house's regular clients.

(Belinda, brothel and independent worker)

This concept of market newness and the related opportunities is relevant to women who are mobile across national borders too, as we argue in Chapter 6. The concept of trafficking requires the construction of an innocent victim (Kantola and Squires 2004) or a sex slave (O'Connell-Davidson 2006); the mobile, agentic migrating woman worker is almost always absent in common narratives about trafficking.

The women we spoke to were not making 'free choices' about work, but they were active in negotiating their local employment terrain. The amount of money available in sex work outstripped what they could earn elsewhere. They continually moved and reworked their sex work employment to achieve the best possible outcome. It is this mobile and agentic approach adopted by the women we interviewed that characterizes the findings we explore in the following chapters. We move from a consideration of women's reasons for working in sex work as documented here to a discussion of the work itself and how women described to us what they did. We draw out what they told us about encounters in the brothel rooms, how they managed their clients and how they understood their skills, and the challenges and opportunities facing them as sex workers. We look at how they acquired mobile and flexible body practices to secure their own safety, to minimize physical wear and tear, and to make sex work sustainable for them.