

Making Sex Work: A Failed Experiment with Legalized Prostitution, by Mary Lucille Sullivan. North Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Spinifex, 2007. 235 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1876756604 (hbk.). US\$18.95.

Mary Lucille Sullivan's *Making Sex Work* investigates the sex industry in Victoria, Australia. The author claims that the Victorian government's 1984 legalization of prostitution has been a "failed social experiment" (p. 2). Sullivan argues that the normalization of prostitution as work undermines women's equality in the workplace, violates women's human rights, and harms women and girls in the industry.

Sullivan frames her research within the feminist debate on prostitution. On one side of the spectrum, she locates the radical feminists who believe "sexual harassment and rape are indistinguishable from the sex the buyers purchase" (p. 5) (see for example K. Barry 1979; M. Farley 2004). Sullivan, a sympathizer of the radical feminist spectrum, writes that "Victoria's legalized prostitution system assists in maintaining male dominance, the sexual objectification of women, and the cultural approval of violence against women" (p. 3). On the other side, Sullivan points to the liberal feminists, who argue that prostitution should be normalized as work, and that it is a woman's right to choose what she wants to do with her own body (see for example J. Aitkin 1978; B. Sullivan 1997). In Victoria, the liberal feminists won this debate when brothel and escort prostitution were legalized in 1984. Because of this legislation, specific planning and health codes now apply to the industry and brothels must be licensed through the state. However, street prostitution continues to be included in the criminal code.

The legalization of prostitution is an area that has been relatively untouched by

academic literature, and Sullivan should be commended for this contribution. Yet her arguments against legalization are not terribly convincing. Sullivan never explicitly defines the measures she will use to show that legalization has failed, though she does write that Victoria has witnessed an increase in both the supply and demand for sex work, an increase in sex trafficking, and no decrease in female sexual assault. However, she does not convincingly demonstrate that any of these changes are in fact due to legalization. For example, some of Australia's Asian neighbors – Cambodia, China, India, and Sri Lanka – have also witnessed an increase in the supply and demand of sex work and sex trafficking during a similar time period (World Health Organization (WHO) 2001); and sex work is illegal in all these countries. Therefore, it is possible that the state of Victoria could be in a similar or even worse situation had sex work remained illegal.

These claims regarding the changes as a result of legislation would have been far more convincing had she borrowed methods of analysis from the (feminist) economics literature. For example, she could have exploited the variation in regulation across Australian states pre- and post-legalization as a counterfactual. Australian states develop legislation for the prostitution industry, at the state, not the federal government level. Victoria was the first of four states to legalize sex work; the Australian Capital Territory legalized in 1992, New South Wales in 1995, and Queensland in 1999 (p. 1). If Sullivan had shown that the demand for sex work shot up in each state shortly after legalization, then the reader might be more convinced that legalization resulted in an increased demand for sex work. Similarly, had we observed a relative increase in sex trafficking first in the state of Victoria, followed by Canberra and New South Wales, and lastly in

Queensland, again we might conclude that legalization led to increased trafficking.

Unfortunately, this type of evidence from other states is not presented.

Raising another important issue relating to legalization, Sullivan explores sex worker health and safety toward the end of the book. In most countries, sex workers are considered a “high risk” group, as they generally have higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or HIV/AIDS relative to the adult population.

Remarkably, Australian sex workers often report lower rates of STIs than the general Australian population (Penelope Saunders 1999). In addition, Australia has the lowest rate of HIV/AIDS among sex workers in the world, and sex worker groups claim this is due to the work of community-based sex worker organizations and projects conducted in partnership with Australia’s state governments (Commonwealth of Australia 2005).

Whether sex worker health status is a result of legalization remains a question for further research; yet the excellent health of Australian sex workers makes me question whether the legalization of prostitution has truly failed. To her credit, Sullivan argues that the government’s narrow emphasis on safe sex and the containment of STIs should be challenged to include more comprehensive strategies that also account for the mental and social well-being of sex workers. She rightfully argues that men have been absent from the government’s agenda, placing the burden of safe sex on women.

The last chapter, “Making Men’s Demand Visible,” is the best chapter in the book because in this chapter, Sullivan finally offers an alternative to Victoria’s legal model, which she criticizes throughout the book. She writes that the Swedish system “provides a viable alternative to the Victorian legalization model” because Sweden recognizes that “prostitution exists because of male demand and women’s poverty” (p. 337) and

prosecutes men who buy women (and men) for sex. According to Gunilla Ekberg (2004), a Swedish advisor on issues of prostitution, by criminalizing clients who buy sex, the government has been successful in reducing the number of sex workers and the amount of sex traffic as well as client demand. This last chapter illustrates the need for additional research if we are to better understand how different legal policies affect various sex market outcomes.

Making Sex Work is a good read for those interested in the politics and history of the Australian prostitution industry. The reader looking for more serious economic analysis might be disappointed. This book is well intentioned and strives to influence Australian policy on sex work. Unfortunately, though it touches on obviously imperative issues, the evidence presented in this book offers very little conclusive evidence to support any policy recommendations.

Manisha Shah, Department of Economics, University of Melbourne,

5th floor Economics and Commerce Bldg, Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

e-mail: m.shah@unimelb.edu.au

Author Biography

Manisha Shah is Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Melbourne. She is a development economist whose research focuses on risk behavior, health outcomes, and regulation of sex markets in developing countries. She explores the linkages between economic incentives and risk behavior using micro data which she helped collect from Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil, and India.

REFERENCES

- Aitkin, J. 1978. *The Prostitute as a Worker*. Paper presented at the Women and Labour Conference. Sydney: Macquarie University.
- Barry, K. 1979. *Female Sexual Slavery*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Commonwealth of Australia. 2005. *National HIV/AIDS Strategy: Revitalising Australia's Response 2005–2008*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Ekberg, Gunilla. 2004. "The Swedish Law Prohibits the Purchase of Sexual Services: Best Practices for Prevention of Prostitution and Trafficking in Human Beings." *Violence against Women* 10(10): 1187–218.
- Farley, M. 2004. "Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart," Prostitution Harms Women Even if Legalized or Decriminalized.' *Violence Against Women*. (October 2004):1087-1125.
- Saunders, Penelope. 1999. "Successful HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategies in Australia: The Role of Sex Worker Organizations." Discussion paper.
www.scarletalliance.org.au/library/saunders99 (accessed February 2008).
- Sullivan, B. 1997. *The Politics of Sex: Prostitution and Pornography in Australia since 1945*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2001. *Sex Work in Asia*. Manila: WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific.