

The sex trade scribes

Two reviews written by Samantha Brennan

Good Girls/Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face

edited by Laurie Bell, The Women's Press, Toronto, 1987, 231 pp, \$12.95

Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry

edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, Cleis Press, San Francisco, 1987, 349 pp, \$14.95

Prostitution and pornography have both proven to be difficult issues for feminists. Arguments that the sale of sex, on the street or in print, involves the subordination of women have led to problems. On the one hand, feminist arguments have played into the hands of morally outraged citizens and politicians, resulting in stronger legislation in both areas. The problem is, by driving the sex industry underground, we leave women who work in it even less protection than before.

As well, feminists have angered women in the sex industry by insisting their work perpetuates patriarchy by teaching men that women's bodies are for sale. Prostitutes say feminists are patronizing when they claim

repair the damage. *Good Girls/Bad Girls* is a collection of essays from a Toronto conference entitled "Challenging our Images: The Politics of Prostitution and Pornography." Cleis Press published *Sex Work* as a way of giving the women in the sex industry an opportunity to describe their reality on their own terms.

For those not familiar with the term, "sex trade worker" refers to those employed in the sale of sex, from models for pornographic photos or films to table dancers and street prostitutes.

Both books break important ground by allowing these women to speak for themselves.

If you want to understand some of the tensions between sex workers and feminists, *Good Girls/Bad Girls* is the book to read first. It begins with a series of articles by feminists Susan Cole, Mariana Valverde, Christine Boyle and Sheila Noonan which put the discussion in a political and historical context. The middle part is made up of essays by sex workers, and both groups come together for the final section. The issues covered include organizing prostitutes, background on the Canadian Organization for the Rights of

lending thing to attempt. Many sex workers say they thought feminists were uptight and just as moralistic as preachers who tried to get them to leave the streets. Both groups had, to some extent, bought society's myths about the other. While the sense of dialogue was probably the most exciting part of the conference, that doesn't always translate well into print. The articles were originally conference addresses, and it's clear they were written for that audience.

Some funny anecdotes stand out. For example, the feminists and the sex workers trying to meet to discuss the conferences at the house of a strictly non-smoking feminist. Sending the smokers outside meant most of the sex workers disappeared. As well, the book begins with a juicy quotation — a prostitute calling feminists "a bunch of fucking madonnas".

Sex Work is somewhat different. Closer in approach to Lizzie Borden's films *Working Girls*, the bulk of this book is simply sex workers talking about their lives. And while the women don't explicitly address politics and government policy, the message that existing laws have to be repealed comes across loud and clear. There is also a wider range of opinion in this volume about the desirability of selling sex, questions of legality aside.

Some enjoy their work and are proud of their skills. Others hope for a society where sex isn't for sale and describe the misery of being forced into prostitution to feed their children and themselves. It's no surprise that a large part of the appeal of the book is simple curiosity, given how little the average person knows about prostitution. The



first section of this collection includes 45 contributions from sex workers. They range from poems to letters and autobiographical essays.

The editors have done a good job of arranging the selections. Some are pretty graphic and unpleasant. Others are funny and touching. The women in *Sex Work* defy any stereotypes about who sells sex. Many mention that they really appreciated getting the opportunity to tell people about their work. Part of what's wrong with our society is that it tries to hide sex workers on dark streets in parts of town where "nice" people don't go,

making them and their work invisible. Still others approach the issue from a standard labour perspective, arguing it's all just work with the added definite disadvantage that you can't organize workers whose jobs are illegal.

The line between the "good girls" and the "bad girls" are certainly fuzzier in this book. Many of the women identified themselves as feminists. Some even worked in the industry to support their own creative writing or political work. *Sex Work* may even challenge the "I could never do that — gross" attitude of many non-sex worker feminists.

The debate is also on their terms in *Sex Work*. Sex workers speak first, followed by a series of essays on connections between sex work and other issues.

Finally, the book has an excellent section on prostitutes' rights in the world. Here you can find the World Charter and World Whores' Congress statement. All of this makes great resource material for people interested in working with local groups to assist sex workers in their struggles against repressive legislation, police harassment, and societal prejudice.

Finally, *Sex Work* is another example of the sort of book Canada Customs doesn't want any of us to read. It was stopped at the border when first ordered, and only released on educational grounds after the Vancouver Women's Bookstore appealed the ruling that it was "obscene". Under the government's new proposed censorship ruling, Bill C-54, owning a copy of this book would be illegal. *Sex Work* contains accounts of women working as prostitutes as young teenagers and graphic descriptions of sex.

Both *Sex Work* and *Good Girls/Bad Girls* are currently available at Red Herring Books. Red Herring, Halifax's cooperative, alternative book vendor, can be found at 1555 Granville Street, at the foot of Blowers.

- a prostitute calling feminists "a bunch of fucking madonnas".

any woman who chooses to sell sex must have been socialized into believing women are inferior to men, or mentally disturbed.

Two books recently published by feminist presses in the United States and Canada set out to

Prostitutes, the anti-soliciting law Bill C-49, and historical connections between working-class lesbians and prostitutes.

The conference, and the resulting book, are brave projects. Getting discussion underway between two groups that can be that far apart is a chal-

by Tony Tracy

There have been victories as well as losses in the fight for women's reproductive rights and freedoms. *The Struggle for Choice* is a series of five videotapes produced by Nancy Nicol which outline many of these battles, from the liberalization of the abortion laws in 1969 to the present period.

The tapes, which are on display at the Centre for Art Tapes on Brunswick Street until March 30, document the history of the pro-choice struggle across the country across the country, from a distinctly socialist perspective. Throughout the series, a link and correlation is made between the effort to obtain reproductive freedoms and the struggle for workers' rights in Canada. A hypothesis of sorts is presented which suggests that

Reproductive freedom

It's a woman's right to choose

during times of oppression of the labour movement, the pro-choice movement has suffered its greatest defeats. The common right-wing opponents are discussed to some degree within the series, including the premier of British Columbia, Bill Vander Zalm, and his predecessor, Bill Bennett.

Nicol, a pro-choice activist and socialist from Toronto, documents in these tapes a complete history of the abortion rights struggle, beginning with a change in the abortion laws in 1969 and continuing with a view of the fight for access to abortion, particularly in Montreal, Toronto, and British Columbia. An emphasis is placed on showing parallels to labour move-

ment and the struggle for workers' rights during this same time frame, particularly during the recession of the early 1980s, which saw the erosion of labour rights as well as of abortion rights.

Dr. Henry Morgentaler and his legal battles to open abortion clinics in major cities are given much coverage in this series. A history of his arrests and subsequent acquittals by juries is shown, which makes the government's attacks on him seem redundant and futile. It is shown quite clearly that all governments in Canada are at fault for this persecution. Even the NDP, which takes an official pro-choice stand as a party, does not follow through with this when in

government, as shown in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Morgentaler was arrested and charged under an NDP government.

Nicol shows that it is in the interests of the state, as it now exists, to curb reproductive freedoms, as well as workers' rights. At the same time, there is a great influence on government leaders by religious groups who are anti-abortion and who attempt to define morality for the remainder of society.

The coercion used by the "pro-life" groups is well documented as well, showing the need for escorts to accompany women seeking abortions to clinics in order to prevent the verbal and physical abuse they receive from anti-abortion protesters outside

the clinics.

These protesters go so far, at times, as physically restraining a woman who is attempting to enter the clinic. Their abusive language is designed to intimidate women and create a sense of guilt.

Nicol seems to call for a common front between the working class and the women's movement which would work towards obtaining reproductive freedom, as well as working for the rights of women in the workplace. The exploitation of women, particularly women of ethnic origin, by employers is shown in the film, and this is linked with the poverty that creates a major need for abortion. Such a common front could bring about equality for all persons, and the right for a person to make decisions affecting her own body.