




Money

The Mundanity of Being a Dominatrix in New Zealand

By **Sasha Borissenko** December 20, 2016, 9:31pm

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Unlike pretty much anywhere else in the world, sex work in New Zealand is the same as any other job, legally speaking. Since the Prostitution Reform Act decriminalised prostitution in 2003, sex workers have the same rights and protection as any other industry.

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith, 27, got into sex work five years ago because it made sense in terms of earnings and hours. They (Gwyn prefers non-binary pronouns) makes a living as a full service escort and dominatrix, while completing their PhD thesis on media coverage of the sex industry in New Zealand since the law change.

Their schedule might include working five nights a week in a brothel, seeing the odd private client, and creating a nest of coffee and papers in their lounge while they tap out versions of a chapter for their PhD. Mostly, this suits them fine—Gwyn is a night owl by nature and being able to arrange work around their studies gives them the flexibility to keep a healthy balance of free time and a social life.

“Usually a job’s a job that pays your mortgage or rent and bills, and if you’re lucky you like it sometimes and it fits in with the rest of your life,” they told VICE. Gwyn’s passionate about talking about sex work to reduce the stigma around it. Despite it’s open legal status in New Zealand, the local industry is shrouded in social taboos and that, they say, puts the rights of its workers at risk.

“There’s an expectation that the correct way to do sex work is to do very little of it and make a lot of money doing so,” says Gwyn. “This model of sex work assumes it’s still dirty and taboo, and the better way to do it—if you must—is to have very little sex. Congratulations, you’ve won capitalism!” Gwyn says in fact it’s a very feast or famine kind of industry. One night they could make up to four figures and a bad week could end in as little as \$70.

“I think it’s absurd to declare that a job is only a legitimate or acceptable thing to do if you love every second of it,” says Gwyn. “There’s a perception that you either do sex work because you love it or you hate it but you’re a victim of circumstance who does it because you don’t have any other choices because of unfortunate life circumstances; to pay for alcohol or drugs; because you’ve been trafficked. This, I think, is extremely unhelpful because it collapses together a bunch of different experiences and strips people of their agency.”

So Gwyn took VICE through a typical 15-hour shift to show us what it’s really like.

4 PM

Gwyn arrives for their shift at 4 PM, puts on makeup and makes arrangements for their 6 PM booking. It’s not all about leather and chains, if anything Gwyn typically wears a pencil skirt and button-down blouse, to reduce dry cleaning expenses.

6 PM

First up, there’s a youngish chap, maybe mid-thirties. He mentions he got divorced a few years back. The first hour is sort of sex, Gwyn guesses: “Including like a blowjob, sex in a few positions, really terrible kissing—he has trouble staying hard so I spend a fair amount of time checking the condom is still on.”

Based on the dude’s erratic conversation, and the volume of sweat he produces from the minute he steps out of the shower, he’s high. Gwyn says they get a fair number of clients who have done drugs, who are actually perfectly fine to deal with aside from being incredibly horny and unable to orgasm, which gets exhausting pretty fast.

After a while it’s apparent the man can’t continue, so the remainder of the booking is spent chatting about Gwyn’s studies, the guy’s job, the sex industry and the stigma against workers and clients.

10 PM

At 10pm a fairly young dude arrives for Gwyn’s second booking. After chatting for almost half an hour they get to it, and it’s nice as the guy isn’t too intent on relocating Gwyn’s internal organs, they say. It’s pretty fun but for the fact the guy keeps getting cramp in his foot, which brings the booking to a halt. Choosing not to finish before the buzzer went off, they continue to talk about neuroplasticity, and phantom limb syndrome.

12 PM

Gwyn finishes their first shift at midnight. They make their room up nicely, before putting on comfy clothing and heading out for a restorative beer. Then they Uber to their second shift at another parlour, which starts at 1am.

Pizza night at the brothel. “Speak for yourself mate,” says Gwyn.

1 AM

Gwyn chugs back the first of three 475 ml Red Bulls. With 12 other sex workers in the parlour lounge, everyone is in a hilarious mood. The new Jennifer Lopez song is on the television, which prompts all the workers to belt out the lyrics, terrifying the three 18-year-old guys who’ve been messing around without making a booking in the process.

It’s this type of camaraderie in brothels that’s very much ignored by the status quo, Gwyn says. “It’s a feeling of support that I think shouldn’t be understated.”

Instead there are false divisions which exist in the industry—a sense of elitism around doing low-volume high-cost appointments, which means there’s little discussion of parlour work. Yet there’s very good reasons people choose one form of work over another, or switch between the two, as people’s needs change, Gwyn says.

3 AM

It’s now 3 AM and a 19-year-old hopes to make the most of his first time at a brothel. He’s overly enthusiastic, and Gwyn puts on their “mum voice” to command the situation. Gwyn also suggests he reevaluate the size of condom to use, in hope of preventing future pregnancy scares or health risks.

Sex only amounts to about 60 percent of the work on the weekends, with the rest taken up by conversation and social and emotional management. There’s also the accounting and marketing side of things, and the logistical and physically taxing side of the job too, such as sore hips and knees as a result of wearing heels for 16 hours, having to go up and down stairs to carry laundry, or having flaky skin from taking up to 10 showers during a shift.

4 AM

Gwyn’s 4 AM booking tries to ask them on a date outside of work. “No.” And whether he can skip using protection. “No.”

6 AM

Gwyn’s up to their third energy drink. At this point Gwyn’s so exhausted that they can’t bear to take off the enormous, hideous cardigan they put on to briefly go outside. It’s freezing in the cavernous lounge.

7 AM

Gwyn’s 7 AM booking waxes lyrical about what soap they prefer to the hotel soap on offer and how they struck gold at the casino earlier. Because the guy is completely wasted, the booking ends with the client talking about how there hasn’t been any good music since the eighties, with music peaking with ABBA.

8.45 AM

Gwyn, at this point deliriously tired, takes out their contact lenses and emerges into the daylight. Someone who’s obviously had sleep in the last 24 hours jogs healthfully past them. They consider the relative merits of getting a taxi to go through McDonald’s drive-thru on the way home, but then they remember the breakfast menu is the worst thing on the planet. Home it is.

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