

# Time to shift the discussion on sex work

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It is time to change the debate around sex work from a moral issue to one of workers' rights, a University of Otago study argues.

Author Peyton Bond, Ph.D. candidate in Sociology, Gender Studies and

Criminology, interviewed seven Dunedin-based sex workers and one brothel manager to determine what decriminalization can look like under the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA).

The study, published in journal *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, found the Act is successful when managers adhere fully to the provisions of the PRA and the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC) guidelines; sex workers are confident and knowledgeable about their rights under the legislation; and councils do not introduce bylaws that contradict the provisions of the PRA.

"Success is defined as a system that ensures workers' rights and equitable and fair treatment. I name this success the "Dunedin Model," Bond says.

Post-decriminalization sex workers in Dunedin felt confident about their rights and management was a large contributing factor to their positive experiences.

Another factor was the absence of bylaws in Dunedin. Bond says bylaws under some councils, including Queenstown and Christchurch, exist as an impediment to the benefits of decriminalization.

Queenstown Lakes District Council's bylaws, which reduce the legal area of operation for brothels to within a two-block zone in both Queenstown and Wanaka, which cannot be located at [ground level](#) or beneath ground level of another building, or within 100m of any existing brothel, have been labeled draconian by Dame Catherine Healy of the NZPC. Such restrictive bylaws can cause sex work to move underground, or face legal trouble.

"Workers-rights oriented management carried more weight than the other three factors in the successful model. This, unfortunately, means that even in a decriminalized, bylaw-free region, where workers have

strong knowledge of their rights, the whims and temporality of management in the industry hold harmful power.

"However, times can change (the interviews were conducted in 2018) and with it legislation sometimes must—this model requires continued input from those working in the field."

Bond hopes the public can work on unlearning their own stigmas and preconceived notions around the sex industry and ensure that whatever their personal stance on the existence of sex work is, it does not mean that workers' rights are not protected.

"Too many people argue against decriminalization on the basis that sex work is 'bad,' without considering the real harms that this rhetoric and its corresponding policies cause—it is not plausible or best practice to make laws about people's work without consulting and listening to those very people."

She also hopes the study is useful to [sex workers](#) and activists fighting for decriminalization in other countries as evidence of what a decriminalized policy model could look like when workers know their rights, management respects those rights, and further legislation (bylaws) don't contradict the decriminalization legislation.

**More information:** Peyton Bond. The Dunedin Model: Dunedin Sex Worker Experiences Under Decriminalisation in Aotearoa New Zealand, *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s13178-021-00551-4](#)

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