Invisible Women: Powerful and Disturbing Stories of Murdered Sex Workers **by Kylie Fox & Ruth Wykes (Echo Publishing)**

Dedication:

For the forgotten, fallen women whose lives mattered more than they knew.

INTRODUCTION

One woman dies while walking home at night and her murder sparks a national outpouring of grief, and a manhunt on a scale that is rarely seen in this country. Another woman is murdered at work, by a client, and barely a ripple is raised. Why is one murder deemed a national tragedy, and the other doesn't seem to matter at all?

It's a familiar story. A small article appears in the paper about a murder and it piques our interest for a moment. As we read on, and the circumstances reveal themselves, we realise it was just a sex worker and we look away. *Serves her right for putting herself in danger*, we think. *She asked for it. We don't care.*

What if that same story was about your sister or your best friend and her job wasn't mentioned? What if the media told you that a young mother went to work in an office, and that afternoon her boss had told her to go outside and wash his car. She said no. He got angry and punched her in the face. These might seem like absurd comparisons. But are they? A woman who engages in sex work is just doing her job. If she consents to give a particular service to a client, it doesn't give them the right to brutalise her or take her life.

When we began to research for this book, the lack of information about murdered sex workers almost overwhelmed us. It seems that the more labels that are attached to a woman, the less human she becomes to other people. So a street-based, drug-addicted, homeless sex worker could disappear and it seems that nobody pays much attention.

The premise of this book is not to paint sex work in any light other than what it is. It is work. It is the transaction of some form of sexual service in exchange for money.

The women we have written about are among the most vulnerable in society. Most of the cases involve street-based sex workers. On a daily or weekly basis they go to work in a job that doesn't afford them the same protection the rest of us take for granted. There are few rules, no job description, no sick leave, no holiday pay, no minimum wage – and very little protection.

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Sex work in Australia has been here at least since European settlement. Whether it's brothels, escorts or so-called red light districts, their services have existed for two basic reasons; it offers men (and sometimes women) a vehicle for safe, relatively anonymous sex, sometimes a way to

experience things their partners are unwilling to engage in, and at other times it is just because a client wants uncomplicated, anonymous sex, and they are willing to pay for it.

Women who work in the sex industry do so for one basic reason – to earn money. It is important to acknowledge that for many Australian women in the commercial sex industry it is a conscious choice they are happy to make, and they work in the business to help them achieve other life goals: to put themselves through university, to pay off a mortgage more quickly, or because the money is great and the friends they make give them a real sense of community.

For some Australian women it is much more complex. The road to St Kilda (Melbourne), and to other streets throughout the country that have become the workplaces of street-based sex workers, isn't straight. Neither is it a road many women know they are travelling until they arrive there.

This is a road for women who may have fallen through the cracks of our society. Women who, as children, found themselves in the confusing world of foster care; a world where, far too often, paedophiles are circling, ready to groom, persuade and abuse those least equipped to tell, or to fight back.

Women who, as children, lost a parent, a sibling, a friend and who stayed too quiet, bottling up their sadness until one day they were introduced to a drug that – for the first time in their young lives – took their pain away. Rebellious teenagers who, in an act of youthful defiance, said yes to a friend who offered them speed; it felt incredible.

Women who don't remember the first time they were sexually assaulted. They were too young. And it happened so often, accompanied by words of love – or threats of punishment and pain. Those women know sex means nothing now; it's a tool, a weapon, a way to get what they need to survive.

Other women who were so young when they fell in love. They made excuses the first time their partner hit them, when he controlled their money, when he isolated them from their friends, from their family.

Women with no money, no networks of family or friends, very poor job prospects – for whom the taste of an opiate would take away their pain, or the buzz of amphetamine would make them feel amazing.

Sometimes it is about mental illness and the scarcity of support. The need for survival may lead women to this place. Mental health services in Australia are under-resourced, and completely inadequate to meet the needs of our burgeoning population. The trend towards de-stigmatising mental health has led to an enormous increase in homelessness. They are among the most vulnerable people in Australian society – and the most ignored.

It is these women: the homeless, mentally ill, abused, assaulted, drug-dependent members of society who are most at risk of having to become street-based sex workers. They are the women

society has discarded, de-funded, disowned. It beggars belief that when they are injured or killed, people proclaim that it is their own fault, that they put themselves at risk.

When people think about street-based sex workers, they have preconceived ideas. Media reporting and pop culture haven't helped because they reinforce the stereotype of a desperate junkie, someone who hasn't found a way to fit in with our society, who leads a high-risk lifestyle. Someone they simply don't understand.

In reality no little girl, while she is growing up and finding her way in the world, harbours a dream to stand on a street corner in the middle of a freezing cold night and exchange sex with strangers for money. No little girl imagines that sex will be the one skill she will have to exchange for her survival as an adult.

The average age of starting out as a street-based sex worker is 13 – barely even a teenager. Thirteen. It doesn't matter whether people want to keep their heads in the sand or not; the truth is that there are paedophiles in Australia, they're organised and they're active. When children who have endured their abuse grow too old for them, they are discarded. Already damaged, distrustful of authority, believing there is no place in society where they fit, they look for ways to survive. They often find those ways on the streets among people who will accept them, support them and not judge them.

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In Australia, the majority of sex workers choose to work as escorts or in brothels, rather than as street workers. However, there are pockets in every major city that are known places for kerb crawlers to go in search of quick, anonymous sex. Currently it is estimated that between 1 and 2 per cent of sex workers are street-based. This is in contrast to the rest of the world where more than 80 per cent of sexual services are transacted from the streets.

Of course the risks are greater. The very nature of the work requires these women to get into cars with strangers, or go into dark alleys and to engage in some form of sex. Once they are alone with a customer they are at his mercy, and it is not uncommon for the customer to take more than he has paid for. Although it is difficult to find accurate figures, some studies have shown that 91 per cent of street-based sex workers have experienced some form of violence in the last six months of working. This violence can take many forms: refusal to use a condom, slapping, beating, assaulting, raping, abducting, stealing money and refusing to pay. Sometimes the violence leaves a woman so badly injured she is unable to work for days or weeks. Women are abducted for days at a time and held as sex slaves before being released.

Crimes against sex workers are rarely reported. A major reason for this is the legal status of their job. Depending on what kind of sex work they engage in, or where they operate from, they are

often working outside the law. The law varies in the different states of Australia, but street-based sex work is not legal anywhere. When sex workers are raped or beaten they are often too afraid of the consequences of reporting the crime, and of being on the radar of the local police, to do anything about it. Another reason for the reluctance to report is that workers do not believe police will take them seriously. There are numerous historical cases where police have treated sex workers as more the criminal than the victim.

Street-based sex workers accept these increased risks, or simply feel there is no alternative. It would be simplistic to think we can understand the reasons, but for those who are out there it is preferable to brothels because the working hours are more flexible, the pay is better and they get to be their own boss.

Another factor is that the majority of street-based sex workers are addicted to illicit drugs. Sex work is a quick, easy way to make the money they need to feed their addictions. It's a moot point: did they turn to the streets because they needed to fund a heroin addiction, or were they on the streets for other reasons, and began to take heroin as a coping tool? There is no clear cut answer, but it is generally accepted that almost all street-based sex workers are addicted to a drug. Sadly, addiction is a terrible disease that is given neither the respect nor the compassion by law makers and enforcers that it needs.

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It's not possible to ignore the feeling, the sense, that among the faceless men are the lonely, the ones who are scanning for a quick exchange of sex for cash, the curious, the judgemental, the overstimulated clans of teenagers. And the predators. There are men who are opportunistic; men who see themselves as ordinary, yet when they are with a sex worker, somehow they see themselves as entitled. She is offering a service for payment, but he decides he's paid for her and can use her in any way he sees fit. The other type of predator, thankfully more rare, is habitual, sadistic, and totally without remorse.

You can't tell by looking if a man is a hunter. More often than not he masquerades as normal, he makes sure you can't see him because he has planned the hunt, prepared for it. He has fantasised about it for so long that it is truth in his head, long before it turns into behaviour.

It may surprise people to know that a predator doesn't pick up sex workers because they're prostitutes. While it's true they are 17 times more likely to be a target for violence than other women, it's not because they're sex workers; it's because they're there. They are accessible, and they are perceived to be less likely to have someone to go home to at the end of the day – they may not be missed as quickly as a woman who might be abducted in a shopping centre car park.

To the collective conscience it began with Jack the Ripper in London. To this day the images remain strong: a mystery man materialised from the fog in Whitechapel, restrained and sadistically murdered a woman, then simply vanished … until the next time. Even though these murders took place almost 130 years ago, people remain fascinated with 'Jack'. Can those same people recall the name of even one of his victims?

Street-based sex workers remain an obvious target for some predators. American serial killer Gary Ridgeway was the Green River Killer who, during the 1980s and 1990s, murdered at least 49 women and girls in Washington State. Most of his victims were sex workers or women in vulnerable situations, including underage runaways. When DNA caught up with him he confessed to double that number. When asked why he chose sex workers as his victims, his answer was illuminating: 'I picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.'

Australia has its share of predators who have targeted sex workers. Men like Donald Morey who is languishing in a Western Australian prison. He was convicted in 2005 for the attempted murder of a sex worker in Perth, and is the prime suspect in the murder of another sex worker and in the disappearance of a woman who had no connection to the sex industry. Bandali Debs, better known to the Australian public for murdering two police officers in 1998, also killed two young sex workers a couple of years before. Gregory Brazel is often described as one of Australia's most violent prisoners. He is perhaps best known for stabbing Chopper Read, but Brazel murdered two sex workers in 1990 and the female owner of a hardware store earlier in 1982. Former paramedic, Francis Fahey, wore his ambulance-issue boots when he murdered two sex workers in Queensland in 2002 and 2003.

As previously discussed, violent crime against sex workers is not uncommon. Many of the perpetrators may see women as less than human – particularly if they are women who sell sex to survive. Sometimes these crimes against women are impetuous, and with the increasing scourge of methamphetamines in society, behaviours are becoming even more aggressive and less predictable. However, there are many times where the assault is fantasised about, thoroughly planned, and then acted out. There might not be a better example of this than Adrian Ernest Bayley, the man who became the target of a manhunt when he raped and murdered Jill Meagher in 2012, while on parole for previous violent assaults against women.

It is impossible to know the extent of Bayley's crimes in the early 2000s when he trawled St Kilda in search of victims. It is a matter of public record that when he was caught at that time, he was charged with having raped and brutalised five sex workers, yet there were at least 10 other

women who were assaulted, held against their will and raped by Bayley, but who refused to press charges or even report him to the police.

Adrian Bayley had perfected a trap that made it impossible for his victim to escape until he had taken everything he wanted. He would pick up his victim, after negotiating a service with her, and then drive into a nearby laneway in Elwood. He would park his car so close to a wall that it was impossible for the woman to open the door and escape.

Court judge Anthony Duckett was horrified by Bayley's crimes and told him, 'Your response to pleading, cries of pain and tears was to force these women into further sex acts.' Despite his revulsion at Bayley's behaviour, the sentence handed down was relatively light. Bayley served only eight years in prison. Even Tom Meagher, the husband of Bayley's murder victim, Jill, later said that Bayley had exposed an inequity in how the justice system treated those attacks.

Bayley only came to the national consciousness when he attacked a different kind of woman. Jill Meagher was just as accessible to Bayley as any of the sex workers from his earlier attacks. Jill could have been anyone – but she was there. The difference this time, the reason the sex workers were horrifically attacked but survived and Jill was murdered, was that this time Bayley knew he had picked the 'wrong kind' of victim. Jill would report her attack. Jill would believe police would track her rapist down. Bayley wasn't going to stand for that. He was determined to remain free so he could continue his predatory and sadistic attacks on women.

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Violent crimes against sex workers are less frequently experienced in legal brothels, although they still happen from time to time. Brothels have rules, accountability, people on the premises, and varying levels of security. This begs the question: if street work is so much more dangerous than working in a brothel, why don't the women get safer jobs? The answer is multilayered, but the easiest way to understand it is to realise that brothels keep up to 60 per cent of the takings, and they have rules which some street-based workers would find impossible to adhere to. Rules such as no drugs while working, no drug addicts, working to a roster, monthly health checks, but mostly a lot less money for doing the same thing they do on the street.

The question also presumes that all sex workers are equal, and have the same needs and aspirations as each other. It assumes that brothel owners/managers don't share the mainstream community's contempt or pity for their street-based sisters. The reality is that brothels have a fairly low opinion of street-based workers and will not employ them. Words like 'dirty junkies', 'unreliable', 'thieves' all came from the mouth of one madam who didn't hold back when explaining her disinterest in employing street-based workers.

There is a hierarchy in the sex industry. At the top are the high-class escorts who command hundreds of dollars an hour. And the bottom? Those people who have the least resources, who are most at risk; or as one hysterical journalist described them, when writing about murdered street-bases sex workers from Queensland's Fortitude Valley, 'the bottom feeders of the Queensland sex industry'.

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The Asian sex trade is an issue that nobody wants to talk about. Or if they do, they whisper about sex slaves, human trafficking, underworld crime or women who come to Australia to undercut the locals: better prices, more options, higher-risk sex.

It's difficult to separate the truth from the various myths that exist. Many Asian women work out of illegal brothels and escort agencies; language barriers are real; cultural differences play a part.

Does human trafficking happen in Australia? Absolutely. There are documented cases of women from countries such as China, Thailand and Malaysia being recruited. Typically they and their families are in poverty and would be lucky to earn the equivalent of $100 a month back home. The promises sound enticing. Go to Australia and go to school, or work in our karaoke bar. You'll make lots of money; you'll be able to support your family. We will pay your airfare and accommodation and you can pay us back out of your wages. There'll be plenty of money left for you to send your family, and to be able to spend yourself.

It's enticing. Of course the reality for some women is very different. Once they're through Australian immigration with their sponsor they are whisked off to a small, cramped, overcrowded apartment where the truth of their situation is explained to them. Coercion, violence and drugs are often used to enforce their new reality. They will service men, and they will like it – or they won't get paid. Rarely do these women ever pay off their loans. Creative bookkeeping ensures that they will continue to owe their sponsor money, long after they have repaid their 'debt'.

There are many other Asian women who come to Australia with their new western husband. It all goes well until it doesn't, and when the marriage ends, a number of women find themselves adrift in a strange land. They are often unskilled, have poor English, and work is hard to come by. They often end up engaged in sex work for survival.

Many other women make conscious choices to come to Australia to engage in sex work. Immigration law makes it almost impossible for single Asian women to come to Australia, so they find sponsors in their home country. They come here to make money, to be able to support their families back home.

For every legal brothel in Melbourne there are four illegal ones. Often working from shopfronts that offer therapeutic massage, or from temporary dwellings that are easy to shut down, they have

sprung up all over Australia. And they appeal to their customers. They offer services at cheaper rates than the legal brothels and escort services, and are sometimes willing to engage in riskier behaviours.

Because illegal brothels operate outside the law, they are not compelled to honour any of the safe work practices that are rigorously applied to their legal counterparts. Distress buttons, security, regular health checks and the mandatory use of condoms may or may not be adopted.

Very few people know the real names of the workers, or anything about them, so how would anyone know if they go missing? The truth is that unless someone discovers a body, nobody does know. When Chinese escort Ting Fang was murdered in Adelaide on New Year's Day 2015, it took days to formally identify her and notify her relatives in China. When 'Jenny' and 'Susan's' badly decomposing bodies were discovered in a bedroom in a Sydney apartment in 2008, nobody knew them or anything about their murders. This was despite the fact that the women had died horrifically in an apartment they shared with 11 other people. In 2000, a woman known as 'Bambi' was shot in an illegal brothel in Queensland and her 12-year-old daughter was abducted and raped. Yet nobody knew anything about it.

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The Australian justice system has come under well-deserved fire in recent years for weighing up the relative value of victims, and imposing lighter sentences when the victim has been perceived to be 'high risk'. The murder of Grace Ilardi highlighted this. Grace was 39 years old when she was murdered in Elwood in 2004. Her killer fled not only the scene but the country. He eventually came back to face justice. Quincy Detenamo was an Olympic weightlifter from the small Pacific nation of Nauru. He said he was sorry, he didn't mean to kill her … things just got out of hand. Newspapers denounced Grace as 'just a prostitute' and Detenamo as a 'fallen hero'. The weight given to one life over another was too great. He was acquitted of murder and found guilty of manslaughter. Detenamo was sentenced to serve less than 10 years in prison.

Police have often been guilty of not treating crimes against sex workers as seriously as they should. Perhaps an insight into their attitudes is a cartoon that used to hang on a wall in an interview room in the St Kilda police station. It depicted a sex worker who was up before a judge who said, 'How do you know it was rape?' to which she replied, 'Because the cheque bounced.'

The sign has been removed, along with some of the preconceived ideas that police have had about sex workers. Although attitudes among police have shifted in the last decade, women are still reluctant to report. They are also wary of having a profile with police as they are fully aware that both their sex work and drug use are viewed as criminal behaviour.

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When the bodies of two women were found floating in the Adelaide River, a muddy crocodile-infested river just south of Darwin, Northern Territory police braced themselves for the media onslaught.

This was going to be a pressure cooker. It had all the ingredients of a case that would bring the national media spotlight to the Territory: sex, drugs, bodies thrown to the crocs, a double murder, teenage suspects and interstate pursuit. And this was one part of Australia where the police force understood how intensely the press would scrutinise their every move. Experience had taught them this years ago when a couple claimed that a dingo had taken their baby from their campsite at Uluru.

Nothing happened. Once it became apparent that the victims were *only* prostitutes – and foreign ones at that – the media seemed to make a collective judgement that this wasn't a story worthy of the nation's attention. Besides, both the media and the public remained preoccupied with another Territory case that had happened almost three years previously – the disappearance of British backpacker Peter Falconio, somewhere in the outback.

Why did the media feed the Australian public an almost daily diet of the mysterious disappearance of a young tourist and pursue his girlfriend, Joanne Lees, halfway around the world yet practically ignore the murder of two women and the callous way their bodies were disposed of?

It is a question which, in one form or another, raised its ugly head numerous times during the research for this book. It became such a predictable, recurring theme – lack of media interest, lack of public information. To the media, the murder of most of these women seemed worthy of little more than a salacious headline: 'Sports Star Kills Prostitute', 'Sex Worker Dies in Hotel'.

Why is it that the public care about the death of some women and not others? In Perth between 1996 and 1997 there was a cluster of disappearances and murders thought to have been committed by the Claremont Serial Killer. Three young women disappeared, and two of them were later found murdered. The prevailing view amongst women all over Perth at the time was, 'It could have been me.' Women responded with gut-clenching fear, and changed their own behaviour – and sometimes their appearance – to avoid drawing the attention of a monster. It was the most talked about crime in Perth for decades. The victims were middle-class and respectable and they all disappeared while enjoying a night out with friends. The city was horrified, terrified – and the public pressure to track down the Claremont Serial Killer was unprecedented. While the cases remain unsolved, they are still talked about with emotion and anxiety in Western Australia.

In 1998, Lisa Brown disappeared from the streets of Perth. In 1999, Jennifer Wilby vanished. Then in 2003, Darylyn Ugle was murdered. All three women were sex workers. When Lisa disappeared, some people worried that the Claremont Killer had changed his modus operandi, because soon after that another sex worker, Jennifer Wilby, died. Police rushed to reassure the

public that this was different, and there was nothing to be alarmed about. Then Darylyn Ugle was murdered, but police and media reinforced their message to the public: there was no link. Many people took the view that Lisa was a drug-addicted prostitute who put herself at risk. Sympathy for her plight, and the death of Jennifer and Darylyn, was difficult to find.

This kind of victim blaming is misleading and naive.

In September 2012, a beautiful young woman disappeared from Brunswick: Jill Meagher. For a week, Melburnians were fixated on the story. When an arrest was made and her body subsequently discovered, the details of the crime horrified people. The depth of public feeling could be measured in the march to honour Jill Meagher that attracted more than 30 000 people.

In July 2013, the papers ran a story that a sex worker had been murdered in her van in St Kilda. Her name was Tracy Connelly but it took the media almost a week to reveal that. Tracy was part of the St Kilda landscape; she had been on the scene for a long time and was loved by many people. She was addicted to heroin, and so was her partner, Tony. He would sit and spot for her, carefully copying down registration numbers of vehicles Tracy left in. She was a hard worker, supportive and caring to other sex workers. It was on the one night that she and Tony were separated, while he was in hospital, that Tracy was brutally killed.

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Invisible Women is by no means a definitive book on the different cases of missing and murdered sex workers in Australia. When we began to research the stories we were astounded. It was always our intention to highlight these crimes against women – the ones nobody seemed to want to talk about. We wanted to contribute to the discussion about why some women's lives seem more valuable, in the eyes of the community, than others; why some murders touch us deeply, and leave us feeling diminished, while others don't even register.

Is the media to blame? Is it their fault that they only give weight to murder when it has an 'angle' that might affect all of us, or when the victim seems especially innocent or the killer likely to strike again? Or do the media merely reflect back to us the society that we have demanded and shaped for ourselves?

Is it TV or the movies that, for years, have created stereotypes and shaped our thinking and learning? Do we really only have sympathy for a sex worker when she is Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, and to our vast relief she is rescued from that life by her knight in shining armour? Do we really believe the other side of the media portrayal of sex workers as dirty, risky, naughty women?

Is it the justice system who historically give criminals lighter sentences when they have *only* raped a prostitute? Is it religion that – across all faiths – reinforce that sex workers are moral outcasts to be condemned or cured?

Or is it us? Do our own personal values and attitudes prevent us from seeing that different isn't necessarily wrong? Who taught us to think that sex workers are second-class citizens? And why did we choose to believe them? Religion has long influenced people in their views about sex workers. Governments throughout the history of Australia have legislated against sex work. The justice system has punished it, and society has mocked and derided it. Misogyny plays a strong part in the bias against sex workers. Although our country has come a long way, in terms of the status of women in Australian society, there still exist strong double standards about the role of women in this country. If a 'nice girl' is still judged by the number of sexual partners she has had, a sex worker carries the weight of condemnation even more heavily on her shoulders.

It took us a long time, and some robust discussion, to decide on who we would highlight in this book. Every woman's story is worth telling, and our eventual decisions were no reflection on the value of the women we haven't been able to include in *Invisible Women*. It was our hope to bring these women to life in a way that might show readers who they really were beyond the headlines: mothers, sisters, daughters, friends, colleagues. Women who loved animals and children, who did the crossword in the newspaper, played Trivial Pursuit and laughed with unbridled joy.

That task was naive, and in many cases insurmountable. For every woman in Australia who has been murdered, they have left behind a network of family and friends whose lives have been shattered by their loss. Yet these living victims of crime don't have access to the same levels of support as people whose loved ones were more 'innocent' victims.

The system needs to change. The cracks in the road need to be paved over. It isn't the sex work or the drug use that creates the dangerous cracks, but the reasons these women are forced to walk that road in the first place.

Change requires compassionate and visionary government across all states and territories of Australia; change that understands there is a place for sex workers in contemporary society, and that legislation needs to be passed to decriminalise sex work.

It requires an honest appraisal of the reasons why women find themselves standing on the street at 3 a.m.; the poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, domestic violence and criminality that keep street-based sex workers enslaved to a lifestyle they don't want, but can't find a way out of.

It requires the funding of outreach programs and safe houses to help deal with the complex, and incredibly difficult task of helping to affect change in the lives of street-based sex workers.

And it requires us, as ordinary people, to stop victim-blaming when we read that another sex worker has been harmed or killed. And to not look away.