

OPINION

Bill Shorten is wrong. NDIS clients need sex workers like me

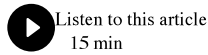


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Rachel Wotton has been a sex worker for three decades, and specialises in providing services to people with disability. She was granted a Churchill Fellowship in 2016, was awarded a masters from Sydney University in 2017, and will shortly complete her PhD at the University of Western Sydney, exploring the experiences of people with disability who access sex-worker services.

Fitz: Having looked closely now at what you do, allow me to say, “Bravo for your work.” And we’ll get to last week’s pronouncements from Bill Shorten re the NDIS decision not to fund sex workers in a moment, but let’s start with: how did you get into sex work?



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Rachel Wotton says: “I just treat every client with the same level of dignity and respect that I expect from them.”

RW: *[Ironic groan]* That’s the first question I always get asked. OK ... I was always fascinated by the industry. I was doing a psychology degree at university and I got involved when a friend went to work in a brothel and they were looking for more staff. I was interested to see whether or not it would be suitable for me, and it was!

Fitz: You make it sound like you came away from your first experiences exhilarated?

RW: Not “exhilarated” per se, but I took to it like a duck to water. It was really interesting and while most people just focus on the very salacious aspects of sex work, to me the sexual interactions are just one component that happens during a booking. Over my nearly 30 years, I’ve had mostly great interactions with people.

Fitz: And when did you make the shift into working with clients with disabilities?



Rachel Wotton with a client, from the documentary Scarlet Road.

RW: That’s the second most common question I get. Look, there’s lots of invisible disabilities, so I can never pinpoint the very first client I saw with disability because people don’t often share what their disability is and, of course, the definition of disability is quite broad. Generally, I just treat every client with the same level of dignity and respect that I expect from them. Over time, I just became well known as one of many sex workers in Australia who is willing, able and experienced in providing services to people with disability.

Fitz: When did you decide to go public and say, “I’m a sex worker, so deal with it. I’m proud.”

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RW: I was always honest about being a sex worker within my circle of friends, right from the beginning. A few years after starting in the sex industry I began contributing and volunteering at the state sex worker organisation, the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP NSW), and over time I was asked to share my own experiences at council meetings. Then I started doing some media using my escort work name. In late 2000 I was one of the co-founders of Touching Base, which is an organisation that brings sex workers and people with disabilities together, and was doing more media, conference presentations and

workshops under my real name. I was also involved in the Australian documentary *Scarlet Road*, using my real name, Rachel, so there was no going back after that. These days I'm actually much more private about my work name and website.

Fitz: It seems to me, from watching *Scarlet Road*, you tend to establish a great emotional rapport with your clients. It appears to be a whole lot more than – to use the vulgar phrase – *wham, bam, thank you, ma'am*, and you often develop a friendship with their families, too?

RW: Yes, that's true. The film did a great job showing the audience that sex workers are human, and so are our clients – and the interactions that we have are very detailed and diverse on a very human level and that's actually what I've found from my research as well.

Fitz: Philip Stanhope, the Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, once said about sex: "The pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous and the expense damnable." Would it be fair to say that in the case of people with often severe disabilities, it is all that but more so?

RW: *[Laughs lightly]* It depends! The orgasm may only be for a few moments, but in fact, for some clients, the orgasm, and the connection experienced between them and the sex worker, may reverberate for weeks because it can reduce stress, it can reduce anxiety, and it can reduce feelings of

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loneliness and isolation. The feedback from some of my participants in the research and also through my professional interactions is that it can also reduce levels of pain. I've had clients who walk into the booking very unsteady, and with a lot of assistance – men with cerebral palsy or Parkinson's – who, after they've had an hour or two with me, or with other sex workers, are actually able to walk out of the session, a lot calmer, their muscles more relaxed and needing a lot less assistance. As to the position, we work it out dependent on the level of mobility, and what they desire. And yes, it can be a lot of money, but it's the clients who have prioritised this in their lives and believe it's worth it.

Fitz: Do you charge differently for sex work with able-bodied people compared with people with disabilities?

RW: I never talk about prices, and every sex worker is different, but for me, I charge the same price for each type of service, regardless of the client. However, I allow for more time at the beginning and the end of the booking for transfers and undressing and dressing, if needed. I also travel further for people with disability as I understand that for many it's a lot more comfortable, practical or easier to have me visit them.

Fitz: Now when it comes to your PhD, I'm interested in who your tutors, professors and lecturers are because I would be surprised if there is *anyone* out there who knows more than you do on this field in Australia?

RW: *[Laughing]* I do feel sometimes that I'm the black sheep of the academic world. But I have really amazing supervisors. So it's Professor Kerry Robinson, Dr Peter Bansel, who's just retired, and Dr Michael Houlbrook, and

they've all been fantastic in guiding me through this PhD. They've treated me with a great amount of dignity and respect and have provided me valuable feedback and advice when I've needed it.

Fitz: So, now let's go to minister Bill Shorten who is responsible for the NDIS. When I first approached you a year ago to do this interview, you declined, as you felt the publicity would be detrimental to ongoing advocacy efforts to get your kind of work included and recognised within the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

RW: I remember.

Fitz: That now appears to be lost, with Bill Shorten saying last Sunday, "While people with disabilities are currently able to access government-funded sexual support services, strict eligibility requirements apply ... We [only] want things that are reasonable and necessary." He made it clear that access will be blocked, saying this kind of sex work "doesn't pass the test". Were you devastated?

RW: Yes, we were all totally blindsided. I gave his office a heads-up in 2022 that I was conducting this research yet they have never reached out to be briefed on the findings. I have been quoting their very own evidence-based policy found on the NDIS website, which says: "We only fund supports that will be, or are likely to be, effective and beneficial for you, having regard to current good practice. This means we consider if there is evidence that the support is effective and beneficial for someone with similar disability support needs. The primary source of evidence we rely on and give the greatest weight to, is evidence from sources that are reliable and widely recognised. This includes published and refereed literature and any consensus of expert opinions."

I would really welcome the opportunity to brief the minister, and his staff, because my research provides the most relevant and up-to-date evidence they should be relying on to determine when it should be deemed reasonable and necessary for some people with disability to be provided sex-worker services in order to "live an ordinary life equal to others".

Fitz: Bill Shorten is a reasonable man, and even Barnaby Joyce – who has been involved in the debate – has moments of lucid reasonableness that can surprise. You have the floor. What do you say to them? Why should sex workers like yourself be paid by the government to provide services to people with disabilities?

RW: We need to listen to people with disability because they're the experts in their lives, their bodies, and what services will best support them. So Bill Shorten has been saying that NDIS supporting sex workers "doesn't meet the test", which I think is incorrect. I also think that he has not been briefed correctly by his own staff. All the experts are ready to brief him on the reasons why some people who are NDIS participants may wish to include sex work services in their funding. And what my research shows, very explicitly, is that

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for many people sex-worker services can support them to achieve their short-term goals, which helps them reach their long-term goals.

Fitz: Can you give me an example?

RW: So, one of the most wonderful stories from my research is that I interviewed a woman who engaged the services of a female sex worker, so that she could explore what her body could do, to work out what she enjoyed and what she didn't enjoy. She also utilised these appointments to learn how to touch another person. The greatest thing with a lot of my survey and interview participants is that they increased their capacity to feel confident and comfortable, and had a greater sense of wellbeing, so that they could go out and start dating. So with this woman, when she started dating, she stopped seeing the sex worker. More recently she let me know she's engaged, achieving her long-term goal to be in a loving relationship.

Fitz: But you'll acknowledge the politics are difficult. We've got a caller on line 1, John Fotheringbottom from Wahroonga Heights. Go ahead, John: *"This is an absolute disgrace! Why the hell should my taxes be used to pay for some woman to root disabled people?"* If you're to respond, Rachel, what do you say to him?

RW: There's lots of things that taxpayer's money goes to, like the PBS and Medicare and what we don't do is rely on moral judgments around what services and what medications are provided to Australian citizens. Instead, we rely on the experts – the doctors and others in the medical profession – to decide what's best for each patient and also what can be provided to citizens if and when they need certain services. For example, you may go through your whole life without needing an ultrasound or an X-ray, but it is still fair that taxpayer dollars go towards those services and facilities.

Fitz: Yes, but we're talking about passing the pub test, and it frankly doesn't pass the pub test until you get out of the pub, read the peer-reviewed proof in the literature, see the documentary and talk to people like you.

RW: Look, ministers are in a privileged position – they can be briefed by experts, learn more and educate themselves about this issue. That's why they have advisers and that's why there's a whole research team within the NDIS. For them to turn their back on the experts such as myself, who are willing, able and wanting to have input into this, is doing a disservice to the taxpayers, because they're not actually doing the job they're employed to do. People with disability have been asking for all NDIS policies to be co-designed and to incorporate meaningful and transparent consultations into every stage of their development. Anything less is deviating from the principles that the NDIS is supposed to be guided by.

Fitz: But there is the very real issue of the NDIS budget blowing out.

RW: I think this is one of those things where, if you light a fire on the right, people don't see the burning inferno on the left. There are so many areas where

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the NDIS *is* wasting money, but this is not one of them. Just this week, Bill Shorten let slip that “we received 228 requests for advice related to requests for sexual activity supports. In 12 months, up to the 30th of April. None were granted.” I personally know the details of a few of these applications and work with occupational therapists and psychosexual therapists who have worked with many, many people doing detailed reports to support their applications. Every case I’ve heard about meets the “reasonable and necessary” threshold. Who are these so-called nameless experts sitting within the depths of the NDIS denying these applications? Without ever meeting the individuals? The Federal Court decided in 2020 that sex-worker services can be deemed a reasonable and necessary service for the NDIS to fund, so where’s the accountability towards these 228 individuals (just in that last year alone, let alone before or since that time)?

Fitz: So your position is that everybody has a right to sexual expression, and because for some people with disabilities this can only be achieved with sex workers, it’s therefore for the state to provide that?



It doesn't pass the pub test? Rachel Wotton responds that people with disability “are part of society as well. And on top of that, they're often taxpayers too, so these are their taxes too.”

RW: I come at it, through a “sexual citizenship” lens, meaning the need to create an environment where *all* people can have equitable opportunities to exercise choice, access and control on how to sexually express themselves. So, for example, we need better accessibility to pubs, clubs and events, so that people can be social, go on dates and go to the same places where everyone else meets people. And for some people, due to their dexterity, they may need support to purchase specific sex toys. It’s about choice and it’s about the individual being able to be in control of their environment and the services that best meet their needs – including, for some, using sex worker service.

Fitz: I take your point, at least better than I did. But the loudest part of politics will still be the shrieks of the mob saying: “My taxes shouldn’t pay for those people!”

RW: What I’ve been trying to remind everyone is that “those people” with disability are part of society as well. And on top of that, they’re often taxpayers too, so these are their taxes too. Every single participant I interviewed,

regardless of whether they were an NDIS participant or not, regardless of whether they used NDIS funding or their private income to pay for sex-worker services, they ALL supported the inclusion of sexual services as a “reasonable and necessary” service option with the NDIS. They also all wanted the NDIS to develop a specific intimacy and relationships policy to help guide people through their options and the application process. Don’t forget, we’re all only one car or skiing accident away from being in the same position, where we end up in a rehab unit, or depend on a wheelchair or other mobility aid to get around independently. So I really don’t subscribe at all to this whole “us” and “them” dichotomy. People with disability are an integral part of our society. We should want to ensure everyone gets the best kind of support they need to thrive, not just to “stay alive”.

Fitz: Thank you for your time, and good luck with everything.

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