

EXPLOITATION

Topless Trading

DEBORAH CASS and ROSEMARY HUNTER identify the issues raised by sexually exploitative trading practices.

Pubs in Melbourne have been employing topless barmaids for many years. The Liquor Trades Union has taken action to prevent the exploitation of women's bodies to sell beer, although there is not yet in Victoria any equivalent to Western Australian liquor licensing regulations that prevent the employment of partially or scantily clad persons on licensed premises. In Melbourne, however, topless trading has also spread into the retail area, with hardware shops in Geelong and Mordialloc, an auto parts store in Frankston and even a take away food outlet in Oakleigh using topless promotions to attract customers. In South Australia, topless hairdressers and taxi drivers have also been reported.

In response to concerns about topless trading, the Leader of the Opposition in Victoria, Jeff Kennett, put the classical liberal view: 'if all parties participate voluntarily I don't see a role for Government intervention'. But the exploitation of women's bodies to sell products is not just an issue between the worker and her employer. Sexually exploitative trading practices have a wider impact on other women as workers, consumers, traders and members of the community. And despite the media presentation of topless promotions, sexual exploitation in trading is not simply an issue about differing moral values. To portray opposition in terms of people being prudish, staid, old-fashioned — as has occurred in all the reporting of Victorian cases — is an effective way of marginalising these voices, and silencing protests.

Concern about the real harms sexually exploitative trading practices cause to other women led to the formation early in 1991 of a group to campaign against such practices. Women Against Sexual Exploitation in Trading (WASET) is based in Melbourne and includes participants from liquor trades and shop assistants unions, the Women's Legal Resources Group, women's refuges, the National Council of Women, Melbourne University Law School, government departments, local councils, and the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

WASET argues that sexual exploitation in trading harms the status and dignity of all women. It encourages the treatment of women as objects, degrades and discriminates against women, and leads to the harassment, intimidation and in some cases physical molestation of women.

WASET does not seek to prohibit the right of women employed within the sex industry to engage in the work they choose. However, working topless or in revealing costumes should not be a condition of work associated with any industry other than the sex industry.

In the retail and hospitality industries, topless and other sexually exploitative trading practices prevent equality of employment for all workers. They create environments which encourage sexual harassment. They undermine the gains made by women in these industries by downgrading the status and credibility of women's work and diminishing the worth of their skills and training in favour of an emphasis merely on their sexuality. Unfair wage differentials are created between workers who work clothed and those who work topless, and older workers, workers who do not 'measure up' to the required standard of attractiveness, workers who refuse to work topless, and men.

At the 1991 ACTU Congress, the ACTU's Working Women's policy was amended to strongly condemn the use of topless and scantily clad women in hotels, retail stores and hairdressing

salons. However, while regulation via industrial awards may appear to be the obvious solution, most topless workers are hired through an agency for brief promotions and are therefore not subject to award regulation that applies only to employees.

Public and communal space is also affected by sexually exploitative trading practices. The immediate area surrounding a shop holding a topless promotion becomes a males-only precinct, as testified by a drapery shop proprietor in Geelong:

There was a street filled with hoons tearing up in their cars, standing outside drinking, going into the shop for a few minutes to have a look then coming out again, noisy and disgusting.

Topless promotions lead to the harassment of women in the locality and create problems of safety and security for women and children. Topless promotions are also offensive to the cultural and religious beliefs of many people.

In addition, topless and other sexually exploitative trading practices expose women working in surrounding enterprises to leers and demands to behave in a similar way. Male customers in food shops in Geelong embarrassed the staff by asking 'when are you going topless?' According to a ladies' hairdresser in the same area:

There were guys with cans of beer outside all the time — some came into the shop wanting a haircut — I refused them because it was near closing time, but I didn't want them.

Moreover, a hostile space is created which discourages families and regular shoppers. The china and giftware shop proprietor stated:

Our custom went down on the Saturdays because that's when families usually come. It was an offence to be asked when we were going topless. It's an embarrassment to be near the shop. None of the shopkeepers want to have anything to do with him and the locals won't go there.

Individuals in the areas where topless retail promotions have occurred have been frustrated by politicians' responses to the issue. Some State