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*"For too long, people have felt it's OK to talk about us, without consulting or including us" / Imagine a sex worker. Nope, step away from the street corner, you've got it wrong. The star of *Scarlet Road*, a touching and bold new documentary, unveils some truths about getting paid to do it.*

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Sex sells, say the suits. But Rachel Wotton, the protagonist of new Australian documentary *Scarlet Road*, says talking about it in an honest way still makes folk squirm. Even though, "As the song goes, 'People are having sex all the time.'"

I'm pretty sure *People Having Sex All The Time* isn't actually a song, but I don't disagree with Wotton, herself a proud sex worker of 20 years and ardent campaigner for sex workers' rights. Quite frankly, if people aren't actually doing 'it', they're probably thinking about it, how much they're not getting of it, or going online to look at it.

Yet despite the power of sex to dictate so many of life's decisions, we often (and quickly) close the door on addressing the topic with frank discussion. Sometimes, we'll even shut off the lights and hide under the blankets.

Of course, right at the other end of this spectrum is sex work - taboo, even in our erotically charged society. We still assume shady back rooms and unsavory characters, and it's the shattering of these assumptions that lie at the heart of filmmaker Catherine Scott's new film. "We want *Scarlet Road* to break down some of the myths and prejudices around who sex workers are and what our lives are like," says Wotton. "We do not live in some kind of bubble, in isolation and in despair."

As the documentary begins, I'm unsure. As a door shut, lights off and under-the-blankets kind of lass, I squirm a bit - seemingly unable to shake memories of those early sex education classes; pastel pamphlets about the sacred flower that is The Sexual Encounter. Surely a cash transaction undermines the candle-lit act that, from early on, we're all (cringingly) assured is 'lovemaking'?

But watching Wotton openly discuss her life as a sex worker, I realise I've become prejudiced about

something I know little about. What an ignorant prude! I stop squirming, sit up straight, un-squint my eyes, and give *Scarlet Road* my full attention.

My initial naivety can, I think, be forgiven. Assumptions about sex work are easily made: that it's dangerous, that it's born of desperation, that it forgoes an intimacy that should - many feel - be implicit. Accordingly, when I ask Wotton about her involvement in *Scarlet Road*, I stumble at the first politically correct hurdle and insinuate that sex work is never voluntary. The correction is immediate.

"Your comment is quickly sliding down the slippery slope of sex work = non voluntary, so therefore sex work = rape. This is one of the biggest problems ALL sex workers face - this constant stigma and discrimination and false belief that we do not have agency in any way and we are incapable of consent ... a sex worker has the option of where to work, how to work, the right to refuse a client and the choice as to what services they want to offer."

Wotton has earned her authoritative voice, with a Masters in Sexual Health and the campaigning she does for sex workers' rights and equality via Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association. She confronts preconceptions about sex work in a variety of ways in the film, but perhaps most enlightening of all is the focus on Touching Base, a foundation Wotton has played a major part in developing. Touching Base permits people with disabilities safe and discreet access to sex workers. It's a project Wotton feels especially strongly about. "It's important to increase the awareness of the barriers and difficulties people with disabilities still face today for equal rights, including the right to sexual expression," she stresses.

In a particularly moving scene, the mother of Mark - a client with cerebral palsy - prepares her

son's room for his birthday present: an evening with Wotton. Anticipating the sex worker's arrival, Mark's mother scatters rose petals around the bed, places a box of chocolates next to freshly plumped pillows, and counts out the notes for Wotton's fee. In demonstrating a mother's utterly selfless dedication to her son, the aim and ethos of Touching Base is legitimised. Powerfully. As Mark explains, all he wants is to know what it's like to wake up beside a woman. I'm immediately reminded of the romantic notions of those pastel pamphlets - handholding and all.

For all her straight shooting, Wotton's vulnerability is potent. It's at the heart of Scott's film, constantly unpicking our position as voyeur: we're not spying, we're being asked to take a closer look. It's crucial to "... put faces and names to both sex workers and their clients," says Wotton. "For too long, people have felt it's OK to talk about us, without consulting or including us."

The documentary mirrors her attitude: it isn't sanctimonious, it's intelligently grounded. Wotton casually elucidates that, "At the end of the day, everyone works for the same reasons; to earn money to buy the things we need and want." But for Wotton, sex work is more than mere endurance. "I often say, 'I am so lucky'. My job is centered on providing someone with feelings of pleasure, joy and happiness."

The next morning I sit at my desk entering data into cell A7 of my spreadsheet - not providing anyone with pleasure, joy or happiness - and her statement resonates. *Scarlet Road* achieves the enviable aspiration of any documentary: changing minds. Mine included. *Interview: Katherine Patrick*  
For more information about Touching Base, visit [touchingbase.org](http://touchingbase.org). For the *Scarlet Road* trailer and DVD, visit [scarletroad.com.au](http://scarletroad.com.au).