Tricks of the Trade

Diamonds may be a girl's best friend, but if she's a sex worker, a condom is a close second. Eve Black says decrim is the best way to get it on.

June 1, 2002 By Eve Black

I work in Sydney, Australia, where prostitution was decriminalized more than 20 years ago and there still hasn't been a single documented case of HIV transmission through commercial sex. This makes me feel safe -- after 10 years of strutting my stuff, I'm still HIV free and, while I do know HIV positive prostitutes, none got the virus on the job.

So the Life is good.

In a typical eight-hour shift, I make anywhere from $150 to $500, seeing two to eight clients. Most are men anywhere from 25 to 70, and since neither of us is breaking the law, they tend to have a hell of a lot more to lose -- careers, marriages, reputations -- than I do. I hold all the cards in my dealings with clients -- from where they can touch me to when to don the condom. Give me trouble, and I'll call the cops.

Working decrim opens the channels of communication between sex worker and client. Without fear of arrest, I can freely discuss what I offer -- straight sex, oral, hand-relief, fantasies -- and clients can discuss their needs too. If he is after something I'm not into, like anal sex, that's easily solved too ("Not my thing, honey. I'll get someone else"). With everything upfront, safe sex also gets a nod so clients know the deal before money changes hands.

However, laws that criminalize prostitution gag both parties, since either may be an undercover cop waiting to pounce. I should know, having worked in the U.S. after finding myself short of cash during a holiday. I discovered that coping with cops was tough, and this gave clients the upper hand as they could threaten me with arrest. Even when the sex began, and I knew the client wasn't a cop, I still couldn't relax because I had to keep my ears peeled for the vice bell (set off during police raids). Paramount in my mind, always, was the need to get this over with, get him out and get ready for the next client or raid -- whichever came first.

These work conditions made me stressed and depressed, frightened and frustrated. It's demeaning and demoralizing to feel those emotions every time you go to work. Is it any wonder then that negotiating condom use in the U.S. often takes a back seat to more immediate safety concerns, like being arrested, bashed or raped?

Mind you, few clients outrightly refuse to wear a rubber -- then again, it's not something you discuss before the fact because that's enough to get you arrested. Instead, I'd speak through innuendo ("It's all-inclusive, and no, I can't tell you what that means"). And so I never really explained what I offered, let alone that latex was the law. Why, I rarely even checked the money, since touching cash was tantamount to committing a crime. "Leave it on the table," I'd say to clients.

Of course, we only got that far if they understood what I meant by "get comfortable" (code for take your clothes off). As for condoms, they were out of sight until I left the room -- to "freshen up" -- and returned with one, often in my mouth, so I could slyly slip it on with little fanfare and much oral expertise (Monica Lewinsky, eat your heart out!).

Men who want raw sex sometimes offered vast sums of money, but I always refused -- even when I developed a drug habit. Clients determined to go bareback would find ingenious ways to break condoms during sex or slip them off when changing positions. I learned early on never to let the client put the condom on or even touch it once in place. "Keep your hands where I can see them, boy."

What a difference decriminalization makes. In the brothel where I now work, condoms are in plain view in every room, alongside the tissues and lube, and all the details of the transaction are negotiated openly. On the phone and in the waiting room, clients are told we use prophylactics. Those seeking unprotected sex may not come in because of this; others visit in spite of it. But what is exceedingly rare is to find yourself upstairs with someone who only then tries to negotiate unsafe sex. Either way, this kind of dispute is easily resolved because management encourages the use of condoms and throws out customers who refuse to wear them.

In this kind of setting, I've found sex work to be an absolute joy! I actually get to know the clients. I even think of them as friends -- not ones I'd see out of work but friends nonetheless. I feel good about what I do. I like bringing pleasure into the world, and there's nothing dirty or nasty about it. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

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