Working Girls

Nevada’s prostitutes can get licensed, tested and taxed

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Mention Las Vegas and most people imagine a neon-lit nightlife paradise with easy access to two usually illicit pleasures: Gambling and prostitution. But in fact, commercial sex is illegal in Clark and Washoe counties, home of Las Vegas and Reno, respectively. However, counties with fewer than 200,000 people can license prostitution, making Nevada unique among the 50 states. Horny newcomers have glamorous fantasies of elegant Victorian bordellos, but Nevada’s brothels are strictly utilitarian. The Mustang Ranch aesthetic springs from the trailer park, not Miss Kitty’s saloon.

The number of legal whorehouses in Nevada ranges between 30 and 40. George Flint, president of the Nevada Brothel Association, describes working conditions in glowing terms. Because of strict health screening, the regular HIV testing of the sex workers and regulations mandating the use of condoms, the rate of disease transmission is close to zero. “If you’ve proven yourself to be a good earner, you can set whatever rules you want,” Flint says.

But women who have worked in these establishments are less enthusiastic. A typical shift is a three-week stint with no days off, 12 hours on weekdays and 14 on Fridays and Saturdays. Management takes half of what “the girls” bring in; many also charge workers for room, board and even condoms. Prostitutes pay for their own health insurance; there are no disability benefits or retirement funds. According to former legal prostitute Laura Anderson, brothel owners’ control over prostitutes extends to the pettiest things. “We weren’t allowed to read books while waiting for customers in the parlor,” she says. Anderson characterizes the much-ballyhooed STD testing as “rushed, inadequate exams at inflated prices.” She calls the legal-brothel system “third-party management with no other options. Until the needs of prostitutes are included in any scheme legitimizing our profession, many of us will choose to work illegally rather than sacrifice freedom, privacy and control over our bodies.”

Nevada’s licensed whorehouses have succeeded in drastically reducing the risk of workers or clients getting HIV and other STDs. Ken Adams, the state’s AIDS program manager, says no legal sex worker has ever tested positive for HIV. Yet if a brothel worker were to seroconvert, she would not only be fired but blacklisted. It’s a felony in Nevada to solicit paid sex if you are HIV positive.

The fact that prostitution is illegal in Reno and Las Vegas doesn’t mean it is nonexistent. Clark

County spends at least $1 million a year in a vain attempt to eliminate illegal commercial sex. Legal-brothel license fees generate Story County’s entire operating funds, and in Lyon County, four brothels entirely support the county hospital. It seems everybody’s out to skim what they can off the top of a working girl’s income.

Yet even radical sex workers willing to accept a degree of state regulation say this system is no model for humanizing the sex industry. Christine Beatty, a former street hooker and a member of the San Francisco Task Force on Prostitution, says, “Unregulated decriminalization will not happen, so those who call for it are wasting their time.” Beatty believes that "some hookers wouldn’t mind some regulation, but even she would not be caught dead in a Nevada brothel.

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