

Prostitution Culture: Legalised brothel prostitution in Victoria, Australia.

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A culture of prostitution

When prostitution is legalised or decriminalised, a culture of prostitution is created which has harmful effects upon the lives not just of the prostituted women but of all women who live within that culture. This damaging culture of prostitution exists in Victoria, Australia. As the practices of prostitution have been normalised they have come to seem ordinary. There are brothels on many streets. Children walk past brothels on their way to school and buy their summer swimsuits in a shop opposite a brothel. Brothel owners are in the Rotary Club and are profiled as role models in a respectable newspapers. Brothels are listed on the Stock Exchange. 60, 000 men buy women in prostitution every week.

In many countries the legalisation or decriminalisation of brothel prostitution is being considered at present, as a way to deal with the many problems associated with men's abuse of women in prostitution. Campaigners hold up the system of legalised brothel prostitution in Victoria as a positive example, the *crème de la crème* of prostitution internationally. For that reason it is important to examine carefully what legalisation has meant for women in Victoria. It has created a prostitution culture.

Legalisation

Brothel prostitution was legalised in Victoria in 1984. It was decriminalised in New South Wales in 1995. There is now also legal brothel prostitution in the Australian Capital Territory in which the capital Canberra is situated, and in Queensland. The proposal to legalise has been defeated, for now, in South Australia, but is being promoted in West Australia and Tasmania. It is being debated presently in New Zealand too (legalized in June 2003).

The arguments put forward for legalisation in Victoria were:

- 1/ It would control the illegal massage parlor industry
- 2/ It would prevent the industry expanding
- 3/ It would end street prostitution, the idea being that street prostituted women would prefer to work in the legal brothels.
- 4/ It would be safer for prostituted women who would not all be in legal brothels and less likely to be murdered or raped. This perspective was accepted by all feminist organisations at that time it seems.

Those who wanted to run legal brothels, previously called pimps and now respectable business people, needed to apply for a license. A Prostitution Control Board was set up to issue licenses and regulate the industry. Regulation included monthly medical inspections for the prostituted women.

The illegal industry:

In Victoria today there are estimated, by the legal brothel owners' association, 400 illegal brothels to 100 legal ones. The illegal brothels move around and are difficult to detect, supposing there was the will to detect them. There is no official role for police in monitoring legal or illegal brothels once legalisation or decriminalisation takes place. They are under the control of local government. In NSW it was apparently the corruption of the police that dictated the introduction of the decriminalisation of brothels there. The police have no role. Local councils have to monitor brothels themselves and have neither the personnel or resources. Similarly to detect illegal brothels in Victoria local councils have to finance private detectives to go into brothels and pay for sex. An investigation into illegal brothels in Yarra in Melbourne cost ratepayers \$42,000 in recent months. Investigators operating in unlicensed brothels sign affidavits outlining the sexual services offered to them. They are then presented to a magistrate who can ban entry to the property. This then penalises the landlords but not the brothel operators who simply move premises.

There is little doubt that the illegal industry is out of control. Legalisation or decriminalisation does not and cannot prevent illegal brothels. In Melbourne police suspect one Hong Kong national who operates 6 unlicensed brothels in outer-eastern Melbourne of making up to \$8 million over the past three years.

The effects of decriminalisation of brothel prostitution in New South Wales in 1995 have been similar. Brothels have reportedly increased four hundred fold and the vast majority have not applied, as they are supposed to do, to the local councils for licenses. Councils cannot afford to employ special staff to enter the illegal brothels and prove that they are in breach of planning regulations. Street prostitution is decriminalised in New South Wales too. Tolerance zones have been set up in which prostituted women are supposed to meet with their abusers, and 'safe houses' in which they can rent rooms. This policy has been manifestly unsuccessful too. The prostituted women do not stick to the zones but use surrounding residential areas.

Street prostitution:

It was thought at the time of legalisation that street prostituted women, at greatest risk of death and serious injury, would be able to move into the legal brothels and be safer. This would also cause the nuisance of men's street prostitution behaviour to be alleviated. In fact street prostitution is a massive social problem in Melbourne. A government inquiry was set up into the problems caused by men's behaviour in St Kilda in 2001 (Attorney-General's Street Prostitution Advisory Group. Interim Report September 2001). The number of women in street prostitution had been rising rapidly in this one area to an estimated 350. The male abusers are sexually using women in front yards and on residents' doorsteps. There are problems with used condoms, faeces and needles. The recommendation of the report was the setting up of tolerance zones in which men could solicit women and 'safe houses' in which they could use

them. The safe houses would have been effectively state brothels although it was hoped that charities would run them. The recommendation was shelved because it was so unpopular with residents and an election was pending. In Sydney an experiment with tolerance zones has been underway since the early 1990s and according to the South Sydney mayor has been a failure. Prostitution abusers are soliciting and using women in commercial and residential areas rather than the tolerance zones chosen by the council. Sydney does have 'safe' houses similar to those rejected, for now, for Melbourne.

Trafficking:

Legalisation and decriminalisation lead to the growth of the industry of prostitution. The traffic in women to supply the legal and illegal brothels is an inevitable result. Sex entrepreneurs find it hard to source women locally to supply an expanding industry and trafficked women are more vulnerable and more profitable. Trafficked women are placed in both illegal and legal brothels in Victoria. They can work legally in legal brothels with work permits if the traffickers apply on their behalf for refugee status. The traffickers sell the women to legal and illegal brothels, in Victoria for \$15,000 each. The women are debt bonded so the profits of their enslavement do not go to them. There are ongoing investigations of several inner-suburban brothels suspected of using women brought from South-East Asia on tourist visas. Police suspect they are forced to have sex with 800 men to pay of debts to the traffickers before they receive any money. They appear, a police spokesman, said 'to be flown here to order'. It is estimated that \$1 million is earned from trafficked women weekly.

Women safer in legalised brothels?

It is well known that street prostitution is extremely dangerous. Women are at risk of rape and murder, beatings, knifings. Prostituted women receive the hatred from men of women and of the sexuality that they are seen as representing. This results in the violence they suffer. In brothel prostitution these extraordinary problems, after all what other form of work includes murder as an ordinary hazard, are supposed to be reduced. Let us consider the legal brothels of Melbourne, supposedly the *crème de la crème* of prostitution. One of my students did research in a legal brothel by interviewing women both before and after 'bookings' about the boundaries they tried to create to control what men were able to do to them and to what extent they were successful (Ingrid Barclay, *Interactive Processes in Brothel Prostitution*. Honours Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne, 2001).

The brothel she studied contained a lounge in which the introductions took place. All the women waited in the lounge. Men came in one at a time to make their selection and the women had to compete to be chosen. They would come up and touch the men sexually and vie with each other in offering what they would do. Some might offer sex without condoms if they particularly needed the money. Then they went up to the room. Women would often apply lubricant in a bathroom on the way up because the men would be most unhappy if they got the impression the women were not sexually aroused and some would refuse to pay. Then the women had to try to control the encounter. Men would sometimes want an 'all around the world' i.e. access to any orifice in any way and the right to touch any part of the woman's body. The woman must then struggle to restrict him whilst not losing the booking. Men might twist

nipples and shove fingers up the woman's anus. One woman said that for anal she would charge \$500 but this would be according to how large it was i.e. a larger penis means more pain. Another woman said a man had started to put lubricant on his fist and when she asked what it was for he said he intended to fistfuck her. The demand for fistfucking suggests that the increasingly violent and degrading practices carried out upon women in pornography are educating men in what they wish to do to women, first in prostitution and then in their relationships. This applies also to anal sex. When women came down from bookings one would shower for 10 minutes in very hot water to get the dirt off her body. Before a booking one woman would come out in goose bumps. Her skin was crawling at the thought of what she would have to endure. Sexual harassment is what the man pays for. The women dissociate to survive the ordeal using psychological techniques or drugs and alcohol.

Women in prostitution are not a different kind of women who can endure the unwanted hands and penises of men in and on their bodies more easily than others. It is true that many are seasoned by previous sexual violence in childhood or adulthood, than which the violence of prostitution can seem less severe. But they hate it just as much. Any acceptance of prostitution is an acceptance that certain women can reasonably be set aside as appropriate objects of exactly the harassment that other non-prostituted women seek to get out of their workplaces and lives.

This is the story of the most respectable form of prostitution in the world. Here in Australia there are codes for the implementation of OHS in brothels drawn up by state authorities, but only for the tiny number of brothels that are legal (Mary Sullivan, Making Sex Work in Victoria, PHD in progress, Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne). It is hard to work out occupational health and safety codes for work in which women are regularly at risk of violence and of diseases which are life-threatening, where they may be required to handle faeces and urine as well as semen, where they have to suffer the psychological damage of dissociation and/or sexual harassment and abuse. Codes for other workplaces require the isolation of dangerous substances, wearing gloves etc. Prostituted women are in no position to do these things.

Sadomasochism brothels:

This is a burgeoning area of the prostitution industry presently for two reasons. One is that SM has become a hugely profitable market sector with clubs, equipment, porn and brothels all its own. Another is that SM offers in Australia a way of setting up illegal brothels. SM brothels frequently do not apply for brothel licenses on the grounds that 'sex' does not take place. They represent themselves as therapy, and as offering fantasies. In fact my local council is currently seeking to prove that 'sex' is taking place in the sm brothels but having great difficulty in doing so. In SM brothels the majority of women used are 'sex slaves' who receive the violence of whips, canes, and torture.

Training men in sexual violence:

Prostitution and rape go together. Quite reasonably some prostitution survivors, such as Eveline Giobbe in the US, call prostitution commercial sexual violence or bought rape. In prostitution men pay to watch (as in pornography) or carry out upon women's

bodies a range of practices that, in their non-commercial form, are precisely the practices of male sexual violence that women are concerned to get out of their bedrooms, their streets, their childhoods, their workplaces. I do not suggest that prostitution is the only reason that sexual violence exists because it exists in many cultures which do not have prostitution and needs to be understood in terms of male dominance. However the sex industry trains men in these practices. The main practice is unwanted sexual intercourse. In this practice the woman dissociates to survive whilst the man penetrates her with no concern for her personhood. He will then expect his female partner to do the same. In sex phone lines women have to dissociate to survive men's abuse that they have paid to speak. In obscene phone calls men, sometimes the same ones, intrude upon and threaten women in their homes. In prostitution men speak foul and degrading words to women and sexually harass them, touching parts of their bodies they want to protect and demanding practices women do not want to allow. In streets and workplaces men do exactly the same except that they do not pay. The pleasure can be more acute when women's consent is clearly absent. In prostitution women are whipped, or have to dress up as babies or young girls. All of this trains and encourages men in brutality and child sex abuse. Many women in prostitution seek to graduate to be mistresses because this is less directly violating. But in sm brothels there are 'slaves' who still service the men, indeed mistresses can direct men to do things to the 'slaves'.

Normalisation of prostitution:

The policy of legalising brothel prostitution in Victoria has failed dramatically in all its aims. When this policy was undertaken there was no consideration of the way in which it might effect the status, lives and relationships of all women in the state. In fact the culture of prostitution spills out into the business community, the billboards on the streets, the local media, and affects the relationships women have with their male partners and the men they work with. Legalisation has normalised men's prostitution behaviour. As a result of this accepting climate tabletop strip clubs moved into Victoria in 1993 and now thrive under the euphemism 'Gentlemen's Clubs'. An inquiry was soon instituted as a result of rumours that prostitution took place in these clubs. But this is hard to prove.

As the industry grows new constituencies of young men are introduced to prostitution behaviour. In 1998 it was estimated that 60,000 men in Victoria abused women in prostitution every week and the figure is likely to be larger now. Generations of men and boys are trained in prostitution behaviour. These men will be the sex tourists and travelling businessmen who abuse women in prostitution in other countries many of whom will be trafficked to those destinations.

The landscape of a prostitution culture

There are certain restrictions on where licensed brothels can be placed. They are not supposed to be near churches or schools. Illegal brothels do not suffer these restrictions. Licensed brothels are, however, on main shopping streets and on residential streets. They are simply part of the ordinary life of the city. Men emerge from the brothels smirking with satisfaction as passers by lug shopping and children. Advertisements for the brothels and the tabletop clubs appear on massive billboards across major arterial roads, offering women as objects for men's use. In the State

Exhibition Centre each year the sex industry exhibition, SEXPO, takes place. The brothels and strip clubs display the women they have to offer, pornography, strip and lapdances take place before thousands of citizens with the sponsorship of the state. Local freesheet newspapers carry advertisements for local brothels called Oriental Plums or Romantics (*The Melbourne Times*, December 11 2002).

Profitable market sector

The financial pages as well as the news pages of newspapers who find the industry of sexual exploitation titillating, cover the profits to be made from investing in prostitution. *The Age* newspaper devoted the front page of its business section to SEXPO in 1998 alongside a profile of Australia's sex industry, said to have an estimated annual turnover of \$A1.2 billion. The Daily Planet brothel was launched on the Australian Stock Exchange in February 2003.

Normalisation of pimping as respectable business

One example of how respectable pimping has become is the featuring of a brothel owner in the My Diary section of the *Sunday Age* newspaper on October 13 this year (*The Sunday Age Agenda* 13/10/02:2). This regular feature covers the working life of prominent Melbourne citizens, usually women. On one occasion it was the Headmistress of famous private girls' school and last week it was a milliner who made hats for women to go to the horse racing. The brothel owner is a Thai woman named Chailai Richardson, described as 'the owner and manager of Top of the Town brothel in Flinders St'. The diary gives an introduction to the featured woman and then details what she does on each day of the week.

Richardson, we are told, met her husband when he was 'building up' the brothel, 11 years ago. She is vice-president of the Thai Association. The vast majority of trafficked women who are sold into debt slavery in both legal and illegal brothels in Melbourne are Thai. 100 women work in her large brothel. She says: 'There is a lot of pressure on the ladies. They find it hard to cope with their work sometimes...Saturday was smooth. A lot of young boys come in on Friday and Saturday'. She promotes her business when there is going to be a convention in town, such as at the World Trade Centre recently with 3,000 men from Thailand. She checks the women to make sure they are wearing suspender belts. The women do not like them because they are itchy but 'they look good' when the women take off their clothes. They have a strip show on Thursdays 'some of those people might stay and have a lady after'. She concludes 'I believe we're here to test ourselves and do our best and achieve as much as we can'.

In Melbourne such an article about pimping in the main Sunday newspaper elicits no adverse comment or enraged readers' letters. Brothelkeeping is an ordinary occupation like being a headmistress. Most women who own or run brothels have been prostituted themselves. There is no promotion in the industry and no way to get out except by doing this.

Relationships between men and women

A culture of prostitution damages the possibility of creating relationships of equality, respect and honesty between women and men in the home, in the workplace and in all areas of life. The sex industry endangers the possibility of equality in all relationships between men and women. As new generations of men are trained in prostitution behaviour this will inevitably affect the way they are able to relate to women in their lives, family, partners, workmates, friends. Equal relationships between men and women are still difficult for many women to achieve. The existence of strip clubs, brothels, pornography and the advertising of these forms of sexual exploitation make it much harder. The prostitution industry creates the ideas that boys and men have about women i.e. that they are objects for sexual use rather than equal human beings.

The sex industry creates the men's culture which controls the business and political world and excludes women. In what are called 'Gentlemen's Clubs' women are paid to place their naked and shaved vagina and anus in front of men who may stare into them. Once upon a time gentlemen's clubs were for rich upper class men who would use them to network and make political deals and business deals. The new gentlemen's clubs which are a form of brothel in which naked women are offered to men to bathe with them, to dance on their laps and of course, and offer other 'sexual services', are much more democratic. Any men with the entry fee can go in. But the deals are still made there. The men bond and network with other men, clinch business deals, hold meetings of corporations. Major companies hire the meeting rooms at the venues and get whiteboards plus naked women on the tables at tea break and lunch. What does this do for the chances of equality for women in these companies? They can attend meetings and suffer the pain and embarrassment of watching other women treated in this way. Or they can refuse to go and lose the chance of advancement. Women executives cannot be equal in a prostitution culture where their male colleagues can cement deals by providing prostituted women to clients, or join them in visiting brothels.

Women workers in the legal profession are particularly affected. In Melbourne the tabletop clubs are in the legal district. Women lawyers see the male partners go to the clubs at lunchtimes to bond and wonder why it is so hard to become partners themselves. The secretarial staff have to lie to wives who ring up about where their husbands are. Many groups of women are affected by such men's prostitution behaviour. The existence of the sex industry and the way it is currently entwined into the way in which Australian men do business make the idea of women's equality in the business world a mockery.

In a prostitution culture boys and girls grow up in a world in which women are sold to men, naked or half naked, pouting, spreading their legs on billboards, on the porn racks in the corner store, in the video store, in music videos. Girls learn that they are meat for men to buy, exchange and consume. Boys are taught that it is reasonable to do this to girls because they like that, and they are for that. Girls and boys grow up in an environment in which one half of the human race is not enslaved into the sexual service of the other half.

The sex industry is secret men's business in which men bond through the sexual exploitation of some women whilst their mothers, wives, girlfriends and daughters are

unaware. Group visits to sex exploitation venues is becoming an ordinary way for men to socialise. On bucks' nights they will sexually exploit women. At other parties they will watch porn together. Once upon a time 18 year old boys did not have such clubs to attend with other males as a form of initiation into their power as men.

Destruction of heterosexual relationships

Men can not be equal to women in sexual relationships if they are involved in the sexual exploitation of other women. The 60,000 men who use women in prostitution in Victoria each week are likely to have female partners. As the industry grows more and more men are involved and more and more women are directly affected. When male partners abuse women in prostitution what are the women to do? Either it will be a secret and the wife will not know what her husband is doing, which means that the basis of trust and honesty that should underly any equal relationship is destroyed. Or the wife will find out about her husband's behaviour and have to work out how to relate to this man. She is likely to leave him. His daughters will have to think about what it means that he stares into the shaved genitals of women their age in the local strip club, who are all some other men's daughters, or penetrates them as they dissociate to survive.

The more men become involved in prostitution behaviour, the more impossible the ideal of egalitarian relationships between men and women inevitably becomes. The expansion of the sex industry and the creation of more male consumers is in direct collision course with the possibility of equal relationships between women and men.

Sex in a prostitution culture:

In a culture of prostitution boys and men are taught that penetrating a woman who is dissociating to survive is 'sex'. This has a great impact, not just on the prostituted women in pornography and prostitution but on all women involved in sexual relationships with men. The aim of feminism has been a 'self-defined' sexuality for women i.e. pleasurable and respectful. Women's ideas of pleasure might include whole body sensuality, they might include affection, even love, as the basis of a sexual relationship, they might not include sexual intercourse, or any form of direct servicing of men that women felt disinclined to engage in. Who knows but that anal sex might not be in the list created by women's imaginations. Certainly a self-defined sexuality for women would be likely to be based upon a woman only engaging in that which gave her pleasure and not having to perform for men. It would be likely to be a sexuality of equality based upon respect, and not just equality in degradation or violence, but a sexuality in which equality and mutuality were themselves exciting. A self-defined sexuality for women would be unlikely to include women feeling that they had to allow men to penetrate them or they would not be allowed to go to sleep, or the man would have a bad mood, or they would not get the housekeeping money, or they would have no money to feed the children. A woman might be sexual when the whim took her or not at all, though she might always want lots of warm love that was not conditional upon sex.

Now all this might sound a little quaint. That is largely because, in the last twenty years, the sex industry has constructed an understanding of what sex is that is in complete opposition to what so many women have said that they wanted. Through

pornography and other forms of prostitution the sex industrialists have created a form of sexuality in which men pay to gain access to a woman who desperately wants to be anywhere else but there, and is dissociating to survive. The man is able to penetrate her mouth, anus or vagina with his penis, fingers or tongue and grab at other parts of her body that are not on the menu. He has no regard for her personhood or pleasure. This is the sex of pornography and other forms of prostitution.

This is also the 'sex' that women in relationships with men find most difficult. Yet the sex industry with its influence on politicians, media, is able to sell this commercial sexual exploitation as what sex really and truly is. The sex industry is the most powerful sex educator in western societies. No other source of sexual information can compete with the scope and power of pimps as sex educators. Generations of men and boys are being trained to this view of what sex is by the powerful inducement of orgasm. This is in opposition to the vast efforts of women to get men to value them for more than sex, to value affection that is not sex related, to value sex that is not just about being a hole for men to enter whilst women think of tomorrow's work problems.

The sex industry has called men's use of a woman as an object with holes to stick a penis and fingers in whilst she dissociates to survive emotionally, sex. What could be more confusing than that? For whom is this 'sex'? And what are its implications?

One implication is that the boys and men require girls and women to act out the scenarios they have learnt from prostitution to be exciting to them. The women have to take up positions, wear particular fetishes, and engage in practices that they may hate in order to gain male approval. As a result there are newspaper reports that teenage girls at parties have to suck off groups of male teenagers as routine. More and more, young women tell me, anal sex is becoming an expected part of sexual interaction. The practices of pornography and prostitution educate men and very swiftly become expected of girls and women.

Women do not have resources or an industry to portray what they might want from sex outside the hubbub created by the sex industry. We do not have a voice, unless we are coopted to speak within the voice of the industry and say how much we love precisely the sex that it sells. A sexuality beyond prostitution would be something very different, something which becomes harder and harder to imagine as the sex industry takes up all available space for 'sex' and portrays itself as a 'sex educator'. A sexuality beyond prostitution would be a sexuality of equality in which women and men, women and women, men and men, find pleasure in each other as equal partners and companions.

Creating a culture outside prostitution

As the legalised prostitution industry expands and influences more and more areas of life it becomes harder to imagine what a culture friendly to women's equality would look like. In such a culture women would be sexually intimate with men for their pleasure, not for the price of a bed for the night or drugs. In such a culture men and boys would learn that they can be women's equals and have work, family and friendship relationships with women on the basis of dignity and respect. In those societies where a prostitution culture has not yet been created by the legalisation and

decriminalisation of brothel prostitution it is important to reject the values that prostitution gives to women. It is possible to dream and imagine the world of women's freedom and even to start to create equal relations between women and men right now.