

What is Wrong With Prostitution? Assessing Exploitation in Legal Brothels

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Abstract

In this paper we assess the degree of exploitation experienced by legal prostitutes working in America's only regulated system of prostitution, the Nevada brothel industry. Based on in-depth, open-ended qualitative interviews and ethnographic research within the Nevada brothel industry, this paper considers three dimensions of exploitation as related to sex work: 1) the presence of danger and violence; 2) work conditions and control; and 3) sexual freedom. We find that legalized prostitution creates an environment in which working women report both patterns of exploitation and empowerment. The experiences of legal prostitutes vary depending on the size and location of the brothel, and the internal brothel culture in the workplace. Additionally, we find that the patterns of exploitation that emerge are primarily connected to two factors: work conditions and social stigma. Further analysis of specific contexts in which prostitution occurs is central to efforts to analyze and understand the social institution of prostitution and its effects on women, and additional research is merited on the effects of particular labor practices and forms of social stigma on prostitutes.

Key Words: Prostitution, Brothels, Sex Work, Exploitation, Women

Introduction

Prostitution is controversial. As a social exchange and gendered institution, it is at the heart of longstanding passionate debate over the nature and effects of commercial sex. Is it an explicit exercise of patriarchal control over women? Is it inherently sexually violent and therefore an exploitation of women? Or, is prostitution an inevitable market exchange? Is it an expression of women's own sexual agency? These are old questions that spur persistent passionate debate. The problem is, and long has been,

that prostitution is not a unitary enterprise, a standardized social exchange, or even a consistently gendered institution. Prostitution is a social, cultural and economic phenomena that is historically specific, culturally diverse, and institutionally variable. As a result, theoretical, normative and policy debates that fall back on the laurels of “it is bad” or “it is not bad,” or even “it’s good” are all equally incomplete, problematic and inaccurate. Perhaps most dangerously, these absolutist positions obscure the complexity of the issues, problems and possibilities associated with prostitution and its subjects. Diverse contexts and experiences are reduced to stereotypes and over-generalization, most of which have some empirical basis in some reality of prostitution, but none of which can accurately characterize or account for prostitution as a world historical practice writ large.

In this paper, we ask, “What is wrong with prostitution?” as it pertains to one aspect of the industry, legal brothel prostitution. We will examine three aspects of brothel prostitution that have been seen as indicators of exploitation: first, danger and violence; second, work conditions and control; and third, sexual independence. We will assess these in relation to stratification both within and between brothels. We conclude by arguing that, for the most part, the problems with prostitution have more to do with exploitative labor conditions and persistent social stigma reproduced by misleading stereotypes than with the fact that laborers actually sex legal sexual contact.

We pose the question, “What is wrong with prostitution?” fully aware of the ambiguity in its phrasing. This is neither a defense of the practices of prostitution (“There’s nothing wrong with it!”), nor is it another indictment of prostitution as wrong, bad, immoral, unethical and exploitative (“Everything’s wrong with prostitution!”). Instead, we seek to contribute to efforts to elide the either/or of it’s good or bad and address the contradictory and complex realities within one very specific form and context of prostitution: legal brothels in the United States. We begin from the supposition that not

all forms of prostitution are the same, so they cannot be equally exploitative or equally empowering. Instead of attempting an in-depth comparison of multiple forms of prostitution---which cannot be adequately accomplished in a single paper---we will operationalize the concept of exploitation as it has been typically applied to prostitution, and then explore whether or to what degree these practices are evident in legal brothel prostitution in the United States, the only regulated system of which operates in Nevada.

The Meaning of ‘Exploitation’

In "What's Wrong with Prostitution, Evaluating Sex Work" Christine Overall examines what it is about sex work that is problematic for women. To do so, she draws upon Lillian Rubin’s criteria for evaluating sex work. Rubin says "A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide" (Rubin 1984:283). Based upon this, Overall identifies and considers seven main forms of exploitation that are problematic in prostitution. These dimensions of possible exploitation within sex work are: 1. Danger and Injury; 2. Coercion; 3. Control and Personal Power; 4. Objectification/Alienation; 5. Economic Exploitation; 6. Sexual Freedom for Women; 7 Social Stigma against Women. Box 1. explains each of these potential sources of exploitation of prostitutes.

Danger and injury	How much danger do these women face in the course of their work? Is physical danger endemic to the job? Is prostitution a source of disease, physical abuse, injury or other crime or violence? Also, attitude toward customers

	because women who have been physically or psychologically abused learn to hate their customers.
Coercion	Do women choose prostitution freely? This is not just being physically forced against their will, but forced by social circumstance. Are prostitutes more likely to be women doubly or triply disadvantaged by poverty and racism, who have no other economic options? Do sex workers come from underprivileged backgrounds, with little opportunity for anything else?
Control and personal power	This includes: control over work environment (hours, clients, etc.). Do they give up income to pimps? Do they have personal control over their work conditions? Do they have control over their free time? Do they have control over men?
Objectification/Alienation	Do these women see and feel that their work portrays them as sexual objects? Are they alienated and/or dehumanized in their labor?
Economic exploitation	Are sex workers paid at a rate that allows subsistence (considering that all workers under capitalism are exploited, and paid for their labor power at a fraction of its value)? Do workers feel they are paid well?
Sexual freedom for	Does prostitution provide an arena where women can enjoy

women	being in charge during sex? Do working women experience a sense of sexual power and/or sexual freedom? Or do the laborers merely serve men's desires?
Stigma	Is there social stigma? Is it attached to women, and only women? How does it impact the working women?

Weitzer (2005) also identifies several areas of concern with respect to the exploitation of sex workers. For Weitzer, the core dimensions of exploitation and stereotyping of prostitutes are: working conditions; workers; self-esteem and psychological adjustment; and the impact of sex work on the surrounding community.

In this paper we will examine three forms of possible exploitation within prostitution as practiced in legalized brothels: 1) danger and violence; 2) work conditions and control; and 3) sexual freedom for women. We exclude the other dimensions of exploitation from this particular analysis because of space limitations; we will take up the remaining aspects of exploitation elsewhere. More importantly, these dimensions of exploitation are also key components in the debate between feminists who oppose all prostitution as exploitative, even violent, and other feminists who argue for the liberating potential and acceptance of sex work as labor. Salient points in this debate typically focus on violence, exploitative work conditions (so much so that for some prostitution cannot even be work), domination and control and whether prostitution can ever be a form of sexual expression or sexual empowerment. So, too, will this analysis.

Methodology

Our data comes from eight years of fieldwork in the Nevada brothel industry. Our data consists of ethnographic notes from visits to 13 of the 26 currently operating brothels in Nevada, participant observation in public debates on brothels and brothel policies, and historical and contemporary document analysis of laws, policies, programs and organization within the brothel system. Between 1998 and 2002 we conducted semi structured, open-ended, face to face interviews with 40 prostitutes. These interviews were all conducted in prostitutes' rooms at the brothels or, on a few occasions, in the lounge area of the brothel without management present. We collected surveys from an additional 25 prostitutes in four of the brothels. We conducted approximately 11 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with current and former brothel managers and owners. We have interviewed approximately 10 state regulators and activists and had formal or informal discussions with a small group of brothel customers.

Exploitation and Stratification Among and Within Brothels

As we explore these issues in the legal brothel industry, it is clear that there are important differences both among and within brothels. We argue that these differences are not insignificant, but rather that they are central to the debate over whether, and to what degree, legalized prostitution is exploitative toward women. Instead of comparing legalized prostitution to other forms of prostitution (for example, illegal or decriminalized systems), given the differences among and within legalized brothels we choose to consider the forms or degrees of exploitation that vary even within legalized prostitution. Doing so gives lie to tendencies by critics to make overarching claims about the oppressive nature of all prostitution, or the exploitative nature of legal prostitution, writ large. Instead, we argue that the differences are central and to ignore them both hinders

debate and results in ideological positioning instead of empirical analysis. Not all legal prostitutes operate under the same work conditions, enter the business for the same reasons, experience their interactions with customers in the same ways or handle stereotypes and stigma similarly. As with all other legal occupations, different workplaces have different environments based on the ownership, management, workplace rules and informal norms among the community of workers. This said, there are patterns of differences among legal prostitutes in Nevada's brothels that are important to address.

With legal brothel prostitution, transactions are always negotiated and provided in the same space, within the brothel. Initial contact is usually in a central parlor room. Customers approach women in the brothel from a line up or at the brothel's bar and then negotiate a price for an interaction behind closed doors in the individual prostitute's room. This routine is relatively consistent across legal brothels in the US.

Outside the doors of the brothel, the buildings are carefully zoned. Laws require that brothels are located specified distances from schools and churches, that they be off main streets, and that they remain in the confines of a regulated and designated "brothel district." All legal brothels also have signs outside reminding customers of state law that mandates condom use.

Also the same throughout the legal brothel industry, is the fact that prostitutes labor as independent contractors who are only allowed to work after passing state and county prescribed background checks and health tests, paying licensing fees, and meeting other regulations. As independent contractors, legal prostitutes often move among different brothels across the state, where they are typically subjected to different formal rules, informal norms, types of customers, brothel cultures, and day-to-day practices. In general, there are three types of brothels in the Nevada system: the very small, frontier brothels, located outside of small towns, usually along remote stretches of

highway; the small brothels located inside relatively isolated small towns across the state; and larger, more urban brothels that are located relatively close to the urban centers of Las Vegas and Reno/Lake Tahoe/Carson City. These differences in location and size have an impact on the prostitutes with respect to how much business they can get, what kinds of customers frequent the establishment, how the brothel is run, and even what kind of women are welcome to work. We will briefly discuss each to familiarize readers with the three different contexts.

Frontier Brothels

Small, isolated brothel houses may struggle to keep even one woman working in the house; at busy times three to five women may be working. Because of their off-the-beaten-path locations, frontier brothels have considerably less business, in general, than other brothels. Some have busy seasons that coincide with hunting or other seasons, or the opening and closing of mines; others rely on steady drifts of repeat visitors from truckers, locals, salesmen, and ranchers. The women working these houses typically have fewer customers and earn less money than their counterparts in other types of brothels. As a result it is often harder for owners to entice young, conventionally attractive women to work in these brothels. This is not always the case, however; sometimes women prefer to work in these out of the way locations because they appreciate the sense of community in small houses and prefer the pace and atmosphere of work.

Small Town Brothels

In mid-size brothels located within small towns, there are similar patterns of customers—miners, ranchers, locals, truckers, salesmen, sportsmen—but they also often have other populations from which to draw clients. Many small towns are trying to develop more

tourist-based economies and promote themselves via organized events like fairs, sporting events, races and competitions, and advertise their quaint communities as casino vacation destinations as well as good places for stop-overs along long and lonely highways. All of this translates into brothels that are more likely to have, on average, 3 to 12 women working depending on the season. Prostitutes working in these brothels vary, but they typically represent the mid-range of workers with respect to how much business they get and their earnings potential. There is similar variation in the ages, appearances, and stories of women in this type of brothel. Some of these houses are small buildings, while others are small, simple old houses or trailers; some are fenced and gated, others wide open and inviting; some are themed and decorated accordingly, while others are simple and utilitarian. It is often easier to find and keep workers in mid-size, small town brothels than it is in frontier brothels, given the amount of business available and the amenities of living and working in small towns as opposed to isolated brothels. On the other hand, some women find the relatively isolated small town living confining and prefer to have the convenience of living closer to large urban areas where they can go and matriculate without being recognized as one of the working girls from the brothel.

Suburban Brothels

Generally brothels that are closer to big cities and tourist destinations like Reno/Tahoe/Carson City and Las Vegas are larger, have more women working at any given time, and are busier. Proximity to larger populations translates into more business for owners and more earning potential for prostitutes. This simple equation results in marked differences in the organization and management of these brothels compared to the frontier and rural brothels. With a few exceptions, these brothels tend to be bigger and fancier establishments that attract more potential workers than they can use. With

more of a supply of women interested in working as prostitutes, and greater demand from customers, these brothels tend to be more expensive for clients, more lucrative for workers and owners, and more competitive overall. In general, women in these brothels are younger, conform more closely to conventional standards of attractiveness, and/or are more likely to be professionals from other parts of the sex industry, such as exotic dancers or porn stars. This larger, busier environment also creates difference workplace cultures, which draw some women even as they repulse others.

Assessing Exploitation and Stratification Within Brothels

Stratification within brothels results in creating a different habitus in each, complete with varying labor practices, cultures, and experiences for prostitutes. In this section we will explore each of the following three dimensions of exploitation to assess the extent to which each is present within the Nevada brothel industry generally, and within different types of brothels specifically: 1) danger and violence; 2) work conditions and 3) Sexual freedom for women.

Danger and Violence

Our research finds that overall, brothels are safe places for women to sell sex. Our interviewees reported that they work in the brothels because they feel safe there. Of more than 40 prostitutes we interviewed, from large and small, suburban and rural brothels across Nevada, only one reported any personal experience with violence in the brothels. The one person who told us about personal experience with violence said that she felt parties “go bad” less than 5% of the time, although this didn’t necessarily always result in violence. Within the brothels 21 of 25 prostitute respondents to a survey agreed with the phrase “my job is safe.” None of the owners and managers told us about any incidents involving violence carried out against the women in the brothels.

Brothels employ a number of specific practices that work to guarantee the safety and health of brothel workers. Brents and Hausbeck (2005) identify 7 main areas that promote safety in the brothels. These include guidelines for the negotiation process, call buttons and audio room monitoring, control of customer behavior, developing good relations with police, limiting out-of-brothel services, limiting the movement of prostitutes, adhering to health regulations and engaging in preventative practices. Much of this section is drawn from work presented in Brents & Hausbeck (2005).

Our research finds, however, that in addition, the real mechanisms for protection are working in a setting that allows constant public scrutiny of the behavior of the customer before the actual paid party, makes client anonymity and easy exit difficult, and provides a houseful of people just a flimsy door away from the prostitute-john interaction and exchange.

Prostitutes meet customers through a line up in the parlor, or at the bar area in the public spaces of the brothel. Once a customer chooses a woman, they go back to the woman's room and negotiate prices and services. The negotiation takes place in the apparent privacy of the prostitute's bedroom. The reality is that the house manager on duty listens in via intercom to the negotiation between the prostitute and the john, so that they know what services were agreed upon at what price. They then turn off the intercom once the negotiation is complete. Before the prostitute begins to provide the agreed-upon services, she leaves her room and takes the cash payment or credit card to the office, which in larger brothels is a discreet operating center and in smaller brothels is often the kitchen or some similar multipurpose room. The manager deposits the money and sets a timer for the particular prostitute's room so that the office knows when the customer's time is up and he needs to either leave or re-negotiate and pay again. Intercoms allow owners to monitor how much the prostitute negotiates for services to prevent theft. But they can also listen for any problems threatening the prostitutes

safety. Many owners and prostitutes tell us that it is during negotiations for payment that workers and managers felt even rational men can get angry or violent. In addition to the added monitoring, when the prostitute takes payment to the manager, she can report any strange feelings or problems, and management can be put on alert.

One owner explained:

“The idea there is to get the money out of the room so that there’s no attempt on the man’s part at some point to be physical or forceful to regain his money. ...Then it’s our responsibility to end the party. You want to eliminate the lady from any of the decisions in the process so that she is sheltered from any browbeating or coercion from the gentleman’s part about more time or anything... that she’s put in a position to be able to say to the gentleman, ‘Oh you’re the best I’ve had all day or all week or all year and I’d love to spend the next hour in here with you, but these SOB’s I work for are going to come pounding on the door and we’re going to get in trouble unless either we leave the room or we talk more money.’ We encourage the lady to put the burden on us. And then she’s their buddy and we’re the bad guys.”

Thus, several safety mechanisms exist. The house can hear if the client gets unruly or abusive during the negotiation and interrupt if needed. Pre-payment to the brothel such that the credit card and cash are not in the prostitute’s room ensures that the client doesn’t try to get any of his money back should he not be fully satisfied by the exchange. The room timers allow the house to keep track of who is working when and who is running over time and might need management intervention.

Our research finds that working in a setting that allows constant public scrutiny of the behavior of the customer before the actual paid party, makes client anonymity and easy exit difficult, and provides a houseful of people just a flimsy door away from the prostitute-john interaction and exchange.

As added security, In addition, all the brothels we visited had call buttons in each of the prostitutes’ rooms. When pressed these panic buttons would either link to a direct intercom to the office—formal or makeshift, depending on the brothel—or ring a buzzer that could be clearly heard by the madam, management or another employee. In most

brothels, the buttons are located in easily accessible locations at the head or side of the bed in the prostitute's room, but this was not always the case. Nonetheless, these buttons are a major source of security for most of the prostitutes we interviewed, and many pointed these out as their direct link to help should an incident occur. Said one prostitute, "You push the panic button once and you have immediate rescue." Owners pointed them out as a back-up system in case other mechanisms failed.

In the end, the safety in brothels is oriented to the protection of the economic viability of the business for brothel owners, and secondarily to the protection of brothel workers' health and safety. Regardless of the motivation, the fact remains that brothels are relatively safe places for prostitutes to work. The lesson seems to be that if prostitution takes place within the parameters of a legally regulated business, both the legal regulations themselves, and the dictates of the market, can work to ensure safety.

Brothels must answer to law enforcement, and because brothels are privilege licenses, no brothel owner wants law enforcement to have to come to their brothel for any reason. One of their greatest fears is customer violence in the public brothel areas. There have been at least two incidents that we know of where customers, or men on premises, have been murdered. In the most recent case, a customer was killed in a bar fight, and brothels were almost outlawed in that town as a result. Owners tell us that they have a zero tolerance police for rowdy or rude behavior in their bar areas.

Owners also report that they take care to maintain good relations with law enforcement. Consequently, they can rely on law enforcement as a back up in the case of trouble.

The owners we interviewed ensure this by making it policy to call the police at the slightest hint of trouble to send a message that they don't tolerate bad behavior. "The whole name of the game is control. But that control also makes us get along pretty well with the sheriff's office. There are two reasons for doing it, one, the sheriff's office, but also the girls' personal safety." As another owner said:

“You can be too late, but you can never call him [the sheriff] too early. So if they have the slightest hint of a problem, they call the sheriff. If they ask the guy to leave and he says, ‘I’m not going to,’ they say fine, I’ll call the sheriff. They don’t even argue with him. They just call the sheriff, and usually by the time the sheriff gets here they guy’s already left. So all we do is give the sheriff’s deputy a cup of coffee and send him down the road.”

One police officer we spoke to took pains to point out that they dealt with fewer problems in the brothels than they did in the local bars.

The public setting of the brothel also allows prostitutes to keep an eye on each other.

More experienced prostitutes tell us how they train newer prostitutes on things to look for in customers, and how to protect themselves. At the same time, the setting of the brothel also means the women are in competition with each other; violence from other women was reported to us as a greater problem than violence from customers.

Brothel prostitutes, with a very few exceptions, conduct all their business at the brothel.

Out-dating, leaving the brothel with a customer, is mostly against the law. When it is allowed, most prostitutes rarely take advantage of it for safety reasons, those that do tell us that they only do it with regular customers for a very large amount of money.

Finally, brothels closely monitor the movement of prostitutes. This is probably one of the most contentious issues in legalized prostitution. Among the reasons owners justify the practice is for the safety of the prostitute. The vast majority of brothels do not allow women to leave the premises while they are on contract to work, even if they are not on shift. Only one of the tiniest and only the very largest brothels allow women to go home when they are working their shifts. Most brothels identify specific days when women can go to the store or run errands; some do not even allow that. Others just require that women log in their specific locations—where, exactly, they are going to run errands—at all times. Most all brothels have a system in place for women to ‘order out’ for what they need from around town by paying a staff person to do their errands for them. There are few other professions where this kind of paternalistic supervision and “lock down”

occurs. "Our rules are there because we want to know where all the girls are all the time. And if we know where all the girls are, all the time, well then we don't have to worry about their health and safety because we know where they are at. And then of course, we have panic buttons and all that type of stuff. And so if they hit a □ if they do have a problem or a situation in their room, of course we know where they're at, and then when."

Other managers told us that the rules that don't allow prostitutes out of the house were for health safety reasons. They told us that if women leave the brothel overnight, they have to take and pass health tests before they can start working again. This delay can take a couple of days or longer, and is often incentive for the women to stay in the house and work longer in-between time off.

Finally, workers are protected from the spread of STDs in a number of ways. First is through what is called a "dick check," a visual check of customers genital area prior to having sex. Workers can then refuse a customer who has a visible problem. In addition, customers are required by law to wear condoms. All of the women we interviewed were passionate about expressing their support for these laws. For example, they insisted that they always use condoms, whether the client prefers to or not. This is less about obeying the law, and more about their commitment to protecting their health, well-being and occupation. As one prostitute explained, "I always use a condom, no exceptions no exceptions at all, ever. I don't care how much money you offer me, my life is worth more than that. That's it." As another working woman told us:

"There isn't to me a fucker that walks in here and pays enough money for you to take that chance. Apparently, us as hookers are doing it right since we haven't had a single girl in the history of legalized prostitution working in a house of prostitution come down positive."

Work Conditions and Control

Weitzer defines this, in addition to access to resources for protection, as their freedom to

refuse clients and particular sex acts, dependence on managers and other third parties. We will discuss these, but in addition, as Wetizer also points out, it is other dynamics in the encounter between worker and client that is often labeled exploitative.

Prostitutes generally reported to us that they control their work process in a number of ways. Prostitutes are employed as independent contractors. Technically this means that the contractor has the right to control the details of how any work is done, including price. The brothel has the right to dictate where and when the work is performed, including working hours, mobility rules, room and board charges and requirements, grievance procedures and the income splits. They can also specify meal hours, dress requirements and other expectations.. Brothel prostitutes sign contracts when they first arrive at the brothel. For the most part, they can write these any way they want.

Owners tell us that they prefer workers to sign on for at least 2-3 weeks to discourage turnover, but there are no hard and fast rules that they enforce. Workers who break contracts are rarely hired again. Beyond this, the workers are subject to the hours and work rules as determined by the brothel.

In most all brothels, women reported that they had the power to refuse clients. A few reported to us that some brothels were more restrictive in which customers could be refused, but none of the women reported that these restrictions applied to the brothel they were currently working in. Given the way brothel workers negotiate parties, there are several ways clients can be refused short of just kicking them out of the room. One of the more common ways of controlling clients is in negotiating price. Many women told us that if there was a customer they did not want to deal with, they would start negotiations at a much higher price. Few prostitutes reported meeting a man they would never party with for any price. There is a financial incentive for taking customers, so that few prostitutes could afford to be so picky as to dramatically cut their client base. How this generally played itself out is in the high end prostitutes in the suburban brothels.

The more elite prostitutes had the most control over who they serviced. Some reported that they only dealt with regulars. Prostitutes also could refuse a customer based on race. The owners who discussed this for the most part did not discourage this practice. Prostitutes also reported that they could refuse certain sex acts. Two common acts they refused were anal sex and kissing.

“I do not kiss. That is my personal boundary....I’ve done a lot of things, but the only thing I will not do is anal sex, just because it is something that is personal to me also. I don’t believe in it.”

It is interesting that anal sex is included in discussions about kissing as part of the physical intimacy boundaries. Most prostitutes reported that they do not kiss, for either intimacy reasons, or because they did not want to “exchange any body fluids.” Women refused anal sex either for intimacy reasons or because they felt it was illegal. In spite of Nevada’s repeal of the sodomy law in 1994, many women and owners reported that anal sex was illegal. Said one prostitute.

“We tell them at the beginning that there’s no kissing on the mouth and no anal sex, those two things...You can actually end your party on that. If you ask for that one more time, the session is over and we won’t refund your money ,because you’re asking me to do something illegal.”

Most brothels have shifts lasting from 8 to 12 hours. However the hours of work was one of the more variable components within brothels. Some of the smaller brothels reported that they had shifts, others reported that everyone was on during the evening shift from about 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. with a morning girl on call for hours outside this shift. Brothels in Elko were all required by law to close at 3 a.m. and many do not open until 3 p.m. Southern Nevada has some of the more restrictive work hours. At Sheri’s Resort outside of Las Vegas, workers are on call 24 hours a day, and must be at the line up with full make up and costume within a few minutes from being called.

Workers usually split their take 50/50 with the house. On top of this they pay room and board and in the larger brothels must tip the bartenders, cleaning staff and any food servers. Some brothels waive room and board if a woman makes no money in a

particular evening, or if she does exceedingly well.

Because workers are independent contractors, they receive no health insurance, benefits, sick leave, or retirement from their employment. They are responsible for paying their own taxes. And they are exempt from many labor laws. In Nevada, more and more workers in the service industries generally are independent contractors, and workers in other parts of the sex industry are often independent contractors. The brothels are not alone in avoiding paying workers benefits or avoiding employee protections.

One of the more controversial practices within brothels is what is known as the “lock down.” Most brothels require workers to live on premises and have restrictions on when they may leave, even if they are not on shift. The smaller houses with lock downs will allow women to leave when they are not on duty, but they are required to notify other staff. In general, the smaller houses are much more informal and flexible. The larger brothels in general have more bureaucratic regulations and some have severe restrictions on mobility, work hours, time off, etc. The larger houses have specific days when workers can shop, run errands, etc. Workers are not allowed to leave these houses, if they do they must have the health checks before they can begin working again. Most all brothels have a system in place for women to ‘order out’ for what they need from around town by paying a staff person to do their errands for them. There are few other professions where this kind of regulation over non-work mobility occurs. Many of the women we surveyed did not report that the lock down was much of a problem. We heard few complaints from the women, and in fact, most of the women indicated on written surveys that they felt they were able to leave the brothel at any time. Perhaps this is because most women live out of state, and in these small towns or rural areas, there is little reason to leave the brothel. It is also the case the many owners we spoke to were very flexible on letting the women go run errands.

At the same time, many brothel owners recognized the difficulty of hiring workers under these conditions. Increasingly, the larger brothels, particularly in Northern Nevada, are moving away from the lock down. Some of the very small brothels may also discreetly allow their workers to go home after shift. One large brothel owner who allowed women to go home when not on shift did so because he knew that they could not keep “quality” workers if they locked them down in the old-fashioned way. They also told us that they could get more workers in the brothel if their rooms could be used for entertaining 24 hours a day. Brothel profitability and a perceived shortage of workers does seem to be driving a slow liberalization of policies that restrict prostitutes’ movement.

Despite the controlling nature of these policies and the fact that Nevada’s legal prostitutes work as independent contractors, the prostitutes we interviewed accepted them as basically reasonable restrictions intended to protect both them and their clients.

Women’s Sexual Freedom

While the women we interviewed reported satisfaction overall with their ability to control their work environment and conditions of labor, there are larger questions about the dynamics of the encounter. Critics of sex work see prostitution as involving self denial, self manipulation, and deep seated alienation from oneself because the workers are selling something as personal as sex. This implies that prostitutes’ activities are distinctly different and worse than other service work involving emotional labor.

We asked the women how they felt about selling sex. Their answers showed great variety. In spite of the relative similarity of working conditions, they had a variety of ways of interpreting their work. The women we interviewed seemed to be divided fairly equally on whether they enjoyed their job for the sex or whether they were just doing what they felt they had to do.

Princess at MB says captures what some prostitutes say most simply, “It’s the easiest

job that you could ever have. I don't have to do anything but what I like to do. I like to have sex. I like to have sex with different people."

Charm at MB talks about sex.

Yeah, I've always been really sexual. I've always been very sexual. And it's always been in my programming that I wanted to be as healthy sexually as I could be because there had been something else when I was a child...I think it was my mom's crap, you know. She didn't want to deal with her sexuality so there was this guilt put on me for being sexual.

As a result, Charm talks of the sex she sells as at least partially "the wonderful, fairy, joy feelings that people don't always give themselves permission to experience..."

RMK at MK is slightly more circumspect. RMK enjoyed the first time working in a brothel.

It was so cool, because it was like, I got back the attention, and that I liked being sexy. But I also go for the money and there was nothing involved. You know, no emotional anything involved." Later she said, "I like the sexual attention, to a degree. But if it got a little bit too much, then it bothered me because then I thought everyone thought I was a hooker.

Many of the women in this category also say they enjoy the money, which makes all else pales by comparison.

I enjoy it [the sex] to a certain extent. I enjoy the money I make. I look upon it as a business transaction...as supplying a need, the old supply and demand...I don't really, I mean, it's not love. I know the difference between love and sex, and it's not love.

Others are pretty clear that what they do on the job is not pleasant. As one prostitute said, she does not enjoy herself while having sex.

I would have to say no., because I have a boyfriend. I've had a couple of bad experiences with a couple of guys... some girls just think about something else. You know sometimes it's even harder because you can get the guys who come in on drugs that they have done outside. They come in here to have fun but they can't, they're just sitting there, and you can't really do nothing with them. So you're sitting with them and they're tripping on you. And you're like, gosh, just please hurry up and make this time go by, and make it go by faster.

Ginger at OB says

It really is very hard to do this. At least with me, I start to feel like bad about myself, or just the thought of going back to a room with a total stranger and getting paid for sex. Sometimes it just almost makes me sick, you know. I mean, it really is a mind fuck. But you just kind of gotta get over it.

COB at OB

Well I think it takes a piece of your soul and heart every time you have to go back to the room...It's not really the actual job, it's the everything outside of the job that messes with you. As far as I can tell, people look at you, how you're judged, how your categorized and everything like that. But it also too is the job, and it's like, umm, you can train yourself like it doesn't bother you. But deep down, once you take down the wall and really concentrate on what is going on, it messes with you.

The statements above, and others like them in our data, are indicative of contradictory impulses and experiences among legal prostitutes. Many of the women report both a sense of empowerment, enjoyment or sexual freedom that comes with their occupation, as well as times when the work is daunting, dissatisfying or degrading.

Conclusion

What is wrong with prostitution? From our research, we see little that is inherent in the sale of sex itself that makes it exploitative. What we do see is great variability in work conditions and control among brothels as the source of most problems for prostitutes. Future research needs to develop more sophisticated, detailed and empirically based analyses of the differences between types and contexts of prostitution when assessing patterns and degrees of exploitation. Doing so will enhance our understanding of this enduring social institution and provide a richer accounting of the experiences of women who labor as prostitutes.

Work conditions within brothels are converging with mainstream service industry jobs.

As culture becomes more sexualized and the sex industry grows, brothel owners who

are closest to urban centers have to compete with both non-sexually oriented and adult business opportunities that offer women much more flexibility and anonymity than in the past. To attract and retain workers, some of the larger brothels in more populated areas are changing some of their traditional, paternalistic and oppressive work rules. Some brothels allow women to return home after their shift if they choose to do so. They are using technology to improve safety and market the business in ways that bring women more clients. Brothels have also changed or eliminated many old house rules, including shifts that allow women more autonomy in rejecting unwanted customers. Some brothels provide training on saving money, doing taxes, and the like. In many of these ways, brothel work is more like traditional service work—which can be both positive and empowering, but also troubling in new and different ways. At the same time, brothel workers are still uniquely constrained by rules, regulations and laws that exploit them in ways that are different from service workers and professionals in other businesses.

However, we do not argue that there is nothing about legal prostitution is problematic, or that it is an occupational environment that is universally empowering to women. On the contrary, we argue that there is certainly exploitation in brothel prostitution, but that: 1) the degrees and forms of exploitation vary by size, location, and house rules; 2) that the work conditions in many legal brothels are incompatible with fair and legal work practices that exist and are enforced in other legal and regulated industries; and 3) that part of the exploitation experienced by legal prostitutes comes from outside the brothel culture itself in the form of social stigma. In our research, not unexpectedly, we find that the stigma associated with prostitution is a significant problem for prostitutes as they manage their identities and negotiate their lives outside the brothels. So much so, that when we asked women what they liked least about their job, one of the more common answers was the stigma attached to prostitution. They were all painfully aware that the world outside of the brothel industry distinguishes between good girls and bad girls, and

that they were typically cast as 'bad'. We did ask prostitutes questions about whether they told their friends and family about their brothel work, and the results were mixed. Those who did typically made sure to point out the fact that they did so with pride and even defiance. They highlighted that they were not ashamed of what they did, in spite of what many people think. Some women, despite emphasizing that they told family and friends and were proud of what they did, admitted that they would not want their daughter doing this job. One woman who did not tell others about her work put it thusly, "I think it's a shame that society (stigmatizes whores)...I mean, I would love to go home and be able to say, yeah, mom's a sex worker."

In fact, socio-cultural perceptions that prostitutes are either exploited victims or dangerous and depraved 'bad girls' themselves reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the perpetuation of social stigma against even legal prostitutes. These stereotypes are premised on the assumptions that: 1) sex is different than other kinds of physically embodied or emotional labors; 2) prostitution is dirty; 3) prostitutes are whores in the bad girl, negative sense of floozies who fuck with husbands and ruin families; 4) prostitutes and prostitution are vectors of disease and violence, respectively; and 5) that prostitution is not legitimate work. It is these stereotypical beliefs about prostitutes and prostitution that reinforce negative social stigma, and in doing so, contribute to a culture of exploitation of the working women themselves. The combination of these sexist, patriarchal and moralistic value judgments and stigma, and the economic exploitation of the marketplace for interactive service industry work generally, which together create more exploitation of legal, working prostitutes than the circumstances or experiences of their labors.

The patterns of exploitation and empowerment documented above are meaningful in and of themselves, especially to the extent that these conditions help shape the life experiences, work conditions and contemporary history of the women who labor as legal

prostitutes. They also challenge still dominant tendencies among academics and activists, media and policy makers, to reduce all prostitutes and forms of prostitution to sameness and pass judgments as if all systems and contexts in which prostitution occurs are the same. This, in itself, is part of the web of problems facing legal prostitutes and contributing to their exploitation.