

The Sex Industry in Nevada

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by Suki Falconberg, Ph.D.

Sin City. Skin City. Las Vegas is flesh city. Billboards everywhere display tempting bodies. At one posh nightclub, the Tao in the Venetian, near-naked girls greet you in perfumed bathwater, roses floating on its surface. Girls shadow dance behind screens at Caesars Palace. The Palms has its Playboy Club. A Penthouse Pet Club has just opened. The city is the haunt of the Implant Babe, Pamela Anderson, and of Carmen Electra, and the cavorting Pussycat Dolls. Rows of topless showgirls in big-stage extravaganzas have been a staple for decades, and the city is famous for its strip clubs—like Crazy Horse and Cheetah’s. Newer clubs are springing up all the time. Topless, and bottomless, venues abound and the city flaunts the beauty of the female body—glossy, shining, naked, or near-naked—images of women as sensually pleasing and arousing objects are everywhere.

As a highly sensuous woman, I like sex and nakedness and the beauty of our lovely soft bodies. We women are lovely and sensual and soft and delectable. I do not connect sex with outmoded notions of ‘lust’ and ‘sin’ and I do not link it with morality. To do so denies an experience that at its highest can be beautiful and emotional as well as physical. And I would see nothing wrong with Las Vegas as a sexual playground if it did not involve exploitation. Unfortunately, this harsher aspect is a big part of the \$6 billion dollar industry of sex in Nevada. This exploitation side makes me object to the name of the gentleman’s club, newly opened, at the Luxor. It is called Cathouse.

What really happens inside Nevada’s legal ‘cathouses’ is not glamorous. Psychologist Melissa Farley’s recent book, *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connection*, the result of a two-year research project sponsored by the U.S. State Department, uncovers some of the less savory side of the Nevada sex industry.

“No one really enjoys being sold,” a woman in a Nevada legal brothel told Farley. “It’s like you sign a contract to be raped.” From interviews and first-hand observation, Farley says that “many of the women in the legal brothels are under intense emotional stress; many of them have symptoms of chronic institutionalization and trauma.” Farley found mentally ill women in the brothels, ones who had been beaten, and ones who has been trafficked in by pimps, who took the majority of the money they earned. She found ‘debt bondage conditions’ in some brothels: girls being charged enormous amounts for food and cigarettes and even the condoms they needed—these latter items are supposed to be supplied, free, by the brothel in a legal establishment.

Prostitution is not legal in Las Vegas or Reno: the brothels are in adjacent rural counties. To get to the ones outside Las Vegas, in the area surrounding the small town of Pahrump, is quite a trip—they are way, way out in the desert—and, once there, it is very difficult to get to talk to the girls. Why, I wonder, if it is legal, is there something to hide? Are these girls ‘inmates’ in a prison?

Legal prostitution is only a part of the picture. Farley reports that the links between illegal and legal prostitution and between trafficking and prostitution are the same as one finds every place where legalizing it has been tried. The Netherlands, Germany, Australia—in all these countries trafficking skyrocketed after prostitution was legalized. It made it much easier for the exploiters to operate, for the ‘johns’ to get at the enslaved, and it did nothing for the girls themselves, the victims of the exploitation. Only a tiny handful of Dutch, German, and Australian prostitutes might benefit from the health and pension systems that legalizing brings. The majority of prostituted beings in these countries are sex slaves with no access to benefits, or any rights whatsoever. Even the few ‘independent’ German/Dutch/Australian prostitutes often report pimps taking their money, so I even wonder if they are ‘free’ to prostitute themselves or whether this ‘trade’ involves a universal form of coercion visited on all the women in it.

Maybe Farley’s most shocking find is that “Las Vegas is the epicenter of North American trafficking and prostitution. Women are trafficked into this city from all over the world, including Korea, China, Mexico, Russia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ukraine, Czech Republic and others.”

According to the U.S. State Department, prostitution and trafficking are heavily linked. Whether you call the girl ‘trafficked’ or not, prostitution is inherently harmful. To quote a pamphlet from the State Department: “Few activities are as brutal and damaging to people as prostitution; victims meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder in the same range as victims of state-organized torture. Shocking abuse of the body, a myriad of serious and fatal diseases, such as AIDS, higher rates of cervical cancer; Prostitution leaves women and children physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually devastated. Recovery takes years, even decades—often, the damage can never be undone.”

I have written two articles on the sex industry in Nevada. I think they can add to Farley’s insights as to what goes on in this lucrative business. The first, “In the Las Vegas Sex Industry, the Rapists Go Free,” you can read on this American Chronicle site. It was written in May 2007 and details a police raid on a brothel where girls were imprisoned

in deplorable conditions and asks why the customers who were raping the girls were let go.

When the case surfaced in the Las Vegas news again last month, I wrote this second piece in response to the coverage of it–

According to the Las Vegas Review-Journal's latest article (Dec. 11, 2007) on Operation Doll House, a brothel sting that rounded up a number of Asian girls, it appears that the rapists/exploiters are going free. One man indicted has received a suspended prison sentence and 5 years probation. That’s all—for his role in the rape of these women's bodies. The article also reports that this was not a case of 'trafficking' and that the girls were not coerced. The RJ's previous coverage of the event, a number of months ago, described the rooms where the girls were found: gallons of lube, hundreds of condoms, filthy mattresses on the floor, the rooms reeking of feces and urine. It described drunk men urinating and vomiting outside before they went in to use the girls. Yet, according to the current RJ article, the FBI investigators found no evidence that the women were being 'forced.'

Now, would a woman 'choose' to have intercourse with men who have just vomited in the street? Would any woman choose to be penetrated multiple times a night by men she doesn't know on a dirty mattress on the floor– in an apartment reeking of urine and feces? No forcing???? Who would ever choose to work under these conditions?

Which male universe do these FBI agents come from? Do they think that their own wives and daughters would ever invite sex with drunk strangers, night after night, on filthy mattresses? If not, then how can they possibly assume any other woman would want to be treated to a nightly dose of serial rape in an atmosphere of filth and misery? In what way is the situation of these girls not 'coercion' and force? And rape—of the most terrible kind.

It took the authorities two years to investigate this situation. Their attitude is well illustrated by what they labeled it: Operation Doll House—what a degradation to imply these raped girls are 'toys'! Why did it take them two years to get the girls out of the brothels? Two years while their poor bodies were being raped thousands of times. And then when they get them out—the people who put them there are let go, on 'probation,' and the customers (the real rapists) are not even punished at all? The girls have no 'probation' from the permanent hell that will be their life after years of being gang raped every day. As a rape/prostitution survivor, I can tell you that the prostitute never heals. I never healed. I never will. I am always in that rape prison.

Were the women held in debt bondage? Are any of these Asian women in brothels not being held in debt bondage? This is not just a form of coercion—it is enslavement.

The FBI agent called it a 'straightforward' case. How so? What is 'straightforward' about women being treated this way–except that it’s rape but that word did not surface in the article. Who makes up the definition of 'force' that the FBI and the courts use? I think I must look at reality very differently from the way the courts and the FBI do. I look at reality from the perspective of a body that has been raped thousands of times—the way these women have been.

The RJ article could have covered this so differently. It could have recounted the extent of the girls' physical injuries. Serial rape, night after night, leaves tremendous damage. The article could have found out what the girls said—that is, if they were able to speak. Ordinarily, due to shame and deep trauma, prostituted women are only capable of saying what they think they have to in order to not be hurt anymore.

The article reports the girls are being sent back to their countries. What it does not mention is that there it is likely they will be re-trafficked: they will probably end up back in prostitution not just because of this but because they will be seen as unfit, as whores, to go back into their society. Also, their self-worth will be so low, due to the thousands of rapes, that they will probably not see a way out of prostitution. I know that when I was in it, I thought I would die in it. I could not picture a life after or beyond it. Who can ever be 'normal' after thousands of rapes? Who can get a job at Sears or Starbucks after thousands of rapes?

I can't see a whole lot of difference between forced prostitution/prostitution/trafficking. Is this Las Vegas case another example of the TIP (Trafficking in Person's Act) not working because the women are too terrified to speak? Their abusers are free to still hurt them if they testify. Is what is happening in this trial an example of women too frightened and damaged to testify? Too fearful of future reprisals? Why didn't the RJ cover this aspect of the case?

I also know that speaking out for these women may be impossible. If faced with the men who hurt me, now, in my current life, there is no way I could ever testify against them. If I were in the same room with them, I would vomit and then run away as far as I could and hide in the nearest closet for safety. There is no police force that will protect me from them, and no court, not anywhere in America on any place else on this Rape Planet that I can go to. The legal system is designed to discredit the 'mass-rape' victim that we label 'prostitute.'

I really don't understand why rape/forced prostitution/trafficking are the only crimes where the victims are blamed for what happens to them.

That's the end of my second article. It indicates what we are up against in terms of tackling prostitution—in Nevada or across the planet. Attitudes and systems that keep girls enslaved and that do little to punish those who inflict extremes of torture on other human beings. 'John' = 'Rapist' and 'Pimp/Owner' = Rapist Murderer of Women's Bodies.

Farley has interviewed hundreds of prostitutes all over the world and she concludes that most are desperate to get out. A Las Vegas investigative reporter I spoke to has interviewed about a hundred prostituted girls and come to the conclusion that almost all of them are exploited and damaged. A former prostitute in Las Vegas who runs a 'john's' program—designed to educate the customers about the harm they inflict, comes to the same conclusion—that these are highly damaged women. And she should know. Being one of the damaged ones.

Farley presented a panel on prostitution shortly after her book came out, and a number of former prostitutes spoke. One said that Las Vegas is greatly lacking in services to help prostituted women, girls, and children. (The city has a thriving business based on the sale of young girls, ages 13-17.) She said that local charities would not help the prostituted. Once they discover you worked as one, they throw you out.

I know that the Salvation Army, nation-wide, is now getting involved in helping the trafficked. They are receiving federal funding to do so. Will they help the prostituted, or do they see a distinction between the two? (For me, the trafficked and the prostituted are the same tortured being.)

At the panel, one prostitute came up with a startling fact: that very few women, girls, or children actually make it out of prostitution, and, of the few who do, life expectancy is short. Most are dead two or three years later. From insanity, suicide, disease?

Her remarks made me stop breathing for a few seconds. I now realize that I was incredibly lucky to actually survive the three-year stint I spent in prostitution and that the odds of my being alive now are amazing. When I was in it, I saw no way out. Esteem so low and a body and mind and emotions so battered that I could not see past the next hour or so. I felt as if I was in a ten-foot pit and could not see the rim. I smiled all the time, as if everything was okay. But I simply assumed I would die in prostitution. I gave up. What life is there after being raped thousands of times by men you don't know?

There is none. I have no courage, no self-worth—all these must come from inside and there is only empty cold space inside me. I am afraid to leave the house. I am terrified of everything. I am not a rape/prostitution survivor. I didn't survive. I have no 'support network' since I have never spoken to another prostitute. I am always afraid I will see the same sadness in her eyes that I see in my own. The only way I know what other prostitutes think is through people like Melissa Farley, who has talked to so many all over the world. With surprise, I found many similarities—whether it's Bangkok or Bombay or London or Las Vegas, the raped body feels the same. Through Farley's interviews, I have also found ones who are 'true' survivors. Hope and peace and safety they have found. That's not me. No hope, no peace, and certainly no safety—since I am terrified to go outside the door. This is a big deal for me since you can't do much of anything else if you can't cross the threshold, into the outside world.

I pretty much live in spite of this. The beautiful things in the world—I know they are there—but I can't reach them for comfort. I am still ten feet down, in that pit. I love sparrows. So small and cute and sweet and fragile, yet also so cheeky and spirited. I wish I could appreciate the beauty of a sparrow again.

Hope. Sweden seems to be doing something that works! They have decriminalized it for the women and made it a felony for the men who buy the girls. Their attitude is simple: Prostitution exploits women—all women. The 'demand' side, the way men 'must' be allowed to purchase bodies, is the result of male dominance and exploitation of the female. Prostitution hurts women. Period. Sweden has reduced trafficking to almost nil and they provide many services for women who are either in prostitution, or who want out, or who have gotten out and are struggling to survive. No blame on the woman in Sweden. Finally, a paradise on earth that really includes women? I have to blink to believe it. And sit inside a warm blanket, safe, in a small space away from how cold and huge the outside world is—to believe it. I hope it's true.

When Sweden's new laws started really working, traffickers shifted more business into Norway. Norway has passed laws similar to Sweden's. Now, Denmark is currently working on going the way of the 'Swedish model.' The latest news I have is that the women of Denmark are pressuring the men who do not buy prostitutes to vote for legislation similar to that in Sweden. All Western European countries, except for Sweden, and now Norway, are major destinations for impoverished girls who are imported from third world countries and from Russia and the Ukraine for sex.

Could the United States follow the Swedish model? It would entail a sweeping change of attitude within our borders—that the prostitute is not a depraved immoral sex fiend addict and a threat to all decent pure women everywhere but that she is a terrible victim of rape and male dominance. Following the Swedish model also involves 'tracking' men who buy sex in other countries. Sweden is working on this side of the problem: it is tackling the Swedish men who go as sex tourists to Thailand and also the sexual behavior of its military abroad. During the World Cup in

Germany, Sweden was the only country that 'policed' its players and tourists to make sure they did not buy any of the 40,000 enslaved bodies that Germany made available for rape 'fun and games.' I will be interested to see if Sweden can do similar policing of its own men at the Beijing Olympics where massive numbers of trafficked Chinese girls will be on sale.

The 'policing' of men will only work in the long run if we change men's hearts. They have to realize that to buy us destroys us. It harms the men as well since it reduces women to slaves.

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