

Indoor Versus Outdoor Prostitution in Rhode Island

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“Nobody really wants to be sold,” a woman in a Nevada legal brothel explained to me. Even if you know that simple fact -- that prostitution is an abusive institution for any human -- maybe you still think it can be made not so bad. Maybe you think that if prostitution happens under a roof, it is better than outside on the street. Actually, the human rights abuses of prostitution lies in the violative, exploitive nature of the sex industry, not in where it happens. Debating whether indoor prostitution should be legal is missing the point.

Buying or renting people for sex is a lot like another institution we abolished. The pimp messaged propaganda that indoor prostitution is safer than outdoor prostitution is like insisting that even though the plantation system is slavery, because the house girls have it better than the field girls, they are not slaves. Prostitution has its very own plantation system. While the women in street prostitution work the fields, call girls, escorts and massage parlor workers are the house ni****s of this system. No amount of payment, mostly to pimps, compensates for the sexism, racism, poverty, and violence intrinsic to the sex industry.

Usually you hear about prostitution from the point of view of pimps -- in Rhode Island, they're the owners and managers of massage parlors. Look at it from the perspective of the woman (or man, or transgendered person) who's being sold, who for the past 15 years in 10 countries, indoors and outdoors, have described their experiences to me. Women explain that prostitution is “paid rape” or “volunteer slavery.” Despite extremely high rates of physical and sexual violence, the emotional damage is the worst. And all data indicate that it is exactly the same whether she is prostituted in a strip club, a massage parlor, a spa, or the street. Prostituted people have an extremely high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (68%), comparable to that of combat veterans, battered women, and rape survivors.

Massage parlors in Rhode Island and across the United States are often destination points for women trafficked by organized crime. Sometimes the women live inside the massage parlor. There is evidence that they have been brainwashed by pimps to fear reporters or community members who might offer assistance.

Whether prostituting indoors or outdoors or both, women have the same history of childhood sexual abuse and the same intense desire to escape. Although one study of prostitution in U.K. found a higher rate of physical assaults in street prostitution, neither is safe. 81% of women prostituting on the street experienced violence at the hands of johns, yet so did 48% of women prostituting indoors. The women indoors were subject to more frequent attempted rape. Even when pimps are said to be running a high-end callgirl service, the woman who's being sold is subjected to the same exploitation. Most people

would not consider these to be acceptable working condition.

Current Rhode Island law is out of step with volumes of evidence that prostitution arises from adverse social conditions including sexual abuse in childhood, often desperate poverty, homelessness, racism, sex discrimination in employment and sex-based lack of educational and economic opportunities, disability, and a culture that increasingly commodifies girls. Those in the industry are subjected to breathtaking rates of battering, rape, and forced drug addiction, along with plummeting life expectancy. Wherever prostitution happens, it harms the women in it. When asked what they most want, an average of 90% worldwide say they want to leave prostitution. Leaving johns and pimps free of criminal sanctions amounts to open season on women and children. What does legal tolerance of such a cruel institution say about the citizens of Rhode Island?

You can't fix what's wrong with prostitution by moving it indoors. The same dangers are there whether she's in a john's house, his car, at his rented massage table, or his room at the Westin. He's still, as one john said, "buying an organ for 10 minutes." She is still treating as a rented organ rather than a human being. The same violation and risk of violence happens whether it's in a massage parlor, the VIP room of a strip club, a legal brothel, or on the street.