

Housing in exchange for sex acts: Prostitution

Vancouver - The advertisement appeared in the rooms and shares section of an online classified website and offered “free rent for the right girl.”

“I’m an attractive mid 30s white male, clean, groomed, fit. Let’s drink tonight and see if we can make this work.”

The ad wasn’t the only one of its kind.

“Rent negotiable or open to alternate payment ideas.”

“Free rent for a female that is willing to play the roll (sic) of a wife.”

The Vancouver men posting these ads don’t always say it outright, but their intent is clear: sexual favours instead of rent.

The ads have become common over the past year or so as Vancouver’s housing prices have skyrocketed, leaving more people in search of rental accommodations. Rentals have become expensive and scarce, and people are looking for roommates to offset the cost. The ads have also appeared on classified sites in other cities with hot housing markets, such as San Francisco, New York and Auckland, N.Z.

The fact that the ads have left the personals section of sites such as Craigslist and are appearing alongside legitimate appeals for roommates adds to the concern.

“It’s taking advantage of the fact that this is a terrible market in which to find reasonably priced living space — it’s very low vacancy rates and very high rents,” said Janine Benedet, a professor at the University of B.C.’s Peter A. Allard School of Law.

Benedet classified the ads as soliciting prostitution and said that under current law — specifically Sec. 286.1 of the Criminal Code, which deals with the commodification of sexual activity — offering to provide accommodation in exchange for sex is illegal.

“New criminal laws make it illegal to pay for sex. It’s a way of paying for sex,” she said.

Not only does she consider the ads illegal, she said they could also run afoul of provincial human rights laws and constitute sexual harassment.

“It’s not simply a mutual sexual relationship where they share accommodation,” Benedet said. “It leaves individuals in a very vulnerable position if they need to submit to sexual acts they otherwise wouldn’t want to keep a roof over their head.”

Samantha Grey, spokeswoman for Vancouver Rape Relief and Women’s Shelter, said the organization has long been aware of men using Craigslist for prostitution. She said the tactic of trading housing for sexual services is a relatively new way to exploit women, but not out of the ordinary.

“I think these ads are appearing on Craigslist as a way for men to use their power, their access to housing, as a way to exploit women’s economic desperation,” Grey said. “We’re in a housing crisis, women are in poverty.”

Particularly at risk are young people and recent immigrants who don’t have the English skills to decipher the true meaning of the ads.

While most people see the underlying message in the ads, Const. Brian Montague, spokesman for the Vancouver Police Department, said that the ads

technically aren't illegal because of the way they are worded.

The men most often couch their intention by saying they are looking for "a companion," a roommate to share their bed or "a part-time assistant" to do massages.

"We can all imply what they mean, but obviously police can't arrest people based on assumptions," Montague said.

A Province reporter contacted a few of the men who placed ads, and posed as a woman looking for a room. When asked to elaborate on the arrangement the men were seeking, they didn't shy away from the question.

"OK, to the point," said one. "Are you OK with giving erotic massages?"

Another responded that he wanted "someone that is willing and loves to have some sexy time with no strings attached. Honestly, we both stay independent, but have fun as friends. Bottom line, a roomie with benefits."

Montague said that if police received a complaint about a possible crime that involved an ad, they would look into it, but proactively investigating the ads is not a priority for police.

"We have to prioritize everything," he said. "Do we put resources into Craigslist ads for people who are looking for free rent for sexual favours, or do we put those resources into sex predators who are online fishing for children and young people?"

Montague's advice is to ignore ads that offer free rent in exchange for questionable activities.

"These situations can turn very strange or very violent or very inappropriate very quickly, because you don't know who you're dealing with. You don't know who these people are," he said.

Benedet said another simple solution is to flag the ads on whatever site is hosting them.

"Craigslist should not be advertising prostitution and it should not be posting ads for people who are seeking to do things that are against the law," Benedet said.

twitter.com/jensaltman