

occupational health and safety concerns in the legal Nevada brothels

By Magdalene Meretrix

Prostitution is illegal everywhere in the United States of America except in the government-licensed brothels in the state of Nevada. There are over thirty licensed brothels throughout the state, ranging from tiny two worker establishments like the Shady Lady to the giants like Madam Kitty's, The Chicken Ranch and Sage Brush with thirty or more bedrooms filled with workers. Since the Nevada government legalized prostitution on Christmas Day, 1970, business has been booming – the Nevada brothels collectively gross an estimated 13 million U.S. dollars per year from the visits of roughly 350,000 customers.

A second law was passed in 1971 that proscribed the licensing of brothels in counties with populations in excess of 400,000 in order to keep prostitution away from the tourist towns of Reno and Las Vegas. There are four levels of prostitution laws: federal, state, county and municipal. Due to the variety of laws as well as the individual brothel owners and management, it is important to remember that conditions vary,

sometimes dramatically, from establishment to establishment.

Health Considerations

One of the most obvious occupational health concerns for prostitutes is sexually transmitted disease. The state of Nevada believes that it has solved that problem by passing laws requiring regular blood tests and pap smears and mandating the use of condoms for all sexual contact. The fact that no cases of HIV seroconversion have occurred in the legal brothels is often presented as evidence of the efficacy of the mandatory testing and condom laws.

While the low STD rate is definitely laudable, it is questionable whether the current practices are as beneficial as a program of education would be. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control's most recent HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report cites no proven cases of HIV transmission from prostitutes (legal and illegal combined) to clients. The U.S. Department of Health estimates that all prostitution (legal and illegal combined) is responsible for only 3% to 5% of STD



Sheri's Ranch in Southern Nevada

transmission (compared to teenagers who are responsible for 30% to 35% of STD transmission).

With such low transmission rates, mandatory condom usage coupled with a mandatory education program for legal prostitutes should be more than sufficient as well as being less expensive and intrusive than weekly STD tests. If the burden of testing were reduced to a monthly level rather than a weekly level it would reduce the financial burden of the workers by over \$1000/year while still providing an added incentive for workers to protect their health. It is readily apparent that Nevada prostitutes are in greater need of quality safer sex education, which puts control of the worker's health in her own hands, than weekly testing which allows her to be a passive bystander in regards to her own health.

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During my time working in the Nevada brothels, I encountered otherwise intelligent women who maintained dangerous safe sex beliefs. Some women believed that two condoms used simultaneously were safer than one condom. Some women were confused about the difference between lubrications, believing that KY Jelly (a single-insertion medical lubricant) was a sufficient lubrication or exhibiting no knowledge of what “water-based” means or why it is important to use a water-based lubricant. Many women believed that they could not get an STD from receiving unprotected oral sex. Mandatory testing will not protect a worker if a condom breaks due to improper usage whereas proper education can prevent that breakage altogether.



Chicken Ranch in Southern Nevada

Workplace Security

Another important safety issue in the Nevada brothels is worker security. What safeguards are available to protect the worker from violence? In Lyon County, brothels are required to surround their property with a fence no shorter than six feet tall, equipped with a buzzer and a locking device that can be opened remotely from within the brothel. Because this is not a state law, most brothels outside of Lyon County are not fenced. (Lyon County currently contains four of the Nevada brothels.) While

these fences do deter the average troublemaker, I witnessed three events while I worked in Nevada that proved that fences and door buzzers are only as effective as the security personnel.

On two occasions, a man climbed over the security fence. In one case the man was spotted and thwarted but in the other case, the man was able to gain entry through a rear door that had been carelessly left unlocked. On the third occasion, a man who had already gained entry through normal channels physically assaulted a worker in her room and walked calmly out the front door, gestured that he needed the gate opened and walked out when another customer pushed the security button for him.

This last, most troubling, incident clearly indicates the need for appropriate staff security training. That particular brothel did not have a designated security guard (though other brothels have employed security staff) because the owner believed that visible security guards would spoil the “party atmosphere” of the brothel. In addition to an authorized security guard, the non-security staff needs to be trained in basic skills. In the case of the in-brothel assault, the perpetrator could have easily been detained if a staff member had noticed that he returned to the parlor from the private room area without a worker. Brothel staff should be constantly vigilant about customers attempting to enter or leave the private area without a worker.

Some brothels have room intercoms that link to a central office. Many workers and customers complain about these intercom systems, saying that

they feel inhibited at the thought of an office worker listening to them having sex. The workers who dislike the intercoms should re-think their position because, intrusive though they may seem, the intercoms can save their lives, especially in combination with the “panic button.” A panic button is a button found either on the face of the intercom or sometimes on the bed frame. When a worker pushes the panic button, a light and alarm go off in the central office. Turning on the intercom while alerting staff can inform security personnel of what sort of situation they’re entering.

It is crucial that these panic buttons, their connected lights and alarms and the intercoms, if present, be kept in good repair. At one brothel, we workers discovered that the lights and alarms connected to the panic buttons were broken. Discussions with management led to the repair of the system, but there’s no telling how long the brothel workers went without security measures before one worker noticed the breakdown. The panic button system can make the difference between life and death for a worker.

Both workers and staff can be trained to prevent a potentially dangerous situation before it starts. Training programs, underwritten by the government or by brothel owners, are sorely needed. Workers need to be trained in conflict management – how to recognize a dangerous or excessively intoxicated client, how to attempt to effectively talk their way out of a situation and how to physically defend themselves against an opponent, especially a larger opponent.

Staff need to be trained in self-defense measures as well as to

turn away dangerous or intoxicated clients before they reach the workers. At a brothel where I worked, the staff allowed me to take a customer to my room even though they knew that he had tried to choke other workers. Not surprisingly, the customer tried to choke me and had to be subdued with a combination of self-defense measures and the panic button in my room. This is unacceptable. Staff should be instructed to remember abusive clients and refuse them entry.

While it seems obvious to take measures to assist the staff and workers to protect themselves against drunk and dangerous clients, it's easy to overlook the security problems related to infighting. The competition and workplace stress of brothel work often combine to create an explosive atmosphere. The rambling halls and doors with no locks provide an environment well suited to ambush. Excessive drug and alcohol use among the workers can exacerbate antagonistic behavior. Protecting the workers from one another is perhaps the most complex tasks of brothel management and often the least considered task as well.

There are no easy answers to infighting, but a few steps

management can take are to watch the workers for signs of prolonged intoxication and take measures to provide a drug-free workplace in a manner that infringes on the worker's free-time outside the brothel as little as possible. Dealing with the aftermath of infighting is equally important. When I was attacked by a co-worker, I was offered the option of pressing charges against my colleague from the inside of a jail cell or dropping charges and going to the emergency room for medical treatment. I was told that this is the standard policy in Lyon County: if two brothel workers have a fight, either both go to jail or both go free no matter the circumstances of the conflict. This is an unacceptable and inhumane way to treat workers. The choice between pressing charges and receiving medical attention is not a real choice.

Workplace Stress

Many avoidable factors contribute to unnecessary and excessive workplace stress in Nevada brothels. One prime contributor is the long hours workers are required to serve. In some brothels, workers are "on the clock" all the time – that is, so long as there are potential

customers in the parlor, all workers are required to be in the parlor entertaining them and attempting to entice them to partake of services in the private area. Other brothels allow their workers to work shifts but most of these aren't much better as the required shift is twelve hours long and fourteen hours on weekends. This creates a 64 to 88 hour workweek that quickly becomes intolerable.

Because brothel management reports the workers as independent contractors, brothel workers have no worker's compensation benefits if they become injured on the job. Brothel workers have no job security, no unemployment benefits and no retirement benefits. But it's questionable as to whether the workers are actually employees or independent contractors. This is an important distinction to make, as the workers currently receive none of the benefits of independent contractor status and none of the benefits of employee status, thus getting the worst of two worlds.

Because there is no government agency charged with overseeing the treatment of the brothel workers, some brothels maintain abusive working conditions. Many women report virtual imprisonment in the brothels. The management will not let the workers leave the brothel without a staff escort unless they are leaving their job altogether. These "lock down" conditions extend to bars on the windows and no telephone privileges over the weekend. Some of the more remotely located brothels grossly overcharge the workers for basic necessities and at least one



Madam Kitty's Fantasy Ranch in Northern Nevada

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confiscates workers' condoms when they arrive and then sells them back to the worker.

As if these working conditions weren't bad enough, it is illegal for the workers to have a romantic relationship on their own time, outside the brothel. Nevada state law (NRS 201.360) declares that:

"A person who [...] lives with or accepts any earnings of a common prostitute, or entices or solicits a person to go to a house of prostitution to engage in sexual conduct with a common prostitute; [...] shall be punished: [...] where no physical force or immediate threat of physical force is used, for a category D felony"

While it can be argued that this law is rarely enforced, the fact that it exists is, at minimum an insult and at maximum, a source of ongoing fear. Officially setting prostitutes aside as a different kind of citizen with restrictions other citizens are not subject to leads to a feeling of resentment and insecurity that increases overall workplace stress.

As can be seen from this brief overview of workplace health and safety issues, improvements are needed and these changes must come from all levels – from the workers themselves through brothel staff and management all the way up to state government. The Nevada brothels are worth saving and improving, however. Despite their flaws, they offer the only legal option for U.S. women who choose to become prostitutes. The biggest improvement overall, though, would be one that increased the workers options, allowing them to work in collectives or independently as well as in the brothels. So long as the brothels

have no legal competition, there is no regulatory or grievance committee and the control of the workplace environment is largely out of the worker's hands, opportunities for abuse will abound.

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Magdalene Meretrix is a Renaissance Woman (if that woman happens to be a Renaissance courtesan, that is.) She is a musician, textile artist, web designer and writer as well as being a 17-years-and-counting veteran of the sex industry. She grew up in the American South and now lives in the foothills where the Sawtooth Mountains kiss the Rockies. Magdalene has a dashing dastardly lover, a mutant deformed cat and a silly grey rat. When she's not having sex, she spends far too much time in front of a computer.