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NEWS REPORT

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With South Australia's prostitution laws stuck between the 1930s and 1950s, our writer finds himself committing an illegal act in a brothel.

IT'S AN ORDINARY looking house at the end of an ordinary looking street in an ordinary Adelaide suburb. You could pass the house 100 times and not give it a second thought. Inside, Roxy is waiting for her 4.30 appointment.

He rings just before the agreed time and is given directions on how to find the small two-bedroom brothel just a short drive from Port Rd in Adelaide's inner west.

Roxy, a tall redhead, is wearing a short black dress and stockings. She applies some last-minute makeup, answers the knock at the door and takes the client to the first room in the house. She re-appears a few minutes later to grab a small bucket of hot water and soap and returns to her client. For \$110, the man receives 30 minutes of Roxy's time, a massage and a "happy ending".

Roxy is frank about how she makes a living. There is no hint of embarrassment. Neither does she conform to any stereotype of the "whore as victim". Roxy knows what she's about to do is illegal, but thinks it's ridiculous. "At the end of the day it's only sex. No one is getting hurt," she says.

While talking to Roxy in the kitchen at the back of the brothel before her client arrives, you would have no idea she was about to do anything out of the ordinary.

She might as well be doing the bloke's tax.

The odd thing about entering a brothel for the first time is the lack of sex appeal. It feels more functional than erotic, and although some of the mood lighting and furniture gives a passing nod to the stereotype of a brothel, it really is a place built for efficiency rather than Pretty Woman-style romantic dreams. There is a dark feel to the building and a slightly funky smell. The aroma is part sweat, part sexual desperation. It would be tough to market as a perfume.

Just being on the premises to speak to Roxy is illegal. Never mind the activity that is taking place in the front room. In South Australia, the laws surrounding the prostitution industry are complex and governed by two pieces of legislation, one written in 1935 and another in 1953. There have been many attempts to change the law, but the divisive nature of the topic means all previous efforts have failed. Five times between 1980 and 2001 legislation was either drawn up, considered or voted on but no change has been agreed on.

But once again the forces, for and against, are gathering and it's likely new legislation will be introduced following the election in March. At least two MPs are considering introducing new Bills if they are reelected next year, and a group of 10 sex workers held a meeting last month to form a lobby group with the aim of forcing the debate back on the public agenda.

SA is the only state or territory that has not updated its prostitution legislation in recent decades. To some extent prostitution is legalised or decriminalised in all other states and territories.

There are no definitive figures on the size of the industry. According to some estimates there are about 100 brothels across the state and between 800 and 1000 people work in the industry in any one year. In Adelaide, a big brothel may have 10 women working on a Saturday night. The vast majority of prostitutes work in escort agencies and brothels. Street work is considered to be a very small component of the overall industry with one estimate saying there are only about 20 regular workers on the street.

Natalie has been a prostitute since she was 19. A product of one of Adelaide's leading private schools, she has recently completed a degree in psychology.

There is nothing about her that would suggest she is a sex worker. On a chilly Adelaide morning she is conservatively dressed in a pink jumper and scarf with ankle-length black skirt. She could be a teacher, a nurse or a doctor.

Natalie, now 24, says she had a happy childhood, went to a good school and is not a drug addict. She became aware of the industry through a relative and thought it would be a good way to make quick money. After starting in massage she graduated to a full service after four months as the money was better and, strange though it sounds, the work was easier.

"I thought I would really struggle with it," Natalie says.

"The thing I struggled with more in my first week was getting undressed in front of someone. But above and beyond that I was quite comfortable." The money was good as well. Natalie worked mainly in a Prospect brothel and would earn about \$2000 a week tax free for five shifts, in which she would see about five clients a day.

But it's a life that naturally involves deception. Natalie's parents don't know and it has cost her friends.

This is not unusual for sex workers. Secrecy is stock in trade. Natalie is not her real name, just as Roxy isn't a real name either. Natalie says changes to the laws would help break down some of the stereotypes that surround the industry.

"There's no such thing as a typical worker. The idea of the short skirt and the stilettos, fishnet stockings is very far from reality. If there was a typical worker it would be a single mum, late 20s early 30s who just wants the flexibility of the work, the good money.

Most of us are pretty educated people actually."

Natalie is now semi-retired from the game. She is putting her psychology degree to use working as a counsellor, but dabbles in sex work when she needs to pay a bill or save for something extra. She has mainly withdrawn for the sake of her boyfriend of three years. He has always known about her work, but Natalie says "I wanted him to feel I was giving him everything". She says she has always managed to distinguish between what is work and what is personal.

In an extension of the deception at which sex workers become adept, she says you differentiate by assuming a different character.

"At work you are someone else, you are another person. You are acting, you are completely and utterly acting," she says. "I am not interested at all in B&D (bondage and discipline) in my personal life, but at work it's a really good way of differentiating again between work and private life. One is pleasing someone else and one is an act of love, it really is. As much as I love and care for the people I work with, the clients, it's very, very separate."

Despite its illegality, the industry exists in a twilight zone, as police have turned a blind eye to brothelbased prostitution. According to numbers gathered by the Office of Crime Statistics and Research, 69 people were apprehended for owning, conducting or managing a brothel in 1999, but over the next seven years only two people were arrested for the same offence. By 2008 the number had crept back up to eight. The sex workers appreciate the lack of police

attention, but there is still a desire to remove the stigma from the work by legitimising the industry.

Ari Reid is the manager of the Sex Industry Network, which is a program of the AIDS Council of SA. She advocates a complete decriminalisation of the industry.

"While you have laws that are criminalising sex workers, regardless of whether the policing is active or less active, it puts sex workers in a really vulnerable position," she says.

Reid has helped co-ordinate the nascent lobby group SWAGGERR (Sex Worker Action Group Gaining Empowerment Rights and Recognition) to help push the debate back in the public domain. "It's not a moral issue anymore. It's happening, it has been happening forever, it's been happening in SA forever. It's something that people have been trying to tackle forever and by pushing it under the carpet you are not doing anything to help sex workers, the general public or anybody." Reid maintains sex work is a job just like any other and deserves the same industrial rights and protections to which any other worker is entitled.

Jay Leisure is a male prostitute in his early 30s (he won't be any more specific) who started working as a 15-year-old in Perth. He has been in Adelaide for the past four years, working from an apartment in the CBD. It's a two-storey affair. Jay's bedroom is upstairs. Downstairs is what he terms his "work space". It's a bedroom, with a double bed, framed Marilyn Monroe posters on the wall and a bowl of condoms on a bedside cabinet.

Jay is hopeful of change. In five years' time he would like sex work to be considered as just another job. "It's a real job where you have to make a certain amount of money each day, meet your targets, get all your washing done, get your advertising in," he says.

He has worked all over Australia and internationally.

In London he was earning \$4500 a week. Forthright and funny, Jay takes great exception to any suggestion he is a victim.

"I am not a victim, no way. Most of the people who work in the industry are empowered that we do this job and make the money we do," he says. "You are in charge of where you are going." He says his clients range across all strata of society, including "policemen and policemen" and the service he offers is similarly diverse. Services start for as little as \$50 and rise to "executive" two or three-hour sessions for \$200 an hour. He hasn't even been affected by the global financial crisis.

Natalie and Jay both appear to be people in control of their own destiny and comfortable with the decisions they have made. Yet clearly, it's a business with a dark side. Most enter it for financial reasons rather than as a career strategy, and there are casualties.

In Perth, Linda Watson runs a half-way house for workers looking to leave the industry. A prostitute and madam herself for almost 20 years, she left the business in 1997 and now says about 20 women a week come to her for help. "In my years of working with women in the sex industry I have seen the damage the life brings to the people," she says. "You end up in a world that is not really real. You don't know where you belong or why you belong in it. You know you have damaged yourself and you think you deserve to stay here because you are not worthy of anything good any more."

Now 54, Watson advocates a total criminalisation of the industry. And she would go further. She wants police to set up cameras outside known brothels and for the pictures of clients to be placed on the internet.

It's an extreme solution. But much of the prostitution debate is framed by extreme examples. There is no middle ground. And it can be a violent world, even if not in the stereotypical view that would have the workers as victims of their clients.

Natalie believes law reform will improve health and safety for the workers as many, herself included, are scared to report crimes to the police because they don't think they will be treated seriously. Almost three years ago, Natalie was sexually assaulted by an acquaintance at a nightclub. The assault was not work-related but she dropped the charges after learning her work history would be read out in court.

A study released last year by the Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests Natalie's experience is disturbingly common. The AIFS noted a 1991 survey in which prostitutes experienced rape and sexual assault at much higher rates than health workers and students who were used as a basis for comparison.

The study found that of 128 sex workers surveyed, 46.9 per cent were victims of rape. This compared with 21.9 per cent of health workers and 12.7 per cent of students. Often the attackers were aware their targets were sex workers and, in part, the survey concluded it was based "on the perception that sex workers have forfeited their right to sexual autonomy". However, the same study also found that the risk of violence to a worker was dependent on which form of prostitution was undertaken. A Queensland survey found 60 per cent of street workers had been raped while working, compared with only 3 per cent of those who worked in a brothel.

In Adelaide, street prostitution is mainly confined to one area in Adelaide's western suburbs and is subject to occasional police operations. In 2004, a survey by police of 19 street prostitutes backed the view that it was the most dangerous form of sex work. Of those interviewed by the police, the average age was 32, all claimed a drug dependency, 68 per cent said they had a communicable disease and 68 per cent said they had been victims of violence.

Attorney-General Michael Atkinson agrees existing laws against prostitution are ineffective and believes they should be altered, but he has no plans to introduce any changes as he says there is "no chance" Parliament will pass new legislation. He points to a "conspicuous lack of success" in other states that have decriminalised or legalised prostitution and says the current law is "probably less harmful" than the models used elsewhere.

Atkinson, though, has previously tried to change the law. As part of the 2001 debate he introduced his own private member's Bill that would allow an exemption for sole operators to continue but clamp down on the rest of the industry and its clients. It failed after receiving only six votes in the lower house, but Atkinson still believes it would be a worthwhile reform. "My view is the greatest vice in the sex industry is the master/ servant relationship. I don't like people employing the girls. I would rather the girls worked for themselves under their own terms and conditions," he says.

Prostitution has been one of the few areas where the Government has failed to accede to the police wishes for law reform, again highlighting the political sensitivity of the area. Police Commissioner Mal Hyde has twice called for the law to be changed. In 2003 he said the legislation was "antiquated and ineffective".

"The moral issue about whether or not prostitution is criminalised or decriminalised is not one for us," he said at the time. "All we ask is whichever way it goes there is an effective regime that we can manage with."

Despite the obstacles, ALP backbencher Steph Key is considering introducing a private member's Bill to decriminalise the sex industry. Key, a former Rann Government minister, is clearly passionate about cases she defines as "equal opportunity and antidiscrimination issues". "Assuming I do win my seat and we get back into Government, we will have to talk about what the tactics might be," she says. "Obviously, I would be trying to get support from whoever is in Cabinet, but ultimately I think it will be a private member's Bill." Key raised the topic with colleagues after the 2006 election, but was quietly told to file it away for another day. "I was told by a couple of ministers, who I won't mention, that this was not a core issue at the moment."

And this will be the problem again. It's political plutonium with the potential to stir up fierce debate and emotion from partisans on both sides. Adding to the unpredictability of the debate is that both major parties allow a conscience vote on the issue, meaning the usual party disciplines will be abandoned and some unusual alliances will spring up.

On the other side of the spectrum, Family First's Robert Brokenshire is in favour of toughening up the law to give police greater powers to crack down on prostitution. "We say give the police the powers to do their job," he says. "Give them very clear and concise powers and the minute they suspect they just go in with a warrant and shut it down."

But Brokenshire has been here before. He was the police minister in the last Liberal Government, before converting to Family First, who introduced the four different reform Bills that failed to pass in 2001. He knows how difficult changing the law will be. "You either support or accept prostitution or you fight against prostitution. It's polarised and in a polarised situation in the Parliament you haven't got a lot of middle ground," he says.

Helen Vicqua has been lobbying for reform for 25 years. The former drama teacher is as passionate about forcing change as ever, but admits she is tired of the fight and tired of politicians. She has chaired the AIDS Council of SA, was secretary of the Prostitutes' Association of SA and believes the current laws are "demeaning to all women". "The most important thing is the women are safe and they can live in dignity. People say hookers are selling their bodies, but so are miners and gardeners and tree loppers they are selling their bodies. Their jobs are not possible without their bodies."

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