



HUMAN TRAFFICKING WORKING GROUP

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NEWS REPORT

Headline	The women behind our sex industry: New laws on prostitution by the Barnett Government in 2010 will put the spotlight on a taboo topic.
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CLEARING the lip-gloss from the corners of her mouth, Kate* perfects her make-up, ready for the start of her shift. She is dressed in jeans, an off-the-shoulder top and a tartan belt. Her gaze wanders around the room as she fidgets with her blouse.

It is 11.45pm on a Saturday. She is sitting in her boss's chair, on the second level of the Langtrees brothel in Burswood, shielded only by the mountain of paperwork strewn across the desk.

In a nervous, but frank interview, she admits she is tired -- tired of giving her body to any man who walks through the door. But most of all, she is tired of taking on all their thoughts and concerns.

"This is the only job that exhausts you physically, mentally and emotionally because you're just giving so much," she said. "You're giving everything. You're not just giving them your opinions and thoughts, but you're giving them your body."

"Some clients are so cool and easy and every now and then you'll get a guy and you'll have really strong sexual chemistry with him and it's wicked sex. But a lot of the guys are just so draining -- you become like a therapist. You take it all on."

Langtrees has provided a rare insight into the profession as the dimly-lit rooms of Perth's brothels prepare to come under the spotlight with the drafting of new laws.

After repealing the former Labor government's legislation, the Barnett Government is poised to overhaul the way prostitution is governed when young women like Kate enter the industry.

At 22, Kate turned to sex work after walking out on an abusive boyfriend with nothing more than a bag of belongings for her baby girl and the clothes on their backs.

Her early memories as a prostitute are hazy. She admits she was initially "numb" to the side-effects because she was "high all the time on speed".

Now she is approaching her 31st birthday and celebrating five years of being clean, but the toll on her body is obvious. In her own words, "the human body wasn't designed to have as much sex as we have".

On a "good"night, she will see five or six men in an eight-hour shift. On a "bad" night, just one or two.

"I think it's just like any other job," she said. "You have your good points and your bad points. I like the fact that I can come in and get to meet new people. I work with great girls, the hours are flexible so those things are good. But, like, there are negatives. It puts a lot of wear and tear on your body."

Except for a four-year break during a relationship, Kate has only ever known the sex industry. Her mum, brothers and sisters, along with all her close friends, know what she does for a living and support her unconditionally.

But her chosen profession remains a secret to the person who matters most in her life -- her nine-year-old daughter. She says she will tell her everything one day, but only when she is mature enough to understand.

Setting her daughter up for a life that she never had is easy, but Kate seems to go blank when asked where she sees herself in the future.

“You know, I really don't know,” she said. “Yeah, I've been thinking about that a lot just lately, hey, because I can't do this for ever. But I'm just not sure what I want to do. When I first started it was supposed to be six months and that was years and years ago. I don't know.”

Unlike Kate, Sarah* is new to the industry.

After just six months, she has taken a genuine liking to the work. Her self-confidence is flourishing and she can't recall a time when she felt more in control.

Speaking over the phone, Sarah describes herself as a “plump sized girl or average size 14” who has not always been comfortable in her own skin.

In fact, the 33-year-old recalls a time when her self-esteem was so battered after the breakdown of her marriage that she did not believe she was worthy of anything.

She struggled with her identity and fought hard to find a job that would restore her independence. It was only when her son, aged in his early teens, required urgent medical treatment that she realised she had run out of time.

She had worked before in government departments, hospitality and dental nursing -- and actually moved to WA in pursuit of a lucrative mining job.

But when the economic downturn hit, any chance of employment in the resources sector was shattered.

Flicking through the newspaper, she stumbled across an ad in the personal section.

Within weeks she had entered the sex industry -- which offers salaries “better than the average professional woman” -- and started working as a prostitute at Langtrees in Burswood.

“I turned to the industry to make money to support a normal lifestyle and since I've started, I've never looked back,” Sarah said. “I think the industry has a lot to offer. I don't feel like I'm being exploited, I don't feel like I'm being used. I feel like I'm in control. I feel there's a market out there where people are genuinely lonely and want comfort.”

As a newcomer to prostitution, Sarah said she shared many of the misconceptions society holds.

“People think if you work in this industry, you're on drugs or you come from a broken home, or you have a criminal record. I'm not a drug addict. I don't even smoke cigarettes,” she said.

“I enjoy doing it. I was really shocked how easy and relaxed it is. At the end of the night I don't have a problem with it because I am providing a service that they want -- they're coming to me, I'm not walking the streets, I'm not breaking up marriages.”

Langtrees owner Beverly Clarke is a hard-working businesswoman and could be sitting in any other office in Perth, were it not for the 14 working rooms downstairs.

A portrait of cricket spin-king Shane Warne hangs on the wall, while her desk overlooks busy Burswood Rd. A graphic artwork she proudly boasts as her youngest son's creation dangles near the door. Her desk is littered with job application forms.

Fussing with her dark hair, she shifts her glasses between her head and nose as she checks emails and takes a call from a member of the public who has arrived to view erotic photographs of some of the girls.

Open 24 hours a day, Langtrees has about 65 girls on the books, working five eight-hour shifts a week on average.

Clients can opt for sessions of between 30 minutes and an hour, with a standard service including massage, sensual massage and sexual intercourse. Kissing and other extras cost more.

“It's not all married men we see,” Ms Clarke said, keen to unravel some of the most common misconceptions. “We see a variety of people -- from fly-in, fly-out mine workers who don't have time to hold down a relationship, to single guys who come in for a bit of fun with their mates.

“We also have some intellectually and physically disabled men because everyone has a sexual need. I think it's amazing how some of our ladies treat these guys and I think they don't get paid enough for that.”

She said the standard service was designed to minimise the impact on the woman's body, mindful of the fact that prostitution should not be seen as a long-term career.

Among a diverse range of sex workers, Ms Clarke said she had single mothers, university students and girls who simply enjoyed sex. Each was required to have regular health checks, monitor clients for symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases and practise safe sex.

“It's a friendly, non-threatening environment and people are free to come and go as they please -- that includes the ladies and the clients,” she said.

A University of WA commerce graduate, Ms Clarke has never been a sex worker and makes it clear she should not be classed as a “madam”.

She spent more than 20 years working in the corporate world before she “fell into” the job of running WA's biggest brothel chain.

“In December 2000, I was diagnosed with advanced cancer,” she said. “I wasn't expected to live and I did, so when it came time for me to go back to work, I could only handle two hours a day, a couple of times a week. One of my friends was doing the website for (former Langtrees madam) Maryanne Kenworthy and said she needed help.”

Initially refusing to apply because of a “typical naive, narrow-minded view” that the sex industry exploited women, the 54-year-old mother of two agreed to put her moral judgments aside and see for herself. Starting off a couple of days a week soon turned into the company's internal accountant, before the opportunity arose to take over from Ms Kenworthy.

After watching successive governments try and fail to regulate the sex industry, she insists advertising is the key and each business should be forced to quote its licence number before an advertisement can be placed.

“You can't drive an industry underground that relies on advertising for its very existence,” she said.

Warning about the explosion of prostitution into residential areas, Ms Clarke boasts that her establishment operates at best standards, but other so-called Asian houses and makeshift brothels were putting women at risk.

“(In some places) girls live, eat, sleep and work on the premises,” she said. “That's OK if they've got a nice environment in which to sleep, it's not a working room and they actually have clean towels and sheets after every sex service. My main ambition is to regulate the industry so everyone is working to the same standards -- we're a service industry, we just happen to be in the service of sex, so let's meet that need in a safe, controlled environment.”

Without meaningful discussion with the sex industry, she said, the Government would fail. And she finds it hard to believe that anyone will ever truly tackle the issue.

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It is a sentiment shared by WA Local Government Association president Bill Mitchell, who says he “will be amazed if they do anything in the life of this Government”.

A WALGA representative sits on the State Government's working group, set up to investigate new laws, along with WA Police, the WA Planning Commission and the departments of the Attorney-General, Health, and Racing and Gaming.

Mr Mitchell says the group has met “a couple of times” but he cannot understand why the former Labor government's plan to regulate 38 existing brothels was dumped. Prostitution will “go on no matter what” and unless the industry is regulated, it merely goes underground, he said.

“I don't sense any urgency in progressing the legislation,” he said. “I don't think it's a priority. We thought the previous government's legislation was quite sensible.”

According to Stephen Plecas, who manages the Magenta sex worker support service in WA, the legal status of sex workers and the industry in general is the greatest challenge that needs to be overcome. He said that when drafting any form of legislation, the health and safety of workers and their clients should be paramount. While most established brothels were strict on practising safe sex, Mr Plecas said he was always shocked at increasing reports of clients asking for “natural”.

“One of the biggest issues is the number of workers who claim that clients are asking for sex without protection,” he said. “It's a persistent and pervasive issue -- some workers say just about every second or every third client tries to negotiate sex without a condom.”

Attorney-General Christian Porter says the State Government is committed to developing new prostitution laws “as a first-term priority”. Though the legislation is still being developed, he expects to create designated zones where brothels would be legal.

Mr Porter also wants to give police the powers they need to act on complaints from members of the public and prosecute individuals engaging in “unpermitted prostitution”.

For Ms Clarke, the changes could not come soon enough. She said regulation would provide security for sex workers, who should only ever turn to the industry for short-term financial gain.

“We encourage our girls to have something after this,” she said. “We don't want them to end up being my age and all they have to show for it is an extensive wardrobe and a large collection of shoes.”

* Names have been changed to protect identities

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