

THE DARK SIDE OF NEVADA

UNDERSTANDING TRAFFICKING IN THE DOMESTIC LEGAL SEX INDUSTRY

I lived next to the madam of one of the brothels in Nevada for three years. In our small town of 8,000 people, she groomed and preyed on young, vulnerable girls. She was allowed to set up tables at the high school on Career Day as a tax-paying business luring these youths into the commercial sex industry. She targeted virgin girls in particular. On the day a girl turned 18, the brothel would host an event where men were given paintball guns and the girl would run through the desert. The first man to tag her would get to take her virginity.

Brittany Dunn, COO & Co-Founder of Safe House Project

TRAFFICKING IN THE LEGAL SEX TRADE

Sex trafficking refers to the inducement of an individual to perform commercial sex acts through force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform the sex acts is not yet eighteen years old.

When we look at the definition of sex trafficking, the criminality of the activities is clearly defined and the harmfulness to society is obvious. Individuals being forced to participate in sexual activity against their will, particularly when those activities involve children, is openly agreed to be criminal.

When we consider the legal domestic sex trade, however, this distinction between wrong and right can seem more ambiguous. Where is the line between paying an individual for sex and coercing them to participate? Are there protections for sex workers that ensure their consent and willingness? Is sex work really just like any other job? These kinds of questions complicate the discussion and make it difficult to understand the industry as a whole.

In this article, we will look at the ways in which the legal sex trade and sex trafficking intersect. For a more comprehensive discussion on the dark side of the legal sex trade in Nevada, watch Safe House Project's webinar [here](#).

LOSS OF CHOICE FORCE, FRAUD, & COERCION

In parts of Nevada, the sex trade has been legal for over fifty years. While most individuals working in brothels in past years have been from places other than Nevada, there has been a distinct shift to local women secretly working in brothels.

How do these women end up in the legal sex trade? According to professionals who interact closely with sex workers in Nevada, most women are recruited in similar ways to sex trafficking survivors and truly should be considered trafficking victims themselves.

Many women are driven to sex work by the promise of payment and desperation to survive. Without professional skills or the ability to work a traditional job, women may be forced to participate in legal sex work simply to provide for themselves or their dependents. According to the legal definition of sex trafficking, any element of force involved in persuading an individual to engage in commercial sex activities qualifies as trafficking. When an individual sees sex work as the only viable option to make enough money to survive, there is a fundamental factor of force considered in that decision. In fact, many women who want to leave legal institutions like brothels are told they owe money and legal action will be taken against them. The similarity between forced sexual activity through trafficking and the legal sex trade is undeniable.

It is also important to consider the element of fraud in an individual's decision to enter the legal sex trade. Particularly for survivors of sexual abuse or assault, brothels can appear to be a safer and more prosperous way to support themselves. In reality, women working in brothels are sold to buyers looking to fulfill violent fantasies who do not consider physical harm to be outside the boundary of legality. These women face legitimate threats to their safety each day, even though they are often promised protection, support, and shelter before they begin working. The reality of legal sex work is rarely presented to

prospective workers and often definitively qualifies as fraudulent.

Lastly, the element of coercion in convincing an individual to work in the legal sex trade aligns with the legal definition of sex trafficking. Women decide to enter the sex trade for a variety of reasons, but many of these reasons hold an inherent aspect of coercion. Whether through the request of a spouse or boyfriend, the emotional manipulation of a pimp, or the destruction of self-worth through previous experiences, a large number of individuals participating in the sex trade were convinced to do so through the pressure of another person or situation. Once they are working in the sex trade, it is incredibly common for madams, pimps, or proprietors of the brothels to emotionally abuse the women, which serves as a valuable method for coercing them into continuing to work there.

The connection between the legal definition of sex trafficking and the methods used to induce individuals to participate in the legal sex trade is also abundantly clear. It is vitally important to consider these elements of force, fraud, and coercion when entering the conversation about the domestic legal sex trade.

LOSS OF AUTONOMY FANTASY, VIOLENCE, & THE INABILITY TO REFUSE

On a basic level, legal brothels sell the opportunity to perform sexual acts that are otherwise unavailable without limits or accountability. Because it is legal to purchase sex, buyers are able to commit whatever kinds of violent acts or abuse they choose in the context of a brothel.

Nearly all repeat buyers in the legal sex trade are also addicted to pornography. There is an abundance of recent research on the connection between pornography and an individual's desire for novelty, which results in the consumption of pornography that steadily increases in violence and intensity. There is also a well-documented link between the consumption of pornography and real-world violence against women. Even by the lowest estimates, [1 in 3 porn videos](#) depicts sexual violence or aggression, and [reports by women who have experienced sexual assault](#) increasingly show that the violence against them was inspired or influenced by previous pornography consumption.

When the link between pornography and violence is so clear, it is little wonder that sex workers experience so much physical harm at the hands of their customers. The legalization of purchasing sex inevitably leads to buyers seizing the opportunity to reenact the scenes they have seen in pornography. Because porn inherently requires escalation to provide novelty, repeat buyers at

legal sex institutions are far more likely to both consume extreme pornography and desire similar experiences with a sex worker.

Another consideration in this conversation of violence and fantasy concerns sex workers' freedom to refuse consent to sexual acts without retribution. It is common practice in brothels to provide workers with a panic button, which brings the question of freely given consent to light. If workers are truly willing to perform these sex acts for payment, there would be no need for panic buttons or emergency response plans. Even as they are being considered for purchase, sex workers must balance their need to be chosen for the money and their need to remain physically safe. As mentioned previously, it can be very difficult for sex workers to decide to leave and they may be threatened with legal action they simply cannot afford. Unfortunately, it is usually just accepted that the violent and dehumanizing fantasies of buyers must be catered to in order to continue working in the legal sex trade.

LOSS OF DIGNITY DEHUMANIZATION, SHAME, & DESPERATION

In Nevada, individual counties are responsible for deciding to legalize the sex trade. There have been several occasions in recent years when this decision has come to a public vote and been upheld by the voters as a whole. People often explain their support for legal prostitution with the belief that it is safer and more empowering for sex workers, or simply that it is acceptable because it is being taxed. Many people hold to the belief that legalization means protection, and that because something is legal it cannot be harmful. This approach to the legal sex trade completely disregards the experiences of sex workers themselves, as well as the effect on society as a whole.

The very nature of prostitution is dehumanizing and takes advantage of shame and desperation. Buyers openly recognize that sex workers are not participating in sex acts out of willingness, but rather out of need, and report that this does not bother them because their purchases are legal. Additionally, it is not a habit for most people to wonder if the people serving them enjoy it. For example, people generally do not wonder if their plumber likes his job. When sex work is legalized, it provides an excuse for buyers to completely disregard the comfort, willingness, and consent of sex workers. Buyers report that this sense of entitlement extends even to situations in which they suspect that a sex worker has been trafficked.

The idea that legal sex work is empowering for workers simply does not align with the reality of their experiences. They are

dehumanized and shamed by buyers, employers, and society as a whole, regardless of the circumstances that resulted in their presence at legal sex institutions.

For fifty years, the sex trade has been legal in the state of Nevada, depending on individual counties. Residents report that the general public is comfortable with the idea of legal prostitution and even gives deference to buyers. This acceptance is attractive to sex traffickers, who often use legal brothels as partners in their activities. Nevada is the highest-ranking state in the nation for the prevalence of illegal commercial sexual activity even with the legality of brothels, and ranks in the top ten states for trafficked and exploited youth. Multiple case studies have found that legalized prostitution leads to higher rates of sex trafficking.

From the experiences of sex workers to the negative effects on society, the legalization of sex work and brothels reflects the harmful and destructive qualities of sex trafficking. Workers are often induced to participate through methods identical to those used by traffickers and physically, emotionally, and sexually abused in similar ways to survivors of sex trafficking. Because the purchase of sex is legal in parts of Nevada, the protections and services available to survivors in other places in the country are stripped from sex workers. The combination of money, fantasy, and the law has rebranded the discussion of legal sex work beyond the reality of the experiences and trauma of the workers themselves. It is past time to recognize that the inherent loss of choice, autonomy, and dignity from sex workers makes the concept of legalization in the sex trade a slap in the face to the value of individual lives.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Understanding Trafficking Within the Domestic Legal Sex Industry](#), Safe House Project Webinar
- [Nevada's Commercial Sex Trade](#), Awaken Reno
- [5 Studies That Show How Often Porn Normalizes Violence Against Women](#), Fight the New Drug
- [Exploring the Connection Between Pornography and Sexual Violence](#), U.S. Department of Justice

