

Ways Life as a Street Prostitute is Nothing Like You Expect

As a society, we have a weird relationship with prostitutes. Clearly there's a massive demand for what they do (and who knows how many more would participate if it were legal), yet we tend to treat the sex workers themselves like vermin. That's odd, considering that if there is ever a victim in the whole thing, it's the prostitutes themselves -- and that's only if they're doing it against their will. Otherwise, who are we angry at?

A year ago, we spoke to a woman who worked in a legal brothel, and many readers pointed out that her experience is hardly typical, since only one U.S. state has legal prostitution. So this time, we're taking a look at the other side: we sat down with Sarah (a street walker in a major American city), Mary (a small-town Alaskan brothel worker), Luke (a San-Francisco-based male prostitute), Meredith (an escort), and Ted (a male prostitute from Quebec). Here's what we learned:

People -- and the Culture in General -- Treat You Like garbage

One study done in San Francisco found that 83 percent of prostitutes had been threatened with a weapon, and 82 percent had been physically assaulted. If your line of work can boast similar stats, we're thinking that you're either a trained mercenary or an average European living in the *Taken* universe. One study of prostitutes in Colorado pointed out a death rate many times higher than that of the general population. And that stat isn't due to their love of extreme sports -- half of the deaths in that thirty-year study were murders. Think back to your favorite zany cartoons and video games. What's the most acceptable type of person to kill?

Yes, murdering sex workers is common enough in fiction to have its own TV Tropes page. We're not saying those shows or games are the reason so many prostitutes wind up murdered; we're saying the real murders and our oddly glib attitude about the subject come from the same place: society doesn't see sex workers as human beings.

Mary (the brothel worker we spoke to) saw the same double standard even among actual criminals:

"Sitting next to a girl in a police truck (okay ... handcuffed to a girl), she said, 'Why can't you sit with those other girls? Are you all hookers? That's nasty.' Turns out this amazing woman was caught for animal cruelty ... she starved a Labrador to death, and I'm the nasty one."

Meredith, meanwhile, started off in a strip club. Things like handjobs and allowing some light fingering were extremely common among her co-workers, yet they still considered full-on prostitution to be disgusting and shameful:

"I remember we had parking lot security to keep us safe, and to stop hookers from cruising around to pick up clients as they left the club. Well, one enterprising chick flied the employee parking lot on accident with signs that said 'Looking for a good time? Call Yolanda.' So all my co-workers were just incensed, like, 'That's so disgusting,' and I'm like, dude -- a lot of the shit we do every day would be considered prostitution if we got busted by a cop."

Everyone Has a Different Backstory (and Yes, Some Are Horrifying)

Of the sex workers we talked to, only one had a horror story about how they got into it (and that was Ted, and we'll get to him in a moment). Unless being poor can be considered a horror story; most of them simply needed the money.

For example, Sarah started doing sex work for the same reason many people settle for a McJob: she had lost her old job, and eventually headed for "that" part of town and waited. "Later that night, I had my first client. And I didn't know what to ask for, so I just said '\$50' and he agreed. I made \$200 that night." Luke was the same -- he was living in San Francisco, ran out of money, and decided to put an ad on the Internet. "I had no food in the fridge ... I figure, well, why not? So I posted an ad on craigslist ..."

Mary, on the other hand, didn't even know her massage parlor was a front for prostitution until after she got there, but soon took the pay raise that came with going the, uh, extra mile. Meredith -- the stripper -- wasn't hurting for money, but just got the right offer one night at the club. "He climaxed in about 30 seconds, and then we spent the rest of the hour talking while he rubbed my feet. Then I got \$500 and went home thinking, 'That was easy.'"

But that brings us to Ted. He was addicted to heroin, and couldn't finance his \$150-\$200-a-day habit any other way. Like an estimated 70 percent of prostitutes with drug problems, the problem came first and the screwing dudes for money came later:

"One evening, I was hanging out downtown with my friend/dealer who was gay, and as we walked past a peep show, he told me that with my looks, I could make a lot of money by becoming a 'commercial' [a Montreal term for male prostitute] ... I went inside and it took about ten minutes for a guy to invite me in one of the booths ... I made \$200 the first night."

Ted wasn't gay, but he did like heroin. And in his case, the barrier to starting his career was very low -- the "peep show" was basically a building where men could go to watch porn in private. Ted and his co-workers hung around outside for the chance to be invited into one of these rent-by-the-minute clandestine sex closets. If you're thinking a peep show like that exposes its workers to a significant amount of danger, well, you're absolutely, obviously right. Ted was sexually assaulted on the job:

" ... he just pulled my pants down andstarted. I was considering taking syringes out of my bag and stabbing him, but I knew that wouldn't incapacitate him, and he'd just beat me up, or worse ... when I pulled my pants up, he threw 15 bucks at me -- three five-dollar bills. I can see that image now in my head, it's traumatizing -- but at the time, my only trauma was missing the \$5 I needed to buy drugs. To me, at the time, \$20 would've been worth it because that's what a good dose cost."

We're trying hard not to turn this whole thing into a demand for legalized prostitution (you guys can have that argument among yourselves). But there was an unmistakable running theme in our conversation, which is that the only shitty parts about being a sex worker is the stigma -- remember that people feel free to assault prostitutes because they know they can't or won't go to the cops. Otherwise ...

It's Not Necessarily a Bad Job

In the movies, nothing is quite as soul-destroying as the first time a character has sex for money. There's a swell of sad music, and a tear out of the corner of an eye as she sheds the last of her self-respect -- and yeah, that does happen. Nobody is claiming *Les Misérables* is inaccurate here. But it's not every prostitute's experience, or even the majority experience. A study in Zurich found that 40 percent of sex workers reported enjoying their jobs, which is likely higher than the ratio in the offices or schools in which most of us are reading this article. Another study of sex workers in New Zealand showed no unusual risk of mental illness as a result of on-the-job stress.

Sarah, our street walking source, had a pretty positive first experience:

"He'd just come home from Iraq ... so we'd talk about cartoons and the horrible things he'd seen, and he's telling me all this and he just met me. I think we only had sex one time, and I was there for three hours."

Like any service profession, prostitutes deal with every kind of customer. Some are psychotic lunatics, most just want to get in and out, but there are people you end up having genuine "moments" with. Luke says, "I had a heart attack at the end of December ... the crazy part is, like half my regulars visited me in the hospital. I had a whole bunch of seizures ... so I haven't been able to legally drive for months. And I've had regulars drive me to the grocery store ... they've just been nice guys. I sleep with them for money, but they've been there for me when they didn't have to be."

As for the police, well, only one of our sources had ever gotten busted -- that was Mary, who worked out of a "massage parlor." You'd think that'd be a better cover than standing on a corner, but her "madam" was about as discreet as a fart in an elevator, and that ended up leading the police right to their door. That's when she found that an arrest for prostitution stays with you forever. Once again, it's like being able to categorize someone else as "prostitute" flips a switch in everyone's brains:

"I got a job in the neighboring town as a massage therapist at a spa. I was a manager for a while, and then they did the background check after 18 months and let me go. That bothers me, too -- the ramifications were worse than the actual work. Everyone else around here has a DUI, and I feel like that's a worse charge, but it's more accepted and 'prostitute' is a dirty word."

But even then, ask her if she has been traumatized by her experience, and she says, "The most traumatizing event of my life was not being able to feed my child."

Okay, but aren't these people constantly getting hassled/threatened by their pimps? Well ...

Pimps Are Going Extinct

Of all the jobs to be made obsolete by modern technology, you may not have expected "pimp" to be one of them, unless you believed in some kind of robot pimp apocalypse. But they suffered from the changing times as much as librarians and record store owners. Modern studies increasingly show prostitutes as independent operators, with no pimps making purple-cape money off their hard work.

One study of sex workers in New York City found that only 10 percent had a "market facilitator", which is the resume-friendly term for it. Only Sarah, our inner-city street walker, had any experience with what you'd recognize as a traditional "pimp":

"I'd broken up with my boyfriend at that point, didn't have anywhere else to stay. He [the pimp] didn't want me to use the phone. I tried to get to my clients on my own, he wouldn't let me. I'm independent and I didn't like that. After 24 hours, I convinced four other girls to leave with me, and he dropped us all off where we wanted to go."

Not that these women don't have men in their lives trying to run the show; while traditional pimps weren't common, Sarah did note that unscrupulous boyfriends often got way more involved in their girlfriend's work than could've possibly been healthy:

"Mostly, it was boyfriends who talked them into it. Everybody's boyfriend is waiting in a car. I knew one girl whose boyfriend would walk her to the car and try to introduce her, like it was a playgroup. I ran into very few pimps, but a lot of boyfriends."

We mentioned how Meredith got her start working as a stripper in a club where low-level sex work was extremely common. Management didn't necessarily condone it, but they still played the role of an extremely passive pimp:

"The club overlooked a lot, because if a girl made \$2000 in 'funny money,' the club got 20 percent of it. The club is the third party at that point. They provide the screening and security."

All of that of course goes against everything pop culture taught us, which is that if somebody is a pimp, *they are happy to tell you.*

The Clients Want More Than Sex

Luke mentioned earlier how many of his clients were there for him while he was sick. If that sounds strange, well, maybe this explains it:

"I can't tell you how many times I've gotten down to the real RUBBING and had them go, 'Y'know, let's just talk.' And we mix a drink and talk for an hour. Mostly they talk about their relationships. One of my closest friends started as a client. He smoked, which I was thrilled with, because it meant I could smoke in the house. And he just wanted to talk about how bad his relationship was with his partner. And since then, I've made a very good relationship with both of them."

That's not unusual -- the Johns regularly wind up merely wanting to talk, and so one of the hardest parts of the job isn't dealing with the hardest part of the client; it's making (or faking) an emotional connection with another human being for an extended period of time. Meredith found the whole "feigning intimacy" thing to be even more draining than sex:

"There's this belief that sex workers really love sex. But it's not sex, it's work. After seeing a client, I wouldn't feel like 'I just got laid.' It'd actually make me want to be with my partner more, because I knew what I had with him was real."

In other words, the clients have needs that, for one reason or another, they can't get filled anywhere else. For example, Luke got into the business expecting to mainly service the San Francisco gay community. But he estimates that 50 percent of his clients identify as straight. No, they're not all gay men living in denial -- sometimes married straight dudes also like to get a little strange on the side.

It's a weird and strange world, no doubt. But sex workers are human beings with hopes, dreams, fears, bills, and a daily job to get up for, just like most of us. And while it's ok to be grossed out or deeply offended by the idea of prostitution, seeing the sex workers as somehow less than human, isn't.