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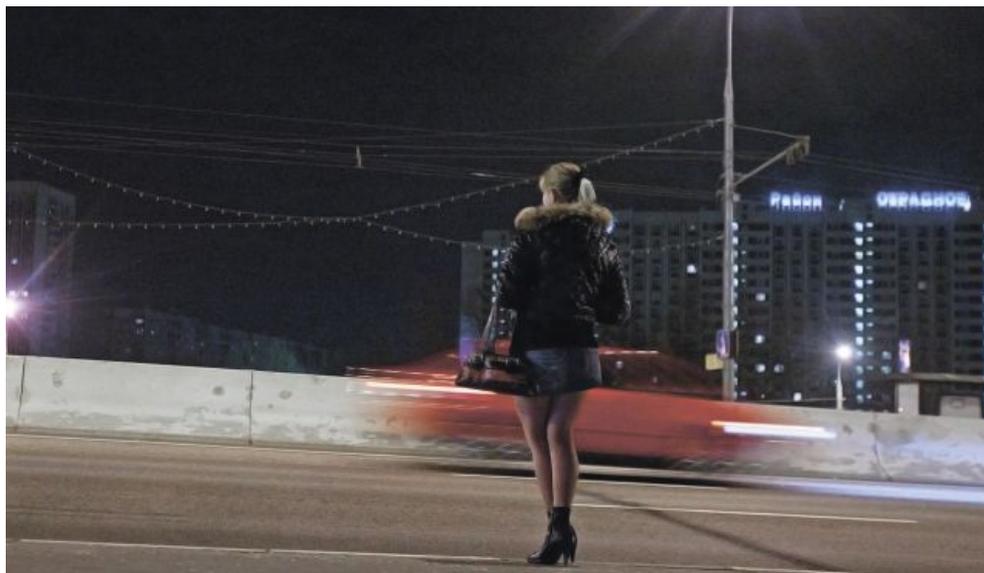
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Meet the Israeli prostitutes who are ready to pay income tax

A women's group seeking to regularize prostitution in Israel says that institutionalizing the world's oldest profession will benefit those working in it.

By Neri Livneh | Jul. 25, 2013 | 1:22 PM | 17

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A prostitute on the street. Exposed to exploitation, disease and violence. Photo by Reuters

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"How should I describe your occupation? Provider of sex services,

prostitution, female escort?” I ask the well-groomed woman sitting opposite me in the office of a religiously observant PR man. My voice reflects a sense of caution, tinged with discomfort. The woman’s outfit looks like it could have come from the ritziest brand-name fashion boutique. For a moment I thought she might have been a candidate for “Meusharot” – the local reality show about ultra-rich women – who didn’t pass the audition. But her articulate, opinionated style of speech showed her to be a very complex personality.

Two hours after our first meeting, I tell myself that it’s been a long time since I encountered an interviewee with such highly developed verbal skills, combining a rich use of language, a sense of humor and indications of what seem to be a broad education.

“Call me a prostitute. That’s what I am and I am proud of it,” the woman says. She asks me to use the fictitious name of Shelly for her because, professional pride aside, she has a child who is in preschool, and teachers and parents might take a dim view of her occupation. But I can’t bring myself to call her a prostitute, even though that is the correct word for the work she does: She makes a living by selling her body to men she doesn’t know for a few hours a day.

“It’s a profession like any other, only better paying,” Shelly says. “Like a teacher, an accountant, a real-estate broker, a secretary. There is something patronizing about the fact that people find it unpleasant to call the profession by its name, as though they will tell me what I can and cannot do, as though they are better than I am.”

Still, in my milieu, people are more likely to curse a woman by calling her a “whore” than by saying “You part-time accountant!”

It was Shelly who initiated our encounter. She had read an op-ed I wrote last March in Haaretz (Hebrew edition) defending Buki Naeh, a former crime reporter, against various allegations by feminist organizations. The latter claimed that the “crime-scene tours” he conducts in Tel Aviv exploit prostitutes and indirectly also abet prostitution. I argued that to the best of my knowledge, no woman chose to be a prostitute so as to be discovered, somewhere down the line, by Naeh and to become famous thanks to him. And anyway, if you want to pursue that line of thought, you can claim that Naeh makes it possible for prostitutes to earn a living not by selling their bodies, but by talking to people.

Suddenly, just as my father, of blessed memory, foresaw in his darkest dreams, I became the friend of the prostitutes, a development I do not take lightly. Indeed, it wasn’t long before Roy Steinmetz, the PR person hired by the Association to Regularize Prostitution in Israel, called me. He wanted me to meet with the head of the association.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

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Angelica, Natalie and Shelly, who says, 'Not one of us fits the common story of the prostitutes who slid into this sort of work. We made a choice.'
Photo by Nir Kafri



Zahava Gal-On at the Knesset.
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MK Orit Zuaretz. Photo by Rami Zarnegar

“Shelly – but that’s a fictitious name,” he replied.

“Why a fictitious name? What is she, a prostitute? No offense, of course,” I said.

Steinmetz confirmed this and added that she heads an organization of about 60 women who work as prostitutes. They seek to regularize their profession and above all to fight the bill submitted by Meretz leader MK Zahava Gal-On and former MK Orit Zuaretz (Kadima), which would make it a crime to buy sex services but not to sell them. If enacted, this legislation – under which not the prostitutes but their clients would be penalized – could eliminate the livelihood of Shelly and her friends.

‘I am at peace’

According to the bill’s underlying logic, if there are no clients there will be no prostitution, and that is an important goal for those who are revolted by the transformation of a woman’s body into an object that provides a service. But Shelly takes a different approach: She is angry at those she calls “the feminists.”

“The feminists are so busy worrying about our supposed rights that they don’t bother to ask what we want,” she explains. “And I ask, where does this patronizing come from? Who gave them the right to decide for me what’s good for me and what isn’t? Why is it that in our case, the struggle for every woman’s right to choose the way to fulfill herself involves shutting us up and forbidding us to talk? The fact is that my friends and I all chose to be prostitutes consciously and without any pressure from others. We all started to work when we were adults; most of us were married, some already mothers. If you check, you will find that not one of us fits the common story of the prostitutes who slid into this sort of work. We did not ‘slide.’ We made a choice. I grew up in a completely normative middle-class home. My parents did not beat me, I wasn’t raped by a relative, I didn’t run away from home, I didn’t use drugs and don’t use them now, and I was already 30 when I decided that prostitution was the most convenient way for me to make a living and see to the family’s well-being.”

Is it possible to make that choice rationally? Tell me about the process of making the decision. You got up one day, spoke with your husband and the two of you decided you would work in prostitution?

“It wasn’t exactly like that, but my husband knows what I do and so does my mother. My husband accepts it completely. My mother is not crazy about it. But I am at peace with myself. Furthermore, I think this work allows me to invest more in my relationship with my partner. A relationship needs to be cultivated and built day by day, and when there is no money for pampering oneself – and economic hardship is the No. 1 reason for divorce – a marriage can be ruined. This way I know that I work a few hours a day, generally in the morning, because I have a child, may be healthy, who is already 3 and a half and was born in the wake of difficult fertility treatments. And thanks to my work, my husband and I can enjoy ourselves. And I say definitely that our relations have improved since I became a prostitute.”

Shelly’s husband is a police officer. He knew about her choice at the time she made it, with his full consent. She was over 30 then (she is now 43), a real estate developer who was in debt because of investments that went

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wrong. She has a matriculation certificate and attended university for a time.

“You know,” I say to her, “I and quite a few of my girlfriends went through hard economic times, but none of us considered the prostitution option. We just kept taking on more and more work and loans – and now that you have raised the idea, it’s already too late for me.”

“Why do you say that?” Shelly replies, amazed. “We have some very elderly clients, too. It’s never too late.”

How did your husband react to your decision?

“It was with his full agreement. I believe in a relationship that is based on openness, because openness allows growth. Openness gives rise to the kind of good relationship that my husband and I have.”

So we could actually say that your husband is your pimp.

“No way. I don’t have a pimp. I rent an apartment together with a few of my girlfriends, we advertise on the Internet, and of course we have a guard who doesn’t let suspicious people enter. But none of us pays a pimp. Our whole idea is to be totally independent, and that will not happen if we are thrown into the street and are exposed to violence, and get taken over by pimps. And we will be thrown into the street if this bill becomes law, because there is nothing easier than arresting the clients in our apartments – the police know exactly where they are.”

But your husband is actually living on the earnings of a woman – isn’t that the definition of a pimp? Doesn’t he have a problem agreeing that you will sell your body so the two of you will enjoy economic well-being?

“Absolutely not. I am grateful to him for his openness.”

Mind and body

An unavoidable psychological effect in women who have been raped or sexually assaulted or who slid into prostitution (or chose it as a livelihood) is dissociation. This is the mental process that underlies schizophrenic manifestations in which the mind seems to detach from the body and creates a disconnect between consciousness and what the body is doing. This dissociation is essential for a woman who engages in sexual intercourse as an expression of intimacy with her partner, but also does so without feeling anything. The major problem in dissociation processes is that they are irreversible. Many studies show that women who have engaged in prostitution suffered irreversible psychological damage. According to one study, women who “chose” prostitution were able to make that choice only because they already possessed a well-developed dissociative mechanism.

How do you separate between making love with your husband and sleeping with men for money?

Shelly: “It was rough the first couple of times, I have to admit, but afterward I got used to it. I see it as a job in every respect, and even a pleasant job. I have nice clients. Some come to me just to talk with someone; a great many of them love their wives but can’t abide the fact that after they were married the wife started to neglect herself. I make between NIS 1,000 and NIS 2,000 for a few hours of work a day. I also pay

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income tax: Please write that we all want to pay tax, when prostitution is regularized. We don't just want to enjoy the protection of the law but also to fulfill the obligations that every citizen has. But when I go to the tax department and the clerk asks me what my occupation is and I tell him 'prostitute,' he tells me – look at the sanctimoniousness! – that he can't write that on the form. Hypocrisy rules the whole state bureaucratic apparatus: Instead of 'prostitute,' he writes that my occupation is 'renting rooms,' and they figure out the tax according to that category.”

The apartment rental issue is the basis for one of the serious problems regarding prostitution here. According to Israeli law, you can engage in prostitution but you cannot solicit for prostitution, and pimping is also illegal.

“The moment I rent an apartment and sublet rooms to my friends, suddenly I am considered the manager of a brothel,” Shelly explains. “An absurd situation is created in which, on the one hand the police protect us and know the exact location of our apartments, but at the same time this situation endangers us and our clients. Which means that if prostitution is not regularized in Israel we will be thrown into the street, like the girls you see in Buki Naeh's tours. They make NIS 30 per client in the yards around the Central Bus Station [in Tel Aviv] and are vulnerable to violence, serious disease and exploitation.”

Natalie (not her real name) met Shelly in one of those apartments. Her bobbed hair, lack of makeup, spiffy black clothes and expensive shoes give her the look of an artsy Tel Aviv yuppie. Natalie is in fact an artist and during the day teaches art in school. Her husband is also a teacher. She is 39, has two children and started to work in prostitution nine years ago.

How did you start?

“I came across an ad in a newspaper and was intrigued – I didn't exactly know what it was all about. The ad said they wanted people for 'discreet work.' I didn't know exactly what was meant until I heard the voice and accent on the phone, and then I got it.”

What voice and what accent?

“She was very businesslike and asked me if I knew what was involved. When she asked over and over, I understood exactly what she meant. I met with her and she explained the arrangement with the apartment and how it works. When I left, I still wasn't sure I wanted to come back. I knew I had to make a type of very brave choice. At first I didn't tell my husband. But when you work in prostitution you do it for the money. My husband noticed that suddenly we had money and I had to broach the subject with him.”

How did he take it?

“Hard at first, but it was a process. We went through a process accompanied by anger and disagreement, and in the end also by acceptance. I am very strong and dominant, and it was clear to me that I was going to stay in prostitution, because it is the only solution that allows me some sort of economic comfort.”

Can't two teachers make a living from their salaries?

“They can, but not comfortably, and you have to moonlight. In my case,

prostitution also makes it possible for me to fulfill myself in art. I don't make money from art but it is essential for me and I don't have a life without it."

Weren't you angry at your husband for agreeing? Why didn't he suggest going to work in prostitution instead of you?

"I am not in the least angry at my husband. I feel only love and admiration for him. He works very hard. He is a first-rate educator, and his presence at home, with the children, is so important and is irreplaceable. His work at home also means absolute support for my artistic pursuits."

Natalie's parents have no idea what she does for a living. Her father is an engineer, her mother a librarian and she herself has a university education.

Didn't your parents have economic difficulties, too?

"They did, and I saw how that wore them down and decided it wouldn't happen to me."

Are you afraid to tell them you are a prostitute?

"I have no interest in their finding out. It would only hurt them. I think that talking about everything is a type of egoism. I know that I am working in prostitution for the family, for my children. And I don't want them to know either, because I don't think I'd be protecting them by telling them what I do."

Until what age do you think you can go on being a prostitute? Do you have an alternative plan?

"No. I will quit on the day we have enough money – because in the meantime we are saving a lot. I am drawing up economic plans. I don't make huge amounts of money, because I only work when the children are in preschool and school, and when I am not teaching. But I do make enough to maintain savings plans for my children. I don't have big dreams, only little ones. I dream of a quiet life in my house with my husband and my children and of doing my art. If I had enough money, I would try to open an art studio for at-risk children."

What risk? The risk that they will slide into prostitution? Don't you see the irony here?

"No. Because I didn't 'slide' – I made a courageous choice. I chose to sacrifice part of myself for the sake of the family, and because it is for the sake of what I ultimately want, it is not a sacrifice."

Tell me about your first time with a client.

"It was very difficult. It wasn't natural. It's something that you really don't want to do."

Why? Because for you sex is connected to feelings and intimacy?

"Yes, it was always like that. But the first time I understood that I was doing it as a type of mission."

Mission? To be a prostitute is a mission?

“For me, yes, because I am doing it for the family. But the first time was difficult and embarrassing and humiliating, because we all have an ego and the moment you do something like that you have to nullify the ego. But gradually it becomes routine and you learn to treat it like a job, and make a distinction between your husband and the clients.”

Aren't you afraid that you will become emotionally attached to one of the clients? You know that women sometimes fall in love with men they sleep with.

“That is completely impossible for me.”

Telling the children

Angelica (not her real name) says that many of her clients come to her because their wives have no patience to talk to them: “So he tells me what he's doing at work, sometimes there is sex and sometimes not, and then he goes home to the woman he loves very much. All my clients love their wives.”

Angelica, who is married a second time and has a son from her first marriage, is 40 and has been working as a prostitute for seven years. She immigrated to Israel at the age of 17 from a former Soviet republic and worked as a certified cosmetician.

“I was pregnant at the time my first husband left Israel, and he left me with a lot of debts,” she relates. “I took more and more jobs, but letters from the Bailiff's Office kept arriving; the first time I got a letter like that I thought I would die. I worked in a factory at the time and would go to work crying. I was depressed and pregnant. After I gave birth the debts kept piling up, and I worked and my mother raised the boy. One of my girlfriends talked to me about how I hardly saw my child and said I had to find something, maybe find a rich lover who would help with money. At the time, I didn't yet know that she herself was working in prostitution. After a time she told me and suggested that I come to the apartment she worked in.

“At first I was really afraid. I pictured prostitution the way you see it in movies – drugged girls in miniskirts, thin and scarred, standing on the street and being beaten by their pimp. But it turned out to be completely different. In the apartment I met amazing women, married with children, who had decided to resolve their economic problems through prostitution. I thought to myself that instead of working 20 hours a day in three jobs I would be able to work a few hours a day, only when my child was in preschool or school, and then be with him at home, take care of him, help him with his homework and see to it that he has everything he needs. When I had three jobs there was no communication with my son at all, but here I saw there was a different possibility: to be a mother the way I understand one should be a mother. Afterward, I met the man who became my second husband. He is raising the child with me and we are incredible parents.”

Angelica's husband works in the airport. At the time he met her, he she was still working part-time as a cosmetician. “But before he proposed, I decided that I had to tell him.”

How did he react?

“Very harshly. It took him a lot of time to digest this. In the end, he was persuaded that it was work, not love, that I don’t have an emotional tie with my clients and that I love only him. With them it is work and no more.”

What do your parents say?

“My father doesn’t know, and my mother cried when I told her. No mother dreams that her daughter will be a prostitute.”

Where do you see yourself at the age of 50? Still working?

“I don’t know, but in the meantime I have paid off all the debts and am saving money for my son. I am very advanced when it comes to cosmetics work and maybe I will open a big center.”

For her part, Shelly doesn’t know how she will tell her son about her job when he grows up. “Don’t tell him,” I advise her. “But I am an advocate of openness,” she replies. “I want my son to love me for what I am and for him to grow up without lies.”

“Then don’t lie to him, just stop being a prostitute,” I suggest.

But Shelly says that it’s easy to say that one day that will happen, but not so easy to say when. To prepare for that day she wants to obtain a B.A. in general studies, so she can have an option to work in an alternative profession.

In general, Shelly, Natalie and Angelica believe that selling their bodies is a precondition for their becoming better mothers and devoted wives.

“What’s happening today,” Natalie observes, “is that families sacrifice themselves on the altar of their livelihood, and as a result parents miss out on raising their children. That will not happen to us. And our relationships won’t be ruined because of economic problems, either.”

Can’t the fact that you are sleeping with men for payment on a regular basis destroy your relationship?

Natalie: “Absolutely not. That is why, painful as it was, it was important for me to have my husband go through the process of accepting my new life together with me.”

The beautiful side

George Bernard Shaw once said something like this: that all women would agree to be prostitutes if the price were high enough. If your way to happiness is by taking money from men, wouldn’t it be preferable to find a rich husband, like the women on that reality show?

Shelly jumps up like she’s been bitten by a snake. “Just the opposite,” she snaps. “My life is 1,000 times better than those women. They all work 24 hours a day, seven days a week for their rich husband; their work is never done. I work a few hours a day and then go home, to my beloved, my child and my hobbies. I have a real life.”

Natalie: “Prostitution makes my happiness possible, allows me to fulfill my yearnings, to do things for myself, for self-fulfillment and self-expression.”

It’s been a long time since I spent time with women who believe so

ardently in the seemingly old-fashioned concept of the importance of marriage and parenthood. The fact that they have chosen to realize that world view by working in prostitution – the most abhorrent occupation according to that same world view – is extremely upsetting, to say the least.

It's not by accident that most adult educated women do not consider working in prostitution if they encounter economic hardship. Even though Shelly and her friends have "invented" nothing – after all, prostitution among normative women already existed in the era of the courtesans and the ladies of the camellias – to choose prostitution requires a personality of a particular kind and well-developed mechanisms of repression, denial and dissociation. You also must be able to treat your body as being separate from yourself – accordingly, as something that can be handled like merchandise – and possess the ability to extinguish and blot out your feelings while the man is doing to you what he paid for. This type of personality structure is more common among women who were victims of sexual assault and sexual offenses within the family or outside it.

"But we are not like that," Shelly, Natalie and Angelica assert. "The biggest problem is that people confuse us with street prostitutes." Shelly says that one of their aims is to conduct a campaign explaining the differences between street prostitution and prostitution of the type they practice. "We want prostitution to leave the street. We want the phenomenon of junkie girls who are exploited and beaten, not to mention the victims of trafficking in women, to disappear completely. I am naturally against trafficking in women or exploiting women. I am no less a feminist than Zahava Gal-On, who says I have a false consciousness."

It wasn't Gal-On who said that.

"It's not important – so it was some other feminist. On a radio program, when I said that I chose prostitution and that it is my right to choose what I want, and that I make that claim based on feminism, she said there was no meaning to a true choice if prostitution is involved, unless I am living with a false consciousness. But where does she come off saying whose consciousness is false and whose isn't, hers or mine? We are strong and independent. We are not victims and we don't need any sort of rehabilitation, not even of our consciousness. Just like the most famous feminists, we too are against exploitation of women and trafficking in women. The prostitutes around the Central Bus Station really are exploited by pimps and drug dealers and clients. But we are not like that at all.

"Maybe instead of seeing our work as the exploitation of women, you could say that we are exploiting men. We are taking money from them for something they might be able to get for free. We have a voice and we want to make it heard, and to say that there is a different kind of prostitution now, in 2013. It is prostitution of normative women with families, and many of us also have other professions. No one has the right to judge us. But because until now we did not speak out, the image of our profession is always that of the junkie prostitutes on street corners. Now, when we are speaking out, we want to present a different side, the beautiful side of prostitution. And make no mistake: I am not idealizing prostitution, I am only saying that it always existed and always will exist. So, instead of fighting us, you have to help us provide sex services in clean surroundings, and to preserve our health and the health of our clients."

Forward and back

“I sponsored the bill to criminalize the clients of prostitution, together with organizations that fight trafficking in human beings. It’s an initiative that was promoted by [former] MK Orit Zuaretz, from Kadima,” says MK Zahava Gal-On. “The legislation is intended to eradicate the phenomenon of prostitution itself – and not, as is the case today, to deal only with its byproducts of violence, pimping or trafficking in women. Because the law creates a distinction between ‘free’ prostitution and trafficking, I was concerned that an illusion had been created that what goes on in the realm of prostitution is legitimate. I believe that one cannot separate trafficking in women from prostitution, and that prostitution has to be treated as a crime against human rights in general and against women in particular. That is why the bill addresses the chief economic engine of the industry: the clients.”

And if they chose to make a living from prostitution freely, in what way is it a crime against their human rights?

“I am aware of allegations of discrimination, inequality and paternalism of one group against another group. They maintain that it is their free choice and that we have no right to intervene in their choice. But there is great debate and false discourse concerning the right of women, in an era of sexual freedom, to sell their bodies, and the right of men to purchase sex services from those women. I say to those women that this discourse ignores the fact that prostitution is not a new phenomenon that sprang up in the liberal world, as part of the freedoms of the individual and out of the desire of individuals to achieve self-fulfillment.

“The historical situation, which abetted the development of prostitution, consisted of a reality of inequality between men and women, and of a lopsided balance of forces between them. I am talking about the historical-gender context, which made possible the development of prostitution over time, because it is relevant in terms of assessing the tremendous social damage latent in this phenomenon, which has played havoc with human dignity and equality between the sexes.

“If prostitution is institutionalized, as some women are proposing, society will become accustomed to the wrong of sexual violence against women, and the state will become a super-pimp. The abolition of slavery undermined the structure of the life of many slaves, and left them without a roof and in dire poverty. But that does not mean that it was wrong to abolish slavery. What it shows is the crucial role the state needs to play to assist every person actively to create a life which bears at least a minimum of human dignity. Even if there are a few women in prostitution who are ‘free and happy,’ as they perceive themselves, the relevant fact is that in its essence prostitution as a social institution is not consistent with the principle of equality between the sexes and with a basic discourse of rights.

“A society in which the services of women can be bought signals that all women can be bought. That has an effect on and cements the inferior status of women in Israeli society. As it is, women are excluded from the public domain, are not represented in the centers of power, are not seen in the corridors of power and are discriminated against in their salaries.”

There was something surrealistic about the sight of Shelly, Natalie and Angelica in a Tel Aviv cafe where no one could possibly imagine their occupation, sitting with a journalist and a religiously observant man. On the one hand, it had been a long time since I engaged in such an intelligent and scintillating conversation with three women who are so aware of

themselves and are not part of my social circle. Women who say they decided to take their fate in their hands and sell what can be easily sold, and who from this point of view perceive themselves as strong, independent and feminist.

Yet, at the same time, everything that the 60 women who are active dues-paying members of the Association to Regularize Prostitution see as a big step toward economic well-being and the betterment of their couplehood and their parenting, is also a big step backward – in the direction of the pre-feminist world, a dark, wicked world in which the exploitation of women, and rape and sexual harassment are the preeminent manifestations of its inherent inequality.

Northern lights

According to a study conducted in 2008 by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's School of Public Policy and Government (commissioned by the Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women), there are several models for regularizing prostitution.

The first, an American model, criminalizes the prostitutes and the clients, and is ruled out by the Israeli Association to Regularize Prostitution. There is also the Swedish model, which imposes a penalty (the lightest sentence is two years in prison) upon those who use prostitution services or who try to coerce women to work in prostitution or who traffic in women. Shelly and her colleagues object to this model, for fear that penalizing clients will force the women to leave their rented apartments and work on the street.

The third model, favored by the Israeli group, relates to legislation in the Netherlands. Under a law passed there in 2000, neither prostitutes nor clients are penalized, but harsher punishments are meted out to traffickers in women, and to pimps and those who force minors to engage in prostitution. The law stipulates that brothels are businesses in every respect and that the profession of prostitution is like any other. All prostitutes in the Netherlands are entitled to the protection granted by the country's labor laws, including an old-age pension, the right to unionize, the right to medical services, and bimonthly AIDS examinations at the taxpayers' expense. However, they must pay income tax and are prohibited from working in prostitution if they are under the age of 18.

This law places the prostitutes' rights at the center and seemingly makes their life better. However, legalizing prostitution has made the phenomenon far more common in the Netherlands, and most of its prostitutes are illegal. Ten percent of the prostitutes who work in the legal brothels, are not minors and are not vulnerable to exploitation by pimps – but the other 90 percent work below the inspection radar. Among them are street prostitutes, victims of trafficking in women and underage junkies.

In contrast, the Swedish scheme brought about a decrease of 80 percent in the number of sex-service clients. A commonly heard claim is that the number of clients did not really decrease, but that men seeking sex services take advantage of the open borders in Europe and visit prostitutes in other countries where prostitution is legal. A decrease in the number of clients is not what the women in the Israeli association are seeking (though that outcome is consistent with a feminist-humanist worldview). The bill sponsored by Gal-On and Zuretz is largely based on the Swedish model.

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