

National Post /

Full Comment /

Christie Blatchford: A frank talk about the sex trade is overdue

Christie Blatchford Jun 13, 2011 – 8:54 PM ET | Last Updated: Jun 13, 2011 9:09 PM ET

My new friend, who is the only working girl I know, should be down at the Ontario Court of Appeal this week.

I mean no disrespect to Terri-Jean Bedford, the dominatrix who is one of the women challenging Canada's prostitution laws, or to the legion of lawyers who will spend days on their feet collectively rendering the oldest game into a dull thing, but they have all become part of a set piece.

My friend is one of the quiet majority, she says, a smart, funny, functional woman who lives in a nice apartment tower in a major Canadian city and earns her living from the sex trade.

"People say they don't want us next door," she says. "Well, we're already there."

She is now what's called "an independent," though she says she's "an agency girl at heart," preferring the regular schedule (3 p.m. to 3 a.m.), convenience of having bookings done for her and the employee's ability to take a few days off without losing clients.

But the existing laws — they were struck down by an Ontario judge last fall and were allowed to stand only pending this current appeal by Ottawa — make it difficult for ethical escort agencies to stay in business, my friend says. Legally, the agencies can't acknowledge the women working for them act as prostitutes, and neither do the women themselves: Everyone involved pretends they are just escorts, or hired dates.

In fact, with prostitution, everyone mostly just pretends period, from the respectable newspapers who charge six to 10 times as much for a classified ad from an escort as they do from any other sort of business to the salons where prostitutes are dinged more for waxing than other women (if the estheticians "go anywhere near an escort's cookie," she says the price rises) to the plastic surgeons who charge them premiums.

The laws being challenged are those banning bawdy houses, living off of the avails of prostitution and soliciting.

My friend can demolish the arguments for keeping the status quo without breaking a sweat (or a nail), but what may be most important is that after 25 years and counting in the business, she says she has not been left demeaned or psychologically harmed, which is the thrust of the federal government's current shtick.

(As someone who has eaten a meal at her place and spent about six hours in her company, this in the course of a story I was working on, I can vouch for the fact she appears as whole and healthy as any of the rest of us.) And she says most girls are more like her than not.

"I think that any work you can do to provide food and a roof over your head, that allows you freedom to make decisions and offers



Nikki Thomas (RIGHT) Executive Director of the Sex Professionals of Canada and SPOC Legal Coordinator Valerie Scott (LEFT) walk into Toronto's Osgoode Hall for the afternoon session on the sex trade industry, Monday June 14, 2011

you financial independence, is worthy,” she says. “It is demeaning to stand in line to fill out welfare papers, to ask to borrow money, to go to work every day and at the end of the month not be able to pay your bills.”

Besides, as she says with a grin, “Sex on any level can be considered demeaning. I have felt more used by lovers than I have by clients, ever. Nothing says thank you like an envelope of money.” She recalls a long-time relationship with a man she describes as delightful and admits to occasions when “we’d have sex and I’d be thinking, ‘Well I hope you’re happy; this is the last thing I feel like.’”

Contrary to public perception — and the sex trade as a dangerous line of work is central to the government’s case — she says the business isn’t inherently violent.

For the approximately 15% of women who work the streets, who because of the “communication” law can’t discuss either transaction or price until they get in a car with a man, there are obvious risks.

But most women in the trade in Canada work as independents or for agencies, as she has, and in her quarter-century at it — she turned herself out at the age of 18 and went directly from a bridal show where she was selling cookware to the bar at a posh waterfront hotel — she has had only two dates go bad.

In one case, she was working with another girl, who robbed the client; in the other, a long-time customer was high on cocaine and steroids.

But, she says, “The fact is, the danger in this industry very, very seldom comes from clients ... the violence comes from the men in their personal lives — pimps, or boyfriends,” just as it usually does for women in the rest of the world.

The common math done about her business infuriates her too. The hardest-working escort she knows, who travels the world working, nets \$90,000 a year but is on the road 300 days. But she says most escorts earn only about a third of that.

She sees 20 clients a month. “Every single one of them is there because he feels I am worthy of interaction, of his hard-earned income.... To me, sex is only demeaning if you’re unwilling to do it.”

Sometimes, she says, she doesn’t feel like working, and “I have the right to say no.” If she needs the money, there comes a tougher equation: “Am I going to be a pro and just suck it up? Or is this bigger than me just pitching a hissy fit?”

Such frankness is long overdue, if not in the business, at least in the discussion about it.

Postmedia News

cblatchford@postmedia.com

Posted in: **Canada, Full Comment** Tags: **Ontario Court Of Appeal, Prostitution, Sex Trade, Sex Workers, Terri-Jean Bedford**

MORE FROM CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD »

