

Homeland Prostitution Policy

By Tracy Quan, [AlterNet](#)

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Former call girl Heidi Fleiss recently announced that a Hollywood movie about her life is in the works. "Pandering," her new book about her misadventures as a Hollywood madam, has been getting airplay on the talk shows. But the Hollywood spin shouldn't allow us to overlook Heidi's travails; she spent almost two years in federal prison. When she was arrested in 1995, there were rumors about celebrity sex, wild partying, inflated dollar amounts. This is the American way of seeing prostitution: as a fantasy gone bad. We're hooked on the glitter and the punishment.

America's prostitution fantasies are also reflected in our laws, which are among the strictest in the world. Outside of Nevada, the buying and selling of consensual adult sex is always illegal. (Even in Nevada, prostitution laws are more complex and forbidding than most people realize.)

We are out of step with our closest neighbors, Mexico and Canada, where prostitution laws are similar to those of Europe or Britain. In Canada, federal solicitation laws will soon be reviewed by the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, to assess their impact on the safety and health of prostitutes. Although prostitutes in every country face discrimination, the actual exchange of money for sex is not a crime in most democracies.

We are also out of step with the United Nations, where prostitutes have worked hard to have their human rights taken seriously for the last 15 years. In January, at a two-day UNAIDS conference in Geneva, prostitutes from Europe, Asia and other regions met with representatives of the International Labor Organization, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and UNESCO. [The Network of Sex Work Projects](#) (NSWP), a global coalition of sex workers and their advocates, played a crucial role in designing the agenda by forcing onto the table a number of issues that had been overlooked.

"We insisted that the conference talk about ethics in research and health care," says Paulo Longo, a former prostitute, practicing psychologist and co-founder of NSWP. Prostitutes are often subjects of HIV studies but too much of this research has been astonishingly careless and inhumane. That's why Longo, who lives in Rio de Janeiro, got involved with prostitutes' rights.

"In 1988," he recalls, "I was training at a public hospital and I was asked by a local NGO to help a researcher do a study of rent boys in Rio."

A year later, when Longo saw the so-called results in a British medical journal, he reacted with horror: "They were saying that 43 percent of Brazilian male sex workers were infected with HIV – but I knew that this study only tested 33 people, eight of whom were seropositive."

The boys, whether infected or not, were never told about their results. Longo was discovering a pattern of unethical research: "Getting the blood of boys and women on the streets, everywhere in the world. Never giving them the results. That's when I started to get more politically involved."

At the Geneva meeting, Thailand – a country famous for its sex industry – was well represented. A bar girl from one of Bangkok's busiest red light districts criticized her

government's health policies, bluntly addressing the coordinator of Thailand's national AIDS program. This outspoken sex trade worker might sound, to American ears, like a fantastic anomaly. Yet, she represents a global trend. As one sex worker explained, "Empowerment is not only about getting free airfare to a UN meeting. It's also about having the courage to say what you think to a government official."

On the last day of the conference, the NSWP proposed (and got) a moment of silence for 10 South African sex workers who had recently been victims in a Cape Town shooting. "It was important for all those U.N. officials to observe that moment of silence," one participant told me.

It's equally important to note that, in these circles, the shooting or death of a sex worker is not used to justify anti-prostitution laws. Instead, the moment of silence was a demonstration of support for a prostitute's right to work safely. Aurorita Mendoza of UNAIDS described sex workers as "one of the biggest mobilizers in the AIDS response," going on to deplore "laws which criminalize them and prevent them from receiving needed information and services."

Twenty-five years ago, the pioneers of the prostitutes' rights movement could not have envisioned the Geneva event. A marginal movement has come of age, spawning a whole generation of human rights bureaucrats who are turning sex workers into a mainstream cause. Prostitution is losing some of its edginess.

Acknowledging that prostitutes have basic rights – that we are an important part of every society – is no longer radical. Those who refuse to do so, those who continue to defend the persecution and arrest of sex workers, are increasingly seen as extremists. America's prostitution policies are so backward in comparison to those of most advanced countries – and a number of developing ones, too – that we provoke sarcastic comparisons with Islamic theocracies. Given our self-image as a secular democracy, this is more than embarrassing; it's bizarre.

Tracy Quan tq@tracyquan.net is the author of the novel, "Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl" (Three Rivers Press) and a contributor to "NYC Sex: How New York City Transformed Sex in America" (Scala.) To visit her website, go to www.tracyquan.net. A version of this article originally appeared in The Philadelphia Inquirer.