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TRICK QUESTION

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Prostitution laws are set to change. Another reform, another dispute. Paula Doneman reports

MARIA is in her 30s and works from home in Brisbane _ as a prostitute. She is not allowed by law to buy security in the form of a bodyguard, and accepts clients knowing she is vulnerable.

Yvonne also works alone_ on the streets of Fortitude Valley. While she waits for her next ``trick'' or as she climbs into a car, she is in danger.

Claire has opted for what she sees as a safer option . . . an illegal brothel. She has to give up half of her earnings but, on the plus side, clients have to wear condoms. However, she has no recourse against her ``employers''.

These are the options available to Queensland's sex workers, variously estimated to number between 2000 and 6000.

It is an industry where workplace health and safety are non-existent, in which five sex workers have been murdered in seven years and in which many suffer bashings, rape and psychological abuse.

``My only security is my gut feeling,'' says sex worker Raewyn. ``Since I started in the industry, I've been robbed five times, raped at knifepoint, threatened and abused.'' There also are health implications.

Health Department figures leaked to The Courier-Mail this week show a low incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and high condom use. But the real figures are unknown, say sex industry workers, because tough laws in Queensland have created a gulf between workers and health services.

Many of the problems against which sex industry lobby groups are railing can be traced back to 1992, when the former Goss Labor government, responding to corruption in the prostitution industry exposed by the 1989 Fitzgerald inquiry, brought in the Prostitution Amendment Laws, which allowed individual workers to operate from home but made it clear that any sex worker operating with another constituted a ``brothel'' and was illegal.

This, says Linda Banach, spokeswoman for the Sex Law Reform Coalition, has caused its own problems: illegal brothels went underground and street prostitution soared.

``Before 1992, you could count on one hand how many street workers there were,'' she says. ``The Government needs to take a look at community and health-based initiatives rather than stricter policing. Policing so far has failed to eradicate street prostitution.''

Likewise, police from the Special Operations Task Force, which targets organised prostitution, are unable to quantify the number of illegal brothels in Queensland _ but say there is no shortage.

Enter the Beattie Government, which is considering reform. One plan, to be discussed by Cabinet on Monday, would allow small-scale brothels with a maximum six rooms, and crack down on street workers.

Under the proposal, leaked to The Courier-Mail this week, there would be health checks, a ban on alcohol, limits on advertising and ``good character'' tests for bordello owners. A licensing board would regulate the industry.

The plan, which Premier Peter Beattie insists is not the formal Government position, would be similar to the system introduced recently by Victoria.

The plan has been welcomed by sex industry lobby group SQWISI (Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry), which has long pushed for reform.

``We also support location limits based on local planning considerations and market forces,'' says co-ordinator Leisha Host, echoing the leaked proposal, which says legal bordellos should be in industrial or commercial areas.

But while it sounds clear-cut _ allow brothels to get prostitutes off the streets _ changing sex laws has not been smooth sailing in the south.

When Victoria introduced its sex law reforms in 1994, it legalised large existing illegal brothels and restricted new ones to six rooms.

It also allowed mini-brothels involving just one or two sex workers. Street prostitution was outlawed.

Since 1994, Victoria has had to revisit its laws, increasing police powers and cracking down on illegal brothels that continue to proliferate, and on venues offering ``sexually explicit entertainment''.

But street prostitution continues, as do illegal brothels.

``There are some workers who only want to work on the street,'' says Jocelyn Snow, adviser to the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria. ``There is quick money on the street.''

She says 85 percent of Melbourne's street workers are drug addicts and need quick cash to feed their habit.

``At a brothel, they have to be there from 10am to 7pm and the other girls, who are straight, often refuse to work with girls who are on drugs because there can be issues like stealing or health reasons,'' says Snow.

The streets are not the only place illegal sex workers still operate.

``There are many working illegally from home still,'' says Snow, who backs the Queensland concept of lone workers operating from home.

In Victoria, she says, single or two-person boutique brothels must be no closer than 100m to homes, or 200m to playgrounds, churches or schools _ making legal prostitution impossible in

most areas.

Snow backs the notion of banning alcohol in brothels, saying it often leads to aggression or sexual dysfunction. ``Alcohol and sex don't go together,' she says.

Sue Metzenrath, co-convenor of the **Scarlet Alliance**, or National Forum For Sex Worker Organisations, says that since the new laws in Victoria, there has been a polarisation of the industry between the haves and have nots.

``Licensing fees are between \$10,000 and \$20,000, and that is a lot of money. (And) there has not been one licence application that has been successful first time,' she says. ``Big-business brothels have given rise to a two-tiered system _ legal and illegal _ because the illegal operations do not have to comply with a system that is expensive, time-consuming and bureaucratic.''

Snow points out other problems, including exploitation of sex workers even while working in legal brothels.

``We still have brothel owners down here who demand free sex from the women who work for them,' Snow says. ``There are no occupational health and safety back-ups, no set awards, no holiday or sick pay and no wage if a client doesn't pick them.''

Victorian Attorney-General Jan Wade maintains the 1994 laws have improved the industry: cutting organised crime, protecting communities from the uncontrolled spread of brothels, affording protection for sex workers and improving the health of those in the industry.

All agree that violence is rare in brothels and, from the industry's point of view, that is what law reforms are about _ giving sex workers a safer work environment.

Others see it also as a way of protecting the community.

Beattie is adamant that his government does not want to follow in the footsteps of its interstate counterparts: ``Victoria is an absolute mess and NSW has major problems. The law we will work towards will be unique to Queensland. Street prostitution will remain illegal because it does impinge and affect the community directly. Clients who seek the services of street prostitutes in residential areas will feel the full force of the law. We also fully support undercover police operations on street prostitution.''

Security issues for lone sex workers have been a driving force behind prostitution law reform, he says, but insists that his guiding principles on the reform laws will be protecting minors, fighting exploitation and corruption, and improving health in the industry.

Though details remain open to dispute, all agree: it is time for change.