

Escort service girls versus street corner women

The dangers of the sex-trade

BY GLENDA MACLEAN

"My husband's first wife was a prostitute and she was murdered," says Lynn, a former prostitute who worked the streets and escort services of Halifax for over five years. "So I followed in her footsteps and I did the street for not quite a year, you know, maybe six or seven months. The violence was too much. I've had a knife to the throat, been ripped off, been left out in deserted areas. [Working the streets is] more unsafe than I found with the escort service. The other [prostitutes] would sometimes try to jack you up — take your money. But, the escort [service] is safer."

The stereotypical image of a woman, with tight clothes and high heels, is probably not an accurate representation of the average Canadian prostitute. In some cities, like Halifax, escort services, massage parlours and nightclubs are the primary venues for prostitution.

"If you don't see it, people don't think it's there. Escorts are a big thing. There's a lot of girls out there with pagers," says Lynn.

She went on to explain the distinction between working escort services and working the street.

"There's a big difference. Your escort service is like your pimp. There's a misconception out there that if you work the street you have a pimp, but that's not necessarily the case. [Escorts are] safer than the street because you have to give a call in and they get the phone number and where you're at. If you're not done by say, an hour, they'll call to check on you.

"You don't have the police harassing you in escort, but on the street they have the police harassing them and scaring the johns away. The police...really hound the people working the street, which is a drag because...they're trying to make some money. I mean they're not hurting anybody."

And what they are doing is legal, sort of.

"Prostitution is not criminal. You can live off the avails of your own prostitution," says Sergeant Tim Moser, project coordinator for the Task Force on Prostitution.

It is the activities surrounding prostitution such as pimping, operating a brothel or 'bawdy house', and any communication for

the purpose of buying or selling sex which are considered offenses. These laws send mixed messages to prostitutes.

"You're fine as long as you don't mention money. You mention money and then you're caught. Then you're screwed. Then you're busted," says Lynn.

Lynn claims that when the police try to catch prostitutes, "they...have an undercover cop in a vehicle and he will try to get you

to...name a price. It's not entrapment by their case standards, but as soon as you mention money you're busted. And how women get around that is...they say... 'show me, show me your dick,' because he can't do that."

Although escort services and prostitution may often be selling the same things, "the laws are different and you're doing the exact same things. I've worked for a number of escort agencies and I've never been busted through an escort service. I've been harassed more on the street," says Lynn.

According to research by Simon Fraser University criminology professor John Lowman, of the yearly 6,000-10,000 prostitution-related charges between 1986 and 1995, five per cent were for pimping charges and three per cent were bawdy house charges. The remaining 92 per cent were related to communications for the purpose of buying and/or selling sexual services.

Sergeant Moser disagrees with the idea that street prostitutes are more heavily targeted by the police and suggests that escort services are a major focus of police investigations.

"A pimp is a pimp is a pimp, whether it's street level or at an escort service. We charged an escort service in August, and we just laid more charges against the same person with respect to some other witnesses that came forward. So, yes, [escort services] are targeted. They're harder to investigate, but nonetheless they are targeted.

"So, I would suggest [to] those who are operating illegal escort services [that] time is limited. Eventually, I'm sure that they will be caught."

John Lowman has published several works on the topic of prostitution. In a recent article, Lowman suggested that most cities in Canada benefit financially from prostitution by licensing escort services and other fronts for selling sex.

Street prostitution also puts money back into the system.

Lynn says, "it's funny because if you get caught and you get a ticket, [you] get a fine, and how

else are you going to pay it but go back to the street? You've got to pay the ticket — so the money can go back to the city that way."

Most of the excitement about prostitution in Halifax relates back to the Halifax-Toronto pimping ring that was uncovered in 1992. A media frenzy followed the arrest of three Halifax area men on pimping and assault charges. At the time it was suggested by Toronto police that Halifax was an ideal training ground for prostitutes who could then be sent out into an inter-city pimping network. The result was the creation of the prostitution task force.

"Originally the task force was set up in 1992...to reduce the exploitation of juvenile women in the sex trade. That remains our goal or mandate to this date, except that we've dropped juvenile and we've added [male prostitutes]," says Sergeant Moser.

Moser defines a pimp as a person who "forces a girl into prostitution, and works the girl in prostitution. So I guess that we're talking about the types of pimps that the task force was originally set to deal with. These were the violent guys, they were living solely on the avails of prostitution. They were taking [girls] across the province, provincial borders, [and] down to the States, on the circuit.

"There was a considerable amount of violence involved — we [still] deal with that. But because the task force dealt with that problem, it's not [such a] big problem now."

Lynn feels that the events of 1992 were distorted by the media.

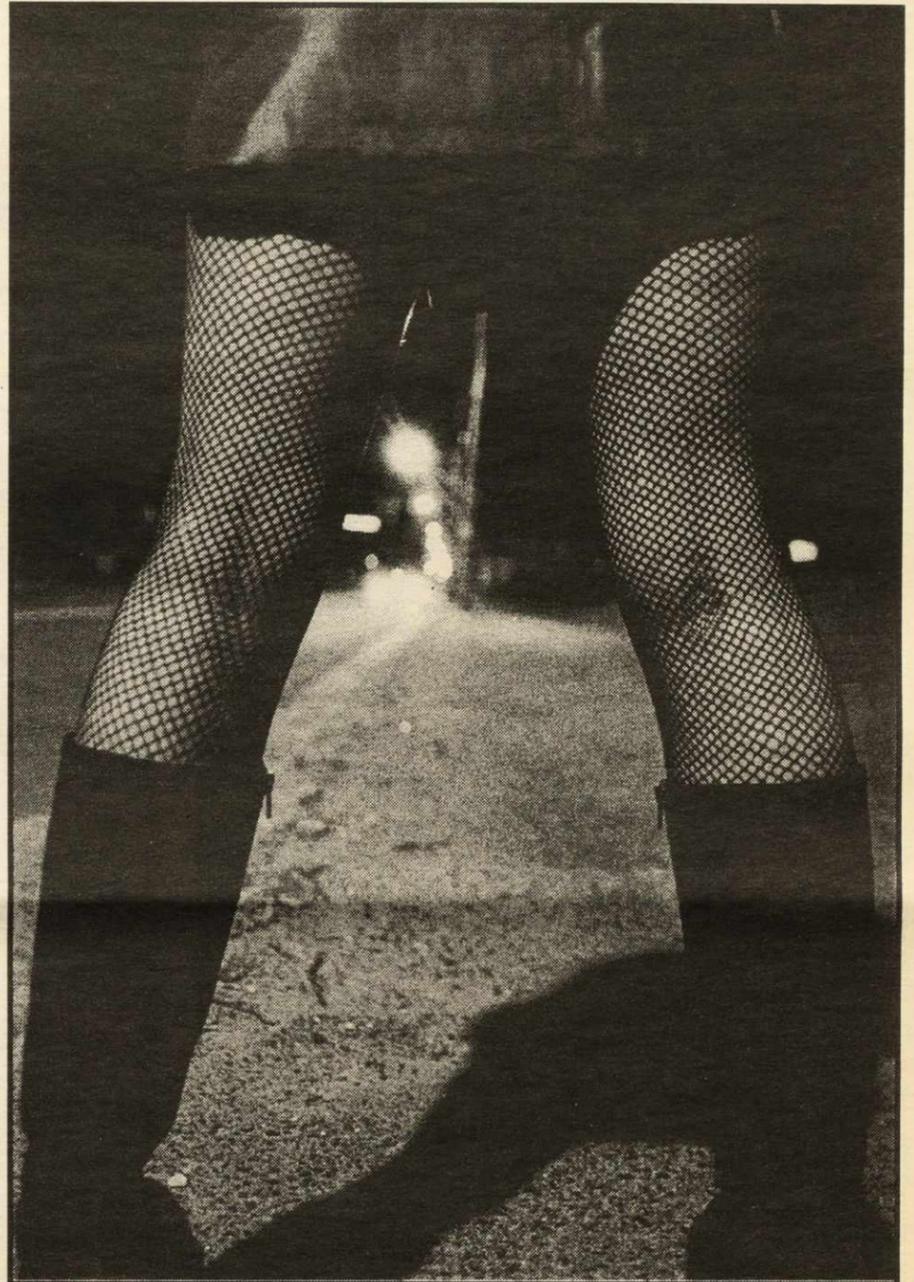
"My opinion is that [the pimping ring] was not as serious as they foresaw it to be. I'm not saying it doesn't take place, but it was truly blown out of proportion. The way the government swooped down and said 'let's rescue these people,' [when] there was a place like Stepping Stone [an outreach program for prostitutes] fighting to stay open — it was kind of like a disappointment."

The media continues to plague individuals who work in the sex trade. John Lowman has drawn links between increased police vigilance and an increase in

for sexually transmitted diseases, Lynn disagrees.

"They're the cleanest. They use condoms."

And what if a john refuses to



PROSTITUTION: Police sources say "a pimp is a pimp is a pimp", but what are the underlying differences between 'street-walkers' and 'escorts'? (Photo by Ryan Lash)

violent crimes against prostitutes.

In one of his articles he wrote, "this anti-prostitute rhetoric made it that much easier for sexual predators and other sexual misogynists to justify violence against street prostitutes."

Lynn supports this idea. "If you see a media rush, sometimes you can see the effects on the bad-trick list."

The bad-trick list is a record of descriptions, licence plate numbers, and other information on johns who have beaten, robbed or in some way mistreated a prostitute. When asked if these trends were noticed by police, Sergeant Moser took a more moderate stance.

"There will always be violence towards a prostitute because ultimately they are being victimized...by the pimps or by the johns."

However, he did not feel that this violence was a result of media attention.

Although many believe sex with prostitutes puts one at risk

wear a condom?

"The majority of women will say, 'what [disease] do you want to give me?' Some of [the clients] will offer extra money [for unprotected sex], but the majority of prostitutes use condoms."

Of the 110 juvenile prostitutes who participated in a 1994 study in Montreal, only one girl was infected with the HIV virus. She was also an IV drug user.

Moser believes part of the problem for those trying to prevent prostitution is that "prostitution has been glorified to some extent by the pimps."

However, Moser is adamant that "prostitution is not a glamorous lifestyle by any stretch of the imagination. You're a piece of property."

Lynn simply wants people to know that there is a face behind the label "prostitute".

"People forget that they're a mother, they're a sister, they're a brother. Everybody has their own story."