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The scandal behind the Secret Service scandal

By Alison Bass

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News consumers have been treated to weeks of titillating coverage about the “sex scandal” involving members of the US Secret Service who apparently consorted with prostitutes in Colombia in the days before President Obama arrived for a Latin American summit. But little has been said about our society’s misconceptions about prostitutes and the clients they serve.

While prostitution has been legalized (or largely decriminalized) in most other developed nations, including Germany, France, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands, it is illegal in the United States (except in strictly regulated brothels in rural counties of Nevada) and has been since the run-up to World War I, when army brass mounted a concerted campaign to wipe out brothels in cities throughout the United States. They were concerned that soldiers returning home from war would contract venereal disease from prostitutes, when in fact research over the decades has shown that men (soldiers and civilians) are much more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases from casual sex than they are from prostitutes.

Obviously, our societal distaste for prostitution is not based on public health concerns. So where does it come from? Over the centuries, Western religions have engrained the idea in our minds that prostitutes are the lowest of the low (the madonna vs. whore dichotomy) in order to preserve the sanctity of marriage. Marriage to a “good” woman is held up as a respected social arrangement because it is the primary means through which erotic expression is linked to reproduction. When the sexual act is tied to money, the buyer clearly has pleasure and not reproduction in mind. This is why religious groups have always condemned sex work — not because it objectifies or marginalizes women, but because it divorces sexual pleasure from the institution they believe is best suited to achieve offspring.

Religions, however, are not all alike, and in many European and South American countries, where Catholicism is the dominant religion, there has always been a tacit tolerance for prostitution and an understanding of the need for some men to engage in sexual encounters free from emotional or physical entanglements. The risk of engaging in forbidden activities is also part of the allure, studies show. Our own religious roots, however, stem from a Puritan or Protestant ethic, and Protestant religious tenets emphasize sexual satisfaction within marriage and thus have traditionally been more condemning of infidelity. That may be one reason for our harsh condemnation of prostitution and the men, particularly high-profile figures like Eliot Spitzer and David Vitter, who engage in it.

The irony here is that it is probably safer for men to go to escorts similar to the ones a few Secret Service agents brought back to their hotel in Columbia than it is to pick up non-prostitutes for casual sex. Studies show that the majority of escorts regularly check themselves for disease and insist on the use of condoms. As one Massachusetts escort I interviewed recently said, “We’re much more likely than the general population to be advocates of safer sex and to be very knowledgeable about it. I haven’t had unsafe intercourse in 10 years.”

Much of what people perceive as bad or dangerous about prostitution has to do with the fact that it is illegal. Sex workers have little legal recourse when clients are violent or abusive, and they have no recourse from police officers who coerce them into providing free sex (in exchange for not being arrested). Research shows that decriminalizing or legalizing sex work actually reduces the incidence of violence against women and makes communities safer. In the Netherlands, prostitutes work with law enforcement to target violent predators and traffickers. Decriminalizing or legalizing adult consensual prostitution here would allow law enforcement to focus their efforts on apprehending pimps who traffic in teenage runaways and illegal immigrants. It’s no surprise that studies show that cities with legal prostitution (like Amsterdam) have significantly lower rates of crime than American cities like New York and San Francisco.

So isn’t it about time we re-examined some of our misconceptions about prostitution? That way, our elected officials could stop spending so much of their time investigating trumped-up sex scandals and start focusing on issues that really matter, like improving the jobs picture or making sure everyone has access to adequate health care.

Alison Bass, author of “Side Effects,” is writing a nonfiction book about prostitution.