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Holding Rhode Island Strip Club Owners Accountable

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For almost 30 years (1980-2009) there were no laws against indoor prostitution in Rhode Island. During that time, being an owner of a strip club where prostitution occurred in the private booths or being a landlord for a massage parlor that was really a brothel were shady, but legal, ways to make money. During the same time, there was no comprehensive law against human trafficking and there was no law banning underage girls from stripping in the clubs.
In 2009, under the leadership of state Rep. Joanne Gianinni (D-Providence), the General Assembly passed three important laws: one law criminalizing prostitution and activities associated with it; a law banning minors from working in adult entertainment; and a human trafficking law. This sweeping legal reform criminalized prostitution and trafficking and created a legal basis for law enforcement to investigate sex trafficking and pimping.

Rhode Island may have changed the laws, but the practice of exploiting women and girls has been slow to die.

In the past year, we’ve seen evidence of prostitution and sex trafficking of teens as young as 14 years of age in the strip clubs. Investigations have shown that the private booths in strip clubs are regularly used for commercial sex acts and likely sex trafficking. Last November, WJAR investigative reporter Jim Taricani interviewed a former worker from the Cadillac Lounge who said that 70 to 80 percent of the dancers engaged in prostitution in the private booths. Each time a dancer takes someone into a private area, the club gets a cut of the money.

When Mayor Taveras proposed banning all private booths, there was an outcry from strip club owners who said they’d go out of business if the private rooms were closed. Their protest revealed the real money maker for the strip clubs — sex acts in the private booths. The financial dependence of strip clubs on the sexual activity in private booths prompted one Rhode Island official to comment that the strip clubs are really “brothels with music.”

The passage of the prostitution law brought about dramatic change for the owners and managers of adult entertainment establishments. Now, if they permit prostitution to occur, they are criminals.

The new law prohibits “permitting prostitution,” which is defined as knowingly permitting any premise to be used for prostitution. It is a felony violation with penalty of one to five years in prison and a fine of $2,000 to $5,000.

In the last year, police have found a 15-year-old girl dancing at Cheaters and prostitution there and at the Satin Doll. The U.S. attorney’s office is prosecuting the underage girl’s pimp for sex trafficking of a minor. The City of Providence has treated these felony violations as licensing issues. Why weren’t the club owners or managers treated like offenders under the state prostitution law?

Mayor Taveras has ordered a new ordinance on adult entertainment establishments to be drafted. He said he wants a “one-strike you’re out” clause, meaning that if one violation is found at a club, it will lose its license. At a recent forum on trafficking in Rhode Island, Providence’s commissioner for public safety, Steven Paré, said that the city representatives sat down with the five owners of strip clubs in Providence to discuss the future ordinance.

I worry about the involvement of five people who are “permitting prostitution,” a felony crime, to have input on a new ordinance. When the state prostitution and human trafficking laws were being drafted, the pimps and traffickers were not consulted.
The engagement of people who appear to be breaking the law in writing new law raises an issue. How does a community change the culture and practice of exploiting women and girls for financial gain? Is it better for the community to use a softer approach to get business owners to end the sexual exploitation and trafficking of victims? Certainly, it would serve the economic interests of Providence to keep the strip clubs open, but it may not serve the interests of the women and girls being exploited. Also, I worry about loopholes that may be introduced to protect the club owners if they are involved in drafting the ordinance.

I urge the City of Providence to draft a strong ordinance that covers existing adult entertainment businesses and the clubs that include forms of sexual exploitation that are starting to crop up in residential neighborhoods. And better yet, treat owners and managers who “permit prostitution” as violators of criminal law, not just licensing violators.

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