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Students turn to sex work to help pay for university

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HUNDREDS of university students in Victoria have turned to prostitution to pay their way through higher education, *The Sunday Age* has learnt.

Up to 40% of the female sex workers in Melbourne's brothels are attending the city's eight universities and other colleges.

Many of the women cite the costs of course fees, increased rent and a rise in the general cost of living for their decision to join the "oldest profession".

One 22-year-old Monash student, who has been working as a prostitute and escort for 18 months, told *The Sunday Age*: "In an ideal world I wouldn't be doing this work but it's well paid and there's no way I could afford to complete university and live out of home if I had any other part-time job."

The huge earning potential for these girls is the biggest attraction of sex work. According to managers at numerous brothels across the city, a pretty woman can pocket as much as \$1400 on a busy night.

Nearly all the brothels contacted by *The Sunday Age* this week admitted they had students working in their establishments. Many said that between 40% and 50% of their girls were in full-time education.

Glen Barnes, general manager at Melbourne's largest brothel, the Daily Planet, said that university students often made the best workers. He explained: "We've got nearly 200 girls on our books and I'd say at least 35% are students, and they're nearly always a pleasure to deal with.

"Typically they're very career-oriented and know exactly what they want to get out of the job. Going to uni is obviously getting more and more expensive, and for many who haven't got wealthy parents, this is the best way to make ends meet. Most of the girls say it's the rising costs of fees and being a student in an expensive city like Melbourne that is making them consider the sex industry.

"We're happy to have them and try to provide an environment which supports them. That means that if it's quiet and they're not with a client we allow them to get out their laptops and study in a spare room."

Although there is no official register of sex workers in Melbourne's brothels, industry insiders believe there are up to 2000 women who are selling their bodies in the city.

A spokeswoman for Top of the Town, another large brothel in the CBD, with about 90 girls on its books, said that girls from all backgrounds were involved.

"You really can't generalise about the type of girl that will become a sex worker," she said.

"We've got workers who went to the most prestigious schools in Melbourne and come from very affluent families. In their cases I think they've made the decision that they'd want to earn their own money rather than accepting handouts from their parents.

"We've also got girls who come from more disadvantaged situations, who can't live at home while

they study, or perhaps they don't want to be a burden on their parents.

"By working in the sex industry they can earn a lot of money in a relatively short period of time.

"The shift work also means that it's fairly easy for them to combine it with their studies.

"Brothels in Melbourne are very well run and offer a safe, clean environment and, after all, these ladies aren't doing anything that's illegal. Some people may object to it, but it really is very professional."

The Top of the Town spokeswoman said one former sex worker had paid her way through a law degree by working one or two nights a week and, once qualified, had returned to the brothel to give legal advice to some of the girls.

"A lot of the time with students, the girls are very clear that they'll only work while they're studying," the spokeswoman said. "Once they've got their degree or qualification that's it, they'll walk away.

"It's not necessarily a choice for the rest of your life, just a way of paying your way until you get to where you want to go."

The number of students working in the sex industry demonstrates the increasing cost of studying at university, according to the National Union of Students.

Statistics from the University of Melbourne show that rent and living expenses for those students who live in the city totals about \$25,000 if living in university or shared accommodation in the city. This does not include tuition fees, which are deferred until after graduation. For a student living in a one-bedroom flat or studio, this cost can rise to more than \$30,000.

Universities stress that they had provisions for students in financial need.

A spokeswoman for Monash University said: "Obviously these ladies are adults and are free to make their own choices about what work they want to enter into. However, we do have extensive services for those who are suffering money problems. Any student can visit our financial counsellors, who are available on all campuses.

"We also offer a wide range of grants, scholarships and bursaries, to those from financially challenged backgrounds."

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