

Chapter 13  
Attitudes toward Prostitution and Sexually Coercive Behaviors of Young Men  
at the University of Nevada at Reno  
from *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections* (2007)

Melissa Farley, Mary Stewart, and Kyle Smith<sup>1</sup>

We investigated the impact of Nevada legal prostitution on the attitudes and behaviors of college-aged men toward women. The legal sexualized objectification of women in brothels is likely to have an impact on the community, especially on men's relationships with and attitudes toward women. The objectification of women and of sex itself is integral to many men's definitions of masculinity. Nonetheless, these beliefs impair men's ability to relate to women as equals, and interfere with their ability to form and maintain intimate relationships with women.<sup>2</sup>

There is much psychological research demonstrating adverse effects of pornography specifically, and television generally on men's attitudes and behaviors toward women.<sup>3</sup> Therefore we predicted that legalized prostitution, the nearby presence of prostituted women in legal brothels who might well be seen by men as 'live pornography', and a state-wide culture of prostitution would have a powerful impact on men's attitudes and behaviors toward women in general.

In 2002 Ann Cotton, Melissa Farley and Robert Baron published a study of United States college students' attitudes about prostitution.<sup>4</sup> We asked about prostitution myth acceptance and rape myth acceptance in a sample of 783 university undergraduates from California, Iowa, Oregon and Texas. Since others had described an association between violent behaviors against women and culturally supported attitudes that encourage men to feel entitled to sexual access to women, to feel superior to women, or to feel that they have license as sexual aggressors,<sup>5</sup> we wanted to investigate this relationship with respect to prostitution.

Rape myths<sup>6</sup> and prostitution myths are components of these culturally supported attitudes that normalize violence against women.<sup>7</sup> Rape myth acceptance is related to sexual aggression.<sup>8</sup> Prostitution myths justify the existence of prostitution, promote misinformation about prostitution, and contribute to a social climate that exploits and harms not only prostituted women but all women. In this 2002 research, we found that among college students, acceptance of rape myths was significantly positively correlated with acceptance of prostitution myths.<sup>9</sup>

Further analyzing the data obtained from the college student sample, Schmidt, Cotton and Farley<sup>10</sup> found that men who reported sexually violent behavior against their non-prostitute partners endorsed significantly more prostitution myths than men who did not report sexual violence. In addition, those men who had bought women for sex reported significantly more sexually violent behaviors against their nonprostitute partners than those men who had not bought women for sex.<sup>5</sup>

Cotton, Farley and Schmidt then compared college students who said that they had engaged in sexual coercion with those who were not sexually coercive. The sexually coercive men were significantly more accepting of prostitution myths than those men who did not report having been sexually coercive with their partners.<sup>11</sup>

In 2006, Dr. Mary Stewart, her student Kyle Smith, and Dr. Melissa Farley used the same questionnaires to compare young men who were students at University of Nevada at Reno to the previously studied U.S. college students, those in the Cotton, Schmidt and Farley studies.

The University of Nevada, Reno (UN-R) is located in a medium sized metropolitan area in northern Nevada. Eighty percent of the 11,500 undergraduate students at UN-R, are Nevada high school graduates. Most of these students grew up in northern Nevada rather than in the larger metropolitan area, Las Vegas, to the south.<sup>12</sup> We felt that the Reno university students were noteworthy in that these young men were attending a school that was not only physically closer to a legal brothel <sup>13</sup> than any other college or university in the United States but was a school which existed in a cultural milieu that defined women as objects for sale.

Although the university is located in Washoe county where prostitution is illegal, nearby Lyon, Storey, and Churchill counties have legalized prostitution. Pimp Joe Conforte's brothel was 20 miles from the University until it was locked down after Conforte fled to Brazil in 1991 after his arrest for income tax evasion.<sup>14</sup> Additional charges filed against Conforte in 1998 include bankruptcy fraud, aiding and abetting, money laundering, witness tampering, racketeering, conspiracy and forfeiture. Conforte's prior arrests include at least 2 convictions for which he served time: in 1959 for trying to extort Washoe County District Attorney Bill Raggio, and in 1963 for income tax evasion.<sup>15</sup>

Conforte's nephew, a Hell's Angels chapter vice-president, still controls a legal brothel that is also close to the University of Nevada. Conforte himself is rumored to be homesick for Nevada and is rumored to have snuck in and out of the U.S. on several occasions. He seems to take pleasure in telephoning other Nevada pimps from Brazil and informing them that he is watching their businesses. He is reportedly heavily involved in Brazilian prostitution.

Other pimps in the Reno area include Dennis Hof, an enterprising pornographer. Hof is one of several legal Nevada pimps who pose as community benefactors, giving away free turkeys at Thanksgiving, or offering Iraq war veterans a golfing weekend that includes free prostitution.

The students who were included in this part of the study had grown up in a climate in which legal prostitution was an ordinary part of the culture. Brothel visitors could easily obtain directions and transportation to the legal brothels, as well as being able to buy women in illegal escort prostitution in the local casinos. Local pimps transport their stables of prostituted women to Reno-area nightclubs, as advertising for prostitution. Prostitution in Nevada is accompanied by a casino and entertainment industry that highlights women as sexually available - taxis and buses advertise nude reviews and "gentleman's clubs" and neon signs and giant billboards present cars, alcohol, gambling, and women as essential components of an evening of entertainment. Although the latter is present in many US cities, legal prostitution is not. Prostitution was woven into the cultural fabric of northern Nevada.

We wondered if a cultural environment in which women were legally for sale in prostitution would affect the college students' attitudes toward prostitution, toward rape, and their attitudes toward women in general. We expected that these young men would be more inclined than other college students to normalize prostitution and the attitudes toward women that prostitution

engenders, since the state of Nevada legally sponsors prostitution. We obtained approval from the University's Institutional Review Board to administer an anonymous questionnaire to young men at University of Nevada at Reno. In 2006, we obtained questionnaires from 131 young men who were attending undergraduate classes at UN-R.

Psychologist Ann Cotton worked with us to compare data from the Reno men with men from universities in California, Texas, Oregon, and Iowa, via statistical analyses. We ran a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) that compared the means of groups (UN-R men vs. other men college students) on a number of different but related variables.<sup>16</sup>

We found significant differences between the attitudes of the Reno students toward prostitution and those of the other college students.<sup>17</sup> The Reno students significantly more often endorsed beliefs that prostitution is a normal activity that should be mainstreamed, such as "There is nothing wrong with prostitution,"<sup>18</sup> "Prostitution should be treated no differently than any other business,"<sup>19</sup> "Prostitution should be legalized," or "decriminalized," "There is nothing wrong with having sex for money,"<sup>20</sup> "Arresting men who patronize prostitutes causes more problems than it solves,"<sup>21</sup> "It's OK for a man to go to a call girl if his wife doesn't find out,"<sup>22</sup> and finally, "I would use an escort service or patronize a call girl if I knew it was safe to do so."<sup>23</sup>

The young men from Reno significantly more often than the other college students subscribed to the unproved and mistaken 'catharsis' theory of prostitution: they assumed that the very existence of prostitution served as a crude pressure release which somehow decreased the likelihood that other (nonprostitute) women would be raped.<sup>24</sup> When compared to the non-Reno students, the Reno young men significantly more often said that they also liked nonrelational sex, that is, sex with no emotional involvement.<sup>25</sup> A hallmark of the sex of prostitution is its nonrelational, impersonal nature.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of these extensive rationalizations for the existence and normalization of prostitution, the young men from Reno also significantly more often than the non-Reno college students believed that prostitution lowers the moral standards of a community.<sup>27</sup> Further research into this seemingly contradictory set of opinions is needed, although it should be noted that in a separate series of cross-cultural interviews with men who frequently buy women in prostitution, we noted a similar set of opposing attitudes. On the one hand, they defended prostitution as a socially necessary institution and on the other hand, they felt nagging guilt and self-contempt for their actions in buying women.<sup>28</sup>

The young men from Reno were more likely than men who attended universities farther away from legal brothels to believe the myth that prostitution sex would turn them into better lovers.<sup>29</sup> They were also significantly more likely to believe that women became prostitutes because they liked sex,<sup>30</sup> and that prostitution was a choice that women should have.<sup>31</sup> These differences are statistically robust, suggesting that there are major differences in how the Reno and the non-Reno students viewed prostitution.

The Reno students more strongly endorsed items that reflected support for prostitution as a reasonable option for the next generation. For example, they felt that it would be acceptable if their sons went to prostitutes<sup>32</sup> and that it would be acceptable if their sons went to brothels.<sup>33</sup> The young

men from the University of Nevada-Reno also significantly more often than young men from other U.S. universities, felt that it would be acceptable if their daughters grew up to be prostitutes.<sup>34</sup>

Compared to non-Nevadans, the Nevada university students significantly more often endorsed statements that justified rape and sexual violence against prostitutes. The Reno men significantly more often felt it was “ridiculous for a call girl to claim she’s been raped by a customer,”<sup>35</sup> and more often stated that “if a man pays for sex, the woman should do whatever he wants.”<sup>36</sup> These deeply sexist attitudes toward women in prostitution - the notion that they exist simply for men to use them - are core beliefs that justify any abuse, especially rape, of women in prostitution who are assumed to be worth less than other human beings. The Reno men endorsed the statement that “prostitution is an exploitation of women’s sexuality” significantly *less often* than the non-Reno men.<sup>37</sup>

We also used a MANOVA statistical analysis to investigate the differences in rape myth acceptance between the Reno college men with men from universities in California, Texas, Oregon and Iowa. Rape myths are culturally supported attitudes that normalize rape. Over the years, psychologists have found that acceptance of rape myths are associated with sexually aggressive behaviors.

Where there were significant differences between the Nevada and non-Nevada students, the Nevada students more strongly endorsed rape myths.<sup>38</sup> For example, the Reno men significantly more often endorsed the rape myth that “Women generally find being physically forced into sex a real ‘turn-on.’”<sup>39</sup> The Reno men normalized sexual coercion in that they significantly more often endorsed the statement “If a woman is willing to “make out” with a guy, then it’s no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex.”<sup>40</sup> The Reno men significantly more frequently than the non-Reno men erroneously assumed a class difference in rape: “Men from nice middle class homes almost never rape.”<sup>41</sup>

It was noteworthy that the Reno college students reported that in the year before they filled out our questionnaire, they used prostitutes significantly more often than the non-Reno college students.<sup>42</sup> The University of Nevada-Reno students significantly more often went to strip clubs<sup>43</sup> and to massage parlor brothels<sup>44</sup> than those students who were from universities elsewhere in the United States.

There were also differences in the two groups of men in their pornography use. The young men from Reno watched significantly more video pornography<sup>45</sup> and viewed more Internet pornography<sup>46</sup> than the non-Reno college students. There was an eight-year difference between the time when the non-Reno university students and the Reno university students responded to our questionnaires. It is possible that the statistically significant differences in the use of video and Internet pornography is at least partly a result of the passage of time during which there is the increasingly widespread use of Internet pornography by all young men, not only those men attending a university that is close to a legal brothel. Nonetheless, the difference between these two groups of men is in the predicted direction.

In conclusion, the cultural mainstreaming of prostitution in Nevada had a significant effect on the attitudes toward women and the behaviors of young men attending University of Nevada,

Reno. In contrast to students from other parts of the United States where prostitution is illegal, the UN-R students were significantly more accepting of prostitution, more accepting of several kinds of sexual violence against not only women in prostitution but also non-prostituting women.

This suggests the powerful influence of a culture that offers women for sale. These findings reflect the sexual objectification and sexual violence against women occurring in a cultural environment where women are legal objects for sale. Along with their assumption of prostitution as normal, the Reno students held a number of sexist stereotypes about women in general.

The intrusion of legal prostitution in Nevada's culture affects men's level of acceptance of the institution of prostitution itself. They were more accepting of prostitution and of the nonrelational sexuality of prostitution than were college students in other locations. They justified the existence of prostitution by subscribing to the myth that if men go to prostitutes they are less likely to rape women.

In fact, Nevada's rate of rape in 2004 was 40.9 per 100,000 population - higher than the U.S. average (32.2) and was significantly higher than rates of rape in California (26.8), New York (18.8) and New Jersey (15.3). Las Vegas (44.7) and Reno (41.3) rape rates were significantly higher than rape rates in other major U.S. tourist destinations such as Los Angeles (23.2), and San Francisco (24.5).<sup>47</sup>

The Reno university students endorsed several rape myths that justified sexual violence. They were sex industry consumers. They were significantly more likely than the non-Reno students to use prostitutes, to go to strip clubs and massage parlors, and to use both video and Internet pornography.

The Reno university students normalized prostitution for their sons and daughters as well as themselves. They considered it acceptable for their future sons to use prostitutes and for their future daughters to become prostitutes.

The Reno students failed to see prostitution as sexual exploitation, while at the same time justifying acts of sexual violence against women in prostitution. They assumed that it would not be possible to, for example, rape a call girl. This attitude is typical of men who buy women in prostitution, and it places prostituted women in harm's way, drastically increasing the probability that johns will rape them.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The book *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections* by Melissa Farley was published in 2007 by nonprofit organization, Prostitution Research & Education.

<sup>2</sup> American Psychological Association (2007) *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Retrieved March 20, 2007 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>, page 28.

<sup>3</sup> L.M. Ward (2003) Understanding the Role of Entertainment Media in the Sexual Socialization of American Youth: A Review of Empirical Research. *Developmental Review* 23: 347-388. Neil M. Malamuth, Tamara Addison, and Mary Koss (2000) Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are There Reliable Effects and Can We Understand Them? *Annual Review of Sex Research* 11: 26-91.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Cotton, Melissa Farley, & Robert Baron (2002) Attitudes toward prostitution and acceptance of rape myths. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 32: pages 1-8.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Koss (1988) Hidden rape: Sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of students in higher education. In A.W. Burgess (ed.) *Rape and Sexual Assault II*. New York: Garland, pages 3-25; K. A. Lonsway

---

and L.F. Fitzgerald (1994) Rape Myths: in review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18: 133-164; N.M. Malamuth, R.J. Sockloskie, M.P. Koss, and J.S. Tanaka (1991) Characteristics of aggressors against women: Testing a model using a national sample of college students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 59: 670-681; J. Miller and M.D. Schwartz (1995) Rape myths and violence against street prostitutes. *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16: 1-23.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of rape myths see Women Against Violence Against Women website [http://www.wavaw.ca/informed\\_myths.php](http://www.wavaw.ca/informed_myths.php).

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thonnes (2000) Prevalence and Consequences of Male-to Female and Female-to-Male Intimate Partner Violence as Measured by the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Violence Against Women* 6 (2): 142-161

<sup>8</sup> B.L. Vogel (2000) Correlates of pre-college males' sexual aggression: Attitudes, beliefs and behavior. *Women and Criminal Justice* 11: 25-47; D.M. Truman, D.M. Tokar, and A.R. Fischer (1996) Dimensions of Masculinity: Relations to Date Rape, Supportive Attitudes, and Sexual Aggression in Dating Situations. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 74: 555-562; J.T. Spence, M. Losoff, and A.S. Robbins (1991) Sexually Aggressive Tactics in Dating Relationships: Personality and Attitudinal Correlates. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 10: 289-304.

<sup>9</sup> Cotton, Farley, and Baron (2002).  $r=.27$ ,  $p<.0001$ .

<sup>10</sup> Megan Schmidt, Ann Cotton, and Melissa Farley (2000) Attitudes toward prostitution and self-reported sexual violence. Presentation at the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, San Antonio, Texas, November 18, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Cotton, Melissa Farley, and Megan Schmidt (2001) Prostitution Myth Acceptance, Sexual Violence, and Pornography Use. Presentation at Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco CA. August 27, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> University of Nevada, Reno Office of Institutional Research.

<sup>13</sup> Reno, Nevada is located in Washoe County. Reno is 15 miles from the nearest legal brothel which is located in nearby Storey County. By state law, legal prostitution is not permitted in any county with a population greater than 400,000.

<sup>14</sup> Erin Meehan Breen (2004) Conforte in Exile. *Reno Gazette-Journal* May 29, 2004. Retrieved June 25, 2005 from <http://www.rgi.com/news/stories/html/2004/05/29/71913.php>.

<sup>15</sup> *Reno Gazette-Journal* (2000) Mustang Ranch Chronology. Aug. 8, 2000. Retrieved October 7, 2005 from <http://www.rgi.com/news/stories/html/2002/11/29/29072.php>.

<sup>16</sup> Because we ran post-hoc tests, we used the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons.

<sup>17</sup> We found significant differences between the attitudes of the Reno students toward prostitution and those of the other college students.  $F(46, 231) = 3.37$ ,  $p=.000$ ; Wilks' Lambda = .60; partial eta squared = .40.

<sup>18</sup> "There is nothing wrong with prostitution." ( $F = 10.38$ ,  $df 1, 276$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

<sup>19</sup> "Prostitution should be treated no differently than any other business." ( $F=18.51$ ,  $df 1, 276$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

<sup>20</sup> "There is nothing wrong with having sex for money." ( $F = 10.94$ ,  $df = 1,276$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

<sup>21</sup> "Arresting men who patronize prostitutes causes more problems than it solves." ( $F = 10.37$ ,  $df=1,276$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

<sup>22</sup> "It's OK for a man to go to a call girl if his wife doesn't find out." ( $F=6.44$ ,  $df=1,383$ ,  $p=.01$ ).

<sup>23</sup> "I would use an escort service or patronize a call girl if I knew it was safe to do so."  $F=4.47$ ,  $df 1,379$ ,  $p=.03$ ).

<sup>24</sup>  $F=5.79$ ,  $df 1, 367$ ,  $p = .02$ .

<sup>25</sup>  $F = 6.00$ ,  $df = 1,377$ ,  $p = .02$ .

<sup>26</sup> Ron Levant (1997). Nonrelational sexuality in men. In Ron Levant and Gary Brooks (eds) *Men and Sex: New Psychological Perspectives*. New York: John Wiley, pages 9-27.

<sup>27</sup> "Prostitution lowers the moral standards of a community."  $F=33.37$ ,  $df 1,276$ ,  $p = .000$ .

<sup>28</sup> Melissa Farley (2007) 'Renting an Organ for 10 Minutes: What Tricks Tell us about Prostitution, Pornography, and Trafficking. In D. Guinn (ed.) *Pornography: Driving the Demand for International Sex Trafficking*. Los Angeles: Captive Daughters Media.

<sup>29</sup> Prostitution sex makes men better lovers.  $F=9.03$ ,  $df 1,276$ ,  $p = .003$ . In fact, women in prostitution 'teach' men to ejaculate as quickly as possible because they dislike the sex of prostitution. Like other women, women in prostitution prefer having sex with men they love, not with anonymous strangers. Men are 'taught' in prostitution that women truly love a premature ejaculator, while at home their wives and girlfriends are left sexually frustrated by the dysfunction.

---

<sup>30</sup>  $F=9.03$ ,  $df$  1,276,  $p = .003$

<sup>31</sup> "Prostitution is a choice that women should have."  $F=9.03$ ,  $df$  1,276,  $p = .003$

<sup>32</sup> "It would be acceptable if my son went to prostitutes." ( $F = 11.98$ ,  $df= 1, 276$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

<sup>33</sup> "It would be acceptable if my son went to brothels." ( $F=33.37$ ,  $df=1,276$ ,  $p=.000$ ).

<sup>34</sup> "It would be acceptable if my daughter grew up to be a prostitute." ( $F = 3.36$ ,  $df = 1, 276$ ,  $p = .012$ ).

<sup>35</sup> "It is ridiculous for a call girl to claim she's been raped by a customer." ( $F = 12.88$ ,  $df1,276$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

<sup>36</sup> "If a man pays for sex, the woman should do whatever he wants." ( $F = 5.57$ ,  $df$  1,276,  $p = .019$ ).

<sup>37</sup> The Reno men significantly *less often* endorsed the statement that prostitution is an exploitation of women's sexuality. ( $F=4.08$ ,  $df$  1,276,  $p = .044$ ).

<sup>38</sup> Reno men were more likely to endorse rape myths.  $F(19, 341) = 2.27$ ,  $p=.002$ ; Wilks' Lambda = .88; partial eta squared = .11.

<sup>39</sup> "Women generally find being physically forced into sex a real 'turn-on.'" ( $F=5.12$ ,  $df$  1,359,  $p=.024$ ).

<sup>40</sup> If a woman is willing to make out with a guy then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex," ( $F=17.42$ ,  $df$  1, 359,  $p = .000$ ).

<sup>41</sup> "Men from nice middle class homes almost never rape." ( $F=3.92$ ,  $df$  1,359,  $p= .014$ ).

<sup>42</sup> Reno men more often used women in prostitution. ( $F = 8.00$ ,  $df$  1,12,  $p=.015$ ).

<sup>43</sup> Reno men more often went to strip clubs.  $F= 4.25$ ,  $df$  1, 384,  $p = .040$

<sup>44</sup> Reno men more often went to massage parlor brothels.  $F=5.56$ ,  $df$  1, 384,  $p = .019$ .

<sup>45</sup> Reno men watched more video pornography.  $F = 39.52$ ,  $df$  1,383,  $p=.000$ .

<sup>46</sup> Reno men watched more Internet pornography.  $F=18.32$ ,  $df$  1, 385,  $p = .000$ .

<sup>47</sup> *FBI Uniform Crime Report* (2004) Table 6. [http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius\\_04/](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/).

<sup>48</sup> Women in prostitution are frequently raped. They are often raped by johns who assume that the payment of money entitles men to the right to rape them, which is exactly what the Reno college students told us that they believed. See Melissa Farley, Ann Cotton, Jacquelyn Lynne, Sybille Zumbeck, Frida Spiwak, Maria E. Reyes, Dinorah Alvarez, and Ufuk Sezgin (2003) Prostitution and Trafficking in 9 Countries: Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2 (3/4): 33-74. Also in Melissa Farley (ed.) *Prostitution, Trafficking and Traumatic Stress* (2003) New York: Routledge for a summary of studies documenting the extremely high incidence of rapes of women in prostitution. Available at <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/c-prostitution-research.html>