As I sat in the small brightly colored room on a sweltering day in Amsterdam in early August 2013, I wondered to myself how this beautiful and obviously educated woman could engage in such a stigmatized and risky profession. Katrina became a prostitute more than 15 years ago after losing a high paying job “in a family-owned business.” Her current “independently-owned business” to many Americans, like myself, is seen as incomprehensible and challenges our moral fabric and sensibilities. But I can’t help to be intrigued by her story and question whether her life has changed since the Dutch government began to regulate prostitution in 2000.

Generally, well-developed countries consider the Netherlands one of the most progressive cultures on the planet. While it is true that the Dutch do have the freedom to act in ways that individuals in other societies would be jailed for or even executed, with these freedoms comes a significant amount of regulation and taxation. Prostitution, unlike the legalization of marijuana and euthanasia, is a social vice that was (and still is) regulated by state and local government in the Netherlands and can be historically tracked from before the Middle Ages.

In this paper I wanted to answer two lingering questions with my research. How have “morally questionable acts” such as prostitution and government regulation of “these acts” changed in modern Dutch history? How have the lives of prostitutes changed, if they’ve changed at all, since the Middle Ages? Because my topic at hand is so large, I decided to initially discuss, very briefly, the history and culture of Dutch prostitution. The second stage of my paper will concentrate on a comparison of the personal lives of Dutch prostitutes from the Middle Ages until the present. This subsequent section will rely heavily upon historical first person accounts, and my own personal interviews with Dutch sex workers. I will conclude by briefly comparing the benefits and disadvantages of the legalization of prostitution since 2000.
Definitions

In this paper prostitution should be defined as “people who sell sex for money in direct interaction with their clients” (Koski, 2007). Many differing types of prostitution exist - including but not limited to:

Playhouses (speelhuizen) are brothels where music is played. The act of sex doesn’t take place within the playhouse, but the customer is provided alcohol and taken to another location for the “act” (Van der Pol, 1996).

Bawds (horeewaardinnen) – Women, who are considered “pimps” and are usually in charge of a home in which prostitutes live and provide services (i.e. a brothel). While bawds have money and hold credit, prostitutes historically did not (van der Pol, 2010). Sometimes one will hear a bawd referred to as a whore-landlady or just a landlady (van de Pol, 1996).

Polder – Usually the term polder means a low-lying tract of land reclaimed from a body of water, such as lake, the sea, or a marsh. In many historical documents the district where prostitution was most prevalent in a city was called a ‘polder’ – perhaps because of the type of ‘low life’s’ living there. Today in Amsterdam is it known as the area around the Zandstraat.

A History of Dutch Prostitution and Government Regulation by Century

The Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages prostitution was legal – albeit frowned upon - in the Netherlands. Overall, the Catholic Church insisted that prostitution should be heavily regulated by the government and argued, “it is better to tolerate a lesser evil than a greater one” (van de Pol, 2000). The practice of prostitution was tolerated primarily to protect virginal young girls and celibate women from falling prey to “lecherous” men who might rape or defile (Ringdal, 1997). Outlawing prostitution or forcing it underground would backfire on society as St. Augustine explained: "If you expel prostitution from society, you will unsettle everything on account of lusts” (Richards, 1994). Of course, the Church did not hesitate to denounce prostitution on moral grounds and prostitutes were strongly urged to reform and repent by becoming nuns (Bullough, 1982). Prostitutes were sinners but could be saved and forgiven (van de Pol, 2010).
Although tolerated by the Church and most city governments, prostitution was still seen as a “dishonorable” profession and something to keep at a distance from honorable citizens. The 1413 city statute in Amsterdam described the Dutch view of prostitution: “Because whores are necessary in big cities and especially in cities such as ours – indeed, it is better to have these women than not to have them - and also because the holy church tolerates whores on good grounds… the court and the sheriff in Amsterdam shall not entirely forbid the keeping of brothels” (Koski, 2007). Because of this decree, prostitution was seen as a “regulated tolerance” and was controlled by rules, and administered with laws that threatened criminal prosecution if not obeyed (Koski, 2007). The Dutch tried to keep prostitution outside of the city walls and “brothels and playhouses” were forced into dark alleys and streets – an early “red light” district, which was often associated with a shady underworld of poor and undesirable people (Brundage, 1987). Prostitutes were allowed to work unhindered by the government unless they became a public nuisance that would draw attention from local authorities (Koski, 2007).

Although tolerated in the Netherlands, prostitutes did not enjoy the same rights that “decent” citizens exercised. These women were not allowed to marry and were often forced to wear special clothing that distinguished them from other married women (Richards, 1994).

**16th-18th Centuries**

Views and attitudes toward prostitution changed considerably before the Dutch Golden Age. The Reformation and the rise of Calvinism in the Netherlands, the Protestant Church as a whole, and the ideas of State were inseparable. If something was considered a crime by the church, it was also considered a crime within the state (Brants, 1998). Sex outside of marriage was considered a sin. Therefore, prostitution was considered illegal under Calvinist law. Prior to the Spanish occupation, Amsterdam (because of its geographic location as a port) realized that it would be too difficult to outlaw prostitution altogether, and instead decided to try and regulate it. The city council legislated that only the city bailiff and his servants could operate a brothel within Amsterdam – around the Piji and Halsteeg (around the Damstraat) – and anyone procuring a whore outside of this area would be subject to fines and imprisonment (Brants, 1998). This proved to be beneficial for the local government in Amsterdam, for such regulation provided much needed tax monies.
After the Spanish Occupation, the Dutch Revolt, and the Alteratie in 1578, whenever the Calvinists overtook a city, the first businesses shut down were brothels (van de Pol, 2010). During this time, the Dutch government did try to judicially suppress it, although this effort proved fruitless (Goodyear, 2009). Furthermore, an epidemic of a new, more deadly venereal disease --the “Great Pox,” (syphilis)-- spread panic and trepidation towards prostitutes and bordellos (van de Pol, 2010). Instead of tolerated sinners, who could be saved, prostitutes were now seen as wretches who needed to be punished by the Church and state (van de Pol, 2010). The most severe punishments occurred during the 1670s when the Calvinist Orangists took control of the government (van de Pol, 2010).

During the latter parts of the 17th century, prosecutions of sex workers were at their height. In the century between 1650 and 1750, 5,784 people involved in prostitution were tried in 8,099 separate trials. Most of these women and men were from lower, uneducated classes (van de Pol, 2010). Men comprised only one in five of those arrested since the institution and management of prostitution largely fell upon the heads of the bawds (van de Pol, 2010). The rationale for this was that society considered women in charge of what happened within the household where the prostitute worked. Men, however, were in charge of what happened outside of the household (van de Pol, 2010). Since the woman was actually running the business, her guilt was considered greater. During the 17th century large whorehouses were “continuously interrupted,” so many businesses remained small to avoid notice. In the case of a raid, both prostitute and bawd were likely to be prosecuted, but the prostitute was more “lightly punished and returned to work (van de Pol, 1996). To avoid her own heavy sentence, the bawd realized that by shifting responsibility onto the prostitute, both returned to work more quickly, and everyone benefitted.

During the Dutch Golden Age, Amsterdam grew as a center of economic and cultural diversity and with this rise in population prostitution experienced a resurgence. Amsterdam was unique because it had all of the characteristics necessary to sustain a significant population of whorehouses and women who were willing or forced to work in them. Amsterdam was a seafaring port; it was urbanized, had a huge population, had a culture that was willing to “look the other way,” and brought in wealth (van de Pol, 2010). According to judicial documents from the late 1600s, some of the “main clients” who frequented the red light district in Amsterdam included sailors of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) while on leave (van de Pol, 2010).
Prostitution in Amsterdam was concentrated in a “Red Light” district. As noted earlier, prostitutes still worked in relative economic enslavement. The first debts were incurred for fancy bright colored silk and satin clothes, which lower class women wouldn’t have been able to afford without credit (van de Pol, 2010). Usually, the bawds closely monitored no more than two girls and took care of household chores and made sure that the customers behaved themselves (van de Pol, 2010). “A woman who was pregnant, could give birth in a whorehouse; a women who was ill could be nursed there; one who was unemployed, could bridge the time there until a new employment” (Van de Pol, 1996). In return for room and board, the prostitute had to provide the bawd with half (or sometimes more than half) of her earnings and often the bawd profited from the sale of vastly overpriced clothes (van de Pol, 2010). The prostitutes, therefore, were kept in a cycle of debt, never to be released until they were considered too old or sick to be of any use to the bawd (Van de Pol, 1996). When that time came, they were put out into the streets to fend for themselves. One must also note that a bawd could sell her prostitutes off to another bawd. These “normal transactions (between whore-landladies) satisfied the demand for new faces” within brothels and allowed for variety for clientele (van de Pol, 1996). With these exchanges, the prostitutes were not released from their debts; instead, the debt incurred with the last bawd was transferred to the new bawd (van de Pol, 1996). Although prostitution was considered illegal in most places within the Netherlands at this time, the government still recognized the legality of the debt owed by the prostitute (van de Pol, 1996).

A typically small brothel might only see one or two clients a day. Often customers would spend an entire day drinking, dancing, and eating, before engaging in sexual activities. Occasionally the client would stay the entire night or remain for a few days (van de Pol, 1996). If a customer was willing to pay for the food, the prostitute would make a few more guilders, so she strongly encouraged him to do this (van de Pol, 2010). Visitors to playhouses were encouraged to drink several bottles of wine at a cost of one guilder each, and a good whore that could bring in lots of money (and drink a lot) was considered successful (van de Pol, 1996). If the prostitute had a fair- minded bawd, the average prostitute during the Golden Age could earn about 6-8 guilders a week – an amount equal to a schooled laborer, and two or three times as much as a typical female household worker (van de Pol, 1996). After paying her debts to the ‘honest’ whore-landlady, she would be able to save about 3 guilders each week, or approximately 100-150 guilders every year (van de Pol 1996). If the bawd was less honest, she
could perpetually keep her prostitutes in a cycle of debt. Unfortunately, many prostitutes did not save the money they earned, instead choosing to buy new clothes, furniture, adornments, or music that would further enhance their income (van de Pol, 1996). Although the prostitute made more money than the average female laborer, she continued to be trapped in debt and would never be freed by her bawd.

During the Golden Age, the government in Amsterdam felt it was important to enact protective regulations aimed at preventing women from entering prostitution altogether. Orphans and widows were provided special protections and were considered the explicit responsibility of the mayor (van de Pol, 1996). The government acted as “parent” for orphans, and “debauching” a girl in an orphanage (these girls were considered easy prey for prostitution) was considered unlawful and taken “very seriously” (van de Pol, 1996).

The 19th Century

Compared to the previous two centuries, a societal and governmental shift concerning prostitution occurred in the 1800s. The French occupied the Netherlands from 1810-1813 and enacted a system of regulation aimed at protecting their interests more than the interests of the Dutch. The 1811 Code Penal removed prostitution as a crime, except for pedophilia (sex was considered illegal with anyone under the age of 15) (Goodyear, 2009). Sex workers were required to be registered with the police and were forced to undergo regular medical examinations for sexually transmitted diseases (Koski, 2007). The French created a system that they felt would protect their armed forces from sexually transmitted infections. The system provided a prostitute with a red card (a work permit of sorts) that would be shown to a potential client as “proof” that she had undergone a physical examination and was “free” of infection (Clarkson, 1939). If, during the next medical examination, the prostitute were found to be infected, the red card would be revoked and replaced with a white card. The prostitute was prohibited from further work until declared physically fit. The red card could be returned upon further inspection and she would be able to resume employment (Clarkson, 1939).

After the French occupation, the Dutch continued to regulate the sex industry locally instead of nationally. Amsterdam discontinued the requirement of a medical examination for prostitutes and registration in an effort to protect the privacy of prostitutes (Koski, 2007). Prostitution was considered a normal and necessary part of society in the 19th Century but
hygienists in the Netherlands supported close governmental control, and the 1851 Local Government Act was passed permitting local regulation of prostitution and brothels (Goodyear, 2009).

The Industrial Revolution brought about change concerning the economics of prostitution within the Netherlands. Until then, a bawd kept a strict financial control over prostitutes because of the high cost of fashionable and glamorous clothes that were necessary to attract high paying customers. With the advent of machines, which produced inexpensive, high quality clothing, the prostitutes incurred less debt from the bawd, and could often be released from their debts (van de Pol, 1996). After being liberated from their whore-landlady, these women were allowed to become independent-businesswomen who at some point might be able to obtain personal capital (van de Pol, 1996).

In most places, the continued practice of selling prostitutes from one whore-landlady to another continued throughout much of the 19th century. A new practice of ‘auctioning prostitutes off to “rich sophisticated lechers [who] would try and buy the ‘freedom’ of a young prostitute” from her bawd, began (Bossenboek, 1998). If sold, the prostitute would then become a private slave without the protection of the bawd (Bossenboek, 1998). Ottho Gerhard Heldring, a Protestant reverend who witnessed firsthand the exploitation of prostitutes during the mid-19th century, remarked that, “Such a traffic of people exists in the civilized Netherlands that is irresponsible” (Bossenboek, 1998). Heldring’s brochure, Is There Still Slavery in the Netherlands, awakened a Protestant majority to the ever-present evils of prostitution, and started a reform movement (Bossenboek, 1998).

In the years after the Industrial Revolution, a growing Protestant middle class began to oppose what it felt was a state sanctioned violation of moral code. The middle class Protestants who felt they had a strong work ethic and self-control wanted to separate itself from lower class citizens, including prostitutes (Clarkson, 1939). By controlling sexual behavior the middle class could distinguish itself from behaviors associated with the lower classes. Organizations like the Association Against Prostitution (1878) began to sprout, and public opinion shifted from seeing prostitution as tolerable to seeing it as perverse (Goodyear, 2009). Anti-prostitution leagues stressed the violence of human trafficking as one of many evils brought about by an outdated state-sanctioned system (Koski, 2007). By the end of the 19th century, Calvinists, along with feminists, felt the need to shift the blame of sex work from that of the prostitute to that of “men’s
malevolent doings” (Koski, 2007). The brothel keeper and any client became to be seen as exploiters, and the sex workers themselves as victims of their debauchery (Goodyear, 2009). During the mid to late 19th century prostitutes working conditions in the Netherlands were abominable. Prostitutes would often become pregnant because they had no access to proper birth control or condoms, and there were no cures for venereal diseases, so that they would often become sterile (Clarkson, 1939). For many prostitutes, their slave existence continued because of dishonest bawds.

In 1896, a committee was formed, made up mostly of members of the city council of Amsterdam, to investigate the “nature and size” of prostitution within the city. They distributed questionnaires to the prostitutes and pronounced a verdict one year later. General practitioner A. Voute explained, “The public houses of debauchery should disappear… that continuing the brothels means continuing the degrading traffic in women; continuing the aggravating temptation to the vilest forms of debauchery; continuing eventually the dependency bordering slavery, where fellow [wo]men are bought and kept by the scum of society” (Bossenboek, 1998). The report had an impact on public opinion and brothels in Amsterdam were officially closed by the city council in 1897, although sex workers never disappeared (Goodyear, 2009).

The 20th Century
At the start of the 20th century, the Netherlands followed the lead of many other European countries instituting stringent laws against “third party activities” like pimping and the keeping of brothels. In 1911, the Dutch passed the Public Morality Acts and Article 205bis of the penal code. These stated that it was “forbidden to give opportunity to prostitution.” The practice of prostitution itself was not actually outlawed, but exploitation and profiteering from prostitutes’ earnings was (Koski, 2007). City officials were able to use the prohibition of brothels as a tool for concentrating sex workers in a specified area within a city (Koski, 2007). Unfortunately, prostitution became a much more illicit business and thus grew a shady underworld of violent criminals.

Pimps, who often posed as respectable middle class young men, overseeing up to 10 young girls at a time, became much more prevalent. Author M.J. Brusse interviewed a police major who monitored the activities in the Zandstraat in the first decade of the 1900s. According to the inspector,
You have among them, of these loafers, mostly in the age between eighteen and twenty-four – you would send them your own daughter to hear her confession. Nicely dressed, decent face sometimes, very respectable in talking, if they want to. Because there all kinds of ranks in the Polder; of well-known families, real gentlemen, who are just lazing and debauching on the earnings of such a poor girl. And you don’t understand what these young kids like about them; what these pimps have, where they become so crazy about, these girls. But the police keep their eye on it, and as soon as we see these innocent girls talking with these pea jackets, they are warned and informed [sic] (Brusse, 1917).

Very often a pimp would convince the young girls’ parents of his intentions to marry her. She would move away from her parents’ home (and the safety of their watchful eyes), marry him, and then find herself forced into prostitution under threat of violence (Brusse, 1917).

Until the first consequences of living together come, which bind the girl even closer to her “guy,” and when he slowly starts with the drilling, to toughen up her feeling of shame, with the help usually of his own bad buddies, or with threats and violence. Because that’s the intention. It started for no other reason, than that she, the earlier the better, makes a living for him, and preferable a lot and nicely…. And if she doesn’t have enough guts, in the beginning; not shamelessly fulfills her task, which he trained her to do, then there will be hell to pay during the night… and within a week or something he can let her solicit the streets on [her] own; she regularly brings the tax home, in which he imposed on her… [sic](Brusse, 1917).

Because the blame for prostitution shifted from the shoulders of the prostitute herself onto the shoulders of the pimp or bawd, the Dutch government was more likely to intervene in instances of exploitation and enslavement. J. Balkenstein, a policeman who was sympathetic to the plight of prostitutes in Amsterdam, set up a sting to research ‘the nature and size’ of the problem of traffic in women and children,

This remarkable step was connected to the assignment he got from the National Comite… Under the cover of ‘client’ he held conversations with prostitutes, as a policeman he followed the trails of certain suspected ‘employers,’ ‘placeurs,’ and ‘traffickers,’ and he personally helped to set girls free from brothels where they had ended up against their will (de Vries, 1997).

Foreign workers were more likely to be exploited because they lacked an understanding of the Dutch language, customs, and laws. In one report, Balkenstein notes that pimps were more readily allowed to prey upon a foreign girl’s fear of deportation,

Young, minor French girls through deception and false documents ended up in the luxurious brothel Maison Weinthal in Amsterdam, how the women were intimidated, how many of them in the so-called closed brothels practically rarely
or never came outside and that some had no clothes to show themselves on the street…. in one case there was a girl that continuously ‘wept’ and with the help of other women knew literally to escape. A tried and tested method seems to have been to instill fear for the police into the woman, especially because her ‘documents’ were not in order…. Every woman, but especially an uncivilized one has a natural fright for ‘papers and documents’ (de Vries, 1997).

Balkenstein’s report was used widely by international governments throughout Europe as a demonstration that ‘an organized traffic’ of foreign women and children in prostitution was a very real and serious problem in the Netherlands (de Vries, 1997).

Sex workers were left alone unless they caused a disturbance or in cases of pedophilia or human trafficking throughout much of the 20th century (Koski, 2007). The Dutch people saw this gedoogbeleid (policy of tolerance) by the authorities, as a “harm reduction,” the idea being, that the best way to protect women from harm was to condone prostitution on a local level (Brants, 1998). In the 1930s, raamprostitutie (window prostitution) by independent businesswomen developed as an attempt to avoid the brothel ban created in 1911 (Goodyear, 2009). Window prostitution, gradually began attracting tourists and, unless a problem arose, was uninhibited by the authorities. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Red-Light district “grew into a free-zone for sex industries.” This situation posed a very serious problem after citizens complained of drunkenness, rowdiness, and violence against sex workers (Koski, 2007). Whispers of regulation towards the sex industry sprouted up amongst many Dutch citizens and public opinion swung towards repealing the ban on brothels.

Current culture and policies of the Dutch government concerning prostitution (2000s)

Under the auspice that if something is banned, the government, therefore, cannot regulate it, the Dutch government repealed Article 205bis on October 1, 2000. In doing so, it decriminalized the ban on brothels. The current policies of sex work are founded on the two ideas “that sex work is inevitable and thus should be regarded as a normal profession because, if illegal, it will attract other forms of illegality. Secondly, by bringing acceptable forms of sex work into the open and protecting them, other criminal activities, such as human trafficking, can be dealt with more effectively” (Koski, 2007). It is now legal to employ men and women who are over the age of consent and do sex work voluntarily. In order to maintain privacy for sex
workers, the government is not allowed to keep a register of prostitutes except in ongoing investigations concerning human trafficking.

The legalization of brothels allows the Dutch government to exercise more control over the sex industry, identify abuses at an earlier stage, and strictly enforce regulations (NMFA, 2005). Repealing Article 205bis aimed at controlling and regulating the employment of sex workers through a municipal licensing system, protect and even elevate the position of sex workers, protect people from being forced into prostitution, protect minors form sexual abuse, reduce prostitution among foreign national residing illegally in the Netherlands, and sever the links between prostitution and crime (NMFA, 2005). Additionally, voluntary adult prostitution is seen as a legitimate occupation. Sex workers are offered government benefits and are also subject to income tax. Brothels are overseen at a local level, must maintain a license, be hygienic, and free of fire risk (Koski, 2007). Prostitutes cannot be forced to consume alcoholic drinks with clients, engage in unsafe sex, and cannot be required to participate in certain sexual acts. If these requirements are not met, the brothel can be shut down and the license will be revoked.

Katrina, who wouldn’t give her exact age, but I guessed it was just under 40, entered prostitution in her mid-20s after trying to escape an abusive relationship that involved drugs. She is a college educated Dutch national who speaks fluent English. I chose Katrina specifically because I wanted to know if the legalization and government regulation of prostitution has improved the lives of sex workers. The following selected excerpts are from the interview I conducted in August, 2013 inside her work space:

McCoy: Why did you get into prostitution? And why do you stay?
Katrina: I was trying to get out of an abusive relationship that involved illegal drugs. Because I couldn’t be trusted, my family let me go from a good family owned business. I had two young boys to take care of, and one of my friends, someone I am no longer friends with, suggested that I try this in order to pay my bills. I stayed in it because it provided for things that I may not otherwise be able to provide for my boys…They go to a nice school, I take a nice vacation each year, and own my own home… But, most of the time I don’t want to keep doing this.
**McCoy:** Will you please describe what a typical day is like for a prostitute in the Red Light District in Amsterdam.

**Katrina:** Sometimes I work during the day, but I would say that most of my work occurs during the evening hours. It is possible for me to have upwards of 12-15 customers a night. But typically, I will see between 5-7 men (in a shift). Some prostitutes allow pretty much whatever sexual position the customer wants for a certain price. I use a system that allows me to charge more Euros depending on the wants of the customer. Most customers will stay with me for about 30 minutes, some stay longer…I would say on average I earn about 75-100 Euros per customer. Some nights, especially weeknights will be slow and I may only see 2 or 3 customers.

**McCoy:** Under what conditions do you work? Do you have a pimp or someone who oversees you?

**Katrina:** I don’t have a pimp, but a majority of women do. I am able to work as an ‘independent contractor’ of sorts. I can choose my hours, but I don’t have a contract. I pay rent for the window. There are also other expenses like clothes, crèmes, and some of the sex toys that I use on customers.

**McCoy:** What are some of the negative aspects of working as a prostitute?

**Katrina:** There’s always the worry of sexually transmitted infection. I get checked often. Violence. That’s another worry. I’m not young, so I also worry about my body keeping up with this type of work.

**McCoy:** Do you ever witness illegal activities within the Red Light District?

**Katrina:** Sometimes. Most of the illegal activities I witness are because of violence towards women. Men will beat sex workers. They (the men) don’t care. Some sex workers are illegal and they can’t report it to the police. There are stories that some of these girls are being held against their will.

**McCoy:** Have you ever experienced violence from a customer?

**Katrina:** Yes. Once, a man asked me to engage in a sexual act that had not been previously agreed upon. I explained that this would cost him 50 Euro more. He grew angry and choked me from behind. I hit him, and because he was drunk, he fell over. I ran out of my window and asked for help. It’s dangerous work. I’m often scared, especially when customers are drunk.
McCoy: Do you ever wish you could get out of prostitution?

Katrina: Yes. I know that I can’t keep this up forever. This is often demeaning and dangerous. I worry about my boys, who are almost old enough to go to university. What if something happens to me?

McCoy: What changes have you seen since the Dutch government decriminalized brothels in 2000?

Katrina: I have to pay taxes. That’s a big change! (She laughs…) The police have more of a presence than they used to in this area. You hear about the police raiding brothels with illegal activities like underage and illegal prostitution. Human trafficking… that’s a big one. You see a lot more tourists, especially Americans… I’d bet that half of my customers are Americans. The Americans will go into the coffee shops (to smoke pot) and find the guts to visit one of the windows. (She laughs…) They’ve also brought in more foreign sex workers. I don’t know many Dutch sex workers.

McCoy: Do you think the decriminalization of brothels has been beneficial for sex workers in the Netherlands?

Katrina: Some people talk about how it has lessened criminal activity, but I don’t see that. There’s definitely more opportunity for sex workers to get medical advice. I wasn’t paying taxes before (the decriminalization) and now I am. They tried to get rid of the stigma of being a sex worker. It’s still there.

The debate concerning the benefits of making brothels legal in the Netherlands rages on. Some argue that decriminalization has allowed the authorities to better monitor both the legal and illegal sectors of the sex industry. Others maintain that the instances of human trafficking and other illegal activities have increased, as has the rate of sexually transmitted infection.

Karina Schaapman, a former Amsterdam prostitute, who is now a city councilor, recently described the Red Light District in Amsterdam: "There are people who are really proud of the red light district as a tourist attraction. It's supposed to be such a wonderful, cheery place that shows just what a free city we are. But I think it's a cesspit. There's a lot of serious criminality. There's a lot of exploitation of women, and a lot of social distress. That's nothing to be proud of" (RNW, 2009).
Conclusion

We have examined the historical progression of prostitution from the Middle Ages to the present. In the Middle Ages prostitution was tolerated by the Catholic Church as a necessary evil, but was seen as a preventative measure intended to inhibit further corruption of society. Early regulatory practices that allowed for the collection of taxes were tried for the two centuries after the Middle Ages. During this time, prostitutes were kept in a constant cycle of debt and economic enslavement, because of the exorbitant expenses enacted by the bawd. The spread of venereal diseases like syphilis increased anxiety and suspicion towards sex workers. Prostitutes were seen as soiled, corrupt, and individuals to be punished for the harm they caused ‘normal citizens.’ Women were considered the immoral instigators in the sex trade, and men as innocent spectators. Sex workers were traded and exploited and their debts followed wherever they were sent. The French sanctioned a system of regulation intended to prevent the spread of infection, which would continue on a local level once the occupation had concluded. The Industrial Revolution allowed more prostitutes the opportunity to become independent workers with cheaper clothes and imports introduced into the Netherlands. Very few of them actually escaped from sexual slavery. In the mid-1800s a Calvinist middle class brought about further changes and called for an outright ban on prostitution. The blame transferred from the female sex worker to the male customers who were seen as ‘the scorn of society.’ At this time birth control was unavailable and sexually transmitted infections were rampant among sex workers. Although prostitution itself was never outlawed, brothels were banned in 1911. In the Post WWII era, the Red Light District became a cesspool of crime and drugs. To combat this situation, many Dutch accepted prostitution as a regular part of society and called for the repeal of the 1911 statute. By 2000, brothels were decriminalized under the stipulation that the Dutch government could maintain close control over the sex trade.

Overall, the institution of prostitution has not changed all that much since the Middle Ages. Titles, regulations, locations, and even the sex itself have all changed. But one thing remains the same; prostitution is an inherently dangerous profession, which preys upon the most vulnerable people in society. Whether legal or illegal, it breeds criminal activity such as extortion, sex trafficking, and violence. The Dutch consider themselves one of the most progressive nations on earth, but was the legalization of prostitution a *progressive* move? Thus
far, this regulatory experiment in morality has changed little in the lives of so many disadvantaged women.

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