

No easy answer to age-old question



SUSAN RAGAN/AP FILE PHOTO

Former prostitute Robyn Few, shown here in a undated 2006 photo, says she has met thousands of sex workers who are middle-class women who consider themselves entrepreneurs.

Realities are unlike the glamorous myth portrayed by 'Kristen' in Eliot Spitzer case  
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NEW YORK—The call girl in the Eliot Spitzer scandal appeared to be leading a glamorous life – staying in an upscale Manhattan highrise, travelling to seduce powerful men in swanky hotel rooms, making more than \$4,000 in one night.

But the reality for most prostitutes is far different.

Many come from broken homes, were homeless at some point, were abused as children and suffer from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, says Mary Anne Layden, director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program in the Center for Cognitive Therapy at University of Pennsylvania. She says many are not making any money because of a drug habit and a pimp or madam who takes half their earnings.

"The idea of *Pretty Woman* is a huge lie," says Layden, referring to the hit movie about a man who hires a prostitute and falls in love with her. "Most prostitutes spiral downward."

Ashley Alexandra Dupre – the 22-year-old identified as "Kristen" in court documents accusing the former New York governor of paying thousands for prostitutes' services –

doesn't seem to be *Pretty Woman* either. Her MySpace page portrays her as a New Jersey native who left a broken home to pursue a music career in New York.

Prostitution takes many forms, including homeless teens who prostitute themselves out of desperation, women and children who are trafficked from other countries, and high-end escorts who drum up business online.

This last group, with its seeming hint of glamour, has gotten the most media attention in the wake of the Spitzer scandal.

Former prostitute Norma Hotaling, who walked the streets and worked for an escort service, says it felt glamorous at first. "I felt an incredible sense of power," she said. "Here's a way I can make money. I can work any hours that I want to work. I can call my own shots. I don't have to take the dates I don't want. It's like, 'I have my own business. Isn't this amazing?'"

But those feelings didn't last long. She was addicted to heroin; she was homeless at times; she was beaten and raped. She began to be horrified that her livelihood depended on sex with strangers on a regular basis.

"You don't find a whole lot of women speaking out about how glamorous it was," she says.

Melissa Farley, a research psychologist who has been studying prostitution for the last 14 years, estimates that 80 per cent of prostitution is done indoors, including massage parlours, champagne rooms in strip clubs, and hotel rooms. She has interviewed 900 prostitutes in 10 countries. She says about 90 per cent say they want to get out.

University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt, of *Freakonomics* fame, recently studied street-level prostitution in Chicago and estimated there were about 4,400 prostitutes working the streets in an average week. They made an average of about \$25 an hour, a far cry from the thousands of dollars charged by high-priced escorts.

The Chicago prostitutes were also more likely to have sex with a police officer than to be arrested by one, and used condoms only a quarter of the time, Levitt found.

On the other end of the spectrum, Sudhir Venkatesh, a Columbia sociologist who collaborated with Levitt, says it is not uncommon to find some prostitutes charging \$10,000 per session. Still, he says those women report getting abused twice a year, while street prostitutes report three times that amount of abuse.

Some current and former sex workers who push for legalizing prostitution say most of the data on the subject is flawed because it is based on interviews with street hookers who are arrested, in battered women's shelters, or enrolled in drug treatment programs.

Former sex worker Veronica Monet says she was working in the business world when she decided to become a high-end prostitute. She has never worked on the streets or for a madam. She made as much as \$15,000 a night as an escort, in addition to her own hotel suite, spa services, dinner and entertainment.

"It's professional dating," says Monet, a sexologist and sex educator. "It's not complicated. People do this all the time for free. We have learned to charge for it."

Robyn Few, also an ex-prostitute and co-founder of SWOP-USA (Sex Workers Outreach Project), says she has met thousands of sex workers, many of whom are middle-class women who run their business on the Internet and consider themselves entrepreneurs. She advises against street prostitution.

"I can promise you we're not all drug addicts," she says. "We're not all abused. We're all human. We have desires, wants, needs. `Kristen' has huge desires. She wants to be a singer. She found a way to work toward those goals."

However, for every Veronica Monet, there are horrific stories that point to the ill effects of prostitution, says Layden.

There are stories of prostitutes as young as 13, women being beaten and raped by their pimps, abused by clients, contracting HIV, and committing suicide because they don't see a way out.

There is no bright future in prostitution, says Hotaling, founder of the SAGE Project (Standing Against Global Exploitation), which helps women leave and recover from sex work. Besides the physical and emotional effects, and the risk of jail time, women eventually find it hard to compete with younger and trafficked women. She says they are left penniless (most weren't investing) with no education, social life (most of their friends were in the industry) or life skills (many have never even had a bank account).

Dupre has not commented about her life as a prostitute, except to tell *The New York Times* she does not want to be thought of as a monster.

She has become a high-profile symbol, both as a victim – a young dropout with a drug problem – and as a woman who defies stereotypes. Madeleine Dash, co-founder of the Sex Workers Action New York, says "Kristen" proves that not all prostitutes are forced into this work out of desperation.

But Farley says prostitution is a dead end, pointing out that homicide is the most frequent cause of death for women in the industry.

"When you glamourize prostitution, it doesn't just affect `Kristen,'" says Rachel Durschlag, founder and director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. "But it affects all these other young vulnerable individuals because it becomes normal."

