

Brothel Nation

By Elena Suárez

In 2003, Spain's Institute of National Statistics (INE) showed that just over one in four Spanish men under the age of 49 had experienced sex with a prostitute - with one in fifteen having done so within the previous year. This was backed up by Maribel Montano of the ruling PSOE party, who claimed in 2007 that "every day

1.5 million men pay for sex" in Spain. In fact, there are an estimated 300,000 prostitutes working around the country, possibly turning over around 40 billion euros per year - which roughly equates to the country's education budget. For good reason, Spain is sometimes dubbed the 'Brothel of Europe'.



Certainly, the openness and extent of prostitution can be a surprise to north Europeans who still cling to the myth of Spain as a prim and proper, old-fashioned, hard-line Catholic country. This notion is swiftly dispelled as you drive at night along any main road out of a large town or city. In the outskirts, and often close to industrial estates, you will come across brightly lit buildings that normally have a garish neon sign pronouncing 'Club'. These are brothels in all but name and sometimes house up to a hundred or more prostitutes. Called 'Clubes de Alterne' (Socialising Clubs) by the Spanish, their location and nature are openly known and tolerated by the police, authorities and local population.

The clubs, of course, vary hugely and span the whole spectrum of prostitution from its lowest depths to a brothel

system that is reasonably fair and transparent within a deeply emotive industry. At their worst, the Clubs de Alterne are controlled by criminal gangs who have trafficked women from Third World countries on the promise of conventional work. Deprived of their passports and physically intimidated, the women are forced to work as prostitutes, whilst earning their bosses huge sums. Indeed, the International Labour Organisation in 2005 calculated that a forced sex worker would earn 67,200 euros a year in an industrialised country.

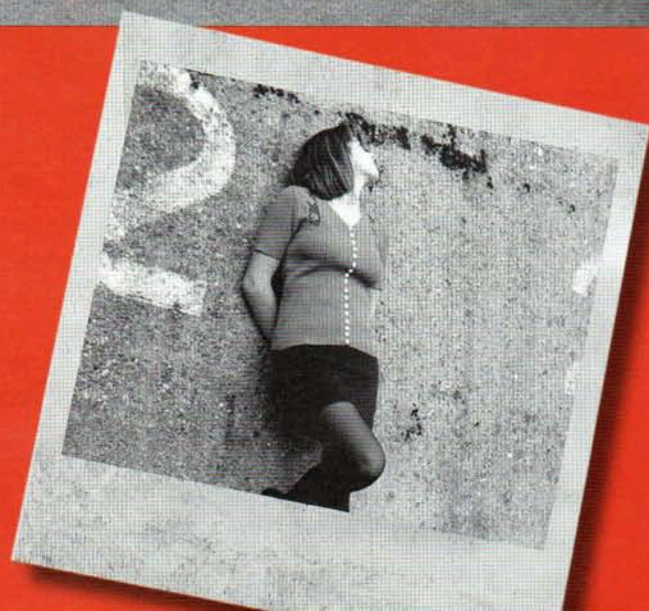
In Spain, there have been calls for prostitution to be legalised and regulated. However, in 2007, after three years of assessment, the parliamentary commission appointed by the socialist government was unable to come to a conclusion and prostitution was left in a legal limbo, being declared neither fully legal nor illegal.

The arguments for and against the legalisation of prostitution have always been complicated, not least by the universal recognition that prostitution is an industry that is almost impossible to completely stamp out. There is also the problem of interfering with the rights of consenting adults within a democracy. In this regard, José Luis Roberto Navarro, Head of Security for the Asociación Nacional de Empresarios de Locales Alterne (ANELA), states: "all the women working in the 200 clubs of our association do so voluntarily. Indeed, many immigrant women now coming to work in Spain as prostitutes know beforehand exactly what they are coming to do. The 2007 removal of many EU border controls has stopped most of the trafficking - at least from European countries."

Navarro's comments are echoed by the eminently practical Gundala Hoffman of www.sexy-guide.com, who has many years of experience as an executive in the sex industry in Rome. "The proliferation of easy communications, whether by internet or mobile phones, means that most women are now well aware of what they are about to do - even if not the personal cost."

Certainly, the Clubs de Alterne are full of immigrants, mostly from Romania and South America. Barely 2% of the prostitutes in Spain are Spanish and, of those, hardly any work in the clubs. In the tight communities of Spanish villages and towns this would be tantamount to social suicide - notwithstanding the widespread use and acceptance of the Clubs de Alterne by Spanish men.

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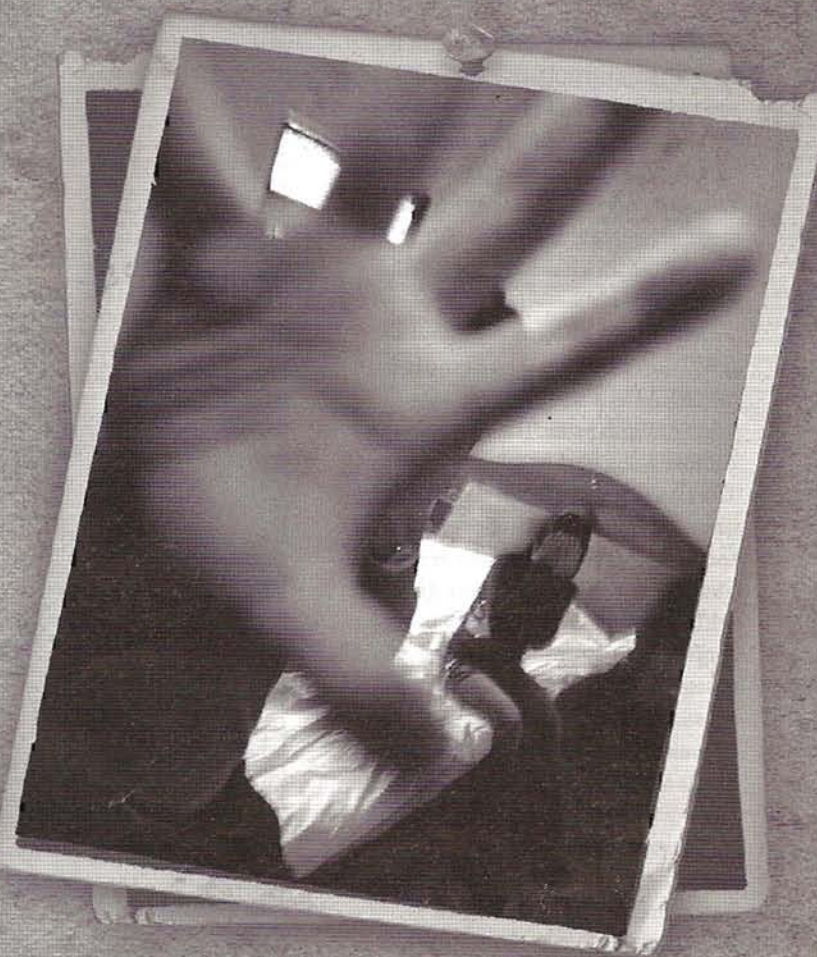
Membership of ANELA, a self-policing organisation, is the closest that Clubes de Alterne get to being regulated in Spain. As a condition of membership, a club must be a properly registered business, such as a hotel or bar licensed for renting rooms. It must also expressly undertake not to allow anyone on the premises under eighteen, any usage of drugs or involuntary prostitution. Furthermore, the club must agree to co-operate fully with the police, whilst ensuring monthly medical check-ups for the women.

The El Cisne club, just south of Valencia city, is a demonstration of the potential benefits of legalisation and regulation. This middle ranking 'club' is actually a hotel in which the women live, paying 50 euros a day for full board. A softly-spoken professional hotelier runs the establishment, which has a full-time chef, a restaurant, swimming pool, salon and internet area for the women. Only slightly more garish than a UK travel lodge, El Cisne is immaculately clean, tidy and un-intimidating, with a recognisable hotel foyer and several rooms for 'short-term' rental - each of which has a shower, WC and an emergency button.

Of course, El Cisne has a

surreal feel about it because during the long working hours (5pm to 4am) it has fifty semi-naked women roaming through the large bar area to the rooms above, the internet area or their own salon. There is also a bizarrely competitive atmosphere, as the women desperately try to gain the attention of any men entering the bar, at which time they are free to negotiate any deal they wish. Whatever they earn (normally 60 euros for half an hour in one of the guest rooms) is a matter for them and of no financial interest to the club.

Left alone to speak to a number of the women, a crude straw poll indicated that the those at El Cisne were there voluntarily. All were immigrants and all had come knowing what they would be doing. Hating the nature of the work, the women saw it as their only way to make any money, having come from desperate poverty in their own countries. They said that their clientele came from all walks of life with three out of ten men treating them gently, whilst nine out of ten men spent no more than half an hour with them. They felt safe at El Cisne and, despite the obviously distasteful nature of the work, were clearly much better off than prostituting themselves elsewhere - let alone on the unprotected horrors of a public street governed by oppressive pimps.



Clearly, clubs such as El Cisne provide a benchmark delivery system for both a consenting male and female that is practically acceptable. However, the excoriating sadness of prostitution is inescapable. In 2003 Medicos de Mundo published a report in which they stated that "prostitution was the modern slavery of the 21st century" and that "most women and children abandon prostitution ill, traumatised and poorer than when they started."

Whilst the Medicos de Mundo report undoubtedly has the sting of absolute truth, it is hard to see how prostitution can be eradicated until the pitiless trauma and impossible conundrum of world poverty is adequately

is it legal?

In Spain, voluntary prostitution is not illegal, although the law forbids the 'abusing of a position of power' and the 'forcing of someone into prostitution', for which a conviction carries a prison sentence.

The owning or running of a brothel has been illegal since 1956, but this is circumvented by the setting up of 'hotels' or 'clubs' that offer 'alternative' shows and services. These are the Clubes de Altermes.

tackled. It is no coincidence that the overwhelming majority of prostitutes are from countries ravaged by war or dire economic plight. Therefore, any 'consent' to becoming a prostitute is normally driven by desperation and then, all too often, sustained for too long when an anaesthetising drug habit takes hold.

In Spain, it looks as though the profusion of Clubes de Alterne is here to stay. As Vicente B, a Valencian businessman says: "the Clubes de Alterne are a part of Spanish culture. They have always existed in one form or another. It is just that over the past ten years they have become more obvious and much more sophisticated, with some clubs delivering a luxury service in truly opulent surroundings." Certainly, it is difficult to envisage persuading Spanish men not to use Clubes de Alterne - and if this desire exists and is universally accepted, then there will always be a demand for it.

However, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that Spain has missed an opportunity to courageously legalise and tightly regulate prostitution. On one level, the government is condoning an enormous cash industry that is impossible to tax as the earnings are, by definition, not fully legal. But far more importantly, not doing so only acts to keep prostitution underground, pushing it further into the hands of organised crime and thus continuing to make it unsafe for all parties. And it is hard to imagine more vulnerable people than young women working in an appallingly distressing business, often far from home and any hope of help.



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the facts

- Every day 1.5 million men pay for sex in Spain.
- There are an estimated 300,000 prostitutes here, turning over up to 40 billion euros per year.
- Barely 2% of the prostitutes in Spain are Spanish. Most are from Eastern Europe and South America.
- The huge scale of immigration in Spain has complicated matters, as many of the immigrants are illegal, thus making effective regulation more difficult.
- In 2006 the UNHCR reported that some 500,000 Russian women (the Natasha Trade) had been sold into the sex industry since the 1990s.
- Some of the top-earning clubs (like the Universo Majestic in Valencia) are themed areas of opulence with prices starting at 156 euros per hour and rising steeply.

reality bites

Two Girls Working at a Club de Alterne

Nika is a pretty, petite, dark-haired Romanian girl with innocent almond eyes who speaks perfect English. She is 20 years old and is dressed in boots and a low-neckline, black shirt ending at the top of her thighs. She works at an ANELA club located in Valencia province.

"I have been here for a week now and I will stay here for three months. No one in my family knows what I am doing; they think I am working in a bar. I hate the work - I am lonely, miss my family, cried all day yesterday and get no physical pleasure from what I do. But I have no choice if I am to make some money, which is totally impossible in my country. I have sex with three to four men a day - seven out of ten men have sex with me, whilst the others just talk or touch me. I was under no pressure to come here and I knew what I was coming to do, as a friend in Romania told me all about it."

Bea is from Romania, is 19 years old, blonde, heavily made-up and buxom with a stud in her lip. She is wearing tight mini-shorts, an open blouse and a skimpy black bra. She also works in an ANELA club in Valencia province.

"I have been working here for a year now and I have no plans to stop at the moment. I am here to earn as much money as I can, as I want to be able to go home and buy a really good car and a house. I do not like the work either but, just occasionally, I do get physical pleasure. I have sex with six to seven men a day who pay me 60 euros for half an hour, all of which I keep. I was under no pressure to come here and I feel safe and secure in this club. I will leave when I feel like it."