

POST
Aug 27 2006

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Time to Drop the Massage Parlor Ads

The Post runs "massage parlor" advertising almost every day in the Sports section. The ads are small and discreet in content, but not always candid. The money for those ads doesn't come from masseuses trained in Swedish, shiatsu or deep-tissue massage. And men don't go there for back rubs.

My inquiries into The Post's acceptance of these ads began after a Page 1 story on Dec. 15 by Laura Blumenfeld caught my eye. Her story started in a local Korean-run massage parlor, where she talked to both the manager of the club and one of the "johns" who come there for sex. For years, stories in The Post and other newspapers have pointed out that massage parlors are often thinly disguised houses of prostitution.

Her story told about a national campaign against prostitution by a bipartisan coalition of political, religious, non-profit and law enforcement groups that successfully pushed for legislation granting state and local police agencies funds to investigate and prosecute brothel owners, pimps and their customers. Their campaign is particularly aimed at stopping the abuse of women who have been coerced by pimps or smugglers.

Then on Aug. 17, The Post published a story by Allan Lengel reporting that federal agents had broken up a sex-slave trafficking ring along the East Coast that allegedly coerced Korean women into working as prostitutes in massage parlors and spas, some in upscale Washington neighborhoods such as Cleveland Park and Glover Park.

Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and FBI agents arrested and charged 31 people in several cities with prostitution-related offenses. Among the 31 people charged were four managers of District massage parlors, all of which had advertised in The Post that week.

Federal documents said that authorities believe the women were given false immigration papers by smugglers who then forced them to work as prostitutes to pay off thousands of dollars in fees

for being smuggled into the country. At least 23 Korean women were rounded up in the District to be interviewed to determine whether they were involuntarily part of the ring. "Some women arrested in the sweep have been certified as victims," said Marc Raimondi, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security and ICE.

Several readers have complained about the ads in the past, and the Aug. 17 story brought a new batch. Steve Lundberg, a Virginia reader, wrote, "It's common knowledge that these

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businesses are fronts for prostitution; this very subject was lampooned by your own Gene Weingarten in The Post magazine a couple of years back when he went to one of these businesses and attempted to just get a massage. To that end, why on earth would The Post so grossly compromise its integrity by continuing to accept advertisements from these fronts for organized crime? Is the few column inches of advertising . . . really worth it?"

Brian C. Hamilton, a Pasadena, Md., reader, wrote, "Does The Post make a habit of advertising for known brothels? The Post has continued to advertise prostitution while sacrificing its journalistic integrity in exchange for the almighty advertising dollar. I personally hold The Washington Post morally responsible for knowingly contributing to the exploitation of women who have come to this country looking for a better life, only to be brutalized by the proprietors and patrons of these establishments. The Washington Post and its advertising department should be ashamed."

Stephen Haaga of Rockville wrote: "I note that your paper profits from these thinly disguised local prostitution fronts and has done so for years now. I think your ethical double standard in doing business with human traffickers and exploiters of vulnerable

immigrants today is shameful."

Mary Ann Werner, vice president and counsel for The Post, spoke for the newspaper on this issue: "We don't knowingly accept advertising from an illegal business, but we do have to rely on licensing authorities and law enforcement to determine that a business is not operating legally. The massage parlors and spas that advertise in The Post have been licensed to operate those businesses by the jurisdictions where they're located, and The Post requires proof of a valid business license. If we learn that a business is not operating within the law, as we did when these recent arrests were made, we will not publish their advertising."

The Post does not routinely check all advertisers for their business licenses, Werner said. It only started checking massage parlors for them after my inquiries began a few months ago. Werner said Post employees also review ads for matters of taste.

Werner also said the arrests raise the question of whether the problems are so prevalent that the policy should be reexamined. The Post also does not accept advertising for escort services, which also can be fronts for prostitution. The Post does not disclose details of its revenue, so it could not be learned what the ads bring in.

The Post takes other advertising that might be considered controversial — for tobacco products, alcohol or guns in jurisdictions where such advertising is legal. Werner said, "Since those are all legal products, we accept those ads, although we impose certain standards in the gun arena in terms of the type of ad we accept and the manner in which the product can appear in the ad."

Many newspapers of comparable quality do not take massage parlor ads — the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Boston Globe. The Post should join them.

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