

# LEBANON'S SEX INDUSTRY

Romanian prostitutes pose in the brothel "Pussy Club" in Schoenefeld, Germany in April. Eastern European women make up the bulk of foreign sex workers in Lebanon.



## Prostitution

# The business of sex

The ins and outs of the world's oldest profession in Lebanon

**L**ebanon's beaches, nightclubs and hotels are packed this summer with visitors spending cash and enjoying all the country has to offer, including the sexual services of women.

One of the main outlets for such activity is the ubiquitous super nightclub business. There are around 130 licensed super nightclubs in Lebanon, where women from the Ukraine, Russia, Morocco and the Dominican Republic work as "artists." Lebanese women are prohibited from working in these establishments, and "families" are not allowed to enter — meaning Lebanese women cannot enter, even as customers, although foreign women can.

The nightclubs' owners characterize their sector as a legitimate and legal business model that presents entertainment and brings women and men together. The super nightclub business is regulated by the government, with permits given by the Ministry of Tourism and oversight by General Security. The super nightclub owners are represented by a lobbying group that includes other, more benign sectors of the tourism industry: the Syndicate of Restaurants, Cafes and Pastry Shop Owners.

But super nightclubs also serve as a platform for prostitution outside the venue's walls — sometimes only as far away as an adjacent hotel. The club may or may not take a direct role in arranging and profiting from their female employees' illegal activity.

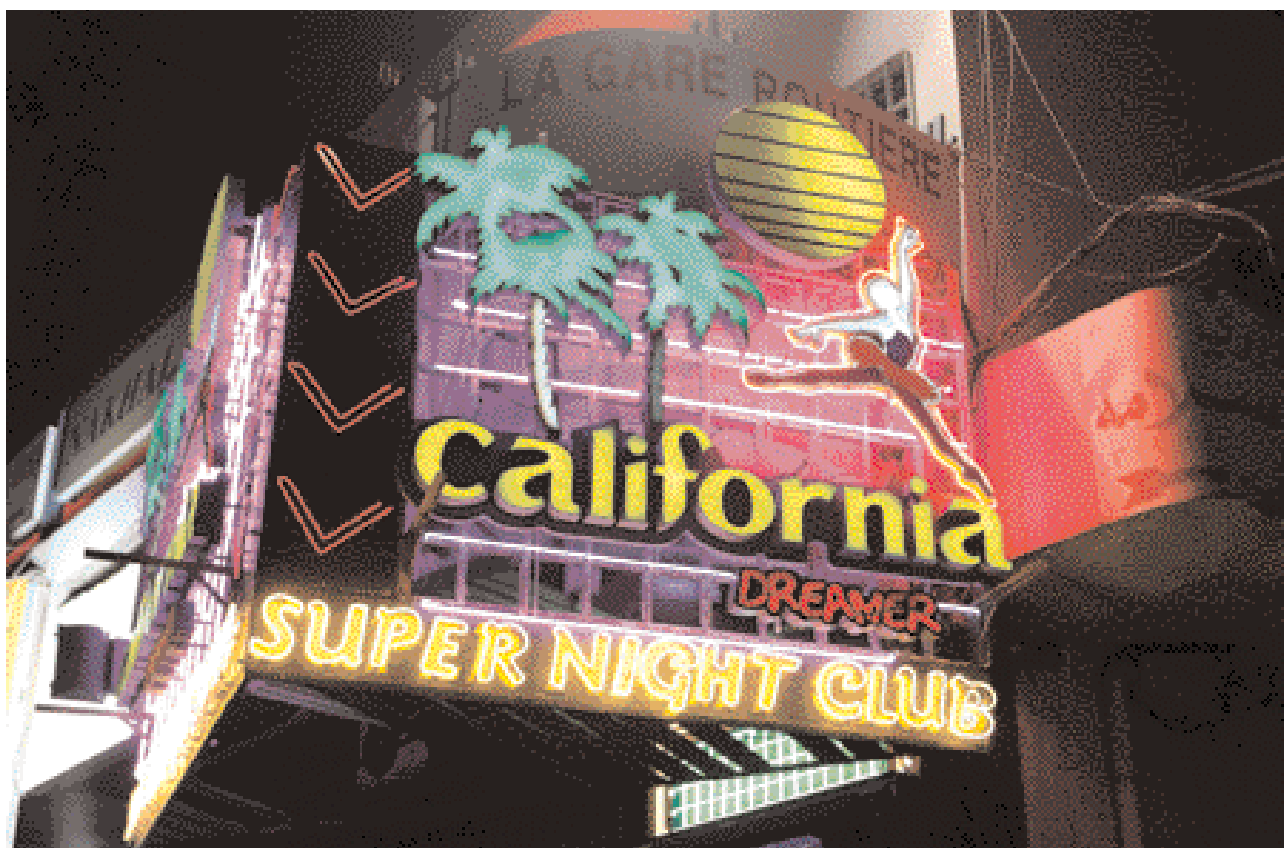
### How it works

In mid-July, a 21-year-old prostitute from the Dominican Republic danced onstage at a super nightclub in the Maamaltein district of Jounieh. She wore white denim shorts cut just below the crotch, stiletto heels and a tight t-shirt that stopped just above her navel. She also wore braces on her teeth. Let's call her Julia.

Men are not allowed to speak with artists like Julia at super nightclubs unless they pay for it. Customers pick the woman they want to talk to by walking through the club or seeing the woman dance or perform on stage. Many clubs offer a "cabaret" beginning at midnight, where women perform dance routines to European and Arabic music and swing on poles dressed in a variety of tight, low-cut and short-skirted costumes.

In order to speak with one of the female artists, a customer must order "champagne" or "picotot," and select the woman he wants to sit at his table. The champagne has nothing to do with a bottle of alcohol: the term is merely super nightclub-speak for having one of the artists sit at a customer's table for exactly an hour and a half. A "picotot" is similar "code" for having a woman sit with a customer for a half hour. Champagne usually costs around \$60 to \$80, and a picotot around \$30 to \$35.

A customer may negotiate one or two drinks to be included in the cost of the champagne. A picotot usually includes one drink. The super nightclubs are not cheap places to grab a



Super nightclubs such as the one above in Lebanon's Maameltain district are frequented by locals and tourists

drink without sitting with a woman: an Almaza beer costs \$11.

Once the women are ordered, they arrive at the customer's table, sit down and strike up conversation. A waiter brings drinks. Few of the women speak English, but as one of the female "artists" at a super nightclub said, "many Lebanese speak Russian."

Often the women immediately initiate physical contact with a customer by putting a hand or arm on the man's leg. Kissing is permitted in super nightclubs, as is light petting, but anything beyond that is strictly prohibited by most clubs, since it could get them in trouble with General Security.

But with the purchase of "champagne," a customer also purchases the right to make a "date" with the woman, supposedly with her consent, within a week of the purchase. The date is often code for sex. When an EXECUTIVE staff member visited a super nightclub posing as a cus-

tommer, Julia, the Dominican artist, made it very clear what services she could provide beyond dancing and sitting with customers.

"Sex costs \$100 for three hours," she announced bluntly. "Talk to the manager if you want to set a date."

When asked if it was possible to

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set a date that night, she said no, customers have to wait until the next day.

General Security regulates super nightclubs and, according to owners, no sex is permitted in the club. It's also risky to allow a woman to leave with a customer at night. Lebanese government regulations require that Julia, like other artists in Lebanon, be in their workplace —

the super nightclub — from 8pm to 5am. General Security and police can enter at any time and demand to see any of the artists.

At 5am, the artists must return to their hotel, where they are not allowed to leave until their "free time," which is 1pm to 8pm daily. This free period is when the women can meet up with their customers from the night before. General Security requires the "telephone number and the car's registration card of the person accompanying" the woman be noted at the hotel's front desk, but beyond that, the woman and man are not monitored.

By law, Julia and her colleagues can only be taken out on "dates" during their free hours. But she hinted that perhaps other arrangements could be made.

"Are you staying at the hotel?" Julia asked, referring to the same hotel, just above the super nightclub, where she and her colleagues live.



There are around 130 super nightclubs in Lebanon that provide legitimate entertainment and also facilitate illegal prostitution

### The business

Super nightclubs come under a variety of different regulations and legal authorities, including the Ministry of Tourism, General Security and the Internal Security Forces. According to Toros Siranossian, who represents the super nightclub owners in the syndicate of restaurants, nightclubs are licensed by the tourism ministry depending on their purpose: there are legitimate discos and nightclubs with a DJ, bars and super nightclubs that only feature a band, singers and a show, where women don't sit with customers (the "family is allowed to enter these," says Siranossian), and super nightclubs where the artists sit with the customer.

The vast majority of super nightclubs are of the latter category.

Customers rarely arrive to the super nightclubs in the Maamaltein district of Jounieh before midnight. Before that, artists like Julia sit around in groups, sipping drinks and eying the men who walk through the door. But by 3:00 a.m., the parking lot is full, and the men keep coming. License plates from Syria and the Gulf stand out in a parking lot filled largely with vehicles bearing Lebanese plates.

A super nightclub owner, who spoke to EXECUTIVE on condition his

real name not be used — let's call him "George" — said his club usually has between 15 and 25 women per night. On average, 10 to 30 customers come in every evening. They mostly order women for champagne.

"I usually make \$10,000 to \$12,000 a month in profit," said George. But in the summer, with Lebanese expatriates back home along with thousands of tourists, he says he usually makes more, ranging from \$15,000 to \$20,000 a month.

With 130 clubs in Lebanon, that is equal to around \$23 million in profit for the minute sector per year — and that's only the legitimate revenue.

A permit for a super nightclub is a one-time cost of \$1,000. Nightclubs pay the women anywhere from \$800 to \$1,200 per month, depending on their ability to dance and perform. A woman also receives \$5 for every "champagne" she is hired for, and \$3 for every "picotot" sold to her customer. They can make up to \$400 or \$500 a month extra from the 'bottles' they sell, according to the nightclub owner.

Owners must deposit around \$650 at General Security for each woman. Clubs must also pay around \$2,500 per month for the hotel where the women live.

There are "two to four women

per room, each one gets a bed, and some hotels have seven different clubs renting out the hotel rooms," said a Lebanese man who will be called "Charbel" for the purposes of concealing his identity. Charbel is intimately familiar with the business because his family owns a super nightclub. Like many involved in the super nightclub business, he is also a frequent customer of many different clubs.

Charbel says other costs associated with running a super nightclub include bartenders, waiters, bouncers, drivers and managers for the hotel.

"We work in two shifts," said George. "The first shift is at the club. The second shift is at the hotel."

All these expenses cost him around \$40,000 per month, including the hotel, the registration for the artists, electricity and insurance.

The nightclub owner says most

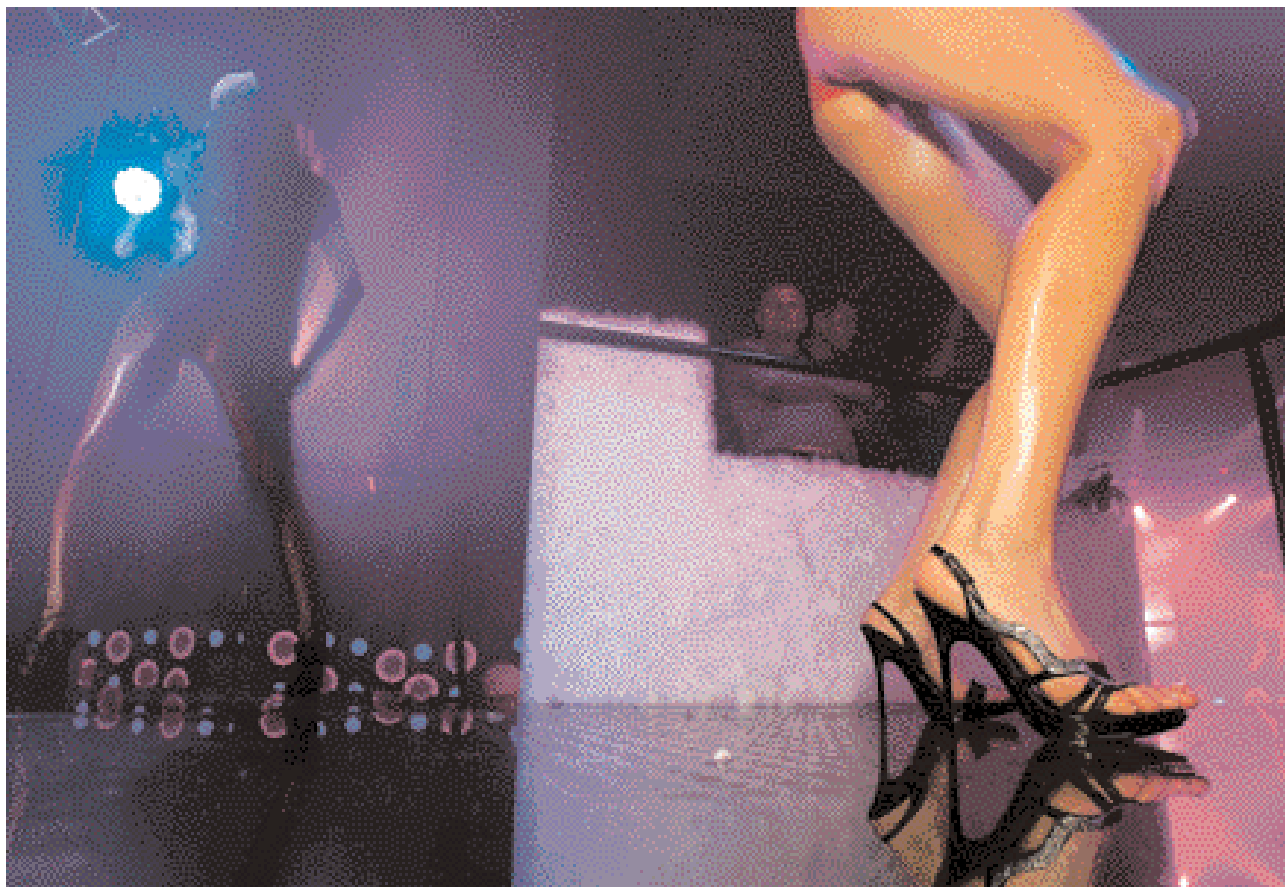
### GENERAL SECURITY REQUIRES THE PHONE NUMBER AND CAR REGISTRATION OF THE PERSON ACCOMPANYING THE 'ARTIST'

of his customers are Lebanese (they like blonde women, he says), and older: He estimates 80 percent of his clients are between 50 and 60 years old.

"They like the company," said George. "It refreshes their memory. Some are married. Some are divorced. Some don't have partners. Some are shy. Some are lonely, and they come because don't know how to build relations."

Few struggling college students or construction workers can afford to be a regular customer at a super nightclub. Just talking to a woman and getting the right to take her out, costs between \$60 to \$80. Add onto that food and gas for a date the next day. If the man wants to have sex, he needs to rent a hotel room, and to fork out \$100 to \$200 to the woman.

The biggest competition between



A dancer performs in a nightclub in Moscow in March 2009. Super nightclub owners say more Eastern European and Russian women are coming to Lebanon because of the global recession.

the clubs is for beautiful women.

"I don't care if you have a laser show, or how nice your chairs are," the owner said. "The customers are coming for the ladies."

To guard their investment, super nightclub owners keep a tight leash on their "product." Club owners take their female employees' passports. It's regular practice for owners to lock the doors of the hotel between 5am and 1pm. Charbel says the women working for his family aren't allowed out of the hotel for more than 30 minutes during their 1pm to 8pm "free time," unless they have a date. Charbel says the restriction on the women's movement is necessary.

"We are restricting movement for our own benefit," he said. "Maybe she has a boyfriend and he doesn't have the money to go out. He'll come and pick her up and we won't get our \$66 for champagne."

"If you don't control everything, you will lose money. When dealing with women you have to control them. If you let them do what they want, you will end up with nothing."

When asked if he's essentially a pimp, George said absolutely not. He said he has no control over agreements and arrangements between customers and the

from his club alone.

#### Eastern Europe to Lebanon

Club owners find women from around the globe through the use of what are called "impresarios." These are the middlemen, the agents who find women in their home countries and arrange for them to come to Lebanon. George says he pays an agency based in Eastern Eu-

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women at his club. He sees his club as the facilitator, "like the computer linking two people together on Internet chat rooms," he said.

Both Charbel and George said it's not unusual for a client to fall in love with one of the nightclub's employees. George boasts that 70 of his customers have married women

from his club alone.

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rope between \$200 and \$400 a month to find artists.

"They'll tell you the picture was





A prostitute smokes a cigarette at the "GeizHaus" brothel in the northern German town of Hamburg. Like Lebanon, prostitution in Germany is legal. But Lebanon has not licensed a brothel since the 1970s, despite the ubiquity of the practice.

## Lebanon trafficking in persons report 2009 – from the United States Department of State

Lebanon, Publication Date 16 June 2009

**"The General Security reported 47 complaints of physical abuse, rape, and withheld earnings of foreign women working in adult clubs in 2008 – complaints that may have involved conditions of involuntary servitude. Most were settled out of court and the victims deported. These cases were hampered by a lack of resources; court backlogs; corruption; cultural biases, particularly against foreign women; bureaucratic indifference and inefficiency; difficulty proving cases of reported abuse; and victims' lack of knowledge of their rights. Given the significant hurdles to pursuing criminal complaints in the Lebanese court system, and in the absence of alternate legal recourse, many foreign victims opted for quick administrative settlements followed by mandatory repatriation."**

**"Moreover, the government pursued policies and practices that significantly harmed foreign victims of trafficking. For example, authorities required that women recruited for prostitution under its "artist" work permit program be confined in hotels for most of the day and summarily deported them if they complained of mistreatment."**

taken one week or three months ago, when in reality it's three years. The best way to bring nice women is to send someone to find them. But you will accept the pictures if you're in need of women."

Charbel says the women pay for their own plane ticket, which from Moscow costs between \$600 and \$1,000. The super nightclub pays the visas (between \$200 and \$350) and medical costs, which include a periodic mandatory pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease test. The cost of the medical test is around \$250.

Artists' visas are granted by General Security for up to six months. When she completes her contract, the artist is required to stay outside the country for the same period she was in Lebanon. Most club owners prefer the women stay up to three months, then return in three months, so they can create return customers.

Charbel says there are currently more women willing to come to Lebanon to be artists because of the financial crisis. But an increase in the number of willing artists has not brought wages down.

### Prostitution or entertainment

George and Charbel both say women in their clubs are never forced to go out with men, or to have sex for money.

"We don't force women to make relations [have sex], that's dirty," the owner said. "It's an agreement between you and the woman. We are providing a show, a drink and we are not pushing them to do anything."

"In prostitution — you pay and you [have sex]," he said. "In our system, this woman signs a contract, it's her own will. It's forbidden for us to sell her — what she does is an agreement between a couple."

There have been reports that women who have arrived in Lebanon from Morocco and Eastern Europe to work at super nightclubs

are surprised to find out the business is a cover for prostitution. But Charbel says that in the past this used to happen, but not now.

"They know why they're here," he said. "People know what coming to Lebanon means. The women lie to

## "THE FIRST REASON THEY COME TO LEBANON IS FOR THE MONEY, THE SECOND REASON FOR THE SEX"

their parents about which country they're coming to. A woman I know tells her family she is in Hong Kong."

Charbel says women will not have sex with a customer for under \$100. "At the good super nightclubs woman will take \$200 for sex."

Super nightclub owners are quick to point out that although the women may be selling themselves, they're making good money. If they spend two hours with three customers during their free time, and charge \$100 per customer, they're making \$300 a day on top of their salary.

Charbel acknowledges the women who come to Lebanon to sell their bodies must have come from terribly desperate conditions in their home countries, but he says business is business.

"I feel sorry for them. They have good hearts," he said. "But it's like a circle. The woman brings the customers, we get the champagne money and they get their money."

Betraying some of the national stereotypes super nightclub owners associate with their employees, Charbel adds that Eastern European women "love sex. They were born with a hunger for sex."

"The first reason they come to Lebanon is for the money, the second reason for the sex. They enjoy it," he said, adding that he has sex regularly with several women from super nightclubs.

### Illegal but condoned

It is not widely known that prostitution is actually legal in Lebanon (see Lebanese Law of 2/6/1931), but the government has

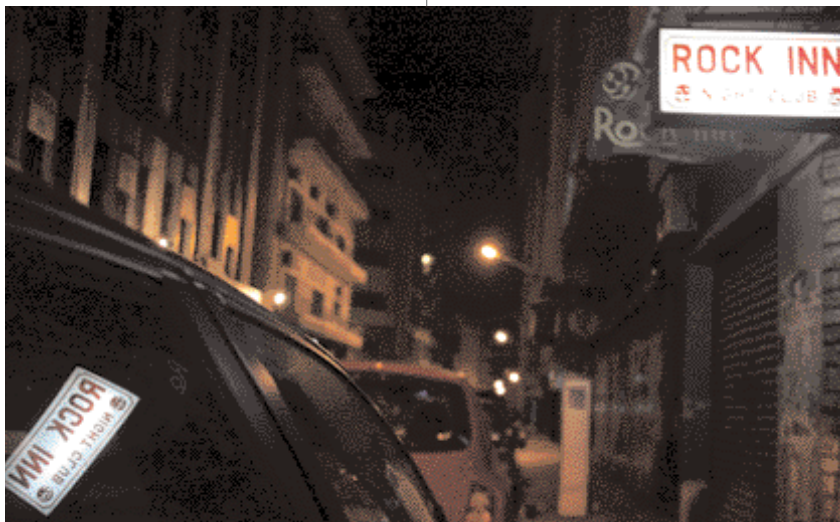
not issued a license for a legal "brothel" since the beginning of the civil war in 1975. At that time, all licensed brothels were located in downtown Beirut, near Martyrs' Square in the Zeitoun district, famously featured in the film "West

Beirut." All the brothels were destroyed during the fighting.

Super nightclubs have filled the void left by the brothels, to a degree. According to Siranossian, who rep-

resents nightclubs to the syndicate, the last ones were issued between 1993 and 1997, says the nightclub owner. Prior to his establishment becoming a super nightclub, he says it was a high-end dinner club, which he renovated for \$1 million in the 1990s. But business dropped off and he needed money, so he rented the space to a man who wanted to open a super nightclub.

Although prostitution is illegal without a license, General Security gives "implicit consent" to uncensored prostitution, according to the United States Department of State's 2007 Trafficking in Persons Report.



A super nightclub in Beirut's Hamra district long known for its red light bars and clubs

resents nightclubs to the syndicate, the super nightclubs were once legitimate establishments during Lebanon's "golden" years of tourism in the 1960s. Back then, cabarets and super nightclubs featured real performers and artists: belly dancers, singers and musicians.

"But the war came and they all closed," Siranossian said. "When the war finished in 1992, [the super nightclubs] wanted to reopen. But there was no business. So they couldn't open in a clean way and bring artists without [the artists sitting at the table with customers], because they will lose money. So they were obliged to open [in their current form]."

Licenses for super nightclubs existed before and during the war, but

The trafficking report says that in 2006 the number of visas issued by the Lebanese government to "mostly eastern European women to work in adult clubs as artists," numbered 4,210. The trafficking report is the only concrete figure for the number of artists' visas issued in recent years found for this article. EXECUTIVE asked General Security to confirm this number, and to provide the number of artists visas granted in 2008 and so far in 2009, but officers were unable to provide the statistics by the time the magazine went to print.

Lebanese General Security commits a significant amount of manpower to regulating the industry. The General Security headquarters contains an entire artists "section." The





The entrance to Dar Al Amal in Sin el Fil; an organization that works to improve the lives of prostitutes

## Street level sex industry

Despite its seediness, the world of super nightclubs does appear to be a clean, transparent and well regulated industry compared to the plight of street-level and red light bar prostitutes. These women sell their bodies for anywhere from \$2 to \$30 dollars for sex. The red light bars mainly operate in Hamra. They are also licensed in a similarly complicated fashion as the super nightclubs, but basically “bar” means brothel, in the traditional sense of the word. News reports have documented how the system works, with a “Mom” running a number of women in the “bar” who service men on a walk-in basis.

“They have small secret rooms in the back,” said a source who works with prostitutes, and didn’t want their name used in this story. “So when the customer likes one of them, it’s very easy to take them to this room.”

An award-winning investigative report in *An Nahar* newspaper on November 27, 2008, said the women are mostly Egyptians, Syrians and Sudanese nationals. The bars are able to operate because the bar owners pay police to overlook the real nature of the establishments, according to those familiar with the business.

Then there are Lebanese women who sell sex on the streets, or out of a hotel or rented apartment, with or without the guidance of a pimp. One former Lebanese prostitute who spoke with EXECUTIVE said she started selling her body on the streets of the Maamaltein district after she ran away from home at the age of 18. She ran away because her father used to rape and beat her. As a prostitute, she charged \$20 to \$30 for one or two hours of sex. She got out of prostitution thanks to Dar Al Amal, one of the few organizations in Lebanon working with prostitutes. Dar Al Amal works with around 60 women from three different centers around Lebanon. They also have a presence in all the women’s prisons.

“We are working with the poorest of the poor,” said the Hoda Kara, director of Dar Al Amal. “We are working with women from dislocated families, who were in orphanages, or [worked as] domestic laborers in houses. They have been abused, exploited, mistreated and violated.”

It’s a similar situation in the Palestinian camps. A report in *Al Akhbar* said women in the Sabra camp charge between \$6 to \$20 for sex while fellatio costs as little as 3,000 Lebanese lira, about \$2. Dar Al Amal’s Kara also says the law is unfair to Lebanese women caught working in prostitution. If a foreign prostitute is caught in Lebanon, she will be deported. If a Lebanese woman is caught with a client in Lebanon, she will be arrested and put in jail. The man will be released, she says. Kara says that especially at this time, prostitution at all levels of society is a “very big business” in Lebanon.

“Because of the tourism here... there is demand,” she said. “And when there is demand, there is supply, for these women who are very poor, who need money, who are not supported [and] because they don’t have any other solution.”

guidelines for “artists” in Lebanon can be read in English and Arabic on General Security’s website.

The artists are handed a booklet upon arrival at General Security, outlining their rights and responsibilities. General Security declined to provide a copy of the booklet to EXECUTIVE’s staff.

But according to news reports and people familiar with the booklet and the regulations, the booklet details the rules an artist must follow while in Lebanon. The booklet also contains an emergency phone number to call if the women are physically attacked, raped, held against their will or forced to do anything they don’t want to do.

### A necessary state of seediness?

Given Lebanon’s other overriding problems, it’s not surprising there would be loopholes and problems with the regulatory system of super nightclubs. The 2009 US Trafficking in Person’s report said General Security reported “47 complaints of physical abuse, rape, and withheld earnings of foreign women working in adult clubs in 2008.” Those were complaints that “may have involved conditions of involuntary servitude.” Most of the cases, the report says, “were settled out of court and the victims deported.”

The report said if women complain about their conditions, they are “summarily deported.”

General Security and the Ministry of Justice were unable to provide the number of complaints by artists in 2007 and 2008, and did not respond to requests for information or an interview about the subject.

Super nightclub owners say the accusations of human trafficking are unfounded. Even the US State Department acknowledged that few women arriving in Lebanon to work in super nightclubs are unaware of what the job involves.

“Most of the women entered the country knowing that they would be working in adult clubs,” the 2009 trafficking report said.





The Cobra super nightclub in Maameltain is not shy about advertising what's on offer

Although Siranossian says he dislikes the super nightclub business that focuses on hooking men up with women, he justifies Lebanon's super nightclub system by comparing it to the rest of the Arab world, where prostitution has no oversight.

"Here in Lebanon we closed the brothels, so now customers go to super nightclub[s] where they can take a woman out the next afternoon," he said. "This is nothing. The most important thing is that the owner of the super nightclub doesn't sell the woman."

Siranossian calls the super nightclubs a "fantastic" solution to the problem of prostitution, because it allows the government to regulate and oversee the industry, somewhat akin to the way escort services operate in the US or Europe.

Charbel verifies this, noting that police usually stop in three or four times a week.

"They're checking to see if the woman is in the club, and hasn't gone out with a customer," he said.

Even then, it appears that circumventing the law is relatively easy. Police corruption in Lebanon is nothing new, and several people acquainted with the industry said that in the past, law enforcement has often looked the other way if enough money is offered.

"The law was permitting us," he said. "When the police come, we'd pay a lot of money, and they'd forget everything for one week, two weeks," he said. "But they're putting too much pressure now. They refuse to take the money."

Customers pay much more than usual if the woman goes out with them during nightclub hours, Charbel says. The average price would be

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\$300 for the woman, paid directly to the super nightclub. She charges her own amount on the side. It's a practice some owners say they are disgusted by.

"Some places are like a bordello, some are like pizza delivery," George said. "They give super nightclubs a bad reputation."

But it's a risky business to break the law. If the police won't take bribes and the nightclub owner gets caught with women outside the club during working hours, the club can be closed down for a month. The women can be deported.

Still, the employee and others familiar with the business say bribes, and connections to powerful politicians, make laws that reg-

ulate the super nightclubs hard to enforce all the time.

"Anyone who opens a super nightclub, for sure if he doesn't have support at a high level, it's not easy for him," said one person familiar with the business, who did not want to be named. "If the [super nightclub] took this permission and they pay money, they can do what they want to do."

But the nightclubs do appear to get into a lot of trouble with the police. Siranossian has represented the nightclub owners for years in the syndicate, and has sometimes been the industry's envoy to General Security.

"There are many problems," he said. "If the woman comes back late to the hotel, or if the owner sells the woman from the club... there are so many problems."

Siranossian says if the syndicate just took care of super nightclub problems, he would be at the General Security every day, all day. The high maintenance nature of the sector appears to be a source of friction between the syndicate and the super nightclub owners; Siranossian says only 10 of the clubs pay their dues to the syndicate. He also says that due

to the changing nature of Lebanon's tourism industry, he expects clubs to close down, or switch to more legitimate nightclubs in the next few years.

Charbel on the other hand says he's actually looking to open his own super nightclub somewhere north of Beirut. He says it's "easy money" but it goes too quickly. "There are too many expenses."

With the global recession continuing, it seems likely the wages required to bring young women to Lebanon will remain steady. However, the industry depends on cheap labor. The minute the price goes up, or better forms of employment can be found in other parts of Eastern Europe, super nightclubs will have a harder time surviving. 