

Sex workers face ruin amid virus fears, brothel closures

By FRANK JORDANS March 17, 2020



The narrow canal-side streets and alleys of Amsterdam's famed Red Light District, normally packed with tourists, were largely deserted Monday March 16, 2020, after the Dutch government ordered bars and restaurants closed and made a point of saying that the restrictions also cover sex clubs and weed-selling coffeeshops. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

BERLIN (AP) — It's 7 p.m. on a Friday night, a time when Aurel Johannes Marx's three-room brothel on the edge of Berlin would normally be preparing for its first customers. Sex for sale has long been a staple part of the German capital's

freewheeling nightlife. But amid concerns over the new coronavirus, even the world's supposedly oldest profession is suffering a sudden slump.

At the “Lankwitzer 7” brothel, with its soft red light and bawdy paintings on the wall, disinfectant dispensers had been installed next to the washbasins. Marx said he ordered staff to hot-wash all towels and sheets, and open the windows more often to let the warm, sticky air escape.

Still, customers just weren't showing up anymore.

“Over the past week, business has gone down by 50%,” Marx said, blaming the decline on the general drop in nightlife that's occurred since the virus arrived in Berlin.

By Saturday, authorities had pulled the plug entirely, ordering the temporary closure of all entertainment venues, including brothels. The city has registered 332 confirmed cases of COVID-19 so far. Several dozens infections have been traced to bars and clubs.

Susanne Bleier Wilp, a German former sex worker and spokeswoman for the Association of Erotic and Sexual Services Providers, or BESD, said the virus has caused fear and uncertainty among the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 sex workers in Germany, where prostitution was largely legalized almost 20 years ago.

“There are those who are withdrawing from the business entirely at the moment for safety reasons,” Bleier Wilp told The Associated Press. Others are requiring that customers disinfect themselves, she added — a measure that medical experts say is unlikely to effectively stop the spread of the virus during close physical contact.

For most people the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. But for some, especially older adults and those with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

The vast majority of those who are infected recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

It wasn't clear how the closure of brothels would affect independent sex workers, and some have come under criticism for suggesting they will continue working.

Salome Balthus, a sex worker in Berlin, said that most of her colleagues would prefer to stay at home.

“But they know that nobody is going to compensate them for loss of income,” she said on Twitter. “90% of all dates are being canceled anyway. As always, we’re left to fend for ourselves.”

“Many of us will face housing problems in three months at the latest,” she added. “In which home should we stay then?”

Unlike regular employees, most sex workers won’t benefit directly from the half-trillion-euro package of loans the German government is making available to companies facing ruin because of the coronavirus outbreak.

“Sex workers are usually self-employed, not employees,” said Bleier Wilp. “That means, they bear all the risks themselves”

Some sex workers may be able to rely on savings for several weeks, she said. “But it becomes more difficult if the crisis lasts for longer. Then many, particularly those who do it full time, may have to seek help.”

Bleier Wilp said a provision in Germany’s infectious disease protection law might allow self-employed sex workers to apply for compensation

In the Netherlands, Amsterdam’s famed red light district was similarly hard hit after the government on Sunday night ordered the closure of schools, bars and restaurants for three weeks and made a point of mentioning that sex clubs also were affected.

By Sunday night, the normally packed canal-side streets and narrow, cobbled alleys that are normally a tourist magnet were largely deserted. On Monday, the windows where scantily clad sex workers pose to attract customers were largely empty. Some had signs taped to the glass saying: “The office is closed” due to the coronavirus restrictions.

“There are almost no clients because there are no people on the street even. So the brothel owners decided to close down,” an Amsterdam sex worker who goes by the pseudonym Foxy Angel, said in a telephone interview.

Angel said she had already spent her savings when she couldn’t work for three weeks because she had a regular flu.

“I’m at the end of my money now, so I’m coming up with different things to make money,” she said. “I’m going to go back on (web) camming and selling porn online.”

Some sex workers would resort to going on paid dates “which you normally don’t do, or go on car dates,” she said, but added that this didn’t feel as safe as the tightly regulated red light district.

Amsterdam’s Prostitution Information Center, which normally offers tours and provides information, has established an emergency fund for sex workers in financial trouble. It is aiming to raise 6,000 euros (\$6,590) and will disburse 40 euros each to people who apply, to cover basics such as shopping, medicines and phone credits.

Before the closure, Berlin brothel owner Marx acknowledged that the women working at his establishment were hurting financially, though there was no suggestion he might make up the shortfall.

“Everybody wants more money, not less. But that’s the situation at the moment, it’s developing rapidly,” he said. “I can’t do anything to change that.

“At some point it will be over, and when it’s over things will work out again,” he added.

Mike Corder and Peter Dejong in Amsterdam, Elena Becatoros in Athens, Jamey Keaten in Geneva and Monika Scislowska in Warsaw contributed to this report.

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Closed windows of sex workers are seen in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, Netherlands, Monday, March 16, 2020. Health minister Bruno Bruins ordered all Dutch schools, cafes, restaurants coffeeshops, saunas, sex clubs and sport and fitness clubs to be closed from Sunday March 15th onwards as the government sought to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in the Netherlands. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



Netherlands, Sunday, March 15, 2020, after a TV address of health minister Bruno Bruins who ordered all Dutch schools, cafes, restaurants, including coffeeshops, brothels, strip clubs and sport clubs to be closed from Sunday onwards as the government sought to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in the Netherlands. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



Illuminated hearts cover the windows of the three room brothel 'Lankwitzer 7' in Berlin, Germany, Friday, March 13, 2020. Sex for sale has long been a staple part of the German capital's hedonistic nightlife, but amid concerns over the new coronavirus even the world's supposedly oldest profession is being hit by a sudden slump. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



Aurel Johannes Marx sits on a bed in his three room brothel 'Lankwitzer 7' as he poses for photo after and interview with the Associated Press in Berlin, Germany, Friday, March 13, 2020. Sex for sale has long been a staple part of the German capital's hedonistic nightlife, but amid concerns over the new coronavirus even the world's supposedly oldest profession is being hit by a sudden slump. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



Susanne Bleier Wilp, a former sex worker and spokeswoman for the Association of Erotic and Sexual Services Providers, or BESD, poses for a photograph after an interview with the Associated Press about the coronavirus outbreak for the business of sexworkers in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, March 11, 2020. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



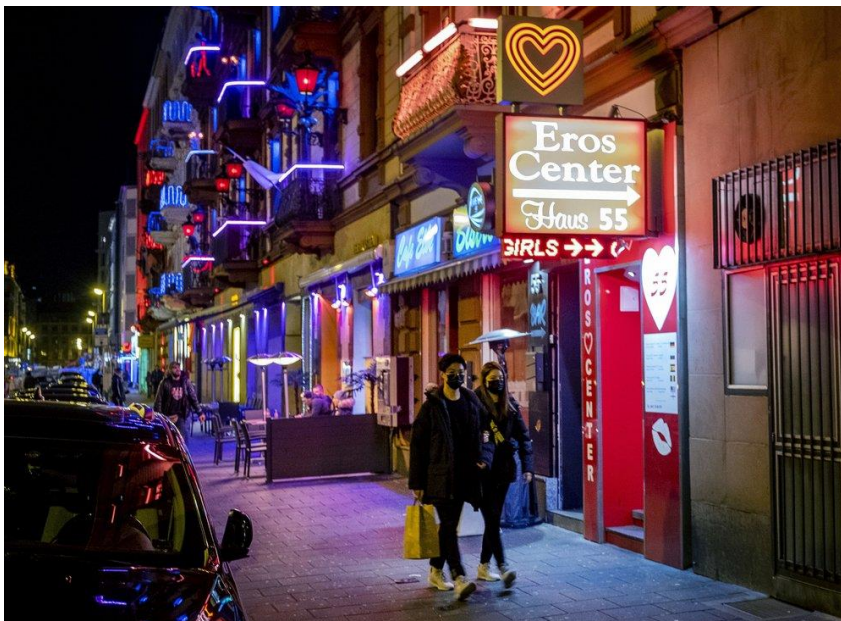
View of the near-empty Red Light District in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Sunday, March 15, 2020, after a TV address of health minister Bruno Bruins who ordered all Dutch schools, cafes, restaurants, including coffeeshops, brothels, strip clubs and sport clubs to be closed from Sunday onwards as the government sought to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in the Netherlands. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



Two tourists pull their suitcases passing closed windows of sex workers in the Red Light District of Amsterdam, Netherlands, Monday, March 16, 2020. Health minister Bruno Bruins ordered all Dutch schools, cafes, restaurants coffeeshops, saunas, sex clubs and sport and fitness clubs to be closed from Sunday March 15th onwards as the government sought to prevent the further spread of coronavirus in the Netherlands. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



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A couple wearing face masks walk through the red light district in Frankfurt, Germany, Saturday, March 14, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)



People walk through the red light district in Frankfurt, Germany, Saturday, March 14, 2020. Only for most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)