

Sex workers stranded in Germany as coronavirus shuts brothels

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BERLIN (Reuters) - Thousands of foreign prostitutes working in Germany have been made homeless after brothels closed due to the coronavirus outbreak and borders snapped shut, making it difficult for them to return home.



FILE PHOTO: A room inside the closed Eros center "Taunusstrasse 26" is seen at the red light district in Frankfurt, Germany, March 30, 2020, as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues. REUTERS/Kai Pfaffenbach/File Photo

Authorities in the country, where prostitution has been legal for almost two decades, shut brothels last month along with other non-essential businesses like restaurants and nightclubs to slow the spread of the virus.

“The coronavirus has been a disaster for me,” said a Polish prostitute in the western city of Bochum known to her clients as Nicole. “I have had no income since mid-March and no place to sleep,” she added, declining to give her real name.

Before the lockdown, she paid her brothel 90 euros (\$97) a day for a room to meet clients and live in. But since then she has been staying with the brothel manager.

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Sex workers in Germany are classed as self-employed, pay tax and are in theory entitled to financial assistance from a fund set up by the government to help freelancers through the pandemic.

“I am hoping the Job Centre will accept my tax returns so I can get unemployment benefits,” said Nicole. “If this happens I will be able to move into an apartment.”

But some prostitutes work illegally and charities supporting the industry say that many who, like Nicole, do pay tax are unaware of their rights. A few are soliciting for clients on the streets to

make ends meet until brothels reopen.

“Demand for paid sex is still there despite the risk of catching the virus,” said Heike Koettner, of the Madonna educational charity for prostitutes in Bochum. “Some women are taking this risk.”

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Susanne Bleier Wilp of the Association for Erotic and Sexual Services Providers lobby group in Berlin said that of the estimated 100,000 to 200,000 prostitutes in Germany about 80% are foreign, mainly from Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and Ukraine.

“Most have managed to make it back home. But others are homeless,” said Bleier Wilp. “We’re talking about 3-4% who are the most vulnerable in the industry. They came here with nothing hoping to earn some money. Now they are staying with friends or living on the street. A lucky few are staying in the brothels.”

Bulgaria, Romania and Poland require returning citizens to quarantine for 14 days, a measure designed to slow the spread of the virus, which in Germany has infected almost 80,000 and killed more than 1,000.

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