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Red lights out: Singapore's sex industry shuts due to coronavirus

by Reuters

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Hundreds of low-income Asian migrant sex workers are uncertain about their future among closures of bars and nightclubs due to COVID-19

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By Joe Brock

SINGAPORE, March 27 (Reuters) - Shortly after midnight on Friday, a young Asian sex worker dressed in a baggy cotton dress and slippers stepped out of a brothel in Singapore's deserted red light district and rolled a wheelie bin to the side of the street.

Two hours earlier, Singapore's vibrant Geylang neighbourhood was having a more typical night - clusters of men negotiating with chain-smoking pimps on the street as women in tight dresses tapped at phones inside neon-lit houses alongside.

Singapore closed bars, nightclubs and cinemas from Friday until the end of April in an effort to contain a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

Although the announcement made no mention of the government-sanctioned brothels in Geylang, pimps and sex workers said they were passed the message that they too would need to close shop.

"I got nice girls for you. Might be your last chance for a while," a grizzled pimp mumbled in the hours before midnight outside one of the dozens of brothels dotted along Geylang's streets, which are monitored by police security cameras.

Singapore announced massive stimulus measures on Thursday to soften the economic shock from the coronavirus outbreak, including generous cash handouts for locals.

But for the hundreds of low-income Asian migrant sex workers and nightclub entertainers in the wealthy city-state, there is huge uncertainty about their future.

"I don't know how we'll survive," said one freelance sex worker, sitting on a plastic chair across the street from a brothel decorated with Chinese red lanterns, a nod to customers about the nationality of the women working inside.

"We don't get looked after like people in other jobs."

Government departments and police did not respond to requests for comment on the closure of brothels.

Singapore, known for its strict laws, does not explicitly criminalise prostitution although aspects of the industry are illegal, including soliciting, pimping and running a brothel.

That has not stopped the sex trade operating in the Asian financial hub, from rendezvous in high-end hotel bars to the infamous Orchard Towers, a drab 1970s commercial building in Singapore's prime shopping district.

Orchard Towers is now closed with police tape around its entrances.

"What am I gonna do now?" said one young woman in a sequined dress as men shuffled out of the tower's drinking holes, including Naughty Girl Nightclub and the Downunder Bar, on Thursday night.

"I guess we'll work something out, honey. People still got to have fun."

(Reporting by Joe Brock; additional reporting by John Geddie; Editing by Raju Gopalakrishnan)

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