

Window Brothels Get the Red Light

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Amsterdam, often hailed as the sex mecca of Europe, is to have a major facelift. After 12 years of legalised window brothels, attracting hordes of customers from all over Europe, politicians, police, citizens and even many of the prostitutes themselves are admitting that state-sanctioned prostitution is a failed social experiment.

Given almost ten years of evidence that criminal gangs control the red-light area of De Wallen, the local council has announced plans to clean it up in an attempt to transform the reputation of the city. Out will go at least half of the window brothels, sex shops and cannabis cafés and in will come more museums, restaurants and art galleries.

Many of those controlling the window scene and facilitating the trafficking of thousands of women into Amsterdam are so-called "loverboys", young Dutchmen of Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese descent, most of them Muslims, who look for vulnerable young Dutch women, pose as lovers, and after a few months, force their "girlfriends" into prostitution, keeping them under close control both by force and psychological means.

Loverboys have the same modus operandi as another group of sex exploiters — the Asian grooming gangs, first exposed in *Standpoint* (December 2010) — that operated with impunity in the northern towns of England. They single out insecure, under-age girls in schools and coffee shops, and outside care homes, and woo them as "boyfriends", promising love, clothes, status and excitement. Then they start to run them as prostitutes. The girls, now emotionally and financially dependent on their loverboys, find themselves locked into a cycle of abuse, sometimes made to work in windows in official red-light districts or being handed from flat to flat.

They put their victims to work in a window so that they can keep an eye on them day and night. Because it is not an offence under the legalised regime to profit from this form of prostitution the loverboys appear invincible, and the young women feel they have little chance of proving the abuse.

The sex industry in Amsterdam, often hailed as an exploitation-free zone, has also been shaped by the huge influx of desperate, vulnerable women coming to the EU from Eastern Europe, Africa and southeast Asia to work in the legal zones. Most will have been trafficked by criminal gangs or individual entrepreneurs promising them a better life and the chance to earn a lot of money. Trafficking, and a sharp rise in heroin and crack cocaine abuse among prostitutes, means the women are increasingly desperate, resulting in customers getting what they want.

"I was told I needed someone to protect me when I started working here five years ago," Ingrid, a 24-year-old Slovakian prostitute, tells me, having agreed to speak to me because at 10am it is still a quiet time for her, when customers sleep off their hangovers. "But all that means is that I pay a pimp to stop me being beaten up, and that is on top of my rent. I can barely make a living."

Since legalisation there are no "pimps" in Amsterdam's red-light area. Men who own the windows and brothels, and live off the earnings of prostitution, are now "managers" or "facilitators". A few feet from the windows, men resembling bouncers stand chatting and checking their merchandise. A customer comes out of a brothel, zipping up his trousers. "The Englishmen drink a lot and can be difficult to handle," says Lena, a quietly-spoken woman from Estonia. "But they spend money. They tell me that back home it is seen as dirty to pay for sex, but here it is just like going to the toilet."

Jan is a beat police officer assigned to the red-light district. I meet him at 1am as he is checking the window brothels by tapping on them and asking the women if there are "any problems". He is nervous about giving me his full name; he tells me that his chiefs have become increasingly sensitive to criticism. "People are starting to hear that our system has a lot of crime and a lot of violence against the working girls linked to it," he says. "The trafficking problem, and the Turkish loverboys, they are all coming to the surface now. Really we have allowed it by being too adventurous with allowing prostitution to be such an attraction to our city."

Legalisation has resulted in a significant increase in sex tourists, in particular from the UK, who travel to Amsterdam primarily to visit the legal brothels. Legal prostitution, including sex shops and live sex performances, attracts as many visitors to Amsterdam as its art galleries and canals.

In 1995, a *tippelzone*, or pick-up area, was set up for street prostitutes in central Amsterdam. The zone was a strip of road behind which were several

parking spaces separated by 6ft-high wooden partitions, as well as one for cyclists, or those who wished to stand up to have sex.

The *tippelzone* was promoted as a way of controlling the problems associated with prostitution, such as drug dealing, trafficking and violence. In 2004 the local council closed it down. The mayor, Job Cohen, admitted it had become a haven for traffickers and drug dealers, and had not achieved its aim — to break the links between prostitution and organised crime.

That same year deputy mayor Rob Oudkerk, leader of the Socialist Party, the city's biggest political party, lost his position when it became known that he frequented prostitutes, including streetwalkers, whom he would have known to be illegal or drug addicts. His successor, Lodewijk Asscher, has very different views on prostitution, and has challenged the pro-legalisation propaganda that has enabled Amsterdam's sex industry to flourish.

In 2006 the city council refused to renew the licences of 37 prostitution entrepreneurs in the red-light area. Using the Public Administration Probity Act, which enabled municipalities to close illegal venues, the council concluded that many brothels were run by organised crime. Among the charges were human and drug trafficking, and money laundering.

Since 2006 Asscher has implemented radical new prostitution policies. It is not just in Amsterdam where change is taking place. *Tippelzones* in Rotterdam and The Hague have been closed, as well as one-third of the 450 window brothels in Amsterdam.

"I was very worried about what had been happening in the old city. When I came into office, six years after legalisation, the signs were not good," Asscher told me. "There is lots of crime in this part of the city."

The Prostitution Framework Act, expected to come into force next January, reads like a last-ditch attempt to address some of the worst consequences of legalisation. It includes a requirement that prostitutes register with the government — an unlikely scenario for those in a stigmatised and clandestine sector. It will also raise the minimum age of involvement from 18 to 21 years. Customers of illegal prostitutes will also be punishable and owners of premises where abuses recur repeatedly will be dealt with. A national register will be introduced for prostitution businesses whose licence application was rejected or licence revoked. But it is almost certainly too little, too late for a city awash with under-age, trafficked and otherwise coerced prostitutes.

"Legalisation was naive," admits Asscher. "We thought we had dealt with it better than anywhere else in the world. There are arguments that further criminalisation would push it underground but it takes it out of the hands of criminals."

One research study on men who pay for sex found that 19 out of 103 interviewees, including some who had never previously had a sexual encounter, had travelled to Amsterdam in order to visit the window brothels.

"Amsterdam was like going through a turnstile into a fairground ride: two minutes and you're out," said one of the men. "The idea that the women had been with five men in the last hour or 20 men in a day was a big turn-off."

Martine and Louise Fokken, 70-year-old identical twins who worked in the red-light area for almost 50 years, give me a tour. They tell me that the influx of loverboys and young foreign women has "ruined" the trade for Dutch women. "Legalisation has never worked. It is better for the pimps and the foreigners," says Martine. "The vultures came in 2000 — organised criminals. They thought, 'Aha, it's legalised, now we're OK.'"

The sisters appear to have a rose-tinted view of a region that has always had problems with the sex trade. In the mid-19th century the Netherlands was a hotbed of prostitution, with sailors being the most prolific buyers and impoverished Dutch women the streetwalkers.

The women were forced to register as prostitutes and submit to weekly medical exams for syphilis. When certified as "clean", they received cards that effectively licensed them to practise and without which they could be imprisoned. In Britain Josephine Butler condemned this system of enforced medical exams, inspiring a coalition of feminists, socialists and Protestants to abolish them in Britain and to campaign in Europe against the regulation and acceptance of prostitution because it was degrading to women.

Amsterdam's brothels were closed by 1897, and in 1911 the abolitionists won the day throughout the country: the government outlawed brothels and criminalised pimping and profiting from prostitution.

But gradually the brothels returned; though still illegal, they were tolerated. In the 1930s, Amsterdam saw its first window brothels. In the 1950s the red-light district became a tourist attraction. Prostitution, sex clubs, pornography shops and drugs were openly tolerated. The 1980s saw an influx of foreign women trafficked into Dutch prostitution, a trend that continues today.

Pressure slowly grew for prostitution to be legalised. In 1985 the Rode Draad (Red Thread), the sex industry workers' union based in Amsterdam, declared that sex workers' rights could only be achieved if pimps and brothels were decriminalised. (Only 100 of Holland's 25,000 prostitutes are union members, most of them "erotic dancers".) The Mr. A. de Graaf Foundation, originally a Christian research institute that promoted the view of prostitution as harmful, changed its focus during the government's consideration of the new law, and began to lobby in favour of legalisation. It was the recipient of generous state subsidies during this period. The legalisation was passed in 2000.

The Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) is run by Mariska Majoor, a former prostitute and advocate of total legalisation of pimping and brothel-owning. She is on the record as saying that trafficking is rare in Amsterdam. PIC conducts excursions through the prostitution area. In 2005 Thomas Cook, the worldwide tour and travel agency founded to promote ethical and educational tourism, launched a night walking tour through the red-light district. Building on tours organised by the PIC, it offered the outings, advertising them as "free to children under three".

"It is a well-oiled propaganda machine," says Chrissie Bennet, a British-born former escort who spent a month in the window brothels in Amsterdam. "The girls all knew we were under the cosh of the pimps, out of debt and desperation. No one would be there if there was any other choice."

But Lodewijk Asscher is sceptical about the propaganda machine which has long claimed that the Dutch way is best when it comes to regulating the sex industry. "The pro-sex-work lobby does not represent the women but the pimps," he says. "They are financed by the [prostitution] sector and so paint a picture that is too good to be true."

His latest scheme is called Project 1012, named after the district's postal code, and aims to bring new and non-prostitution related business and tourism into the red-light area. It is a collaboration between banks, developers, corporations, investors and entrepreneurs. Under the scheme, licences of coffee shops, gambling houses and brothels will be revoked if they are discovered to be involved in criminal behaviour.

One of the city's most talked-about restaurants, Anna, opened last year in a refurbished brothel building. Next door to the window brothels is online music station Red Light Radio. When I walk round the red-light district with the Fokken twins they take me to what was the first window brothel they worked in together, and squeal with delight at seeing not naked women in the window

but naked mannequins: the building is now a haute couture dress shop. The Red Thread sex workers' union went into receivership in August as a result of losing its government grant.

Asscher hopes to attract more than £600 million of investment from businesses moving to the area, but he also has a plan B if his project fails: he will consider bringing in new legislation to criminalise the buying of sexual services, as countries such as Sweden and Norway have done.