

## Lights dim in Amsterdam's red light district

Amsterdam's famous red light district has seen better days. A morning stroll through this most picturesque part of the Dutch capital reveals signs advertising windows for hire and an atmosphere of general depression.

The decline in 'window prostitution' - where the working women display themselves behind glass for the passing clientele - has been documented in a new survey revealing that the number of window prostitutes in the Netherlands halved between 1999 and last year.

The survey, conducted by the 'Rode Draad', which looks after the interests of prostitutes, found that many women were working 16-hour days for a pittance.

Legislation passed in 2000 that legalised brothels with the intention of improving conditions for prostitutes had not led to better security or conditions, the report found.

Amsterdam's 'Wallen' red light district bears this out. In an alleyway near the Oude Kerk (Old Church) that traces its history to the 13th century, a row of girls smiles tautly at passers-by.

A blonde with an eastern European accent calls out an invitation in English, but an attempt to engage her in conversation meets with an increasingly frosty response. 'You are in, you pay euro 50 (\$65),' she says.

A second attempt to ask her name and where she comes from, meets with: 'What do you want? I'm not here to talk. Fifty euros.' The other girls avert their gaze as the visitor passes - another time-waster.

The response is a typical one in the narrow alleyways off the canals with names like Oudezijds Voorburgwal.

The city authorities are investing large sums in the area, where most of the buildings are 17th century and many even older. The canal side roads are being repaved and the canals themselves repaired.

The Rode Draad report describes the atmosphere in many establishments as 'depressing' and notes that younger men show little interest in old style brothels and window prostitution.

It points to the rise in more upmarket businesses where sex is available for money, like massage salons, and saunas and to the 'eroticisation' of social life in general.

The kind of kinky sex once sought in brothels is now to be had in the bedroom or at sex parties.

The Wallen bear out another conclusion. Virtual sex slavery based on the abuse of foreign women, whether from Eastern [Europe](#) or from Africa, remains widespread.

Prostitutes regularly have to pay exorbitant fees for the facilities in brothels, are often required to live on the premises and are forced into unsafe practices to keep the clients happy.

Local authorities are failing to act to ensure appropriate standards, and tax evasion is rampant, the report says. Rates for window prostitutes in The Hague can go as low as euro 20.

As a wintry dusk descends, the pubs in the Wallen fill up and the atmosphere becomes livelier. Groups of young men, mostly tourists, saunter along the narrow streets. Every now and then the boldest of the group approaches a window but the encounter with the woman is short-lived and no money changes hands.

There is also little activity outside the establishments offering live shows, the doormen ardently soliciting passers-by with scant success.

A more welcoming atmosphere prevails in Bloedstraat, a street off Oudezijds Achterburgwal, where a statuesque and willowy brunette swings open her window with an expansive gesture.

Laura, who hails from Spain, is offering her services for euro 50. She rattles off her repertoire with a smile and confides she is a transsexual 'with everything'.

Business at the exotic end of the market is clearly better.

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