

Dominique Strauss-Kahn's 'swinging lifestyle' shocks France

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Harrowing testimonies from prostitutes at the former IMF chief's trial for 'aggravated pimping' have exposed the country's social and economic dark side.



Dominique Strauss-Kahn leaves his hotel to attend the trial. Photograph: Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

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It is a saga of money, fame and destitute women ferried to luxury locations for sex with powerful men, against a backdrop of economic deprivation and social misery. France has been shaken this week by harrowing testimony from a trial in

Lille that not only put in the dock Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former International Monetary Fund chief and one-time French presidential hopeful, but also examined a much wider, depressing picture of poverty, women submitted to sex acts against their will and alleged pimps who referred to them as “livestock”.

In court, Strauss-Kahn, 65, the one-time hero of the French left, flatly denied the accusation he aided and abetted the prostitution of seven women – a charge of “aggravated pimping” that carries a 10-year prison sentence. He said he never knew or suspected there were any prostitutes among the many women brought to him by regional French businessmen friends for group sex, at what he termed “festive afternoons” in Europe and the US while he was head of the IMF.

But after three days of distressing testimony at a court in Lille – during which two prostitutes said Strauss-Kahn had subjected them to a sex act they did not want, and he self-assuredly explained his appetite for group sex and how his sexual style was “rougher than the average man” – France began considering the wider implications of the vast trial known as the “Carlton Affair”, after the luxury hotel in Lille in which Strauss-Kahn has never set foot, but which was at the centre of the first investigation.

“Strauss-Kahn insisted he never had sex with prostitutes because 'I prefer a party atmosphere before, during and after'”

The grim stories of what the newspaper Libération called “the terrible daily reality” of prostitutes that emerged in the broader Lille trial have shocked France and could push the socialist government, which claims it wants to “abolish” prostitution, to resurrect its plans to criminalise paying for sex – a law that got through parliament but has stalled in the senate.

The court is trying 13 men accused of pimping, including Strauss-Kahn. Most of the accused have no connection to the former IMF director. But two businessmen and a senior Lille police chief are accused of recruiting and paying prostitutes for “soirées” with Strauss-Kahn in order to curry favour with him. They deny the charges and say Strauss-Kahn never knew the women were paid because they kept it secret.

The testimony of the prostitutes, some of whom were sexually abused as children, has highlighted France's social and economic problems.

Destitute and jobless in the area around the northern city of Lille which has been hit by some of France's worst unemployment, some of the women went to work just over the Belgian border where brothels are tolerated by law.



Dominique Alderweireld, also known as Dodo the Pimp, arrives at court. Photograph: Christophe Ena/AP

Surveillance showed Dodo the Pimp referring to the prostitutes as “livestock”. In her cellar, Jade said she didn't have a television so she didn't recognise Strauss-Kahn when she was first taken to him, only seeing him in the press later and exclaiming: “That's him with clothes on.” She spoke English, which came in handy at US immigration on a trip to see Strauss-Kahn in Washington, when border staff found it odd that the businessmen and Jade had come all that way for only a couple of nights.

Another detail in court was the seeming power trip of the businessmen who delivered women to Strauss-Kahn. “Ah, isn't power great?” one businessman allegedly said during one “soirée” where Strauss-Kahn was present. Another, Fabrice Paszkowski – a Lille entrepreneur who Strauss-Kahn described as a very good friend – told one woman that he wanted to organize “giant orgies at the Elysée”, presumably when Strauss-Kahn became president of France.

One woman told the inquiry she felt women present at one group sex event were

used as mere “receptacles”. Another woman participant, asked about others suffering during the group sex, told the inquiry: “It didn’t happen to me, but I didn’t need to do it to put food on the table.”

An angry Strauss-Kahn, who said he never organized the events himself but was a guest, rebutted some women’s description of the “soirées” as “slaughter”, “killing” and “butchery”. He said other women present had described him as courteous.

He said the only time he spoke to an “unabashed swinger” about money was when he asked her if she wanted to come to Paris to see him and he would pay her expenses. He said the suggestion that he had to be brought “fresh meat” by businessmen friends was a disgrace. He insisted he never had sex with prostitutes because “I prefer a party atmosphere before, during and after”. He told one sexual partner: “I have a horror of whores.”

“He said sex with strangers was 'the whole point' of his 'swinging lifestyle'”

Asked by the judge if it was not odd that he would have sex with strangers – such as one woman who was in fact a prostitute, with whom he had sex minutes after meeting her in the basement of a French restaurant – he said sex with strangers was “the whole point” of his “swinging lifestyle”

Accused by Jade and another prostitutes of using force to subject them to a sex act they did not want, Strauss-Kahn said he had not noticed any refusal, and believed that “no means no”.

Strauss-Kahn’s lawyers appear confident that he will be acquitted on the pimping charge. The judges are likely to spend many weeks deliberating. Even if observers feel there is little evidence to convict Strauss-Kahn of pimping, his public image has suffered. He has been a political pariah since his arrest in New York four years ago over the alleged attempted rape of the hotel maid, Nafissatou Diallo, over which he settled a civil case after prosecutors dropped criminal charges.

An online poll for the rightwing paper Le Figaro this week asked: “Do you believe Strauss-Kahn when he says he didn’t know the women he met were prostitutes?” About 11% said yes, 88% said no.