

A survivor goes on a brothel tour in Frankfurt's red light district: Truth? or propaganda & lies about prostitution?

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Just walking through the area around Frankfurt's Central Station where brothels stand wall to wall gives me the strange feeling of being in the wrong place here, as an onlooker. Looking up along the Laufhäuser with its rows of women, I reluctantly feel the need to go to the room. There at least I'd know how to act, there I know the procedure, the programme, what I have to say, but here, like this, as a spectator of prostitution? Weird. To be here is like returning to your ex-boyfriend who beat you: everything is familiar but still feels all wrong. And this is how it feels when I go on the brothel tour and find myself standing in a room of the Laufhaus at Taunusstraße 26. In a Laufhaus brothel, punters stroll along hallways and buy a woman who he picks out after looking over the women who are sitting on bar stools in the hallways.

Memories of my time in prostitution crash and tumble back to me. The small rooms. The coloured walls. The dim light. The covered windows. It is cramped, hot, bleak. I know exactly how sordid this would look if somebody switched on the lights. Breathe in. Breathe out. Today I am here as an outsider, a listener.

I'm in this brothel room with several women. It's getting cramped. The woman guiding the tour introduces the women to us. Us? I wonder if I were confused with the other members of the tour, most of who probably had nothing to do with prostitution and who therefore know very little about what it is really like.

D is standing at the room's only window, which is cracked open an inch. Thank God! If I now had to smell this brothel mix – cigarette smoke, sweat, semen, and rubber – I think I would lose it. D looks exhausted in spite of the dim light in this room. She looks older than 45. She has on leisurewear and a baseball cap. Maybe this is the end of her shift. "A woman to woman talk about prostitution" is what we were promised. A Doña Carmen member leaves to get money to pay D to answer our questions and chat. Doña Carmen is a prostitutes' rights organization that promotes prostitution as a job for women.

D is a dominatrix and before that she was a beautician. She started in prostitution 10 years ago. "I got in through a woman friend." "Women get into prostitution through women", the tour guide says. (But the information provided by the police says that 80% - 90% of women in

German legal brothels are under the control of pimps). I ask D how much she pays for the room per day: € 100 (\$125). And how much does she charge for prostitution? That starts at €50 (\$62). I look around the room and see strangling collars, furniture for restraining punters who want to be punished, and corsages (“dressing up all costs extra”). I remember that I found being a dominatrix far more exhausting than other prostitution. I hated being booked to dominate a punter. “Regular prostitution” means that you can at least step away from the active involvement, check your fingernails in an unobserved moment, or make a face. But being a dominatrix means you have to focus 100% on the punter, to get into his mind, and having to do what you do not really want to do, providing sexual satisfaction to someone's disgusting fantasies. But I do not say this.

D speaks in short sentences. Now and then she is interrupted by Juanita Henning (founder of Doña Carmen), who finishes D's sentences for her, or “straightens out” something D says. But it isn't easy to straighten anything out with so many contradictions that come up in the next 15 minutes.

“You've got to be the type for becoming a dominatrix”, D says, correcting this a few minutes later to, “I am not a dominatrix by preference. I don't really care what I do in here. It doesn't affect me.” What does she provide to punters? “Nothing really happens here. I don't have to get undressed, and I'm not touched. There are no sexual acts here. Once in a while, a guy satisfies himself.”

What she does do then?

“Oh, nothing really, I tie them up a little bit, degrade them verbally a little bit. That is nothing really. Now and then I slap them a little, very lightly. This here is only fantasy, nothing more, no sex or anything. Nothing real.” It sounds a bit as if the punters just hover in here, give her €50 and then disappear again, maybe while she calls them “filthy pigs.” A woman asks if she ever feels disgust. “No, why should I? Nothing really happens in here. And it's got nothing to do with me, nothing at all.”

Nothing happens. It's got nothing to do with me. I wonder what the connection is between this obsessive minimisation, this diminution and denial and dissociation. I feel sorry for D, who is paid by the pimp and the brothel tour guide to talk and answer to us today. And I would have done the same, I would also rather have been paid by the pimp to say something: after all, that means one less punter. And to be honest, what else could she have said when she was confronted with 15 middle class women? I wouldn't have said, “No, it makes me puke, I find the men repulsive” in such a situation either.

Henning, the tour guide, is quick to shut down unwanted questions: “About being disgusted, what kind of a question is that? It's only ever directed at sex workers.” D says, “Imagine you are a nurse, that is the same.” A woman on the tour: “But nurses sometimes feel disgust.” Tour guide: “You can't compare that now, can you!” The woman on the tour, “So you're not disgusted?” D: “No. Never.” Tour guide Henning: “Disgust is a form of attraction. To feel disgust means to find someone attractive.”

Now I feel very dizzy. Is that because the place is so hot or because the situation is so absurd? The entire room is full of middle class women, and D says there is nothing happening here.

But what do the men pay for then? And how can this be, that this has nothing to do with her while she is in here, after all, when it happens? And then disgust is named attraction. My head spins. This is so grotesque that I momentarily even doubt my senses.

A woman on the tour asks if there were ever transgressions. No, says D, she is always in control of the situation. No violence, ever. "I do not want this discussion of violence here", the tour guide interrupts. "Violence is not prostitution. That is not prostitution!" "True, I decide what happens here", D says. But that is not really true – she only fulfils the punters' wishes. And then these wishes come down to "nothing really happens here" – who can believe that?

How many punters does she see in one day? "That differs", D says, "One, two sometimes." "But how can you then pay for the rent?" a woman on the tour asks. "Well, it's three or four sometimes" D says.

What happens then, one woman wants to know. "Well, first I've got to get the punter into my room. Then I sit him down on the bed, and if he says "no" I say "yes,"" D laughs, "and then the money transaction is done and then the best thing is for him to get a ball gag in his mouth so he cannot talk me to bits." Her laughter sounds bitter. The longer we stay the more I feel sorry for D. She is not permitted to talk about what happens here, she is desperately trying to minimise everything, and she does not seem to make much money. Her revulsion comes across. She says she does not have regulars.

Does she talk about prostitution with her friends, a woman asks. "Not really," D says. "Only a few friends know what I do. I tell the others that I work in a fitness studio, they never ask about my work anyway. And when I have a partner I tell him what I do, but we never talk about it either." Does she talk to the other women in the brothel? "Nope." she says, "it's only hi and bye." I immediately think that my friends and acquaintances always ask me what I'm doing. But prostitution makes for loneliness.

"What about the other girls here," one asks, "are you a special case?" D waves that off, "They have to do more, more performance and more clients, like 6 or 7 a day, but I don't." But why, I wonder, do they have to do more prostitution? Is it because the others, unlike D, have a pimp? I can't blame her for defining herself in contrast to the others. In this situation, one justifies one's own existence by saying, "I'm not doing too badly, look over there, they *really* have it bad." Prostitution hierarchies. The escort lady looking down on those in the small brothels. And those in the small brothels looking down on those in the Laufhaus who have to tolerate being ogled and judged while sitting on their stools. "Whore-ogling" has become a popular sport among men. Those in the Laufhaus look down on those in street prostitution. Defining yourself against those below at least conveys a feeling of not having ended up at the bottom yet.

"Don't let anyone trick you into believing this is all so bad!" D shouts after us as we leave the room.

After this there is a discussion in Doña Carmen's office. Asked about pimps, Juanita Henning responds, "Pimps, they don't exist, that is an invented term to stigmatise the prostitutes' environment." The tour leader's board member (and her co-pimp) adds, "It is only two pimps

a year who get sentenced in the entire country!” Then she equates homosexuality and prostitution in order to point to the discrimination. I wonder since when prostitution has been a sexual orientation or preference. But Juanita Henning goes for it now in full force. Prostitution is prohibited in order to control women’s sexuality, she says, all women’s sexuality. Women are only allowed to have intercourse with men they feel connected to emotionally or socially. She makes it sound as if prostitution was liberating and oh-so-very feminist. “Men have a monopoly on buying sex, not that there’s a problem with that. But we women should learn to do the same. We need more call boys and such.” Her ultimate goal seems to be that ALL of us should have impersonal sex without caring about the other person.

“But the woman is selling her sexuality”, a woman remarks. “Prostitution has nothing to do with her sexuality at all!” Henning says, who just a minute ago told us prostitution was about the liberation of women’s sexuality, “this isn’t about her sexuality. This is only about the man’s sexuality, this is only focused on his needs.” Aha, I think, a moment of clarity, but that is over now: “That is why women do not become sick in prostitution, sick in their minds, or mentally disturbed. They don’t have any of that because this has nothing to do with them and their sexuality. The women just briefly place their bodies at the man’s disposal.”

A woman asks about the Hell’s Angels (a gang known to be international pimps). They’re no problem, the tour guide says. “None at all. There is no violence in prostitution here. They just collect the taxes.” Then an incredulous second question: “The Hell’s Angels collect the taxes for the tax office?” “Yes,” the tour guide says, “the city has commissioned them to do that.”

“And forced prostitution? What about the women from other countries who are beaten or who have had their passports taken away?” “That’s just clichés.” My head spins. Alarmingly, there are women here who believe what she is telling them. “I have never thought about it this way,” one woman on the tour says, “but it is like that with women’s sexuality and it is unfair that there are no brothels for women.”

Why do women come to Doña Carmen, someone asks. A good question, I think, since there are apparently no problems. “They come because of the taxes,” Henning explains, who a minute before had enthused about the Bulgarians and Romanians in Frankfurt prostitution being able to finance a nice little house of their own and above all being able to feed their families. “When they leave, they have problems with the tax office that estimates their earnings. That is why they come here. When they depart, they are all broke. Totally poor.”

What else but tax advice could prostitutes want from an association that says there is no forced prostitution, no trafficking, no pimps, no violence in prostitution? “But do the women really do this voluntarily?” one asks. Juanita Henning snaps: “The question alone is already so discriminatory.”

Once outside, I ask the women whether they believed what they had heard. “Partly,” they say. Some thought it was quite exaggerated. But others believed what they had been told.

I return to the action “No place of pleasure.” Unlike the Doña Carmen organization, our action is not mentioned in the city’s Bahnhofsviertelnacht programme. Women from several abolitionist organisations have placed posters on the ground to remember women murdered in prostitution. Although they are only the confirmed homicides of Frankfurt women, they are

still way too many. It's frightening how many women have been killed while prostituting. People come closer, and leave roses and light candles. It is a sad sight, and it is in great contrast to what I have just heard. By now the streets are crowded and noisy, and people are drinking. Punters are exiting brothels as if they'd just bought cigarettes, not human beings. Abolitionists hand out leaflets, engaging in discussions. Most people seem to be touched. Some wipe away tears, others recount that they have such a person in their families, and others tell us about prostituted women that they know were murdered in Frankfurt who have not yet been mentioned in any news or police report.

On a side street, strippers dance on a float. On another street, stoned people wander near a legal drug sales room. A transgender prostitute walks the streets, looking for punters. And I wonder, does anybody have anything to celebrate here? Isn't this wrong, to scatter glitter onto this misery, to turn this violence into a circus? What is going on with these people who come here to have a party? Do they realise that the adrenaline fix that comes from looking at the women in a red light area is classist, sexist, and offensive? What to them is a little tourist outing is a life of misery to the women in the Red Light zone.

I wonder if this is what the City of Frankfurt considers legitimate information about prostitution? Although its brothel tours are no longer part of the official programme, Doña Carmen is supposedly teaching the public about prostitution. Along with the churning out of hollow phrases, the distortions and minimisation that float around in my mind, I also wonder: what is really going on here with the Hell's Angels and the taxes? Dear City of Frankfurt: Are you collaborating with organised crime to collect your taxes? And if you aren't, why don't you object to being represented like this? Is that good for Frankfurt's "ohhhh how naughty & exciting" image? I'm surprised. An organisation that relentlessly speaks of "so-called forced prostitution" and "so-called trafficking" is supposed to enlighten us on prostitution according to the official brochure published by Frankfurt City, but people only learn about the murders and the violence by punters because of a few tireless women activists who are not on the official programme. It seems as if Frankfurt doesn't care about its prostitutes at all.

Back home, I find punters' Internet evaluations of the women in the Laufhaus, the brothel where D rented a room. The quotes make me shudder. They are poisonous.

"Sooo hot! Then we can ride this hot mare when she's pregnant AO" (anal sex without a condom).

"Yes, this gal is unfortunately not all there! Well you go and be nailed and inseminated by 30 guys a day. And Crystal does the rest with her."

"Great photos! She really must have had it given to her last night, red as her pussy is!"

"S is a very devout whore, sometimes she does AVO. She's drugged, totally spineless. You can do what you like inside her, put anything up her from down there. Bottles, candles etc. She only does AO. She's got a little sponge in there for contraception, lol. I regularly fuck her hard and jerk off deep in front of her uterus."

“Hi guys, I too was with the pregnant garbage can and I have inseminated her (as much as was possible) beautifully and deeply. The girl is very pregnant and unfortunately she is really badly unhinged and so crude that you can hardly concentrate on the fucking. It's hard to talk with her. She is still very nice and we both had our fun, but I somehow feel sorry for her too. I'll definitely go and visit her again these days...”

“Was there yesterday, too, and looked around for her, but in the room where she was and which you can see on the photos there's a plump Turkish woman now with moles on her face ... she then let herself be fucked and inseminated AO for € 25. Sex toys are no problem. I read that she inserted a dildo she had found somewhere.”

“I am sure she is pregnant.... She's totally finished: Fat balloon belly, her damaged feet in flip-flops, totally messed-up greasy bleached hair ... When I think back to how she started ... But she is clearly directed from elsewhere - too much pressure on her or money taken away from her...”

“Early evening S was already rather stoned, because of her medication or other psychoactive substances. She was sitting on the bed in one of her curious whore-rags and meowed when I came in. She let me put my manly full-mouth kiss and my greedy grabbing fingers on her tits and pussy. Without saying anything I first undressed myself, then her. A three finger probe in her bulging pussy, furrowed by the birth, revealed a reservoir of semen in the whore.”

“L is known to be one of the largest semen depositories in BHV (Bahnhofsviertel). There is nothing to add to the description above, I find her typically gypsy-whore-pretty. As soon as you approach her room she begins a show with her tits, massaging her cunt (in my case she was wearing a bra only, no panties) and she immediately grabs you at your pants. “Come, sweetie, squirt semen in my pussy.” What is a man to do? The price at € 30 was okay too.

But none of this is a problem, right? Because the women's disgust really means that they find these men to be attractive. And besides no woman in prostitution ever feels disgust, not at all. That's what I learned today.

And a beer to that, a cigarette, some loud music, and partying with the colleagues – Bahnhofsviertelnacht Frankfurt olé! If this isn't a reason to celebrate, what is?