

‘They Don’t Have Money’: Greece’s Prostitutes Hit Hard by Financial Crisis

By Iliana Magra, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/world/europe/prostitutes-greece-crisis.html>

ATHENS — A prospective client walked into the narrow, dimly lit room in the basement of a broken-down building in central Athens. Elena, 22, took off her robe and stood up. Evaggelia, her 59-year-old, fiery-tempered madam, immediately went into her pitch.

“My girl is flawless,” Evaggelia said in Greek. “I recommend her without reservation.” She recited the “menu,” and added that with one exception, “my girl does everything in bed.”

Without taking off his sunglasses, the paunchy middle-aged client rubbed his chin and eyed Elena, a Russian-Polish prostitute, as she flipped her blond hair and turned in sky-high black heels. “O.K.,” he finally said.

The price? Twenty euros, about \$23.

I was sitting a foot away on a small couch fitted with a plastic slipcover inside a brothel, witnessing this age-old transaction. We were on Filis Street — a warren of alleyways and dingy two-story houses — which has been home to Athenian brothels for most of the past century.

The trade is more desperate now because of Greece’s lost decade since the 2008 financial crisis, which has left no profession unscathed. The collapsed economy and the arrival of tens of thousands of migrants have pushed even more women into prostitution — even as prices have fallen through the floor.

And for all the talk of a new era in gender relations, with women around the world speaking out and forcing a reckoning against sexual violence, #MeToo does not exist here in this room bathed in red and purple lights, where the women are silent and their bodies are for sale, and a coffee table is loaded with condoms.

“I had a flower shop for 18 years — and now I’m here out of necessity, not out of joy,” said Dimitra, a middle-aged woman who lost her shop in the crisis and now works as a madam on Filis Street. “I used to be called Mrs. Dimitra, but now I’ve become a whore.”

In Greece, prostitution is legal in registered brothels, though the vast majority of brothels in Athens are unregistered. Street prostitution is illegal, yet women routinely sell sex on some street corners. While many women enter the profession out of economic necessity, others are trafficked or coerced into sex work.

“Prostitution has increased and changed, basically in the context of the new political, economic and cultural environment,” said Grigoris Lazos, a professor of criminology at Panteion University in Athens, referring to Greece’s painful economic austerity.

Mr. Lazos spent six years researching how the country's twin crises — migration and economic austerity — had changed prostitution in Athens. He found that the number of prostitutes in the city had increased by 7 percent since 2012, yet prices have dropped drastically, both for women working on the streets and in brothels.

“In 2012, it would require an average of 39 euros” for a client to hire a prostitute in a brothel, Mr. Lazos said, “while in 2017 just €17 — a 56 percent decrease.”

According to Greek law, a brothel has to be at least about 655 feet away from schools, hospitals, churches, nurseries and public squares, among other places. But given the density of downtown Athens, it's virtually impossible to house prostitutes there legally. Mr. Lazos found that only eight of the 798 brothels operating in the city in August were legal.

The number was vastly different from the police statistics, which count no more than 300 brothels in the city. A spokesman for the Athenian police, Theodoros Chronopoulos, explained that the official number does not include hidden brothels.

Mr. Chronopoulos said that officers aggressively work to break up trafficking rings, pointing to rising arrests. But the police mostly leave brothels alone, he said, partly because of the sense among the authorities that they help single men deal with loneliness.

“We're quite tolerant when it comes to brothels,” he said, “because we understand that what they do is social service.”

The police later provided an additional statement, with Mr. Chronopoulos saying: “There is no tolerance when it comes to brothels. The checks are intensive and constant and violations are applied where appropriate.”

None of the women I interviewed spoke of their profession as a social service, and they often expressed disgust for their male clients. Evaggelia, the madam where Elena works, said of the men: “They're not worthy enough of a girlfriend. They think that by paying 20 euros, they buy something.”

All the women insisted on using only one name because of the stigma and for safety reasons. None said that she had been forced — except by necessity — to be there. But none wanted to be here.

“I hate sex,” Elena said. “I like the money, not the job.”

Anastasia, known as “Amazon” to clients, has worked as a prostitute since she was 14. She's now 33, and says the work is harder than ever.

“People don't have money anymore,” she said one afternoon in Satovriandou Street outside a hotel named Easy Access, where clients have sessions that last from 10 minutes to a half-hour.

Anastasia says they promise, “I’ll come when I get paid,” or they ask for bargains. Men often ask for unprotected sex, she said, and many prostitutes who are drug addicts take on such clients for less than 10 euros.

“The ones that do it have AIDS, so they don’t care, they’re even doing it for vengeance,” according to Anastasia, who is in rehabilitation for drug addiction. “But they’ve destroyed the market.”

The number of H.I.V. cases in Greece has actually dropped since 2012, when intravenous drug use was rampant during the height of the financial crisis, said Dimitra Paraskeva, the head of Greece’s H.I.V. office. Greece had 628 H.I.V. cases last year, almost half the number from six years ago, according to official data.

In the cheaper Athenian brothels of Metaxourgio, I met Monica, a 30-year-old Albanian prostitute who grew up in the northern city of Thessaloniki. She said she entered the business 10 years ago, when she lived in Crete. She moved to Athens five years ago, in search of a new life, and initially worked in a taverna.

She had completed one year toward a culinary degree to become a cook and wanted to use her earnings to pay for a second year — but her boss never paid her a salary.

“I came here,” she said of the brothel, “because it’s the only job that, once you do it, you know you’ll get paid.”

Today, she spends six to eight hours a day trying to entice clients, but most do not stay.

“They don’t have money,” she said. “They haven’t had money for the past seven years.”

When she does get a client, she charges 10 euros for 10 minutes, and is allowed to keep half.

“A few years ago, they used to tip,” Monica said. “They’d give you 20 and 50, even 100 euros if they liked it. Now, no more tips.”

With the Greek crisis, the clientele changed, too, the women noted. They are now largely migrants, many who live in the apartments above the brothels in the gritty, low-rent areas. Many Greek men are simply too poor to pay anymore.

“Their wages used to be 800 or 900 euros,” Monica said. “Now they get nothing.”

Besides the increase in migrant clients, Mr. Lazos’s research pointed to an uptick of about 5 percent in Greek clientele between 2012 and 2017.

“It’s something that a man can’t quit,” Manolis, a 33-year-old taxi-driver and brothel regular who insisted on being identified only by his first name, whispered one afternoon on Filis Street. A small white light was on outside several doors left half-opened, a signal to roaming clients that a prostitute was available.

“Sex is like smoking,” Manolis said. “You’ll find 20 euros for it, one way or another.”

Despite the drop in prices, customers have become choosier.

“Seven or eight years ago, 20 to 30 men would go to the bedroom with the girl,” said Vaso, 65, who has been a madam for the past 20 years. Today, she said, it is more like five or six.

“Now they come, take a look,” she said, “and say, ‘I’ll be back.’ ”