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- DATA MAP
- FEATURES
- INTERVIEWS
- WNN BREAKING
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- GLOBAL ARTS
- RADIO ON AIR
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- CONTACT

Anti-immigrant sentiments plague sex workers of Geneva's 'Red-Light' district

By **WNN Editors Team** on September 10, 2012 · [Comments Off on Anti-immigrant sentiments plague sex workers of Geneva's 'Red-Light' district](#)

Carli Pierson – WNN Features



The La Sirène Club is one of many bars in Geneva, Switzerland's red-light district located in the Paquis section of the city. Image: Carli Pierson/WNN

(WNN) Geneva, SWITZERLAND: As Switzerland appears to be weathering the storm of the rising European financial crisis, Geneva's immigrant women, who work inside the city's active sex trade industry, tell a different story. Prostitution has been a legal industry inside Switzerland since the enactment of the Swiss Criminal Code in 1942.

As Euro zone economies are beginning to falter, migrant prostitutes from neighboring countries like Italy and Spain continue to make their way into the alpine country in hopes of avoiding the global slowdown. Instead they find themselves trying to survive in the streets, competing for fewer clients among a growing population of undocumented migrant sex workers. Geneva itself has over 4,100 registered prostitutes, although according to the Police Vice Unit, only 25 percent reported regular business activity in 2011.

There were an estimated 70,000-180,000 illegal immigrants in Switzerland in 2010 and as surrounding countries continue to struggle economically, experts anticipate that illegal immigration and prostitution will only continue to increase. Already an increased number of women were involved in prostitution last year according to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). While noting that prostitution does not necessarily imply human trafficking, the economic crisis in Europe raises new concerns about the topic as criminal networks move women into countries less affected by the financial crisis.

In one of the world's most expensive cities for immigrants, times in Geneva are tough and business is slow for those involved at the lowest level of prostitution in the city.

For illegal immigrants the streets and seedy bars of Paquis are where they sell their services. Higher up in the 'red-light' food chain, young beautiful eastern European women in big glass windows blow kisses to men in the street, between moments of glancing down at their iPads. According to Geneva's Police Vice Unit, the average sex act in Geneva costs 150 Swiss Francs (\$159 USD). That's before costs like room rentals, clothes, makeup, or a club fees can cut the cost down. At the very top, European elites can pay up to 700 Swiss Francs (\$740 USD) or more for services as they circulate among Geneva's highest bidders. The majority of undocumented migrant women though are excluded from most higher levels in Switzerland's sex industry.

To combat deteriorating conditions, the sex workers of Paquis have recently formed the first sex workers syndicate in Switzerland. According to a recent article published in the **Geneva Tribune**, between 100-150 sex workers are organising a rally this week at the Temple of Paquis to protest Geneva's current laws on prostitution. The issues are numerous. They include efforts by sex workers to stop the allowance made in Geneva for landlords to charge sex workers any price they wish for rent, which can include up to 3,000 Swiss Francs (approximately \$3,179 USD) for a room, without allowing sex workers to make any legal recourse against the landlords. The syndicate is also asking for greater human rights in protection and also for the Police Vice Unit of Paquis in Geneva to tighten down on all incidents of violence against women, especially violence against sex workers in the area.

As anti-immigrant sentiments have been rising throughout Europe, they often press down on migrant women who have come to the Swiss region to work as sex workers. Many undocumented 'illegal' migrant women in the industry are also in daily danger of contracting HIV/AIDS. Often afraid to reveal their 'illegal' status to authorities while needing health care, many undocumented women stay hidden with needs that can reach a crisis level. Since health care in Switzerland is part of a 'pay as you go' insurance-based system, many undocumented sex workers feel they cannot afford to pay for their health care. They also feel they might be sanctioned by the Swiss government after their illegal status is revealed if they see a nurse or a doctor, or if they are billed afterwards for any health care services.

UMSCO – Unité mobile de soins communautaires is a specialised medical unit made up of **doctors, nurses and social workers who work together** as a medical team through the outpatient clinic (Département de médecine communautaire et de premier recours – DMC) of the University Hospital of Geneva (HUG) to combine their efforts to help sex workers, especially those who have contracted HIV/AIDS. The goal is to help undocumented migrants feel more at ease to receive the care they need. In spite of this some undocumented migrant women who work in the sex industry may continue to hide deteriorating health conditions as long as possible.

The road for an undocumented sex worker in Switzerland is not easy. In addition to HIV/AIDS, some of the diseases plaguing sex workers also include diabetes and tuberculosis.

"Aspects of sex work are criminalized in 116 countries around the world, says said United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, Prasada Rao. "Laws in many countries conflate adult consensual sex work with human trafficking. Routine police raids, often in the name of anti-trafficking, lead to arrest and harassment of adult consenting sex workers," he continued. "These discriminatory practices drive sex workers to social exclusion and into a socially disadvantaged position, accentuating their vulnerability to HIV," added Rao in a recent statement made at the July **AIDS2012** conference in Washington, D.C.

"It's not as chic as it used to be," says Nada, the owner of 'La Sirene,' also known in English as 'The Mermaid,' a bar in the city's little known red-light district of Paquis. "Just look around you, when I walk to work I feel like I don't even know where I am," adds Nada in a one-on-one interview with WNN – Women News Network. While it may not be as chic as it used to be, Geneva is still one of the most expensive cities in the world. It may not feel like that though in the backstreets of the red-light district.

Switzerland has traditionally been a transit point for sex trafficking victims and while trafficking for sexual exploitation is illegal under Article 182 of the Swiss penal code, until very recently, it was the only country in Europe where 16-year-olds could prostitute themselves legally. This helped to make it number 8 in the top 10 sex tourism destinations in the world. It also left legal loopholes for sex traffickers as third parties profited from child prostitution.

"The Government of Switzerland does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so," says the latest 2012 report on Trafficking in Persons (TIP) by the **United States Department of State**.

In December 2011, Switzerland's Federal Council did approve an amendment to the Swiss penal code finally prohibiting the use of minor children under the age of 18 in the sex trade. This move was in step with requirements under the **Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse**, which Switzerland ratified in 2010. The Government of Switzerland however has yet to fully conform its laws to its obligations under the Convention. Furthermore, accountability for convicted traffickers continues to be a problem as suspended sentences are still commonplace.

"Nevertheless, until the third-party harboring, transport, or recruitment of a teenager in prostitution is illegal, Switzerland does not prohibit all forms of trafficking," continues the U.S. State Department. "In addition, improvements are needed in accountability for convicted traffickers; suspended sentences continue to be the norm."

The topics discussed inside Switzerland today are not focused as much on sex-trafficking as they are on the increasing discrimination, anti-immigration and racist ideologies thrown on foreign nationals from other countries who come into the region without proper documentation. Even legal immigrants in Geneva face a particularly tough battle as they fight racist hiring practices as well as overt and extreme discrimination. In fact, one of the most common topics brought along with the struggles of the European financial crisis is the 'anti-immigrant' sentiment.

To see more of this story with video and special reports link to page 2 below > > >

Pages: 1 2

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