

Trouble in Paradise: the rise and fall of Germany's 'brothel king'

Monday 24 June 2019, by [LORENZ Hilke](#), [NELSON Catherine](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2019).

Jürgen Rudloff's chain of 'wellness spas' sold sex as a health service for men. But his business model was fatally flawed - as his trial for aiding and abetting trafficking revealed

Until his dramatic fall from grace, Jürgen Rudloff was the self-proclaimed "brothel king" of [Germany](#). Owner of a chain of clubs he boasted was the "the largest marketplace for sex in Europe", he was every inch the well-dressed entrepreneur, a regular face on reality TV and chat shows.

Rudloff is now serving a five-year sentence for aiding and abetting trafficking. His trial laid bare the misery and abuse of women working as prostitutes at his club who, according to court documents, were treated like animals and beaten if they didn't make enough money. His imprisonment has dismantled the idea of Germany's "clean prostitution" industry and raised troubling questions about what lies behind the legalised, booming sex trade.

[Prostitution](#) - legalised in Germany in 2002 - is worth an annual €15bn (£13.4bn), and more than a million men visit prostitutes every day. The change in the law led to a rise in "super brothels", attracting tourists from countries where such establishments are illegal.

Rudloff's empire - a chain of Paradise brothels - was founded on the idea that sex could be sold as a health service for men, on an almost industrial scale.

The jewel in the crown was the Stuttgart Paradise, opened in 2008 at a cost of more than €6m.

The five-storey club is billed as a "male wellness centre", where customers pay €69 to cover entry, a meal, drinks and a Turkish bath. Sex costs an additional €50 for half an hour. Men wear bathrobes and shower shoes; women are naked aside from high heels.

Women who work at the club also pay the €69 entry fee, a daily tax of €25 plus the cost of a dormitory bed if they spend the night.

The Paradise business model is the same as the hundreds of other "sauna clubs" across Germany - brothel owners provide the premises, and the women are self-employed. Yet Rudloff's high-volume, low-cost model only works if the supply of women is enough to satisfy demand and bring enough customers through the doors.

According to court documents, this became a problem for Paradise almost immediately. There weren't enough women to fill the clubs. So Rudloff's friends in the industry offered to help him out.

In 2008, as Rudloff was growing his business, investigators in Augsburg, Bavaria - a hundred miles from Stuttgart - received a tip-off that gangs from the city were trafficking women from eastern [Europe](#), and sending them to work in Paradise. (While prostitution is legal in Germany, pimping and sex trafficking are not.) There was still no clear connection to Rudloff at this point. Then in 2013, a

trafficking investigation into a brothel in Augsburg uncovered further links with Paradise.

At 6pm on 30 November 2014, in a mammoth operation involving 1,000 police officers and 70 locations, Rudloff's four clubs in Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Saarbrücken and the Austrian city of Graz were searched simultaneously. The private and business premises of the brothel managers, as well as investors' cars and apartments, were combed through, and files, financial records, computers and phones confiscated.

The evidence was sufficient to convict several pimps who had trafficked women into Paradise. Rudloff himself was finally arrested in September 2017.

In a trial lasting almost a year, testimony from the jailed pimps revealed that trafficking was crucial to the success of Rudloff's business.

Among the witnesses at his trial was Ibrahim "I", a former member of the Hell's Angels and a close friend of Rudloff's. Ibrahim admitted forcing women into prostitution at Paradise, setting them a daily target of €500 a day and beating them if they didn't bring enough money home. He would hit them on the head, rather than the body, he explained, so that no one would see the bruises. He also tattooed his name on to women's bodies and ordered women to undergo breast enlargement surgery.

One woman who worked at Paradise told the court she had seen young women weeping after their first night working there. Another said that she had seen gang members treat women "like animals".

Peter Holzwarth, the chief prosecutor at the trial, argued that the owner and management at the clubs were guilty of *Organisationsdelikt* - aiding and abetting an organisation involved in criminality. "He knew - in the cases brought to court - that the women working at his club were being exploited by pimps," says Holzwarth. "And he knew the women were trafficked, or rather, he thought that they might be and [still let them work], and that is sufficient for a conviction."

The court agreed. Sentencing Rudloff in late February this year, the judge remarked: "A clean brothel of this size is hard to imagine." He said he hoped the convictions would serve as a warning to the sex industry.

Three months on, questions are being asked about the scale of the criminality that could be lurking within Germany's legalised brothels.

Augsburg's chief police inspector, Helmut Sporer, says that the huge growth of the sex industry post-legalisation has fuelled a rising demand for women. German authorities have no data on the number of women who work in the domestic sex trade, but conservative estimates suggest 400,000. According to Sporer, more than 90% of these women come from south-east Europe and Africa, and half are under 21.

"The majority don't conform to the profile of the self-employed sex worker. They speak no German - or only very basic German. They have a limited education and they are travelling abroad for the first time. Many don't even know which city they are in," says Sporer, who says that all these factors make it likely that many are not working voluntarily in prostitution.

It's not just migrants at risk of exploitation. Sandra Norak, 29, has never worked at Paradise, but spent six years working in brothels across Germany after meeting a man on the internet while she was still at school.

Norak's boyfriend threatened her with violence, forcing her to work at a brothel where she had to

sleep with up to 500 clients a month. She kept none of the money for herself. Now an activist for changes to Germany's prostitution laws, Norak claims her exploitation was replicated for the majority of the women she met, most of whom were pushed into the trade by pimps or traffickers.

It was not until 2014 that she was able to get herself out of the sex trade and complete high school.

The experience, she says, is a "kind of destruction of your identity". "[Some of the women] could have got away from the guy exploiting them but didn't have the strength or the belief to find their way back to a respectable life."

The Paradise case has shaken the industry, says lawyer Frank Theumer, who has known Jürgen Rudloff for 30 years, and defended him at his trial. "The big brothel owners, whether in Augsburg, Hamburg or Berlin, have become more careful." According to Theumer, what happened to Rudloff could happen to anyone working in the industry.

There are many who believe Rudloff's conviction makes it easier for campaigners pushing to criminalise prostitution. Undine de Rivière, of the professional association of sex workers BesD, has been connected with the trade for 25 years. These days she works mainly from her private apartment or as an escort. An hour with her in the afternoon costs from €300, depending on the services requested. De Rivière says that though forced prostitution and trafficking do occur, she is convinced that neither is inherent to sex work.

Lilli Erdbeermund, also of BesD, agrees: "Opponents of sex work seek such high-profile cases as supply for demanding a general ban on sex work or further special laws for our industry ... [yet] these criminalising laws have particularly dire consequences for one of the most vulnerable groups in sex work: migrants." She says such laws push sex workers, especially those from marginalised groups, into danger.

For prosecutors like Holzwarth, Rudloff's conviction is a warning to those cashing in on Germany's insatiable demand for commercial sex. "Rudloff's case was not an isolated incident," he says. "In my opinion, cooperation between brothel owners and pimps is risky but profitable for both sides. A win-win situation ... but the case has had an impact already. I think brothel owners will be more careful about dealing with pimps."

Hilke Lorenz is a reporter for the [Stuttgarter Zeitung](#). Additional reporting by [Catherine Nelson](#)

Hilke Lorenz
Catherine Nelson

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Guardian
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jun/22/trouble-in-paradise-rise-and-fall-of-germany-brothel-king-jurgen-rudloff>