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Girls of Paradise fake escort site reveals reality of prostitution

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By **Nita Bhalla**

NEW DELHI (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Feeling lonely? Want some fun? Visit Girls Of Paradise escort site with its wide selection of scantily clad women and pay them for sex.

Click on Marielle, Lucy, Sybille or Monica. Chat online and meet up. Prices are reasonable. Girls are local.

This, however, is where the charade stops and hopes of a "good time" end. It may look like any other escort website on the internet, but most of the Girls of Paradise are dead.

Start chatting with 19-year-old Ines, a pretty, smiling brunette in a pale blue negligee and pictures of her battered and bruised face appear. A chilling message fills the screen: "Ines was thrown from a bridge by her pimp. She is seriously disabled and will never be able to walk again."

Click on Julia, 28, a blonde with cherry-red lipstick, and a series of images show her face swollen and bruised, her mouth bleeding. Her message reads: "The body of Julia, burnt, slashed and heavily battered with brass knuckles, was found in the Bois Du Boulogne (park in Paris). Killed by a client."

Chats with other girls turn equally horrific, detailing brutal attacks and grisly deaths. Each chat ends: "When you are a client of prostitution, you are an accomplice to the violence they face."

The fake escort website is the brainchild of French charity Mouvement du Nid and advertising agency McCann Paris, part of a campaign to raise awareness about the reality of prostitution.

The charity discussed the innovative project at a conference in Delhi earlier this week, where 250 representatives of civil society groups, activists and survivors from 30 countries shared strategies on how to curb the sexual exploitation of women.

"TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL"

The site - which uses the images of real women who were murdered by their clients, pimps or traffickers - is automated, but was live for two days last year with staff from Mouvement du Nid posing as prostitutes and interacting with clients.

From a make-shift call center, they chatted with clients online and by phone -- but instead of offering sex, they said they were unavailable as they had been beaten by their pimp, or explained how the girl requested had been stabbed to death by a customer.

In the ten hours that the site was live, more than 600 phone calls and thousands of online chats were recorded. The footage was used to produce a campaign video which showed how men visiting prostitutes were encouraging the global trade of women, so were accomplices to their abuse and exploitation.

Claire Quidet, spokeswoman for Mouvement du Nid, said the ad aimed to help shape public opinion as France debated criminalizing prostitution.

"At first we weren't too excited as a frontline NGO working with victims of prostitution to

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"We see how pimps and traffickers are using new technologies such as the internet as a tool to exploit women, so we thought we can also try it to combat the problem of prostitution."

"IS ANOTHER GIRL AVAILABLE?"

Sex work is illegal in most countries across the world, yet exists everywhere. There are an estimated 40 million sex workers globally, according to French charity Fondation Scelles.

Activists say most have been lured, duped or forced into sexual slavery by pimps and traffickers, largely due to poverty, a lack of opportunities and a marginalized status in society.



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Once forced to work in brothels, on street corners, in massage parlors, strip clubs or private homes, it is difficult for sex workers to leave, activists say.

For many it is the threat of physical abuse from their pimp that keeps them in prostitution, but some stay because they have been ostracized by their families and have nowhere to go.

Quidet said what was interesting about the experiment was the reaction of clients on discovering the woman they had wanted for sex had been beaten to a pulp or stabbed to death.

"We thought they would hang up or insult us after we said 'No, you can't see her because she is dead or she has been stabbed, or she is in a wheelchair because she was beaten by her pimp. But it never happened. Not once," she said.

While clients were compassionate at first and wanted to know what had happened to the victim, expressing shock at the violence, it quickly changed to denial -- all they wanted was a girl for the night, she said.

"'Oh, this is horrible' or 'I feel so sorry for her' would be the first reaction. But very quickly the client would then say 'Can I see you instead?' or 'Is someone else available?'"

"Once I said 'It's not going to be possible to meet as I am in a wheelchair because I was beaten up by my pimp, and one client replied 'I don't mind the wheelchair ... it's okay.'"

(Reporting by Nita Bhalla @nitabhalla, Editing by Lyndsay Griffiths. Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking, property rights, climate change and resilience. Visit news.trust.org)

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