

From the girls who see 10 men a night and face being beaten with knuckledusters to the high-class hookers earning £6,000...

the reality of selling



MANDY APPLEYARD

On a dingy estate in St Petersburg Stacey Dooley sits around a kitchen table with three Russian sex workers. A security guard stands by the door, ushering in clients – often three or four at a time. Single beds are cordoned off with rigged curtains.

"Sometimes they want a gangbang", one of them tells Stacey. "And sometimes groups of men come carrying weapons..."

Dangerous environments are all in a day's work for documentary-maker Stacey Dooley, but her new three-part series takes her into the darkest corners of global prostitution.

For BBC3's *Sex in Strange Places*, she spends time with sex workers in Turkey, Russia and Brazil – uncovering shocking attitudes to sex.

Interviewing sex workers, brothel owners and government officials, Stacey admits:

"People have so many preconceptions about sex workers and I did too before I made this series. The reality is there's usually only one reason these women are doing this and it's to survive."

In Russia, where there are three million prostitutes, it is seen by some as a glamorous and lucrative profession, but there's a dark underbelly of corruption and exploitation.

"I saw both sides", says Stacey. "There's this Western image of high-class glamorous Russian escorts, but that's not the whole story."

Running a brothel can lead to five years in jail, so there's no pimp at the hidden sex den Stacey visited in St Petersburg.

Instead, each of the women, including a resident dominatrix, pay towards the rent and a security guard. The rest of the money is theirs.

On one night, they see as many as 10 men and earn less than £70. "The girls are in high spirits but it is grim", Stacey says. "Often the clients have knives, knuckledusters, even

guns sometimes. They beat up the guard and rob the women. When I asked why the police didn't help them, one of the ladies told me it was 'like the Wild West.'"

Prostitution is illegal in Russia. "Putin wants to wipe places like this off the map and the Church agrees," says Stacey. "But there are escort's phone numbers actually spray-painted on the roads in St Petersburg."

Prostitutes, paid as little as £8 for oral sex, haunt the city's freezing-cold streets in search of work, despite the dangers lurking on every corner.

"The financial crisis means there are more prostitutes than ever on the streets.

"I teamed up with a charity that helps sex workers and we went out of the streets to talk

to them.

"While I was there I saw policemen taking bribes from the girls. For 500 rubles (£5) they won't arrest them," says Stacey. Shocked by what she saw, she took her concerns right to the top of the Russian government. "When I put this

to Putin's right hand man, Vitaly Milonov, he told me there was no difference between a murderer and a prostitute," she says.

"Russian politicians are demonising these women instead of helping them."

For the Russian rich elite however, there is no need to walk the freezing streets to find sex. They go online.

In Moscow, Stacey met call-girls who cater for the super-rich, stay in luxurious hotels and promise to indulge their clients' fantasies.

One confident, designer-clad 24-year-old escort is Alvora, who wears Agent Provocateur lingerie and earns £700 a night - more than the average Russian earns in an entire month.

Stacey says: "She hired a top professional photographer to take new pictures for her website and insists on being taken to four or five star hotels by her clients.

"Sex work is so profitable for her that she can afford a large apartment in the centre of the city. It's a world away from what I saw on the streets."

On the other side of the world, Stacey uncovered another side of the sex industry. Sunshine and carnivals might represent the

Brazil that many people recognise, but there's a darker side to this country.

Around a million transgender people live in Brazil, many of them facing such ingrained prejudice that they struggle to find a job and resort to making a living selling sex.

Stacey meets Aninya, formerly Phillippe, a 21-year-old

transgender sex worker from Rio. "She does this work to support her mother," says Stacey. "Her main clients were married, straight men, who told their wives they were doing overtime."

Clutching her pet chihuahua in her modest apartment, Aninya shows Stacey the special trikinis she wears for work.

Designed to hide her penis by tucking it in a pouch between her legs, they make her appear completely feminine.

"She regularly has eight clients a day, and customers fly in from the UK", says Stacey.

Others talk to her about the discrimination and dangers they face finding customers on the streets, setting out in the dead of night to earn a living with the very real fear that they may not make it home.

Violence against gay and transgender sex workers in Brazil is endemic. The country has the highest murder rate of trans women in the world and they have a life expectancy of just 30.

Stacey meets a fragile trans samba dancer called Barbara, who turns tricks on the streets to pay household bills and a

woman working in Rio's notorious red light area who rents a tiny room with a single bed (£1.80 for 20 minutes) where she has sex with up to 20 men a night.

"What I realised was that while a lot of the trans sex workers liked to glam up and entertain, beneath the performance the reality is they are desperate and scared."

Brazil also has a huge market for so-called high-class escorts, who can earn £6,000 a month - which is more than a judge.

Stacey visits an upmarket hotel for sex workers - "essentially a posh brothel," she says - and finds that attitudes to sex and women in Brazil can be much less progressive than people imagine.

Oscar rents out hotel rooms by the hour and boasts of sexual conquests with the women that work there. "He was late to meet me because he was having a threesome" says Stacey. "His views on sex were very liberal, but he hadn't considered the psychological damage on the women working in his hotel."

In the documentary, Oscar tells Stacey: "Prostitution is like any profession, not every doctor likes being a doctor, not every cleaner likes being a cleaner. Not everyone loves their job."

If Stacey has taken anything from her investigations, it's that selling sex is rarely a choice, and comes with a price.

"So many of these women are attracted to sex work because of the money but it's like dancing with the devil - all this comes at a price," she says. "Some of

them struggle psychologically, living a double life and juggling health and medical concerns with daily life.

"It's a question of whether you can deal with that and, honestly, I don't think I could."

Stacey Dooley: Sex in Strange Places, is on **BBC3** on Tuesday nights



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