



Input from the European Women's Lobby for SR VAWG's report on violence against women and prostitution

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About the European Women's Lobby

The European Women's Lobby (EWL) is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in Europe with 32 national coordination organisations and 17 European-wide member organisations, representing a total of more than 2,000 women's rights organisations. The EWL's mission is to represent an inclusive, fearless, loud, independent feminist voice and bring the voices of women and girls into the European political arena. Representing the diversity of the women's movement across Europe, the EWL mobilises its members' collective experience and expertise to work on major issues affecting women and girls. The EWL strives to realise women's rights, equality between women and men and social justice and to combat all forms of violence against women and girls. The EWL is also the co-founder of the **Brussels'Call** created in 2012, a partnership coalition of over **120** civil society organisations, as well as survivors and experts, committed to working at the international, European, Member State and local level to end prostitution and sexual exploitation in Europe.

Women and girls, the main group affected by prostitution

Prostitution is a form of violence that nourishes itself from different forms of systemic inequalities based on sex, poverty, age, ethnicity and migration status.

Indeed, women and girls are the most affected by prostitution as they represent 90%¹ of persons in prostitution while 97%² of so-called "sex-buyers" are men. A majority of women in prostitution are migrant women as they make up 80% to 90% of persons in prostitution in countries like Austria, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain and between 60% to 75% in Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Greece, Denmark and Norway. Overall, this equals an average of 84%³. In many cases, they are coming from less economically developed countries in Eastern Europe, Asia or Africa, where opportunities and protections for young women are severely constrained. As a part of a survey of 854 participants in nine countries, 63% experienced child sexual abuse and 47% entered prostitution before age 18⁴.

Women and girls in prostitution face different forms of violence intrinsically linked to being in prostitution:

¹ Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution and its Impact on Gender Equality, European Parliament Study 2014, p. 37:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493040/IPOL-FEMM_ET\(2014\)493040_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/493040/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2014)493040_EN.pdf)

² 2 Stop Traffick! Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls, Immigrant Council of Ireland 2014, p. 32: <http://www.stoptraffick.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2013/03/STOP-TRAFFICK-full-report.Pdf>

³ Monica O'Connor 2018, p. 18-19

⁴ 16 Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: an Update on Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, M. Farley et al. 2003, p. 57; 40 : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281348842_Prostitution_and_trafficking_in_nine_countries_An_update_on_violence_and_posttraumatic_stress_disorder

- **Economic coercion:** No woman or girl makes money of prostitution - the majority of them cannot make enough money to own a car, an apartment or simply to save money for the future and 9 out of 10 women in prostitution have said that would leave it if they could⁵ but the cycle of precarity entraps them in a system that relies on their exploitation. On the contrary, according to Europol, in Europe, a pimp is estimated to earn 110 000 euros per year and per woman⁶ they are exploiting in prostitution.
- **Physical and sexual violence:** A report based on 9 countries⁷ found that 63% of women in prostitution have reported having been raped since entering prostitution and 71% of women reported physical assault. This same source identified many of the physical harms and mental traumas of trafficking for sexual exploitation including “vaginal injuries, increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, forced pregnancies”.
- **Mental health abuse:** More than two third of women in prostitution reported trauma on par with soldiers returning from war⁸. 68% met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁹. Among the identified mental traumas of trafficking for sexual exploitation, one can find “high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression.”¹⁰ Moreover, similarities can be noticed between the impacts of sexual exploitation and other forms of gender-specific abuse including female genital mutilation (FGM) and forced and child marriage. These include: “sexual and reproductive dysfunctions, severe and complex post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies and attempts, clinical depression, psychosis, loss of confidence and a reduction in professional and educational attainment. Victims are reported to have persistent feelings of shame and disgust, loss of sleep and psychological disassociation, as well as symptoms identical to those exhibited by the victims of torture and war.”¹¹
- **Higher mortality rates:** Mortality rates for individuals in prostitution are also exceptionally high compared to the average worker¹². The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes highlighted that women in prostitution are 18 times more likely to be murdered than women of similar age and race who are not in prostitution¹³.

Examples of hidden forms of prostitution and the link between prostitution and pornography

The internet, in particular social media and online platforms, make it increasingly easy for pimps and traffickers to keep victims hidden and mobile, making it more difficult for law enforcement and support services to identify and help victims. They also facilitate forms of prostitution such as ‘camming’ and ‘sugaring’ that are often more hidden and deprioritised compared to more visible forms of street prostitution, red light districts, and visible sites like onlyfans.

⁵ Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: an Update on Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, M. Farley et al. 2003, p. 56: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281348842_Prostitution_and_trafficking_in_nine_countries_An_update_on_vio

⁶ ‘Traffic des femmes en provenance de l’Est’ (Trafficking in eastern European women), Le Monde Diplomatique, December 1999.

⁷ Prostitution in 9 countries - research by Melissa Farley, partner organisations including EWL, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Fondation Scelles, Isala asbl.

⁸ Data from the EIGE, prostitution in 9 countries - research by Melissa Farley, partner organisations including EWL, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Fondation Scelles, Isala asbl.

⁹ 5 Farley et al. 2003, p. 56

¹⁰ Prostitution in 9 countries - research by Melissa Farley, partner organisations including EWL, Immigrant Council of Ireland, Fondation Scelles, Isala asbl.

¹¹ EIGE 2017 p. 12

¹² Global Study on Homicide: Gender-related killing of women and girls, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018, P. 35: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf

¹³ [Microsoft Word - Booklet 5 for layout_16July \(unodc.org\)](#)

Additionally, many brothels operate by using ‘fronts’, such as [massage parlours](#), which also act as hotspots for human trafficking and are used to fund organised crime. Prostitution hidden behind fronts makes it more difficult to identify victims.

When it comes to pornography, we can observe that systems of prostitution and pornography [operate through similar mechanisms and tactics for recruiting, exploiting and trapping women](#) for the purpose of sexual abuse for profit. Moreover, the rise and normalisation of violence and abuse in pornography, such as rape (acted or real), incest, pain and humiliation, choking, and the failure of online platforms to prevent underage access to violent pornography which shapes men’s preferences from a young age, is driving an increased demand for violent and misogynistic sexual acts and a dehumanisation of women as sexual objects to inflict pain and control over.

Sex-buyers, pimps, traffickers, brothel owners: the responsible behind this system

Sex buyers are at the origin of the form of violence that is prostitution as they are the ones triggering the demand for women and girls in this exploitative system. 97% of sex buyers are men¹⁴ and most of them are in relationships, are well educated and have a profession¹⁵.

For 25% of men, the concept of ‘rape’ for women in prostitution is ‘ridiculous’¹⁶. A study of buyers in Scotland found that: 22% believe that once they pay, the customer can do whatever he wants; 25% expressed attitudes tolerant to rape; and it was found that buyers who visit prostitutes regularly are more likely to act in a sexually coercive way with women who aren’t in prostitution¹⁷. Obviously, pimps, traffickers, brothel owners and other third party exploiters are also responsible for perpetuating this system of exploitation and we must act to make sure that society combats these attempts to undermine women’s bodily autonomy, equality and well-being, and instead works towards building a society which values women and girls and where all are free from sexual violence and exploitation.

The link between prostitution and human trafficking

Trafficking is endemic in prostitution. According to the European Commission, 51% of trafficking in the EU is for sexual exploitation and 87% of those sexually exploited are women and the high-risk sectors for sexual exploitation remain the same as for previous years, i.e. prostitution, escort agencies and services, the pornography industry, massage services, bars and nightclubs¹⁸. UNODC estimates that as many as one million women in Europe are involved in prostitution, 1/7 of which are trafficking victims, amounting to 140,000 women in total¹⁹. Globally, the number of identified victims of trafficking has more than tripled since 2003, yet conviction rates have lagged behind, indicating a failure to hold perpetrators accountable²⁰.

¹⁴ 2 Stop Traffick! Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls, Immigrant Council of Ireland 2014, p. 32: <http://www.stoptraffick.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2013/03/STOP-TRAFFICK-full-report.pdf>

¹⁵ EIGE/Farley

¹⁶ Men who buy sex. Who They Buy and What They Know: A research study of 103 men who describe their use of trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution, and their awareness of coercion and violence, Melissa Farley, Julie Bindel and Jacqueline M. Golding, Prostitution Research and Education and Eaves, 2009, p. 13: <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/Isidocs/Mensex.pdf>

¹⁷ Prostitutes’ Customers: Motives and Misconceptions, M. Monto in R. Weitzer (ed.), Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography and the Sex Industry, second edition, Routledge 2010 p. 233–55.

¹⁸ [Combating Trafficking in Human Beings \(europa.eu\)](#)

¹⁹ 29 The Globalization of Crime A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2010, p. 49: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta/TOCTA_Report_2010_low_res.pdf

²⁰ 30 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2010, p. 63-64: https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTIP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

Does legalising prostitution help in reducing trafficking? No. Pimping and trafficking still takes place in areas where prostitution is legal²¹, and providing sexual services in brothels doesn't give women much protection from exploitation. 95% of those in prostitution in the Netherlands are "self-employed" and rent rooms in brothels²². This means that brothel owners do not provide them with employee protections, and instead, often exploit them in another way with extortionately high rents, meaning they must see multiple men every day in order just to earn enough to pay the rent. Brothel owners themselves have said that they don't have the skills to check whether women are being exploited or abused when they come to their brothels²³.

The 'Equality Model': the only efficient legislative framework to prevent violence against women and girls

First introduced in Sweden in 1998, the "Equality Model" (also called "Nordic Model") is a legal model recognising the inequality of power and privilege at the core of prostitution. It is based on the adoption of laws, policies and resourcing that guarantee:

- The decriminalisation of all those directly affected by prostitution;
- The development of real alternatives and exit programmes (housing, health, employment support) for those in prostitution;
- The criminalisation of all forms of coercive control and exploitation including pimping and trafficking;
- The criminalisation of the purchase of a sexual act;
- The implementation of policies of prevention and education to promote equality and comprehensive sexuality.

937 punters were arrested in France within one year of the adoption of the Equality Model and the number of persons exploited in street prostitution has halved since 1999 while it tripled in Denmark and Norway for the same period.

Indeed, in countries where prostitution has been legalised, such as The Netherlands, Germany and New Zealand, exploitation has not stopped and harm has not been reduced. For instance, the Netherlands have 9 times the amount of people exploited in prostitution than in Sweden, while Germany has 30-40 times the amount of people exploited in prostitution.²⁴ Once established as a legal enterprise, we have seen that prostitution presents impossible challenges to law enforcement and a country that sees prostitution as a 'job like any other' will not have the impetus to provide budgetary support to adequately meet the severe support needs of those in or exiting prostitution in their countries. In New Zealand, where prostitution is legal, over one third of women still felt they had to accept a client when they didn't want to²⁵. In every country, prostitution operates through booking websites where browsing and 'reviewing' women is encouraged. If a woman doesn't do what the buyer wants, for example acquiescing to sex acts she is not comfortable with or finds degrading, he is likely to leave her a bad review. Bad reviews mean

²¹ 8 Between Visibility and Invisibility: Sex Workers and Informal Services in Amsterdam, Verhoeven, M. & B. Van Gestel, *Feminist Economics* 23(3) 2017 p. 110–33: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13545701.2016.1195002>

²² Study on the Gender Dimension of Trafficking in Human Beings, S. Walby et al, European Commission 2016, p. 82: https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/study_on_the_gender_dimension_of_trafficking_in_human_beings_final_report.pdf

²³ 49 Walby et al. 2016, p. 103 50 Walby et al. 2016, p. 112-113

²⁴ Study on the Gender Dimension of Trafficking in Human Beings, S. Walby et al, European Commission 2016, p. 82: https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/study_on_the_gender_dimension_of_trafficking_in_human_beings_final_report.pdf

²⁵ The Impact of the Prostitution Reform Act on the Health and Safety Practices of Sex Workers, Report to the Prostitution Law Committee, Abel, G., L. Fitzgerald & C. Brunton, Department of Public Health and General Practice, University of Otago, Christchurch 2007, p. 116: <https://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/otago018607.pdf>

that an economically vulnerable woman will be put under even more pressure. This is another form of coercion that results in many women doing things they don't want to do. Besides, the European Parliament's 2023 Resolution on Prostitution stated that: "an inherent element of agency is the capacity to give and withhold consent; notes that consent can only be given freely when there is no power imbalance between the people involved and when there is no use of threat, violence, deception or coercion; notes, further, that consent obtained through the giving or receiving of payments or benefits is baseless"²⁶

A common myth is that legalising prostitution would mean that sex buyers would be forced to wear condoms, and that women in prostitution would feel empowered enough to successfully negotiate safe sex with the buyer. However, in all prostitution regimes sex buyers still want to have sex without a condom. This practice is usually offered by pimps or brothel owners because sex buyers are willing to pay more for it. Fundamentally, the power imbalance that results from the sex buyer having money, and the individual in prostitution needing it, is what prostitution is predicated on, and the same logic extends to specific sex acts.

In 2011, a deputy mayor of Amsterdam, Lodewijk Asscher, stated that decriminalising procuring has been a "national error" and that the government has been "reprehensibly naive"²⁷. By contrast, countries which have implemented the Equality model have not only seen a reduction in demand but in the total number of victims of sexual exploitation through prostitution: In Sweden,²⁸ Norway²⁹ and France there has been a marked reduction in men buying sex.³⁰

How to end violence in prostitution? End prostitution!

According to the Council of Europe, "Gender-based violence is defined as a form of violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman and/or that affects women disproportionately and that seriously inhibits the ability of women and girls to enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men."⁴ By this metric, prostitution in itself constitutes a form of sexual violence against women and girls. The normalisation of prostitution fosters acts of violence against women by sending the social signal that women are commodities. It is not about sex: it is about power and about the purchase of sex as a result of the denial of the other person's desire. Equality between women and men and genuine sexual freedom cannot be achieved as long as prostitution exists.

Therefore, adopting the Equality Model as a legal framework is the first step to undertake to end this exploitative system. Obviously, this has to be done with adequate funding for support services, exit programmes but drivers and risk factors behind prostitution must also be tackled: domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, female poverty, poor employment and education opportunities among women, and other form of disadvantage among women, particularly those most targeted by pimps and traffickers. [Comprehensive sexuality education](#) with an emphasis on consent, mutuality, respect and equality must also be taught in schools.

For more information on our position please consult resources available on the following link: [BrusselsCall — Our abolitionist library](#)

²⁶ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0328_EN.html

²⁷ [Les Néerlandais commencent à regretter la légalisation de la prostitution \(lemonde.fr\)](https://www.lemonde.fr)

²⁸ Swedish Government Offices (Statens Offentliga Utredningar) (SOU) 2010. Forbud mot kop av sexuellt: En utvärdering 1999–2008 [Prohibition of the Purchase of Sexual Services: An Evaluation 1999–2008, p. 7-8:

https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/the_ban_against_the_purchase_of_sexual_services_an_evaluation_1999-2008_1.pdf

²⁹ Evaluation of Norwegian legislation criminalising the buying of sexual services (English summary) Rasmussen et al. 2014: <http://www.eu-norway.org/Global/SiteFolders/webeu/Evaluation.pdf>

³⁰ A Study on the Impact of the Law from 13 April 2016 Against the 'Prostitution System' in France, La Bail and Giametta 2018: <https://www.medecinsdumonde.org/sites/default/files/ENGLISH-Synthese-Rapportprostitution-BD.PDF>