



**isala asbl**  
Rue du Grand Hospice 7, 1000 Brussels  
Belgium  
info@isalaasbl.be  
<https://www.isalaasbl.be/>

## Input for SR VAWG's report on violence against women and prostitution

January 2024

### Introduction

**This contribution from isala asbl draws upon the organisation's extensive knowledge and hands-on experience as a grassroots association dedicated to assisting women and girls in prostitution in Belgium.** With over 700 contacts annually, isala operates a weekly presence at the two main street prostitution sites in Brussels. Additionally, our association provides a welcoming drop-in and listening space every Friday throughout the year, where individuals can seek support without prior appointments. Services offered are all free of charge and encompass various aspects, including assistance with housing, employment, health, legal access, parenthood, French language classes, and more.

isala also provides individualised and holistic support for women in their efforts to leave prostitution – the demand they all express upon getting in contact with the association. In 2022/2023, isala welcomed more than thirty people at its offices (half of whom were new contacts) and provided individual support to more than 25 women in their respective life paths. Today, isala's main action is mainly carried out by a team of 35 volunteers, men and women of all ages and different backgrounds, who are supported by two staff members.

### **The profile of prostituted women and girls in Belgium, and why prostitution is at the crossroads of all forms of violence**

***"It is the very last thing you can do when you are a woman."***

**- A women in prostitution met by isala**

According to police reports, there are about 23,000 prostituted persons in Belgium, of which 4,000 to 5,000 are in Brussels. Among these, 85% are said to be victims of exploitation.

Belgium's geographical location makes it a real hub for sexual exploitation, as a destination, origin and transit centre. Migrant women and girls in prostitution that isala meets come mainly from Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Albania... often from ethnic minorities in their country of origin, such as Turkish-speaking Bulgarians), but also from Africa (Nigeria, Morocco...), Central/South America (Ecuador...) and Asia. These foreign women and girls, who are fleeing difficult living conditions in their country of origin, are exploited by networks or individuals (husband, 'boyfriend', 'friend', etc.) and remain in a clandestine and precarious situation. In fact, they are in an irregular administrative situation, i.e., they do not have a residence permit. Very often, they do not speak French or Dutch fluently - sometimes they are not even fully literate in their mother tongue.

**Belgium has long been recognised as a favoured destination for cross-border sex buyers, characterised by its tolerance towards brothels throughout the country.** This permissive approach is partly due to the substantial profits these establishments generate for their owners, contributing to the tax revenues of the municipalities in which they are located. For example, in the windows on Rue d'Aerschot (Brussels' red-light district), each prostituted person pays around €250 per day to the owners, making a rent of €7,500 per woman per month. The first 150 sex buyers of the month cover only the woman's right to be in the window. "Mega-brothels" like the so-called Villa Tinto in Antwerp generate up to €200,000 in turnover each month. The majority of women in these places are foreigners, mostly of Romanian or Bulgarian origin. Various networks fuel the demand through these establishments; for instance, a trafficking network in Brussels' Quartier Nord recently placed young Nigerian and Ghanaian women, including several minors, in the windows of brothels.

**The women in prostitution that isala meets though its outreach action are at the intersection of all systems of domination and all forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism and class.** These inequalities reinforce their isolation/marginalisation and limit their access to the most basic rights, including the right to dignity, housing, health and education. isala's frontline experience shows that social isolation is one of the first barriers to exit prostitution: since most of them are or have been victims of human trafficking, they are economically and many times dependant on the income from prostitution (sometimes they are also socially dependant on their network and contacts in the prostitution system). Because they depend on the system of prostitution, they cannot take the time to learn the language, get some training, look for a job, or even start the procedure to obtain a residence permit. This whole system prevents them from exiting prostitution because without housing, formal education and training, decent income and proper access to healthcare (including mental health and treatment of trauma), prostitution is their only option.

The prostituted women that isala supports share all of them a common experience: violence marked their lives. Every woman isala supports has lived at least various forms of violence:

domestic violence, sexual violence, incest, economic violence... In most of the cases, **the experience of violence was a determining factor of their entry into prostitution.**

In addition, they also share the same understanding of the experience of prostitution in itself: insults, menaces, humiliations, physical attacks... but also the fact of being confronted to non-desired sexual acts. All the women that isala supports and interviews on a weekly basis report feeling disgust, shame, dirtied, used, and objectified after the sexual act in the prostitution experience. Despite having unique life experiences, each of the women that isala supports shares the same circumstances: they have been in a situation of poverty, precariousness, violence or threats, a very traumatic event...

### **How Belgium's legislative framework and policies promote a system of sexual exploitation and violate the rights of the most vulnerable women and girls**

*"People think it's quick, easy money, but it's not true, it's very difficult.*

*I would like to have a 'normal' job."*

- A women in prostitution met by isala

**In addition to this acknowledged tolerance for the exploitation of others in prostitution, there is another reality: the absence of measures and policies aimed at the real protection of all victims of prostitution.** On March 18, 2022, the Belgian Federal Parliament adopted a reform of the Penal Code amending provisions related to sexual offences, including those related to prostitution. Previously, the Belgian Penal Code generally prohibited and penalised pimping, except for "real estate pimping," which had been exempt from sanctions since 1995. After the 2022 reform, the offence of pimping is redefined, and pimping is decriminalised in two different scenarios: "except in cases provided for by law" and in cases where there is "an abnormal economic advantage or any other abnormal advantage." By introducing two exceptional regimes to the offence of pimping, Belgium authorises the exploitation of the prostitution of others and therefore violates international human rights law ratified by the country.

**The new definition of pimping introduced by the 2022 reform and the new legal framework threaten individuals at the forefront of prostitution. These major exceptional regimes to the offence of pimping create a legal facade behind which exploiters can conceal their activities, effectively preventing any fight against pimping.**

With the new definition of pimping, some forms of it are no longer penalised, in direct contradiction to international law. They become lucrative and legal activities; some pimps profiting from the exploitation of prostitution victims now have the status of businessmen. It

is evident that the new legislation has already begun to create a pull on the prostitution "market"; for example, the frontline association isala, which supports prostituted persons in Belgium, has received several calls from "entrepreneurs" wanting to create apps facilitating the contact between sex buyers and prostituted women. On specialised websites for prostitution advertisements, ads for "massage centres" and other structures are multiplying. These ads are managed by operators and present women as commodities, even offering promotions on certain types of sexual services.

**For society, the message is dangerous but unequivocal: prostitution is now a "normal activity," a "market like any other."**

Belgian territory thus becomes conducive to the criminal profits of pimps and traffickers who invest to maximise their profits, at the expense of the most marginalised women and girls exploited in the prostitution system. It is foreseeable that the new legislation will lead to an increase in prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation, as demonstrated, notably, by the example of Germany.<sup>1</sup>

**No federal nor regional mechanism exists for the exit from prostitution and social and professional integration.** The lack of structural funding for grassroots associations such as isala and the absence of concrete and systemic solutions (reception structures, access to justice, regularisation, pathways out of prostitution and social and professional integration) from the public authorities contribute to making the situation of women and girls in prostitution and sexual exploitation in Belgium even more vulnerable.

### **Strengthening the fight against the prostitution system and providing support for prostituted women and girls: the Equality Model as the way forward**

***"The question is not why it is so difficult to get out, but above all, why it is so easy to get in."***  
**- A survivor of prostitution**

We recommend following the Equality Model adopted by countries such as Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Ireland & Northern Ireland, France, and Canada - an approach acknowledged by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls and recommended by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Germany saw a 30% increase in the number of prostituted persons following the 2002 law legalising prostitution. 95% of people in prostitution come from abroad, mainly from the poorest regions of Eastern Europe. Now considered "the brothel of Europe", it is estimated that 1.2 million men buy sex there every day.

European Parliament in its September 2023 resolution. This approach allows for advancing equality between women and men and protecting the most marginalised women

The Equality Model is a proven, integrated approach to creating a Europe where gender inequalities do not result in prostitution and where everyone has the choice not to have access to their bodies bought or sold for sex.<sup>2</sup>

Concretely, this includes:

- The repeal of all repressive measures against prostituted persons;
- The condemnation of all forms of pimping and repeal of all exceptions to procuring;
- **The creation and implementation of concrete measures (including measures targeting the clients of prostitution) to tackle the demand** that sustains and encourages all forms of sexual exploitation of people, in particular women and girls;
- **Real, ambitious and unconditional support for victims of prostitution and sexual exploitation through the creation and implementation of dedicated and adapted programmes** (including access to material, psychological and social support, housing, legal aid, medical and material assistance, employment, education and training opportunities);
- Implement policies to prevent prostitution: promote education on equality between women and men, provide information on the reality of prostitution and dismantle stereotypes from school onwards.;
- **The reinforcement and scaling up of the action of associations providing assistance to women and victims through structural and sustainable funding.**

## Conclusion

When women in prostitution confide in us and share their stories, it is frequently evident that they have encountered recurrent acts of violence since childhood. These shared experiences, stemming from family, institutions, and societal influences, all represent violations of their fundamental rights, and none of them are accidental. **Prostitution is intrinsically a system of violence and part of the continuum of male violence.**

---

<sup>2</sup> Brussels Call - <https://brusselscall.eu/>