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

Input from civil society support organizations working with issues related to the sexual exploitation of children, prostitution and human trafficking in Sweden.

*This response is a joint effort by six of Sweden´s leading non-governmental civil society organizations specialized in providing support for women and girls in all forms of prostitution including trafficking for sexual exploitation.*

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## Support, protection and care for women and girls exploited in prostitution in Sweden

In the Swedish context, support and assistance for women and girls in prostitution has been a key priority and a crucial complement to our legislative framework. As the sex purchase act clearly indicates that addressing demand and providing support are key components in combating prostitution, the Swedish state prioritizes funding efforts at the national, municipal, and civil society levels to support women and girls exploited in prostitution. All support organizations represented in this document receive financial support from either the state, local municipalities, or both. These funds are a crucial part of the government's efforts to combat prostitution.

 The Swedish Gender Equality Agency is tasked with coordinating the activities against trafficking in human beings at a national level. The National Coordination Against Prostitution and Trafficking in Human Beings (NSPM) involves developing cooperation between authorities and other actors, as well as with international actors, and assisting authorities with methodological support and capacity development. The regional coordinators for prostitution and human trafficking, employed by the social services, are responsible for coordinating the support and protection of identified victims of prostitution. They offer practical consultation and guidance both to professionals and to women and girls exploited in prostitution

Another key entity in Sweden is the municipality-run “Mika centers”, located in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Borås, Umeå and Malmö (“Evonhuset”). Mika centers offer counseling, legal support, gynecological care, etc. to victims and survivors of prostitution. The police and social services work closely together when conducting prostitution raids – social services focus on the identified victims of prostitution and facilitate the provision of support services. To further develop the nationwide support for women and girls in prostitution, the Government decided in June 2022 to appoint an inquiry on the protection, support and care of individuals subjected to abuse in the production or distribution of pornography and an inquiry on an exit program for persons exploited in prostitution.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The civil society plays a pivotal role in delivering support and assistance for women and girls in prostitution in Sweden. The organizations represented in this document provide support to individuals currently in prostitution and those who wish to exit. Our range of support services spans from easily accessible measures like anonymous online chat functions to comprehensive, long-term rehabilitation programs. For example, Novahuset and Alltid Sedd conduct outreach on online platforms where prostitution occurs and as a preventive measure to identify those at risk for prostitution in order to provide support. Ellencentret runs an anonymous online chat, and offers long-term therapy to young people with experiences of prostitution. Qjouren Väst offers specialized support for women in prostitution that also struggle with addictions. Talita offers a long-term exit program for women and girls exploited in prostitution, including trauma therapy, financial assistance, safe housing, job training, and integration measures.

 The support we civil society organizations offer has proven effective in facilitating the exit from prostitution for the majority of individuals we work with. For example, 89% of the young women in contact with Ellencentret and 95% of the women supported by Talita have successfully exited prostitution. This high success rate is attributable to the comprehensive, sustained support provided, coupled with collaborative efforts between civil society organizations and relevant authorities. We civil society organizations have developed a long term cooperation with relevant authorities, including the police, Social services, and the regional coordinators for prostitution and human trafficking.

## Profile and experiences among women and girls in prostitution

The women and girls we encounter, whether they are currently seeking support or not, have life histories marked by trauma and a range of vulnerabilities. In Sweden, a large number of those exploited in prostitution are impoverished migrant women and girls from war-torn regions or economically disadvantaged countries such as Ukraine, Romania, Nigeria and others in the Global South. Driven by the hope of securing a livelihood, these women and girls fall prey to traffickers who exploit them in prostitution.

 Our organizations also work with women and girls of Swedish origin. With few exceptions, these individuals have histories of childhood sexual abuse, typically starting between the ages of 10 to 14 years. For instance, in 2022, every girl assisted by Ellencentret reported a history of childhood sexual abuse.[[2]](#footnote-2) The correlation between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent entrance into prostitution is well-established in international research.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Many of the women and girls we work with have also been placed in community or foster care, having grown up in environments characterized by neglect and violence. Their vulnerability is further compounded by factors like poverty, addictions, and neuropsychiatric or intellectual disabilities, increasing their risk of exploitation.

Within prostitution, women and girls are further subjected to systemic and multiple forms of violence by sex buyers, pimps, and traffickers. This is reflected in the high rates of PTSD[[4]](#footnote-4) and dissociation they experience. Often, substance abuse is used as a coping mechanism. Common mental health issues we observe include self-harm, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

These realities, which span their backgrounds and the effects of prostitution, are validated by international research and recent Swedish government inquiries into prostitution and sexual exploitation[[5]](#footnote-5). A comprehensive understanding of the vulnerabilities leading to prostitution and the systemic violence experienced therein is essential to fully grasp the extent of the harm they suffer and its repercussions. Recognizing these factors is key to emphasizing the need for our comprehensive support services.

## How the sex purchase act facilitates our work

In Sweden, the recognition of prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes as a central part of men's violence against women, is an important basis for understanding it as a form of violence. The starting point of the Swedish model is that the responsibility always falls on the person who buys sex, and that what maintains prostitution is demand. Fighting the demand and being able to refer to prostitution as something linked to physical and sexual violence, facilitates both in the support aimed at the target group, but also to be able to demonstrate that it constitutes a human rights violation.

The sex purchase act has been instrumental in facilitating our support work among women and girls exploited in prostitution. Enacted as a key component of a comprehensive bill aimed at ending men's violence against women, the law is a cornerstone in Sweden's pursuit of gender equality. Its implementation, within this extensive gender equality framework, has shaped the perspectives and operational approaches of the police and social services. By holding buyers accountable and concurrently protecting victims, it enhances victims’ access to crucial care, protection and support.

 The law aids us in reaching and offering our support to women and girls in prostitution. By focusing on sex buyers, police and social workers frequently come into contact with those in need of our services, allowing for effective referrals and support.

The normative effects of the law, combined with extensive training and education within the police force, have positively altered their responses and treatment of individuals in prostitution. As a result, many women and girls we encounter are experiencing respectful and empathetic interactions with the police, often for the first time in their lives.

 Women and girls in prostitution frequently carry a heavy burden of shame and face considerable stigmatization, often being blamed for their circumstances. A crucial aspect of the healing process, as with any form of sexual violence, involves redirecting blame and shame to where they rightfully belong: with the perpetrators. In our work, the healing journey of these women and girls is significantly aided by the Swedish state's clear delineation between perpetrators and victims. This official stance helps lift the burden of “why me?” off their shoulders, validates their experiences, and supports their path to recovery.

The common understanding of prostitution as violence also streamlines our joint efforts to educate and safeguard young people, raising awareness about the risks and realities of prostitution. Additionally, the law's clear stance facilitates our collaboration with the public sector by establishing a shared recognition of the need for protection, support, and care. Finally, thanks to the law, the Swedish state allocates funding for civil society actors in providing crucial support and exit programs for women and girls exploited in prostitution.

## Improving support, assistance and care to our target group

Swedish support and survivor organizations are actively included in decision-making processes related to their target group. They are regularly invited by decision makers to participate in national and international discussions that ensure that the decisions align with the target group's needs. Moreover, the perspectives and opinions of survivors are incorporated into the preparatory stages of political decision-making. A prime example is the Swedish government's establishment of a governmental inquiry[[6]](#footnote-6) aimed at enhancing access to exit programs for adults and children exploited in prostitution and human trafficking. Organizations represented in this document, as well as survivor organizations, contributed in various capacities, such as being appointed official experts for the inquiry, participating in reference groups, or aiding the investigators and researchers in formulating culturally relevant research questions for interviews and surveys with the target group.

The report from this governmental inquiry outlines the current state of support, care, and protection for individuals exploited in prostitution and proposes concrete steps for improvement. A crucial recommendation is the extension of temporary residence permits for women and girls caught in prostitution. Exiting prostitution is a challenging and lengthy process that necessitates long-term, holistic, and individualized support. By extending the permit duration to two years, migrant women would have a better opportunity to participate in exit programs and prepare for integration either in the host country or upon returning home. Additionally, it's important that access to these exit programs is not conditional on involvement in a criminal investigation.

 Other areas for improvement are ensuring long-term funding for civil society organizations working with the target group. The inquiry also highlights the need for coordinators within each municipality that are responsible for ensuring individually-tailored, holistic support for each individual wishing to exit prostitution.

 Another recently published Swedish governmental inquiry[[7]](#footnote-7) has also proposed broadening the scope of the Sex Purchase Act and procurement laws to include digital prostitution occurring on online platforms. Considering the increasingly digital nature of the sex industry, this expansion is a crucial step. It ensures that every victim, irrespective of where the prostitution occurs, is recognized and treated as a crime victim, entitled to protection, support, and care.

1. The inquiry (SOU 2023:97 *Ut ur utsatthet)* was tasked to submit proposals for the design and coordination of an exit programme for adult victims of prostitution, human trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation, and a suitable actor to manage such a programme. In addition, they assessed the extent to which Sweden is fulfilling its international commitments on the identification, protection, support and return of victims of human trafficking and propose measures to improve this where necessary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ​​Stiftelsen 1000 Möjligheter (2023). *Ellenrapporten – Tjejer utsatta för prostitution och annan*

*sexuell exploatering.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See e.g., Averdijk, M., Ribeaud, D., & Eisner, M. (2020). Longitudinal Risk Factors of Selling and Buying Sexual Services Among Youths in Switzerland. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *4*(49), 1279–1290. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01571-3>; Krisch, M., Averdijk, M., Valdebenito, S., & Eisner, M. (2019). Sex Trade Among Youth: A Global Review of the Prevalence, Contexts and Correlates of Transactional Sex Among the General Population of Youth. *Adolescent Research Review*, *4*(2), 115–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-019-00107-z>; Farley, M., Cotten, A., Lynne, J., Zumbeck, S., Spiwak, F., Reyes, M. E., Alvarez, D., & Sezgin, U. (2003). Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An update on Violence and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Trauma Practice*, *2*(3/4), 33–74. <https://doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03>, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Of the girls and young women that Ellencentret meet ca 72% suffer from PTSD - Stiftelsen 1000 Möjligheter (2023). *Ellenrapporten – Tjejer utsatta för prostitution och annan*

*sexuell exploatering..*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. SOU 2023:97 *Ut ur utsatthet*; SOU 2023:80 *Sexuellt utnyttjande i pornografiska syften*

*- våldsutsatthet som behöver synliggöras*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. SOU 2023:97 *Ut ur utsatthet* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. SOU 2023:80 *Ett starkare straffrättsligt skydd*

*– mot sexuella kränkningar, bedrägerier i vissa fall och brott med hatmotiv avseende kön* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)