



**european  
sex workers  
rights  
alliance**

## **REPORT on women's poverty in Europe ([2021/2170\(INI\)](#))**

Dear distinguished Member of the European Parliament,

On July 5, the European Parliament Plenary will vote on the [Report](#) on Women's poverty in Europe.

While we support the general aim and intent of the resolution, we call upon you to vote against the words 'as well as prostitution' in para 26 and vote against para 29:

*26. Notes that the worsening social and economic situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has increased all forms of abuse and violence towards women, as well as prostitution, in violation of their human rights; underlines the need to increase public, financial and human resources in order to support groups at risk of poverty and tackle situations posing a risk to children and young people, the elderly, people with disabilities and the homeless;*

*29. Considers prostitution to be a serious form of violence and exploitation affecting mostly women and children; calls on the Member States to take specific action to combat the economic, social and cultural causes of prostitution so that women in a situation of poverty and social exclusion do not fall victim to such exploitation; calls on the Member States to take specific action to help prostitutes with their social and professional reintegration;*

**Justification:** The paragraphs **conflate all sex work with violence against women and exploitation**. This wording fails to recognise the reasons that people are engaged in sex work and the support services they need, and is instead frequently used as justification for criminalisation.

Overwhelmingly, people enter sex work as a result of **financial hardship**. ESWA and our member organisations have documented how the COVID-19 pandemic has [exacerbated financial struggles](#), pushing more people into the sex industry and [increasing their marginalisation](#).

The criminalisation of sex work has meant that sex workers have been **routinely excluded from the crucial support and social protection** offered to other workers. **Criminalisation of sex work does not decrease the number of sex workers nor does it protect women who sell sex.**

Policies need to uphold and protect the human rights of women, increase their options and opportunities and affirm their right to self-determination. **They should not restrict, repress, or**

**ESWA**

**admin@eswalliance.org | <http://www.eswalliance.org/>**

**criminalise the limited options women in poverty have.**

In practical terms, the policies criminalising purchase of sex and all third parties exacerbate vulnerabilities of sex workers in following terms:

- sex workers **working together are routinely [criminalised](#) by authorities** for illegal brothel-keeping; consequently, sex workers themselves are punished for prostitution related criminal offences, despite the important role working together plays in keeping sex workers safe
- sex workers are pushed to **operate in more isolated and dangerous environments**
- prostitution laws are disproportionately enforced in the spaces occupied by sex workers: their homes, neighbourhoods, working establishments and other workspaces. As a result, **sex workers, not clients, incur the majority of profiling, surveillance and policing under these measures**, not only while working but also in their day-to-day lives.
- sex workers who do not agree with the narrative of prostitution as violence against women **risk losing custody of their children**
- migrant sex workers **risk losing their residence permit** if they are identified as sex workers
- as a result of excessive enforcement of pimping laws, **landlords can be criminalised and sex workers face evictions from their homes and risk homelessness**
- societal stigma and the notion of what is appropriate behaviour for women, together with the above mentioned risks, **drives structural violence, discrimination and has far reaching consequences of sex workers access to justice, access to health services, access to housing**
- Additionally, in delineating the scope of application of the Istanbul Convention GREVIO, the monitoring body of the Council of Europe's **Istanbul Convention** noted that the convention as such **does not define prostitution as a form of violence against women** ([see para 6 of the Report](#)).
- UN agencies, including [UNDP](#), UNFPA, [UNAIDS](#) and the [World Health Organisation](#) documented that in the context of consensual adult sex and sex work, **criminal laws actually cause harm, especially for already marginalised groups.**
- Policies criminalising the purchase of sex introduced in numerous European countries have **proven ineffective, impeding sex workers' agency, wellbeing, safety, access to services and justice**. Research by academics and NGOs such as Amnesty International and Medecins du Monde from [France](#), [Ireland](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Sweden](#) or [Norway](#) point out how such policies fail to protect people selling sex.

Poverty and economic exclusion are not new issues for sex working communities. We strongly oppose criminalisation, which outlaws one group of women's capacity for consent and further restricts the already limited options that women in poverty have. Instead, states should be

responsible for increasing options and opportunities for women selling sex, which is only possible through meaningful inclusion and consultation with sex working communities.

Kind regards

Sabrina Sanchez

Coordinator, European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance

**The European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA)** – previously the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) - is a sex worker-led network representing 100+ organisations in 30 countries in Western, Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia. Our aim is to ensure that all sex worker voices are heard, and that their human, health and labour rights are recognised and protected.