



Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030

European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) contribution to advance Gender Equality beyond 2025

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Introduction

The European Sex Workers Rights Alliance (ESWA) is a network of sex workers' organisations representing over 111 groups in 30 countries across Europe and Central Asia.

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Over 50% of ESWA's member organisations are led by sex workers. The ESWA board and the majority of its staff are sex workers from a variety of backgrounds and with a range of experiences. ESWA aims to ensure that the voices of all sex workers are heard, and that their human, health and labour rights are recognised and protected.

Sex work is a multi-gendered phenomenon, and sex workers of all genders and sexual orientations offer sexual services and many are actively involved in the sex workers' rights movement.

Cisgender women make up the majority of sex workers globally, including in Europe, for a variety of reasons. Some might decide to work in the sex industry because it allows for more flexible working hours and gives them greater control over their working conditions than other jobs, which are often important factors for mothers or women with caring responsibilities whose needs are not met in the mainstream labour market. Others find it more financially rewarding than low-paid, female-dominated professions. For many—especially undocumented migrants, minority women, trans women, and women with disabilities—sex work may be one of very few viable income options. With low entry barriers and skills often learned outside formal education, it offers accessibility that other sectors do not.

Sex work is deeply linked to female poverty and structural inequality in the labour market. Economic crises and austerity measures in Europe have led more women to enter sex work, often coming from undervalued professions like teaching, caregiving, or domestic work. Austerity disproportionately harms women—especially women of colour, disabled women, single mothers and trans women—amplifying existing inequalities. These conditions reflect broader systemic failures that the current Gender Equality Strategy must address more directly.

The *Equinox* report on the 2021–2025 Gender Equality Strategy highlights key concerns about the EU's current approach—particularly its failure to meaningfully engage with **intersections of gender, race, class, migration status, and structural discrimination**. It criticises a narrow, individualistic framing of gender equality that overlooks **the lived realities of marginalised communities**, including racialised women, migrants, and sex workers. Without an intersectional, anti-racist lens, policies risk reinforcing rather than dismantling existing power hierarchies. The report calls for **redistributive and transformative justice**, rooted in the lived experiences of those most affected by inequality.

Sex work intersects with multiple social justice issues affecting women, including the gender pay gap, access to social benefits and childcare, educational exclusion, minority rights, migration, and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. These intersections clearly demonstrate why the **new Gender Equality Strategy must be inclusive of sex workers—recognising their lived realities, addressing the structural inequalities they face, and ensuring that gender equality policies do not leave them behind.**

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Terminology Note

The EU Directive on combating violence against women uses the term **“women in prostitution”**, which many human rights, health, and sex worker-led organisations—including ESWA—strongly contest. This language is stigmatising, implies moral judgement, and strips individuals of agency.

According to the 2024 UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines, sex work refers to the consensual exchange of sexual services between adults for money or goods. This definition distinguishes sex work from trafficking and coercion, centring consent, autonomy, and agency. UNAIDS and the Global Commission on HIV and the Law explicitly discourage the use of terms such as “prostitution”, “prostitute”, or “prostituted women”, which are associated with deviancy, criminality, and victimhood.

A growing number of international and regional bodies—including WHO, ILO, UNFPA, UNDP, the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Council of Europe institutions—support the term sex worker, in line with rights-based and non-stigmatising language that reflects the self-identification of the community.

The Growing Recognition of Sex Workers’ Rights by international human rights bodies

Sex workers have long been left behind in gender equality and human rights policymaking. However, there is a growing recognition by international and regional human rights bodies that sex workers face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination—including on the basis of gender, class, race, migration status, and sexuality—and that their rights must be meaningfully addressed in equality frameworks.

The **UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls** (WGDAWG), in its 2024 report to the Human Rights Council, explicitly highlighted that laws criminalising or marginalising sex work exacerbate stigma and violence, hinder access to justice and healthcare, and reinforce gender-based discrimination (UN HRC, [A/HRC/WG.11/39/1](#), 2024). The Working Group called on governments to adopt policies grounded in gender equality, harm reduction, and human rights. Likewise, the **UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health**, the **Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (IE SOGI)**, and WGDAWG jointly published a comprehensive *Guide on the Human Rights of Sex Workers* in 2024. This document calls for the full inclusion of sex workers in all areas of policy that affect their lives, recognising them as agents of change and human rights defenders, and addressing the widespread stigma and social exclusion they face ([OHCHR, 2024](#)).

At the regional level, the **Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights** has strongly advocated for the protection of sex workers' human rights, underlining that governments must ensure that sex workers are not excluded from social services, public health systems, or policy discussions because of moral judgment or stigma. In her 2024 statement, the

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Commissioner emphasised the urgent need to address the human rights violations that sex workers face—violations rooted in gender inequality, social exclusion, and intersecting forms of discrimination ([CoE Commissioner, 2024](#)).

While the **European Commission does not hold direct competence over national sex work legislation**, it plays a crucial role in setting the tone and priorities for human rights and gender equality across the EU. Recognition of sex workers' rights and inclusion of their voices in the **EU Gender Equality Strategy** would be an important step in aligning EU policies with international human rights standards and fulfilling the EU's own commitments to intersectionality and non-discrimination. Failing to name sex workers as a group vulnerable to gender-based violence and systemic exclusion undermines the Strategy's reach and credibility.

Freedom from Gender-based violence

The new EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence rightly recognises **women sex workers** (framed as women in prostitution) **as a group at heightened risk of violence against women (VAW)** in its recitals. This important recognition must be reflected in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030 through a clearer and more explicit articulation of sex workers' experiences as victims of gender-based violence. Such violence is not incidental but systemic- stemming directly from stigma, harmful stereotypes about acceptable female sexual behaviour, and punitive societal expectations. These forces not only enable interpersonal violence against sex workers but also manifest as institutional violence, including discrimination and abuse by law enforcement and denial of access to justice and support services.

Sex workers face heightened and often overlooked exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, physical assault, extortion, and harassment. Research shows that instead of receiving protection, sex workers are frequently targeted by violence not only from clients but also from police and other state actors. The ESWAs' [“Exposed from All Sides” the role of policing in access to justice \(2024\) feminist participatory action research](#) report documents how criminalisation, police surveillance, and punitive legal frameworks foster a climate of fear and mistrust, deterring sex workers from seeking protection or justice.

At the core of this systemic violence lies **stigma and deeply rooted societal expectations about women's sexual behaviour**. Women are still judged by patriarchal standards of sexual respectability, and sex workers are routinely dehumanised and deemed less worthy of protection because they fall outside these norms. **Whorephobia**—the fear and hatred of those who sell or are perceived to sell sex—drives much of the discrimination and institutional violence sex workers face. This stigma leads to victim-blaming when they experience violence, disbelief by authorities, and exclusion from gender-based violence services.

These harms are compounded for sex workers who are also trans women, migrants, women of colour, or undocumented, whose overlapping identities expose them to additional layers of violence and exclusion. Rather than ensuring their safety, current policing and legal frameworks often increase harm and perpetuate impunity for

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perpetrators. **Combatting GBV in a meaningful way requires confronting the systemic stigma and discrimination that fuel it.**

A key barrier in addressing gender-based violence against sex workers is the widespread **mistrust of police and formal institutions**, rooted in long-standing experiences of criminalisation, discrimination, and abuse. As documented in *“Exposed from All Sides”*, many sex workers avoid reporting violence due to fear of arrest, deportation, humiliation, or being dismissed by authorities. This fear is not unfounded—**law enforcement actors across Europe have repeatedly been shown to hold and act upon misogynistic, transphobic, and anti-migrant attitudes**, particularly toward those at the intersections of multiple marginalised identities. Such prejudice not only results in outright abuse or neglect but also contributes to a broader institutional culture of impunity and exclusion.

In this context, **community-led and sex worker-led organisations** play a crucial role in bridging the gap between sex workers and justice systems they cannot trust. These groups are often the only safe and accessible point of contact for sex workers experiencing violence. They provide peer support, legal information, safety resources, and referrals, and they are uniquely trusted by their communities due to shared lived experience. They also play a critical role in documenting rights violations, advocating for systemic change, and accompanying survivors through legal or support processes when institutions fail to do so safely.

It is also essential that the model of **transformative justice** seeks to repair harm, address the underlying conditions and root causes that perpetuate harm and injustice, and avoid creating new cycles of oppression. This does not mean that there are no consequences or accountability for those responsible for harming others. It is an alternative framework that addresses harm, discrimination, and violence by centring the voices and needs of affected communities, particularly those most vulnerable to systemic injustice.

Despite their proven effectiveness, community-led initiatives remain chronically underfunded and structurally excluded from formal decision-making spaces. The EU Gender Equality Strategy must recognise and invest in these interventions as essential frontline responses to gender-based violence, particularly where state institutions perpetuate the very harms they are meant to prevent.

ESWA supports revisiting the EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (VAW Directive) to include a **consent-based definition of rape as a Eurocrime**. This would also help harmonise protections, align national laws with the Istanbul Convention, and strengthen access to justice for all survivors of sexual violence.

For sex workers, consent means agreed-upon terms and conditions under which sexual services are provided. If these are violated—such as through coercion, threats, or refusal to use protection—it is not consent. Sex workers must have the legal and social recognition to report such violations and access non-judgmental support and justice. The ability to refuse clients or certain acts, and to define boundaries, is central to their safety and dignity.

Denying sex workers the legal and moral capacity to consent also strips them of the power to refuse consent. When the law frames all sex work as violence, it obscures actual acts of violence and contributes to systemic failures—such as police refusing to recognise

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the rape of a sex worker, on the basis that “rape is their job.” As one survivor recounted: *“The police told me I could not be raped, as rape is my work.”*

Consenting to sex—or selling sex—does not mean consenting to violence. While structural factors like poverty, discrimination, and gender inequality may shape a person’s entry into sex work, these do not eliminate their capacity to make autonomous choices. Suggesting otherwise undermines sex workers’ human rights and dignity, and legitimises paternalistic state control over their bodies and lives.

Recommendations:

- **Mainstream the transformative justice as** an alternative framework that addresses harm, discrimination and violence in a way that centres the voices and needs of affected communities, particularly those most vulnerable to systemic injustice.
- **Revisit the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence** in order to update it, in line with the review obligation under Article 45(2) of the Directive, and consider introducing a consent-based definition of rape and sexual violence in the Directive.
- **Provide concrete guidance to Member States** to address GBV against sex workers throughout the transposition of the VAW Directive, with an intersectional lens that recognises the compounded vulnerabilities faced by trans women, undocumented migrants, racialised women, women with disabilities, and others marginalised in society.
- **Address the root causes of violence**, including stigma, harmful gender stereotypes about women’s sexuality, and **whorephobia**, which underpin much of the violence sex workers face and are often reproduced by public institutions.
- **Recognise and combat institutional violence** by:
 - Requiring Member States to train law enforcement, prosecutors, and judicial actors on respectful and rights-based engagement with sex workers;
 - Support establishing clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms for police misconduct, especially where it intersects with misogyny, transphobia, racism, and xenophobia;
 - Promoting *firewalls* between public services and immigration enforcement, ensuring that sex workers and migrants—regardless of residence status—can safely report violence, seek help, and access justice without fear of deportation or criminalisation.
- **Through EU funding schemes invest in and formally support community-led and sex worker-led organisations** that bridge the gap between sex workers and justice systems. These organisations must be recognised as essential partners in delivering services, providing legal and psychosocial support, and monitoring violence.

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- **Mandate the collection of disaggregated data** on violence against sex workers (including by gender identity, migration status, and ethnicity), with strong safeguards for anonymity, data protection, and informed consent.
- **Ensure the meaningful participation of sex worker-led and other community-based organisations** in the implementation, evaluation, and future development of the Gender Equality Strategy and all EU initiatives to combat GBV.
- In line with *Equinox*'s call for a structural and redistributive approach to gender justice, **embed anti-racism, migrant justice, and socio-economic equity frameworks** into the EU's GBV policies. Recognise that violence against sex workers does not occur in a vacuum but is sustained by broader systems of inequality and exclusion.

The highest standards of health

This analysis is grounded in the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA)'s report [*"Two Pairs of Gloves" Sex Workers, Stigma and Discrimination in Health Settings*](#) (2023), which documents how stigma is a fundamental barrier to sex workers' right to health across Europe and Central Asia. The report finds that sex workers, especially those who are trans, migrants, undocumented, or living with HIV, routinely experience humiliation, refusal of care, and breaches of confidentiality in healthcare settings. Nowhere is this more damaging than in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)—where services must be accessible, non-judgmental, and rights-based.

Stigma lies at the heart of systemic health inequalities experienced by sex workers. Health professionals often operate with moralistic or pathologising views of sex work, which leads to substandard or punitive care. This includes being denied contraception, abortion, or gender-affirming treatment, subjected to unnecessary disclosure of sex work status, or threatened with reporting to the police, immigration authorities, or social services. These violations are not isolated incidents but stem from deep structural discrimination embedded in laws, health systems, and societal attitudes.

This is in direct contradiction with international public health standards. **WHO and UNAIDS recognise sex workers as a key population, disproportionately affected by health inequities and requiring targeted, stigma-free, and community-led health interventions.** Their guidance emphasises that public health strategies must meaningfully include sex workers in the design, implementation, and monitoring of health services, and that eliminating stigma is central to improving health outcomes and access.

Yet across the EU, sex workers remain largely excluded from national health strategies, and sex worker-led organisations—despite their frontline role in service delivery—receive little to no institutional support. This exclusion is particularly acute in SRHR policy spaces, where sex workers' specific needs are rarely addressed.

The European Commission plays a vital role by issuing guidance, setting EU-level standards, supporting research, and funding programmes that advance equity. It is therefore essential that the Commission's health and gender equality frameworks

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recognise stigma as a structural barrier and prioritise community-led, rights-based responses that are inclusive of sex workers.

Recommendations:

1. **Explicitly recognise stigma and discrimination as key structural barriers to health**, and ensure that the Gender Equality Strategy addresses the specific impact of stigma on sex workers' access to SRHR services.
2. **Align with WHO and UNAIDS guidance** by recognising sex workers as a key population in EU health and gender equality frameworks, and promote targeted, stigma-free, and community-led responses.
3. **Provide guidance to Member States** on ensuring non-discriminatory access to SRHR for sex workers, including safe abortion, contraception, HIV/STI services, pregnancy care, and gender-affirming treatment.
4. **Fund sex worker-led and community-based health initiatives** through EU health and equality programmes, ensuring that those most affected by stigma are leading the response to it.
5. **Promote comprehensive training** for healthcare providers on stigma reduction, patients' rights, and respectful SRHR care, co-developed and delivered with sex worker-led organisations.
6. **Encourage the development of national anti-stigma strategies** in health settings, with monitoring mechanisms and participation of key populations, including sex workers.
7. **Support the creation of firewalls** between health systems and law enforcement or immigration authorities, so that migrants and sex workers can access services safely, regardless of legal or residence status.
8. **Mandate the collection of disaggregated, anonymised data** on sex workers' health outcomes and experiences with healthcare, with full respect for data protection and consent.
9. **Ensure meaningful participation of sex worker-led organisations** in all EU policy processes related to health and SRHR—including consultation mechanisms, funding decisions, and programme evaluations.
10. **Prioritise long-term, flexible funding for community-led initiatives** that directly address stigma and deliver culturally competent, rights-based healthcare to sex workers and other marginalised groups.

Equal pay and economic empowerment

While the European Commission does not have a mandate to regulate sex work directly, the **Gender Equality Strategy must nonetheless acknowledge the interconnectedness**

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between economic inequality, labour market discrimination, and sex work. Many people—especially cisgender women, trans people, racialised and migrant individuals, and those with precarious legal status—enter sex work due to economic necessity and exclusion from formal employment. As the [ICRSE Intersectional Activism Toolkit](#) (2018) and broader feminist research show, sex work is often one of the few viable options available to people who are systematically denied access to stable, safe, and well-paid work.

Austerity politics, wage gaps, and systemic discrimination in the labour market have disproportionately affected marginalised communities. Migrant women, trans women, and racialised people often experience multiple forms of exclusion—ranging from language barriers and non-recognition of qualifications to racism, xenophobia, and gender identity-based discrimination—that make access to the formal labour market difficult or impossible. **As a result, many turn to sex work for financial survival, flexibility, and autonomy in contexts where mainstream jobs are low-paid, informal, or inaccessible.**

The Gender Equality Strategy must therefore integrate an intersectional and economic justice approach—recognising that economic empowerment is not achievable for all women unless structural labour market barriers are addressed, and acknowledging that sex workers are part of the broader picture of gendered economic inequality.

Digital Labour and Online Sex Work: Platform Workers' Rights Must Include All Workers

In recent years, many sex workers have shifted their work to online spaces—creating and selling intimate content, webcamming, or offering services through digital platforms. For many, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, **online sex work emerged as a safer and more flexible income source**, particularly for those unable to access in-person work due to legal, health, or social constraints.

However, these workers are still subjected to intense stigma, censorship, discrimination by payment processors, and general-purpose platforms. They must be seen as **gendered, emerging forms of precarised labour**. Debates about online sex work are often shaped by moral panic rather than labour rights—leaving online sex workers in a legal grey zone with little to no protection. Crucially, **these workers are not recognised or protected under current interpretations of platform labour regulations.**

The **Platform Work Directive**, now in force, seeks to improve working conditions by ensuring correct employment status, transparency, and accountability in platform work. However, the definition of digital labour platforms remains narrow, explicitly excluding sex workers and online adult content creators. Platforms used by these workers are classified as merely facilitating services—such as advertising or connecting providers with clients—rather than organising work. As a result, they are not subject to the obligations placed on labour platforms, including crucial safeguards like algorithmic accountability, transparency, and worker protections. This exclusion overlooks the significant control these platforms exert over sex workers' conditions, pricing, and safety, leaving them unprotected under the Directive. The European Commission should recognise that sex workers working online face intersectional discrimination and algorithmic control that demand transparency, accountability, and safety measures within platform governance.

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frameworks. (See ESWA report [Conditions, Control and Consent: Exploring the impact of platformisation of sex work](#), 2023)

Recent research from the [Fairwork Platform Sex Work Report 2025](#) further underscores the urgency of addressing labour injustices in this sector. Most platforms in the study **fail to meet even the minimum threshold of fair work standards**, such as fair pay, job security, safety, and grievance mechanisms. Among the core issues identified are:

- **Algorithmic opacity and discrimination**, including "shadowbanning" and content visibility suppression, which disproportionately affect racialised, trans, and disabled sex workers;
- **Arbitrary content takedowns and sudden account suspensions**, with little to no transparency or possibility for appeal;
- **Exclusion from basic labour rights**, as many platforms categorise workers as "creators" or "freelancers" to avoid employer responsibilities;
- **Reinforced stigma and moral regulation**, where platform policies mirror broader social biases, policing what is deemed "acceptable" sexual expression;
- **High exposure to digital abuse**, including image-based abuse (such as non-consensual sharing of intimate content), doxxing, stalking, and targeted harassment. The report notes that digital sex workers are particularly vulnerable due to the public and intimate nature of their work, coupled with the lack of platform safeguards and inadequate law enforcement responses.

"Platform-based sex workers remain among the most precarious and unprotected digital workers. Their exclusion is not incidental—it is the product of persistent stigma and regulatory neglect." Fairwork, 2025, p. 4

These risks are heightened by the fact that digital sex workers often have no alternative platforms or institutional protections, creating **a dependency on companies that exercise near-total control over their livelihoods**. Moreover, workers report deep mistrust of institutions and law enforcement, further isolating them from access to redress.

The **Digital Services Act (DSA)** introduces new standards of transparency and accountability for platforms operating in the EU. It provides important tools that can be leveraged to address some of the abuses and harms faced by online sex workers, particularly in relation to **arbitrary moderation, lack of appeal mechanisms, and systemic discrimination** in content governance.

ESWA urges the European Commission to **not ignore gendered, emerging forms of precarised labour**, such as adult and erotic content creation. Platform-based sex workers, particularly women, trans, and non-binary people, are increasingly affected by moralising political initiatives and systemic misogyny that target the digital ecosystems in which they work. In some countries, [such as Sweden](#), new legislative efforts and enforcement measures target consumers of erotic content, which effectively undermines the viability of these platforms. This results in significant loss of income and options for adult and erotic content creators and platform-based sex workers, who are then forced to **rely on**

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unregulated intermediaries or migrate to less safe, less transparent digital platforms where exploitative practices are more common. These actions do not enhance safety or dignity—they **expose workers to greater risks of economic instability, abuse, and exploitation**. The Commission must clearly acknowledge that **platform-based sex work is a form of labour** and ensure that both the **Platform Work Directive** and the **Digital Services Act (DSA)** are implemented in ways that protect all workers, including those engaged in stigmatised but lawful work.

Recommendations:

1. **Acknowledge the link between gendered economic inequality, labour market exclusion, and entry into sex work**—particularly among migrant, trans, racialised, and undocumented women and gender-diverse people.
2. **Promote policies that reduce economic precarity**, including investment in inclusive labour markets, language and credential recognition for migrants, and anti-discrimination enforcement in employment.
3. **Through the CERV Funding Programme fund intersectional research and community-led initiatives** that explore the impact of wage inequality and labour market discrimination on sex workers' lives, and support their socio-economic rights.
4. **Ensure that the implementation of the Platform Work Directive explicitly includes digital forms of sex work**, and protects them from algorithmic discrimination, unfair content moderation, employment misclassification, and technology-facilitated violence such as doxxing or image-based abuse.
5. **Ensure that the implementation of the Platform Work Directive and the Digital Services Act (DSA)** explicitly includes and protects adult and erotic content creators, recognising them as workers entitled to labour rights, digital safety, and social protections. The Commission should issue research and provide guidance to member states, discouraging them from adopting moralising or punitive measures—such as targeting consumers of erotic content or banning erotic platforms entirely—that leads to deplatforming of adult content creators and forcing them to rely on intermediaries and unsafe, unregulated platforms.

Political participation and equal representation

Sex workers across Europe face profound barriers to political participation and representation, grounded in entrenched stigma, legal discrimination, and rising political hostility. In recent years, a regressive political climate—shaped by the influence of far-right ideologies, trans-exclusionary feminist narratives, and rising anti-gender movements—has increasingly undermined women's rights and gender equality. The European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights' "Next Wave Report" (2025) warns of the coordinated rise of ultra-conservative actors across Europe, whose campaigns target sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ communities, and feminists. Though less often acknowledged, **sex workers are also seen as part of this ideological “crusade”**, portrayed

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as a threat to traditional family values and exploited as symbolic targets in moral panic campaigns.

This regressive approach is also mirrored in international discourse. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, in her recent report, **controversially adopted a “sex-based” framing of violence**, which undermines decades of intersectional, inclusive feminist advocacy and erases the realities of trans and sex working communities ([Joint Statement, 2025](#)). Such language aligns, whether intentionally or not, with the positions of anti-rights actors like the European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ), whose 2025 report “*Prostitution: A New Right for Women?*” rejects the legitimacy of sex workers’ voices, rights, and identities and dehumanises sex workers right defenders ([ECLJ, 2025](#)). Rather than recognising sex workers as rights-holders, such narratives cast them as either threats to the social order or helpless victims needing rescue—excluding them from meaningful participation.

Sex workers’ exclusion is not only ideological but structural. **Gender-critical feminists**, who frequently oppose the recognition of trans rights, often **align with ultra-conservative organisations in their anti-sex work stance**. This unlikely alliance reinforces the institutional ambiguity around sex workers’ rights, deepening discrimination in EU institutions, national policies, and civil society spaces.

In 2021, ESWA received an evaluation report for its CERV Operating Grant application (proposal number 101051251), which informed us of the proposal's rejection. The basis for this rejection is deeply concerning and included statements such as: **“The main risk remains that of including sex workers in the project activities and their inclusion in policy making.”** This rationale starkly contradicts the core principles of the CERV programme, which are rooted in non-discrimination, inclusion, and support for civil society. It illustrates how sex workers are systematically marginalised and denied recognition as human rights defenders—excluded not for a lack of capacity or relevance, but because of who they are.

This undermines the principles of participatory democracy. As [Front Line Defenders](#) (2021) highlights, **sex worker human rights defenders must be recognised as women human rights defenders**, entitled to protection, funding, and inclusion in policy spaces (FLD Report, 2021). Instead, they are silenced and disqualified from shaping debates about their lives.

This strategy of erasure is also evident in institutional texts. The **2023 Prostitution Resolution** by the European Parliament adopts a deeply exclusionary stance. It states that while some people refer to themselves as “sex workers”, they are a *minority in prostitution*, “*well-organised and publicly visible*”. This wording **delegitimises sex worker organisations by falsely implying they do not represent the community**, even though groups like ESWA represent over 110 member organisations, reaching an estimated 150,000 people annually across Europe. By that logic, no trade union would be seen as legitimate, since none represent a majority of all workers in any sector.

Sex workers also face direct institutional discrimination when engaging in advocacy across Europe. Their political voices are dismissed, their organisations excluded, and their identities weaponised against them. Notable examples include:

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- **Sweden:** Red Umbrella Sweden, a sex worker-led organisation, was systematically excluded from policy consultations and barred from cooperating with state-funded health providers. Flyers were rejected solely due to their advocacy for sex workers' rights. One member was **publicly outed by police during a raid**, despite not being charged with any crime. Her name, photo, and address were published in the media, leading to job loss and social exclusion. This forced visibility functions as a **state-enabled punishment mechanism**—intended to deter sex workers from political engagement.
- **Germany:** A sex worker human rights defender faced a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) case, exemplifying how legal systems can be misused to intimidate and silence sex worker activists.
- **France:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government refused to provide emergency aid to sex workers, citing concerns it would benefit "pimps." Despite being registered taxpayers, sex workers were denied support, revealing how **stigma and stereotypes are used to justify exclusion from life-saving measures**.

These examples highlight how sex workers are **deliberately excluded from democratic participation**—denied the right to unionise, silenced through litigation, and punished for visibility. Public identification as a sex worker can result in **loss of employment, public shaming, or legal threats**, creating a hostile environment where advocacy is not only discouraged but actively penalised. As one sex worker from Sweden described:

"They explained to me what prostitution is, as if I hadn't lived it. As if I wasn't qualified to speak about it."

Online Political Participation and Digital Discrimination

Sex workers face profound barriers to political participation in digital spaces—barriers that are systemic, algorithmic, and discriminatory. The internet has become a vital arena for advocacy, organising, and access to information, especially for communities historically excluded from traditional policymaking spaces. Yet for sex workers, particularly those who are racialised, trans, or migrant, online platforms are increasingly hostile and exclusionary.

Sex workers and sex worker-led organisations are disproportionately targeted by **algorithmic discrimination** and **content moderation systems** that treat any mention of sex work as inherently harmful, exploitative, or violative of platform policies—even when shared in the context of harm reduction, advocacy, or labour rights. The 2022 ESWA report [*The Impact of Online Censorship and Digital Discrimination on Sex Workers*](#) documented how platform censorship has become a key tool of digital exclusion, preventing sex workers from engaging in public discourse and exercising fundamental rights such as:

- **Freedom of expression**, including the ability to speak about their experiences and challenge harmful laws and stereotypes;
- **Freedom of assembly**, including the organisation of community actions and awareness campaigns;
- **Right to access information**, especially about health, safety, and legal rights;

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- **Freedom of association and unionisation**, including the visibility of sex worker-led organisations and their ability to grow, coordinate, and advocate.

This pattern of erasure has intensified. The ESWA 2025 [Report Sex Workers Belong On Social Media: Recommendations for Platform Accountability](#) highlights that automated systems routinely flag and suppress posts by sex workers or allies, often with no human review or opportunity for appeal. Racialised and gender-diverse sex workers are especially targeted, as their bodies and expressions are more likely to be misclassified as “explicit” or “dangerous” under opaque, biased moderation criteria.

“These algorithmic systems are not neutral—they reproduce the very biases that marginalise sex workers offline.” ESWA, 2025

Case Study: The Suspension of ESWA’s Instagram Account

One clear example of this systemic discrimination occurred on **1 June 2025**, just **one day before ESWA’s biggest coordinated action** commemorating the 50th anniversary of **International Sex Workers’ Rights Day**.

To honour the historic church occupation in Lyon on 2 June 1975—where sex workers protested police violence and demanded dignity and labour rights—ESWA coordinated a Europe-wide mobilisation. Sex worker-led groups across 30 countries organised symbolic reclaiming of public and religious spaces, live-streamed events, and released advocacy materials across social media.

Yet on the eve of the action, **ESWA’s main Instagram account—with over 10,000 followers—was suddenly suspended without warning or explanation**. All prepared content, live streams, and outreach were rendered invisible. Member organisations reported similar experiences, suggesting a **coordinated mass-reporting campaign likely exploited platform moderation systems** to silence the mobilisation.

This action amounted to a **digital erasure of sex workers’ political agency** and a violation of their fundamental rights. It blocked:

- **Collective expression** on a globally recognised day of protest;
- **Public education and visibility**, including awareness campaigns and harm reduction information;
- **Democratic participation**, by excluding sex workers from online spaces where civil society increasingly operates.

By silencing the voices of over 120 sex worker-led organisations across 30 countries, this takedown demonstrates the precarity of online organising for criminalised and stigmatised communities—and the need for structural accountability. These acts are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader trend in which sex worker voices are algorithmically excluded from the digital public sphere.

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Recommendations:

1. Recognise Sex Worker Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) as Women's Rights and Human Rights Defenders. Ensure that sex workers, particularly those leading advocacy and organising efforts, are explicitly recognised as human rights defenders in EU policies and funding frameworks. This includes the full inclusion of sex worker-led organisations in civil society consultations, equal access to EU programmes (such as CERV), and protection from institutional discrimination and retaliation. Recognition should be aligned with the *Front Line Defenders* (2021) standards for WHRDs and the EU Guidelines on HRDs.

2. Ensure Equitable Enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Strengthen enforcement of the DSA to prevent algorithmic discrimination against marginalised groups, including sex workers, trans people, and racialised communities. Content moderation systems must be transparent, accountable, and subject to human rights impact assessments. Implement independent oversight mechanisms and ensure that content moderation practices do not disproportionately silence advocacy, unionisation, and public health communication by stigmatised groups.

3. Establish Safeguards to Prevent Discrimination in EU Funding Evaluations
The European Commission must implement robust safeguards to ensure that funding evaluation processes—particularly within programmes like CERV—are free from bias and discrimination. This includes:

- Adopting **clear, rights-based evaluation criteria** aligned with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and anti-discrimination principles.
- Ensuring the **diversity and impartiality** of evaluation panels, especially in areas affected by polarising socio-political debates (e.g. sex workers' rights, trans rights, pornography).
- Introducing **transparency and accountability mechanisms** in cases where applicants are rejected based on the inclusion of stigmatised or marginalised groups.

In light of the deep divisions even within feminist movements on issues such as sex work and gender identity, evaluators must be selected with attention to their independence, rights-based expertise, and awareness of intersectional discrimination. Marginalised communities should never be treated as “risks” to participation or policy-making.

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