

## **ESWA's response to the European Parliament's Resolution on the Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2026-2030**

21 November, 2025

Last week, the European Parliament voted on the report that will shape the next Gender Equality Strategy. The report acknowledges that sex workers face specific human rights violations, including social exclusion and discrimination. This recognition is an important starting place, but the report fails to accurately address these structural inequalities. Crucially, by neglecting to meaningfully consult sex workers in its drafting, it reinforces the very power imbalances the Gender Equality Strategy is meant to confront.

The report stresses the need for services supporting those who wish to exit prostitution. While exit services are important, focusing exclusively on 'sufficiently financed, easily accessible and high-quality exit programmes' is insufficient and discriminatory. This is especially painful considering the current funding crisis for feminist organising, which has hit community organisations and peer-led support networks the hardest. These groups are precisely the ones able to bridge barriers to care, providing trusted, stigma-free support for the most marginalised communities.

Focusing only on exiting services ignores structural barriers that continue to prevent sex workers from accessing basic rights and services. Sex workers deserve equal access to a full range of high-quality support, including health care, social services, and victim assistance, regardless of whether they wish to stay in or leave the industry. Limiting support to exit programmes further divides the sex worker community into those considered 'worthy' or "undeserving" of support, reinforcing stigma instead of delivering comprehensive, inclusive care. Despite the EU VAW Directive recognising women sex workers (referred to as women in prostitution) as a group requiring targeted support, the GES exemplifies a policy approach that fails to meet these obligations, leaving sex workers who are victims of crime without the protections and services they are entitled to.

In Paragraph 13, the report encourages Member States to pursue "decriminalisation of people in prostitution" and "destigmatisation," while in the very same sentence calling for "demand reduction" and the "punishment of clients." These goals are fundamentally contradictory.

Legislative frameworks that support decriminalisation and destigmatisation are recognised by international human rights and public health bodies as the only method to improve sex workers' rights, health, and safety from violence and exploitation. In contrast, 'end-demand' policies and client-criminalisation legislations are widely documented to force sex workers underground where they encounter even greater barriers to crucial legal, police and health services while failing to address the root causes of precarious work. These approaches reinforce stigma and reproduce the very systems of violence and harmful stereotypes that paragraph 13 aims to challenge. Policies cannot simultaneously promote decriminalisation and criminalising measures, and the message to propose this leads to inconsistent policies that will ultimately harm those who are already most marginalised.

This inconsistency is further reflected in the language of the report. While highlighting the violence caused by structural discrimination and negative stereotypes, the text consistently refers to "prostitution" rather than "sex work," disregarding terminology preferred by sex workers themselves, human rights organisations and global health institutes and contributing

to the very stigma it seeks to address. Similarly, in the general turn towards person-centred language, reference to prostitution has become outdated and is found to facilitate further marginalisation (e.g. noted in UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines). This approach was echoed in the terminology used by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović, in her note on human rights of sex workers.

Next to these points, we are also concerned about the reference to all forms of surrogacy as “reproductive exploitation”. Only a human-rights-based approach that recognises the centrality of *bodily autonomy* can address these issues meaningfully. The parallels with sex-worker rights are clear: when the state criminalises activities involving people’s own bodies —whether providing sexual or gestational services— it does not prevent exploitation, but instead heightens vulnerability. Criminalisation pushes both sex work and surrogacy underground, increasing risks of coercion and abuse, while reducing the ability of governments, health services, and civil society organisations to offer oversight, ensure informed consent, and provide support. As seen in the sex-work context, removing legal security in the name of “protection” ultimately denies people agency and exposes them to greater harm. Applying the same punitive logic to surrogacy would produce equally damaging consequences for surrogates and children born out of surrogacy.

Finally, we welcome the report’s call for Member States to ensure that sex workers are actively involved in policymaking concerning their rights. This makes it even more striking that sex workers were not meaningfully involved in the drafting of this report. If sex workers had been consulted, as e.g. required by EP Resolution on Prostitution paragraph 29, this could have provided a more nuanced discussion that truly represents people’s experiences. Evidence-based and rights-based policy cannot be built without the meaningful and inclusive participation of the people it concerns.

We will continue to advocate for an EU Gender Equality Strategy that recognises sex workers’ rights as integral to gender equality rather than peripheral to it. As in previous cycles, the Parliament has already sounded the alarm on deepening inequalities and democratic backsliding, underscoring the urgency of a rights-based approach. It is now incumbent on the European Commission to uphold its obligations and ensure that all forthcoming gender-equality measures provide the highest level of protection and support for *everyone*, without discrimination based on gender, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, or the nature of one’s work. A future-proof Strategy must explicitly safeguard bodily autonomy, reject criminalisation that harms, and guarantee that sex workers are fully recognised as rights-holders within the EU’s equality framework.

Yours sincerely,

**The European Sex Workers Rights Alliance**

