

THE EUROPEAN MODEL

GUARANTEEING THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF SEX WORKERS IN THE EU

THE EUROPAEUM
A network of leading European universities

POLICY BRIEF

The European Union (EU) is founded on values such as human dignity, freedom, equality, and respect for human rights. Yet, when it comes to sex workers, the EU fails to uphold these values. Sex workers across member states face systemic discrimination, stigma and violence. Existing policies contribute to these harms.

The EU has already taken action on the issue of sex work regulation several times (INI 2103 in 2013; INI 2139 in 2022). However, it has failed to set a clear standard in line with core EU values.

The **European Model** addresses these failures by **decriminalising** sex work, **recognising** sex work as work, and implementing **support measures** to guarantee sex workers' rights. This would benefit the estimated 700.000 to 1.250.000 sex workers in the EU (Adair & Nezhyvenko, 2017).

SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ARE SYSTEMATICALLY VIOLATED



Discrimination

Sex workers are denied equal access to services, protections, and opportunities, such as healthcare or labour rights.



Stigma

Prejudiced attitudes isolate sex workers and limit their access to support. These often intersect with stigma based on gender, class, migration status, or race.



Violence

Sex workers often experience physical or psychological harm. This is exacerbated by unsafe working conditions and lack of legal protections.

OLD APPROACHES WORSEN THE PROBLEM, BUT ALTERNATIVES EXIST

*The EU's legal and policy landscape is fragmented and fails to protect sex workers' rights.
(Di Nicola, 2021; Bąkowski and Prpic, 2024)*

NORDIC MODEL

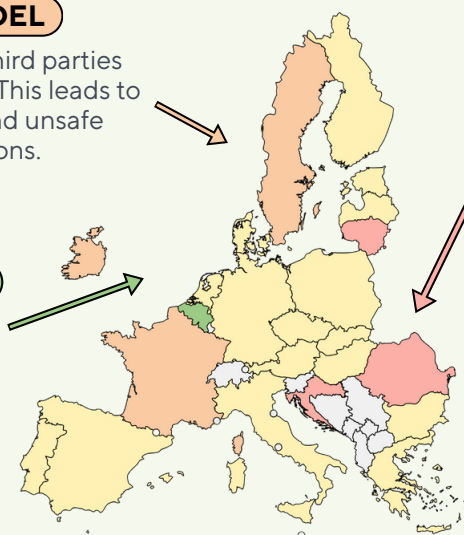
Penalises clients and third parties rather than sex workers. This leads to increased violence and unsafe working conditions.

e.g. Sweden

DECRIMINALISATION

Removes all aspects of sex work from criminal law. Major human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch support this policy.

e.g. Belgium



FULL CRIMINALISATION

Penalises sex workers, clients and third parties. It endangers sex workers by forcing isolation, restricting healthcare access, and discouraging safe sex practices.

e.g. Romania

RESTRICTIVE REGULATION

Legalises sex work but imposes strict regulations. These may include criminalising brothel keeping, penalising third parties, imposing location limits, and enforcing mandatory STI checks or health counselling.

e.g. Greece

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A EUROPEAN MODEL FOR SEX WORK IS NEEDED

The model consists of three pillars:

DECRIMINALISE SEX WORK

Removing all aspects of sex work from criminal law

- Improves **safety, health, and access to justice**
- **Allows addressing** exploitation and **trafficking**
- **Treats all sex workers equally**, whether online or street-based

RECOGNISE SEX WORK AS WORK

Ensuring equal labour rights and providing legal protections for specific risks

- Guarantees access to **labour and social security rights**
- **Prevents exploitation** by giving sex workers the power to stop or report abuse

SUPPORT SEX WORKERS

Implementing complementary measures to guarantee sex workers' rights

- **Combats stigma** via public campaigns and anti-bias training
- Ensures **safe service access** for undocumented sex workers
- Empowers **sex worker-led initiatives**

REGIONS ADOPTING THESE POLICIES SEE MAJOR BENEFITS

Evidence from New Zealand and New South Wales (Australia), where sex work was decriminalised (Pyett & Warr, 1999; Abel, 2014; Platt et al., 2018; Armstrong, 2021; Maciotti et al. 2022)



- **IMPROVED WELLBEING.** Decriminalisation led to improved health, reduced stress and fear, and better access to health and social services.



- **SAFER WORKING CONDITIONS.** Greater negotiating power with clients, improved relationships with law enforcement, simplified client-screening processes, and protection against exploitative working practices.



- **ECONOMIC BENEFITS.** Decriminalisation cuts law enforcement costs, increases tax revenue, and lowers healthcare spending.

THIS MODEL SUPPORTS ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS

- Research indicates that decriminalising sex work helps authorities **distinguish consensual sex work from coercion**, improves victim protection, reduces reporting barriers.
- Major **anti-trafficking organisations support decriminalising sex work.**
- Shifting from punitive to labour rights-based approaches creates **safer conditions and better outcomes** for both sex workers and trafficking victims.

THE EU'S NEXT STEPS

1

ISSUE A RECOMMENDATION

by the European Parliament and Commission endorsing **decriminalisation** in member states.

2

ADOPT A DIRECTIVE

on **labour protections for sex workers** and specific regulations to address the unique risks in the industry.

3

FUND PROPOSED MEASURES

to support the social, physical and mental **well-being of sex workers.**