

# TOWARDS EQUALITY

## PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS





The Brussels' Call is a collaboration of dozens of Members of the European Parliament and more than 200 civil society organisations, working together to combat violence against women and girls through seeking to end the system of prostitution. Founded in 2012 by the European Women's Lobby, Foundation Scelles and Movement du Nid, we are committed to working at international, European, Member State and local level to achieve the abolition of prostitution while ensuring accountability of procurers and sex buyers and effective supports are provided to those directly affected.

**#EndDemand #BrusselsCall**

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The European Women's Lobby (EWL) brings together the women's movement in Europe to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women's human rights and equality between women and men. We are the largest European umbrella network of women's associations representing a total of more than 2000 organisations in all EU Member States and Candidate Countries, as well as 18 European-wide organisations representing the diversity of women and girls in Europe. EWL envisions a society in which women's contribution to all aspects of life is recognised, rewarded and celebrated - in leadership, in care and in production; all women have self-confidence, freedom of choice, and freedom from violence and exploitation; and no woman or girl is left behind.



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# CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Prostitution in the EU	3
The Equality Model	4
EWL Equality Model Index	5
How the international sex trade evades national law	7
Support for equality	11
Conclusion	14

## PROGRESS TOWARDS EQUALITY

**1949** UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others

- People affected by prostitution should not be criminalised
- People affected by prostitution should be protected
- Procuring and trafficking in human beings should be criminalised
- 'Prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person.'

**1979** UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Article 6: 'parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.'

**1998** Sweden introduced what is now known as the Equality Model. Recognising prostitution as a form of violence against women, the law only criminalises the sex buyers, traffickers, pimps and brothels. The Equality Model decriminalises women on the frontline of prostitution and provides prevention and exit supports.

**2009** Article 83 of the Treaty for the Functioning of the European Union recognises 'trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation of women and children' as a European crime ensuring 'minimum rules concerning the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in the areas of particularly serious crime with a cross-border dimension'.

**2014** European Parliament Resolution on Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution and its Impact on Gender Equality recognises 'that prostitution, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation are highly gendered issues and violations of human dignity, contrary to human rights principles, among which gender equality, and therefore contrary to the principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, including the goal and the principle of gender equality'.

# TOWARDS EQUALITY PROGRESS, CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS

**The systemic inequalities facing women and girls require a societal and a political response. The advertising and trading of women and girls for sex does not occur in isolation. The sex marketplace is a part of the cultural and societal sexual objectification of women and girls.**

The European Union is built on principles of human rights and equality and has made significant progress towards women's equality. This hard won progress has revealed continuing barriers to equality, opportunity and freedom including the sexual commodification of women. While not all men pay for sex, those who do have a huge impact in driving and sustaining the demand for exploited women. By criminalising their abusive behaviour the EU can effectively end the trade of women and girls for sex. By eliminating the trafficking and trade of all people for sex we will also be challenging the underlying values of commodification and objectification of women and girls. Only when we take meaningful action to tackle demand can we make it clear that selling women and girls for sex is a denial of their human rights and incompatible with gender equality.

Since the ratification of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the law has become a powerful tool to limit abuses of power, to combat prejudice and discrimination and protect vulnerable and marginalised groups from exploitation. With the right balance of liberties and protections the EU can lead the world towards more equality, opportunity and freedom of expression.

**The EU can establish and defend the human right not to be bought or sold for sex across all member states.**

**2014** Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on Prostitution, Trafficking and Modern Slavery in Europe calls on Council of Europe member and observer States, Parliamentary Assembly observer States and partners for democracy to criminalise the purchase of sexual services, ban the advertising of sexual services, criminalise pimping, set up counselling, health and exit programmes and raise awareness of respectful, gender-equal and violence-free sexuality. While it is an example of soft and normative influence rather than binding law, there are suggestions that this Resolution has inspired two member states to adopt this model themselves – France and Ireland in 2016 and 2017 respectively (Di Nicola 2021).

**2020** The UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) releases General Recommendation 38 on trafficking and prostitution, which states 'States parties must pursue all appropriate means to eradicate trafficking and exploitation of prostitution to ensure that laws, systems, regulations and funding are in place to make the realisation of that right effective, rather than illusory... the Committee acknowledges that trafficking and exploitation of prostitution in women and girls is unequivocally a phenomenon rooted in structural, sex-based discrimination, constituting gender-based violence'.

**2021** European Parliament Resolution on the Gender Equality Strategy recognises 'human trafficking is on the rise around the world; whereas the prostitution market fuels the trafficking of women and children and exacerbates violence against them, particularly in countries where the sex industry has been legalised'.

## NEXT STEPS

### Ending prostitution and violence against women in the EU

- ★ EU legal action on prostitution should be part of a comprehensive legal framework tackling the full continuum of male violence against women and girls, with an EU Directive as its cornerstone. This is why the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence should include provisions against prostitution and sexual exploitation and promote the implementation of the Equality Model at the European Union level.
- ★ Legislation must be harmonised with relevant Directives, having end-demand at its core as per the Anti-Trafficking Directive. It must be comprehensive in tackling all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse as per the Directive on Child Sexual Exploitation and Pornography.
- ★ The EWL proposes the law includes as the legal definition of sexual exploitation: **“sexual exploitation is a form of gender-based violence against women and girls which consists in the commercialisation of a woman's body for obtaining of financial or other benefits through the involvement of another person in prostitution, sexual servitude or other kinds of sexual or reproductive services, including pornographic acts or the production of pornographic materials. It results in physical and psychological harm.”** This definition recognises the absence of consent in prostitution (EWL, 2022).
- ★ If updated, the Anti-Trafficking Directive should give a minimum standard of criminalising the payment for sexual act from a victim of trafficking and should remove the term "knowingly".

## PROSTITUTION IN THE EU

The sex trade exploits economic and power inequalities between men and women. In Europe, 90% of prostituted people are women and girls (Europarl 2014), and approx. 97% of sex buyers are men (ICI 2014). While not every woman exploited in the sex trade has been trafficked, almost all trafficked women in the EU are in the sex trade. Any approach to the sex trade without an end-demand agenda will fuel further trafficking and exploitation.

The Council of Europe defines gender-based violence as: “**a form of violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman and/or that affects women disproportionately and that seriously inhibits the ability of women and girls to enjoy their rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men**” (COE Istanbul Convention 2011). The sex trade certainly meets this criteria. It is an abusive place where 70-95% of women report physical assault, 60-70% report rape and 68% meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Farley et al. 2003). 9 in 10 women in prostitution have said that they would leave it if they could (Farley et al. 2003), but the cycle of poverty entraps them in a system that relies on their exploitation.

On average, 70% of the individuals in prostitution in the EU are migrant women (EPRS 2014). Individuals may seek to migrate from their country of origin to escape poverty, discrimination or prejudice or to flee conflict. Often operating in constrained circumstances, migrants are more at risk of trafficking or exploitation, particularly when legal routes to asylum or residency are blocked by restrictive border policies in destination countries. With 65% of trafficking in the EU for the purposes of sexual exploitation and 95% of those sexually exploited being women (European Commission 2018), trafficking and prostitution are intrinsically linked.

**“NO EASY. PEOPLE LIE. I COME HERE, I STAY IN PLACES I DON'T WANT TO STAY. IS A LITTLE HARD, I REMEMBER, WHEN I COME HERE [CRIES]... WHEN I COME HERE, I THINKING PEOPLE GOING TO KILL ME OR DO SOMETHING.”**

- Iris

Prostitution exploits multiple, intersecting inequalities. Legalising the abuse of women will not make these inequalities, prejudice or discrimination go away. Europe's approach to prostitution must have gender equality at its heart.

In Europe,

**90%**

of prostituted people are women and girls

**97%**

of sex buyers are men



**9 in 10**

women in prostitution have said that they would leave it if they could

## THE EQUALITY MODEL

In 1999, Sweden introduced an integrated, women-centred response to the sex trade. The law decriminalises the person being prostituted while holding buyers, pimps and brothels responsible. Statistics show that street prostitution and demand has decreased as a result of the new law.

- ★ **Freedom of the individual** Respects and decriminalises individuals in prostitution
- ★ **Freedom of opportunity** Enables people who choose to leave prostitution
- ★ **Freedom of choice** Supports people who don't want to enter prostitution
- ★ **Freedom from slavery** Empowers victims of trafficking and coercion to escape
- ★ **Freedom from exploitation** Ends culture of commodification and objectification of women's bodies
- ★ **Full and free consent** Supports an individual's continuous control and power to refuse sex

This is in contrast to the legalisation and decriminalisation frameworks which have both proven not only to multiply and increase prostitution but also to normalise the activity.

**“THEY'VE OPENED HOUSING, EDUCATION, THEY'VE PICKED MY SELF-ESTEEM UP OFF THE FLOOR... I'M 28 NOW, IF I'M ABLE TO BE OK NOW I'LL BE OK, IF I KEEP GOING THROUGH THESE DOORS THAT [SUPPORT SERVICE] HAS OPENED FOR ME.”**

- Survivor of prostitution

THE EQUALITY MODEL IS AN INTEGRATED, WOMEN-CENTRED RESPONSE TO THE COMPLEX AND INTERSECTING FACTORS EVIDENT IN THE SEX TRADE.





# TOWARDS EQUALITY EWL EQUALITY MODEL INDEX

The European Women’s Lobby has created this Equality Model Index (EMI) to monitor progress towards adoption of the Equality Model across all EU27 States.

The ‘diverse legal landscape in the EU fails to effectively contribute to discouraging demand of such services’, and the inadequate criminalising of users ‘contributes to fostering the crime, including through a culture of impunity’ (European Commission)

Many countries have made progress towards the Equality Model by decriminalising individuals selling sex and to criminalise brothel-keeping and pimping. While these measures may limit growth of the sex trade, without criminalising sex buying and providing concentrated supports to women, the fundamental issue of paid sexual coercion is left unchallenged. Countries that legalise pimping through the regulation of brothels are adding to the harm by enabling a legal front for a criminal enterprise. The buying and selling of other people for sex must be criminalised in every form. We must build on the progress made so far across Europe to move closer to equality in Europe for all. In order to do this we need a co-ordinated response and a significant investment in exit programmes to allow their concrete implementation and leadership at the EU level.

“I HAVE BEEN WITH [SUPPORT SERVICE FOR WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION] TWO YEARS, BUT I’M GETTING TO A PLACE WHERE I DON’T NEED THEM ANYMORE. I HAVE PLANS AND SET GOALS THAT I CAN ACTUALLY WORK TOWARDS. I AM TRAINING IN HEALTHCARE AND EXCITED FOR THE FUTURE. WHAT HAPPENED TOOK AWAY MY POWER, MY LOVED ONES, AND MY LOVE OF LIFE, BUT I FINALLY HAVE THEM BACK AGAIN.”

- Survivor of prostitution

Legalisation of pimping/ brothels	Criminalisation of individuals caught in sex trade	Sex buying permitted	EU27/ Schengen	Decriminalisation of individuals caught in sex trade	Criminalisation of pimping/ brothels	Criminalisation of sex buying/ financial coercion	Prevention or exit supports that enable freedom from sexual exploitation
			Sweden				
			France				
			Ireland				
			Iceland				
			Norway				
			Lithuania				
			Finland				
			Belgium				
			Bulgaria				
			Cyprus				
			Czechia				
			Denmark				
			Estonia				
			Italy				
			Luxembourg				
			Malta				
			Poland				
			Portugal				
			Slovenia				
			Spain*				
			Hungary				
			Latvia				
			Slovakia				
			Romania				
			Croatia				
			Austria				
			Germany**				
			Greece				
			Netherlands				
			Switzerland				

\*At the time of writing an abolitionist law on prostitution is currently under review in Spain.


\*\*Pimping is illegal when it takes place outside of a regulated 'working environment' and is considered 'exploitative'.

EWL analysis of commercial sexual exploitation

## HOW THE INTERNATIONAL SEX TRADE EVADES NATIONAL LAW

### THE SEX TRADE IS TARGETING POOR PEOPLE IN RICH COUNTRIES AND ALL PEOPLE IN POOR COUNTRIES

The various European studies on prostitution as well as country questionnaires carried out by the EWL, show that prostitution is embedded in the same regional inequalities as any other exploitative enterprise in Europe. Inequality of opportunity and inequality of welfare support and protection against discrimination between the countries primarily in the north and west of Europe, and those on the peripheries, influence the flow of the trafficking or prostitution: from the poorer countries (typically Central and Eastern Europe) towards the richer ones.

**70%**  of the individuals in prostitution in the EU are migrant women

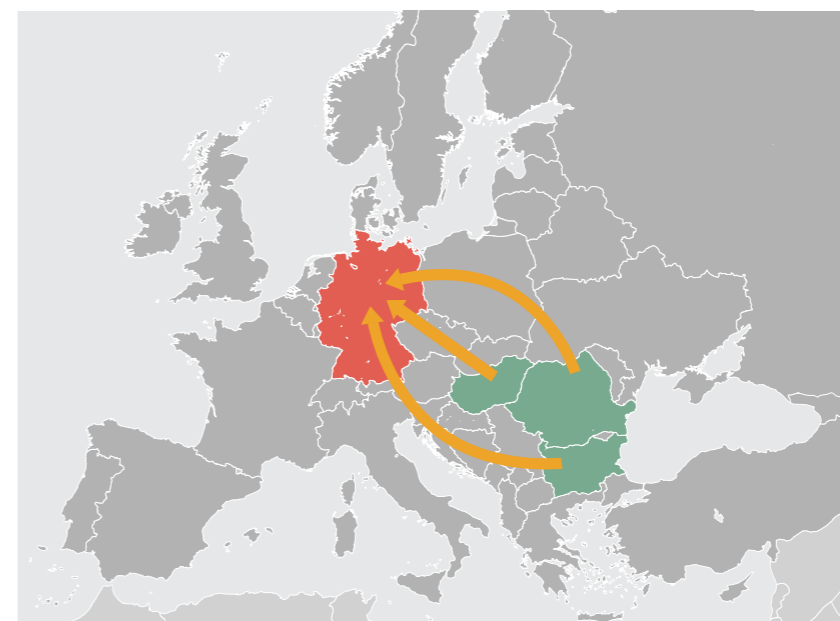
On average, **70% of the individuals in prostitution in the EU are migrant women** (EPRS 2014:27). Prostitution in the member states is part of a globalised and transnational market. 'The majority of sex trafficking flows involve EU citizens, and therefore are from a Member State to another, with girls mainly coming from Eastern EU Member States. (Di Nicola 2021:28).

**“YOU GET 50 EUROS FOR A FUCK AND A BLOW JOB; YOU HAVE TO PAY YOUR RENT AND YOUR TAX, SOMETIMES ALSO YOUR PIMP. THAT LEAVES YOU WITH NO MONEY. BECAUSE THE WOMEN ARE INDEPENDENT WORKERS THEY CAN CHOOSE FOR THEMSELVES HOW MUCH THEY WORK. IF THEY NEED MONEY THEY OFTEN MAKE WORKING DAYS OF SIXTEEN HOURS. THIS IS VERY EXHAUSTING FOR THE BODY AND THE MIND.”**

(The Audacity of Tolerance: A Critical Analysis of Legalized Prostitution in Amsterdam's Red Light District. Humanity in Action)

Finnish colleagues report: 'Women are trafficked mainly from Estonia, Russia and there have been cases of women brought to Finland from Nigeria through Italy. Thai massage parlours are known to provide sexual acts'. Greece 'is a transit country in terms of migration, that means a lot of risks especially for unaccompanied children and single women.' Hungary: 'The main destination countries for girls and women from Hungary are Germany (the most popular destination), Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Also, trafficking and migration for the purposes of prostitution within Hungary is common: trafficking victims (not limited to prostitution purposes) come mainly from the northern, north-western regions of Hungary (Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county) and south-western regions of Hungary (Baranya county, Tolna county) - which regions are also listed among the most underdeveloped in the entire EU.'

In 2016 Europol released a report on trafficking in human beings that clearly states that prostitution is a risk sector for trafficking and that countries where prostitution has been legalised experience higher levels of exploitation. Sex buyers' demand for prostituted women is also analysed in the European Commission Study on the gender dimension of trafficking in human beings published in 2016.



**ONLY 20% OF THOSE IN PROSTITUTION WERE OF GERMAN NATIONALITY, WITH THE MAJORITY COMING FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN MEMBER STATES: ROMANIA (8,800), BULGARIA (2,800) AND HUNGARY (1,800)**

## CASE STUDY: GERMANY

National-level regulations on prostitution within an individual member state are documented as having had an impact on migration and trafficking for prostitution throughout the EU. This is clearly visible in the case of Germany, which liberalised its prostitution policy in 2002. The Prostitution Act introduced in that year regulates the sale and purchase of prostitution, including employment contracts, health insurance, etc. as 'sex work'. It also legalised profit-making from prostitution, such as the running of brothels. According to this Act, individuals in prostitution can, in theory, work in approved structures or on a freelance basis, as well as benefit from regular work contracts and having the recognition of the agreements between them, their employers and clients being subject to civil law.

However, in 2007, the German government found that there "are no viable indications that the [legalisation of prostitution] has reduced crime" and that legalisation has "made their work in prosecuting trafficking in human beings and pimping more difficult" (German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, 2007).

Sporer (2013) describes intra-EU sex trade migration as a direct consequence of the 2002 Prostitution Act, which saw pimping and trafficking networks becoming active in moving women to Germany from the most impoverished regions of the EU, facilitated by visa-free access and the principle of the freedom of the movement of people.

Europol has identified Germany as a popular destination for human trafficking due to high demand for paid sex (Europol, 2016) but the Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Being at the Council of Europe (GRETA) has noted that official figures "do not reflect the real scale of the phenomenon of human trafficking in Germany" due to inadequate data collection and identification measures (GRETA, 2019).

**THE SEX TRADE IS OPPORTUNISTIC AND TRANSNATIONAL. IT BLENDS LEGAL AND ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES. IT TAKES ADVANTAGE OF LOOPHOLES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE LAW BETWEEN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES. DEPENDING ON NATIONAL LAWS THE SEX TRADE CAN BE LARGER AND MORE VISIBLE OR SMALLER, WITH LESS INFLUENCE ON COMMUNITIES. COUNTRIES THAT OPT FOR DECRIMINALISATION OR LEGALISATION OF SEX BUYING AND/ OR BROTHELS SEE INCREASED SCALE AND HARM IN THE SEX TRADE.**

The sex trade preys on poverty and can't exist without it. Pimps and brothels seek new young women and girls in less economically developed territories or countries experiencing economic crisis - transporting or trafficking them into regions that support their trade. We are already seeing how traffickers are taking advantage of the crisis in Ukraine to force refugee women into prostitution in western Europe. (BBC, 2022; Guardian, 2022) Booking websites for trade that is illegal in one country will be hosted in another. Sex buyers will cross borders to access prostituted women while protecting their anonymity and avoiding any consequences of their actions.

**ADVERTISEMENTS IN GERMANY INCLUDE: "SEX WITH ALL WOMEN AS LONG AS YOU WANT, AS OFTEN AS YOU WANT AND THE WAY YOU WANT".**

Women reported enduring sexual acts for 18-hour days and living in the same rooms in which these acts were taking place. Germany now features massive 12-story brothels to service men around the clock. Advertisements in Germany include: "Sex with all women as long as you want, as often as you want and the way you want".

In practice, the German legal situation appears to have primarily spurred demand for prostitution and as a result, the trafficking and migration of women from poorer regions to meet this demand. The German Statistical Office counts that men spend 14.6 billion euro per year on prostitution (2016).

In 2017, a Prostitute Protection Act was adopted to "improve the situation of the individuals in prostitution and support the identification of victims of human trafficking and 'forced prostitution'." The Act introduced the mandatory registration for individuals in prostitution, licensing and regulations for brothels and other 'sex businesses' and prohibiting certain forms of prostitution deemed inhumane.

23,700 individuals and 2,290 businesses were registered for prostitution in Germany at the end of 2021 (Statisches Bundesamt, 2021). In 2020, 20% of individuals registered as prostitutes were of German nationality and the three most common foreign nationalities were Romanian with 8,800 (35% of all registered individuals), Bulgarian with 2,800 (11%) and Hungarian with 1,800 (7%) (Statisches Bundesamt, 2020).

However, we know that a minority of individuals in prostitution are registered in this formal system, therefore the true number and profile of women in prostitution in Germany is likely to be far higher.

However, this dynamic is not only at play across borders, but within countries too: from poorer regions towards richer regions, and between ethnic and social classes. Also it is reported that border regions are very much affected, e.g. German men go to the Czech Republic, because it is cheaper there. Legal asymmetries also mean that border regions can become hotspots for prostitution as men travel seamlessly across the border to buy sex, for example, Saarland in Germany which is close to the French border and host to many brothels catering to French men seeking to circumvent the laws in their home country.

**To effectively control a transnational trade the EU must have a co-ordinated, shared response that ends the buying and selling of people for sex.**

**"[AFTER THE FIRST ATTACK I WAS] REALLY SCARED, REALLY UNHAPPY. I HAD PARANOID. A LOT OF PROBLEMS. A LOT OF PROBLEMS...I MEAN, I NOT TRUST THE MEN ANYMORE. I TAKE A BREAK [FROM PROSTITUTION], LIKE A MONTH. AND THEN I BACK AGAIN. BUT LIKE AFTER A MONTH I WAS ATTACKED AGAIN, WITH KNIFE...YOU CAN'T GET HAPPINESS FROM THAT MONEY [PROSTITUTION]. ALWAYS YOU'LL BE SAD, WILL BE PARANOID."**

- Romana

**REGULATION FAILS WOMEN**



**23,700 individuals in prostitution and 2,290 prostitution businesses were registered in Germany at the end of 2021.**

**80%**

**of those registered in prostitution are migrants.**



# SUPPORT FOR EQUALITY

## NEW EU PUBLIC ATTITUDES RESEARCH BY THE EWL MEMBERS

Public attitudes research from four countries across the EU: Ireland (Opinions, 2020); Malta (Misco, 2021); Lithuania (Baltijos Tyrimai, 2021); and Hungary (Idea, Datalyze) shows that there is widespread acknowledgement of the damage the sex trade wreaks on individuals and society, and that support for pro-legalisation measures is low. Each of these countries has different regimes; currently, the Equality Model is in place in Ireland, Malta has loose regulation that technically allows the sale and purchase of sex, but stops short of a legally sanctioned commercialised sex trade, prostitution is permitted in certain 'tolerance zones' in Hungary, and prostitution is illegal in Lithuania.

For many, prostitution is intrinsically connected to sexual violence and exploitation – far from 'a job like any other'. For example, 71% in Ireland, 79.5% in Malta and 80% in Lithuania believe that prostitution is sexual exploitation and people should be supported to leave it. 81% of Lithuanians and almost three quarters of Maltese also believe that prostitution is a form of sexual violence and should be stopped (52% of Irish and 50% of Hungarians also agree this is the case). As well as this, respondents understand the impact on society at large, with 73% in Ireland, 75.2% in Malta, and 72% in Lithuania agreeing that even if some people choose to sell sex, prostitution has negative social impacts that can not be ignored. These concerns come to the fore when examining the risks the public see associated with legalising or fully 'decriminalising' prostitution in their respective countries. For example, 69% in Ireland, 79.5% in Malta and 72% in Lithuania believe that legalisation will lead to an increase in rates of sexual violence in society. A majority also have concerns that legalisation will lead to an expansion of the sex trade in their country (72% in Ireland, 67.3% in Malta, 73% in Lithuania, 58% in Hungary), that there will be an increased demand for prostituted women and girls (63% in Ireland, 70.3% in Malta, 58% in Hungary, 67% in Lithuania), and that organised crime will benefit through the drugs, trafficking and money-laundering that accompany the sex trade (80% in Ireland, 74.3% in Malta, 68% in Hungary, 76% in Lithuania).

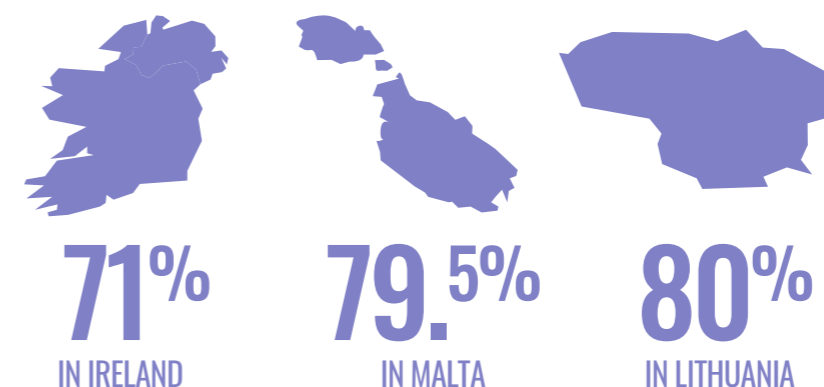
A significant majority of the public align with the values and purpose of the Equality Model. For example, an overwhelming majority see prostituting other people as unacceptable (88% in Ireland, 93.3% in Malta, 92% in Lithuania, 79% in Hungary) while 73% in Ireland, 67.8% in Malta, 53% in Hungary and 84% in Lithuania believe paying for sex is unacceptable.

## SOCIAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS BUYING SEX

The majority of men are not sex buyers. They do not use women in prostitution and do not consider it acceptable. However, those who do buy sex are responsible for demand in the sex trade. The attitudes of these men toward the women they buy reveals the sexist and harmful narrative that underpins prostitution. While almost all sex buyers are men, according to research there are clear differences between sex buyers men and men who don't buy sex in their attitudes towards women, including towards women who are not in prostitution (Farley et al. 2015). Farley's study revealed that: 65% of non-buyers treat it as sexual exploitation, compared to 40% of buyers; more than one third of sex buyers think that paying means that the woman has to do what he says (21% of non-buyers think this); two thirds of sex buyer men think that prostitution is consensual sex vs one third of non-buyers; 56% of sex buyers would find it OK if their sons went into a brothel vs only 20% of non-buyers; less than a quarter of sex buyers would find it OK if their daughter worked in a strip club vs only 11% of non-buyers; and 70% of the men who don't buy sex think that prostitution has very negative to extremely negative harms on women in prostitution vs only 31% of sex buyers.

**56%**  
of sex buyers would find it OK if their sons went into a brothel compared to only

**20%**  
of non-buyers



### believe that prostitution is sexual exploitation and people should be supported to leave it

There is also significant support for policy measures that make up the component parts of the Equality Model. For example, there is strong support for government measures to help people not get drawn into the sex trade (75% in Ireland, 88.9% in Malta, 69% in Lithuania) and also for the government to provide welfare supports to help people to leave prostitution (80% in Ireland, 92.6% in Malta, 60% in Hungary, 53% Lithuania). Welfare supports and policy measures aimed at giving women more choices than prostitution are the bedrock of the Equality Model and cannot exist in a regime where prostitution is legalised and normalised as a 'legitimate job'.

While the scope of this research is currently limited to four countries in the EU, the findings present important considerations for legislative and policy approaches to the sex trade. Strong beliefs that prostitution is not a legitimate trade, well founded concerns regarding the negative social impacts of legalisation and support for Equality Model positioning and welfare policies are all indications that respondents do not support the sex trade, and see intrinsic harms to prostitution that can never be solved by its legalisation. Further research into public attitudes across Europe could provide a more detailed picture of the public's perception of prostitution across different regimes, but certainly this initial research presents important food for thought for all policymakers.

**81%** of Lithuanians and almost three quarters of Maltese see prostitution as a form of sexual violence and should be stopped

This clearly shows that men who buy sex prefer to ignore or minimise the harms of prostitution.

This study shows that two thirds of sex buyers believe that most women in prostitution are forced into prostitution. This is in line with other studies that find men who buy sex are well aware that either outright coercion or extreme poverty or trauma are present in the case of the women whose bodies they use: and they carry on anyway (Farley et al. 2015; Dragomirescu, Necula, and Simion 2009). From our public attitudes research we know that the majority of people are against prostitution. When we consider that the sex trade, with its attendant harms to individuals and society, exists purely to cater to this cohort of men, it becomes increasingly apparent that prostitution is an outdated and misogynistic trade that has no reason to exist in a more equal future.



**2/3**  
of sex buyers believe that most women in prostitution are forced into prostitution



Before the Equality Model was adopted in Sweden, only



supported the criminalisation of buying sex, but since its adoption every survey on the issue shows



are in favour of criminalisation.

## LEGISLATE, COMMUNICATE, EDUCATE FOR EQUALITY

Research in Sweden shows that legislative and policy leadership approaches influence societal attitudes over time. Before the Equality Model was adopted in Sweden, only 45% of women and 20% of men supported the criminalisation of buying sex, but since its adoption every survey on the issue shows that 80% of women and 60% of men are in favour (Schon 2021:394, quoting Swedish surveys).

A study on sex buyers in Sweden, Norway (where the Equality Model has also been implemented) and Denmark (the Equality Model is not in place in Denmark - both buying and selling sex is decriminalised) showed that the legislation has an effect on prostitution use. This research found that, in the previous six months, Danish men exhibited the highest percentage rate of sex buying, and Swedish the lowest (Jakobsson/Kotsadam 2013). Therefore, it is important for policymakers to consider the social impact of legislative and policy approaches to prostitution. If full decriminalisation or legalisation can support permissive attitudes to sex buying, in turn leading to growth of the sex trade as we have seen in places such as Germany and the Netherlands (Walby 2016), the Equality Model can result in societies that value the equality of women and do not normalise the buying and selling of women's bodies.

## CASE STUDY: SWEDEN

The 1999 Swedish Sex Purchase Act shifts the responsibility and focus to the buyers of sex, recognising that demand drives the supply and the intrinsic connections between prostitution and human trafficking. French legislators were led by similar considerations in introducing a law prohibiting the purchase of sex in 2016, recognising that a permissive attitude towards prostitution undermines gender equality. Ireland introduced provisions criminalising the purchase of sex in 2017. In Sweden, the Sex Purchase Act is seen as a complement to support services offered to survivors of prostitution as well as further education and training of the police, social services and other relevant authorities. The authorities and agencies work not only with exit programmes but also support interventions to end human trafficking and other types of sexual exploitation.

Since the adoption of this integrated approach, the purchase of sex has decreased: while in 1999 12% of Swedish men admitted to having purchased sex from an individual in prostitution, in 2013 this share was only 7.8% (Schon 2021:395).

Between 1997 and 2013 there was a



reduction in Swedish men who say they have purchased sex from an individual in prostitution (12% in 1999, 7.8% in 2013)

## CONCLUSION:

Europe has made great progress towards gender equality, but we will never reach full equality until we take action on prostitution. Only by recognising prostitution as a form of gender-based violence can we end the targeting of women and girls by the sex trade.

We know that the exploitation of women and girls intersects with the forms of disadvantage and inequality that lead to migration to western Europe from less economically developed regions. We also know that pimps, traffickers and sex trade opportunists exploit uneven regulation across Europe to evade the law and conduct their 'business' with little regard for the welfare of the women they shuttle from place to place. Only when Europe develops a single, co-ordinated approach to tackling prostitution will we be able to close the loopholes and ensure the equality and freedom of *all* women in Europe.

The Equality Model represents a more progressive future for women in Europe. Having proven its success in Sweden, it is gaining ground across other countries in Europe, making a strong statement that men's sexual entitlement is *not* more important than women's equality. Leadership on the Equality Model can have a profound impact on gender equality across Europe, not only through legislation, but through policies that support women in meaningful ways to escape the historical traps of coercion, exploitation and poverty.

We know that the sex trade, if left unchecked, will generate more demand. We have seen this in places where prostitution has become a legal, commercialised industry. The majority of people do not want this - they want to see Europe's women and girls flourish and live free from exploitation and abuse, and are willing to support policies that enable this.

**The Brussels' Call is asking policymakers to stand up for women's equality by taking concrete actions on prostitution at the EU level. Europe is ready for a future free from prostitution.**

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