



**SEX WORKERS  
OF THE WORLD  
UNITE!**

**SEX WORKERS UNITE!**  
POVERTY OUT LOW  
NO INTERNATIONAL UNION OF SEXWORKERS

**STOP REPRESSION AGAINST SEXWORKERS**

**DISCRIMINATION**  
**SHAME!**

PHOTO: A. Sorfleet

# The Sex Workers in Europe Manifesto



**A**lthough sex workers in Europe come from many different countries and many different backgrounds, we have discovered that we face many of the same problems in our work and in our lives. In this document we explore the current inequalities and injustices in our lives and in the sex industry; we question their origin; we confront and challenge them; and we put forward our vision of the changes needed to create a more equitable society — one that acknowledges and values sex workers, our rights, and our labour.

## Background

In response to increasingly repressive legislation, policies and practices across Europe, a small group of sex workers and sex workers' allies in The Netherlands got together in 2002 to organise a conference to give sex workers a voice. They began by putting out a call across Europe, inviting sex workers, sex-work projects and sex-worker-rights activists to join them. An Organising Committee (OC) was formed (composed mainly of sex workers), and the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe was legally established to raise funds for, and host, the conference.

The OC decided that not only should the conference give sex workers a voice, it should also produce tools for defending our rights across Europe and for creating alliances with human rights, labour and migrants' organisations. One tool the OC saw the need for was a sex workers' manifesto — created by sex workers, for sex workers — setting out a shared vision of an equitable society.

The committee undertook a year-long consultation with sex workers across Europe, the results of which were then collated. It proceeded to create a draft manifesto, based on views shared by a majority of participants.

The European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour and Migration was held in Brussels, Belgium, October 15-17, 2005. There, approximately 120 sex workers from 24 European countries fine-tuned the draft to produce *The Sex Workers in Europe Manifesto*, which they then endorsed.

On October 17, 2005 delegates presented the Manifesto to the European Parliament, at the invitation of Monica Frassoni, Italian Member of European Parliament (Greens / European Free Alliance).

## Beyond Tolerance and Compassion: Recognise Our Human Rights

We live in a society where services are bought and sold. Among these services are services which are sexual in nature. The provision of these sexual services constitutes sex work. Sex work should not be criminalised.

Sacrificing sex workers' rights on the grounds of religious convictions or sexual mores is unacceptable. All people have the right to hold their own views on such matters, but these views should never be imposed on any individual, nor should they justify any political decision.

We wish to see a society in which sex workers are not denied social power.

We condemn the hypocrisy in our societies whereby our services are utilised while our profession or businesses are made illegal. Legislation that criminalises sex work results in abuse and in a lack of control for sex workers over our work and lives.

We oppose the criminalisation of those identifying themselves as sex workers — their partners, clients and managers — and everyone else working in the sex industry. Such criminalisation denies sex workers equal protection under the law.

Migration plays an important role in meeting the demands of the labour market. We demand that our governments acknowledge and apply fundamental human, labour and civil rights for migrants.

## The right to be free from discrimination

**WE DEMAND** an end to discrimination and the abuse of power by police and other public

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PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)

**Sex workers march for human rights.**

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authorities. Offering sexual services is not an invitation to any kind of violence. The credibility of sex workers must be respected.

**WE DEMAND** that crimes against us and our testimonies be taken seriously by the justice system. Sex workers should, to the same extent as anyone else, be presumed innocent until guilt is proven.

We assert the right to report abuses against us without risking prosecution.

Defamation of sex workers incites discrimination and hatred. We demand that sex workers be protected by anti-discrimination legislation.

## The right to our bodies

Sex work is by definition consensual sex. Non-consensual sex is not sex work; it is sexual violence or slavery.

**WE DEMAND** that our right as human beings to use our bodies in any way we do not find harmful be respected. This includes the right to establish consensual sexual relations, no matter the gender or ethnicity of our partners, and regardless of whether or not they are paying.

## The right to be heard

We assert our right to participate in public forums and debates where policies which could affect our working and living conditions are being discussed or determined.

**WE DEMAND** that our voices be heard, listened to and respected. Our experiences are diverse, but all are valid, and we condemn those who would steal our voices and say that we do not have the capacity to make decisions or articulate our needs.

## The right to associate and gather

We assert our right to associate with others of our choice. This includes the right to join and form professional associations and unions; formal and informal business partnerships; political parties; and social-reform and community projects.

We assert our right to be in any public space, and our right to demonstrate publicly.

## Abuse in sex work

It is true that abuse happens in sex work. However, abuse does not *define* sex work. Any approach that defines sex work as violence is a simplistic one that denies our diversity and experience and reduces us to the status of helpless victims. Such approaches undermine our autonomy and our right to self-determination.

Recognising the rights of sex workers would enable us to have infringements of our rights addressed.

**WE DEMAND** protection from those who threaten us and our families for exposing their abuse.

**WE DEMAND** that mechanisms be developed to allow us to remain anonymous when reporting grievances and crimes against us.

## Young people in sex work

It is essential that education focus on empowering young people to have sexual autonomy.

**WE DEMAND** that support, services and outreach be provided to young people, in order that they may have real choices in their lives, including the possibility of alternative work. Young people should have a say on legislation and policies that affect them.

## Our Lives

### Being a sex worker

The “identity” and “social role” imposed on us by society often defines us as intrinsically unworthy and a threat to moral, public and social order. Labelling us sinners, criminals, or victims creates a stigma that separates us from “good” and “decent” citizens—in fact, from the rest of society.

This stigma leads to an exclusively negative and stereotypical view of “whores.” To protect ourselves, and to ensure that we have a place within society, most sex workers hide the means of our livelihood. Many absorb the societal stigma of shame and unworthiness, and live in fear of being

exposed. For this reason, many sex workers tolerate abusive treatment. Sex workers are socially excluded as a result of stigma and this leads to being denied health and social services; housing; and alternative work. It often forces separation from our children and isolation from our families and communities.

Societal prejudices promote divisions within the sex industry, based on such factors as migrant status, race, ethnic origin, gender, age, sexuality, drug use, work sector, and services provided. This worsens the social exclusion and stigma experienced by certain groups of sex workers.

We condemn such moralistic and prejudiced distinctions, and assert that *all* sex workers, and all forms of sex work, are equally valid and valuable.

We recognise that stigma is something we have common that links all sex workers, despite the enormous diversity in our realities at work and in our lives. We have come together to confront and challenge this stigma and the injustice it creates.

We assert that sex work is a sexual and economic activity which implies nothing about our identities, values, or participation in society.

## Active citizenship

Sex workers should not be perceived merely as victims to be assisted, criminals to be arrested, or targets for public-health interventions. We are members of society, with needs and aspirations, who have the potential to make real and valuable contributions to our communities.

**WE DEMAND** that existing mechanisms for representation and consultation be open to sex workers.

## Privacy and family

We assert our right to establish personal relationships, and to have self-determination within those relationships.

Labelling of our partners as pimps, exploiters, and abusers, simply because they are our partners, presupposes that we have no autonomy and implies that we are not worthy of love or of being in relationships; this denies us the possibility of a private life.

**WE DEMAND** an end to legislation that criminalises our partners, children and other family members for associating with us and being supported by our earnings.

The threat of having our children taken from us removes our ability to seek support and assistance, if we need it, in relation to parenting or abusive relationships.

**WE DEMAND** an end to the unjustifiable practice of social service agencies and courts taking our children from us simply because we provide sexual services.

## Media and education

Our voices and experiences are often manipulated by the media; we are seldom given the right to reply; and our complaints in this regard are routinely dismissed.

The portrayal of sex workers in the mass media perpetuates the stereotypical image of us as unworthy, as victims, or as a threat to moral, public and social order. In particular, the xenophobic portrayal of migrant sex workers increases the stigma and vulnerability they already face. Such portrayals of sex workers gives false legitimacy to those within our society who seek to harm us and to violate our rights.

Furthermore, our clients are misrepresented in the media as being violent, perverted or psychologically disturbed. Paying for sexual services is not an intrinsically violent or anti-social behaviour. Such stereotyping silences discussion about the reality of the sex industry. It perpetuates our isolation and obscures the violence perpetrated by abusers posing as clients. Moreover, it prevents us from addressing the behaviour of the small, but significant, number of clients who do cause problems.

Since mass media perpetuates stigma that does us harm, we require that our governments support us and our clients in educating and informing

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**“Stop Repression Against Sex Workers Now!”**

PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)



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public officials and the general public, in order that we may participate fully in our society.

## Combating violence against sex workers

Sex workers experience disproportionate levels of violence and crime. The stigma put upon sex workers has led to society and public authorities condoning violence and crimes against us, because they are seen as inherent to our work.

**WE DEMAND** that our governments recognise that violence against sex workers is a crime, whether perpetrated by local residents or other members of the public, by clients, by managers, by our partners, or by persons in positions of authority.

We require that our governments publicly condemn those who perpetrate actual violence against us. We demand that they take action in combating the actual violence we experience, rather than the perceived violence of prostitution, as put forward by misguided activists who seek to abolish all forms of sex work.

Time and resources now spent arresting and prosecuting innocent sex workers and non-violent clients should be redirected towards dealing with rape and other violent crimes against us.

Mechanisms must be developed to encourage and support sex workers in reporting crimes, including early warning systems amongst sex workers about potentially-violent clients.

## Health and well-being

No one, least of all sex workers, denies that there are health risks involved in sex work. However, it is a myth that we are “dirty” or “unclean.” In reality, we are more knowledgeable about our sexual

health, and practise safe sex more skilfully, than the general population. Moreover, most of us act as sexual-health educators for our clients.

We call for the recognition of our role in society as a valuable resource for sexual well-being and health promotion.

Stigma remains a barrier to health care for sex workers. Prejudice and discrimination occur within health-care settings: some health-care workers subject sex workers to degrading and humiliating treatment.

**WE DEMAND** that all health-care workers treat us with respect and dignity, and that our complaints of discriminatory treatment be taken seriously.

In furtherance of the goal of the health and well-being of all sex workers, we demand that our governments provide access to:

- health services for all migrant workers
- needle exchange and drug-treatment options for dependent drug users
- treatment for people living with HIV, without which many may die unnecessarily
- transition treatment for transgendered persons who desire it.

## NO registration, NO mandatory testing

Registration and mandatory testing of sex workers are not effective measures for preventing disease, particularly when there is no requirement for clients to be tested. One of the consequences of mandatory testing (where it still exists) is that some clients assume that sex workers are “healthy” and so resist the use of condoms, not recognising the threat this might pose to a sex worker’s sexual health.

Registration and mandatory sexual health and HIV testing are a violation of sex workers’ human rights. Such practices reinforce the myth that sex workers are a threat to public health, and promote the stereotypical view that sex workers transmit infections.

**WE DEMAND** an end to registration and mandatory testing.

## The rights to travel, to migrate, and to seek asylum

The lack of opportunities to migrate can put our health, and indeed our very lives, in danger.

*A steady stream of red umbrellas...*

PHOTO: Maj Christensen



We assert our right to travel and to work in any country without discrimination. Information about working in the sex industry and its different sectors should be made available.

**WE DEMAND** that *all* people have the right to move within and between countries for personal and financial reasons, including seeking gainful employment and residence in the area of their choice.

**WE DEMAND** that the education and qualifications of migrant workers in all fields be recognised on a basis of equality.

Violence, coercion and exploitation related to migration and sex work must be understood and tackled within a framework that recognises the worth, and the fundamental rights, of migrants.

Restrictive migration legislation and anti-prostitution policies must be identified as contributing factors to the violation of migrants' rights. Focusing discussion on "trafficking" obscures the issue of migrants' rights.

Many trades are subject to the imposition of forced labour and of practices resembling slavery. However, if a trade is legal and the labour of its workers is recognised, there is far more potential for preventing abuse and for exposing and stopping the violation of workers' rights.

**WE DEMAND** that our governments prioritize and protect the human rights of victims of forced labour and of practices resembling slavery, regardless of how they came to be in their situations, and regardless of their ability, or willingness, to cooperate, or testify, in criminal justice proceedings.

We call upon our governments to give asylum to victims of such labour practices, and to provide support to them and to their families and friends. Failure to do so perpetuates their exploitation and further violates their fundamental human rights.

**WE DEMAND** the right to asylum for sex workers who are subjected to state or community violence because they sell sexual services.

**WE DEMAND** the right to asylum for anyone denied human rights on the basis of a "crime of status," such as sex work, health status, gender, or sexual orientation.



PHOTO: Maj Christensen

*... winds it's way through Brussels' streets.*

## Our Labour

The body and mind are economic resources that people use in many different ways. We view all forms of sex work as equally valid. These include: stripping and nude dancing, engaging in street or indoor prostitution, providing escort services, engaging in remunerated phone sex, and performing in pornography.

For some, the exchange of sex for money is part of their private lives. These individuals do not define remunerated sex as work.

For many others, sex becomes work. Some work independently, others collectively. Many are "employed" by third parties. For all of us, remunerated sex is an income-generating activity and, as such, must be recognised as labour.

Alienation, exploitation, abuse and coercion do exist in the sex industry, as in any other industry, but they do not define us or our industry. It is possible to limit such problems when the workers within an industry are formally recognised, accepted by society at large, and supported by trade unions. The establishment of labour rights enables workers to use labour regulations to report abuses, and to organise against exploitation and unacceptable working conditions.

The lack of recognition of sex work as labour, and the criminalisation of activities within and around the sex industry, results in sex workers being treated like criminals, even when we do not break any laws. Many laws treat us as legal "minors," as though we were unable to make informed decisions. Such treatment alienates us from the rest of society and, by preventing us from working collectively and safely, reduces our ability to control our work and our lives.

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PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)

**Accompanied by our escorts.**

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Treating sex workers like criminals increases the likelihood of uncontrolled exploitation, abuse and coercion. Many of us are forced to tolerate unacceptable working hours, unsanitary working conditions, unfair division of income, and unreasonable restrictions on freedom of movement. Certain groups of sex workers, such as migrants, are disproportionately affected by unacceptable working conditions.

**WE DEMAND** that legislation ensuring just and favourable conditions of work, remuneration and protection against unemployment be extended to include sex workers.

**WE DEMAND** that sex work be recognised as gainful employment, enabling migrants to apply for work and residence permits, and that both documented and undocumented migrants be entitled to full labour rights.

**WE DEMAND** that a European Commission Ombudsman oversee national legislation governing the sex industry. This can be a newly-created post or can be added to the work of an existing ombudsman.

## Professional and personal development

We assert our right to join and form unions.

As sex workers, we require the same possibilities for professional development as other workers. We assert our right to develop vocational training and advice services, including offering support to those who choose to work independently and to those who wish to establish their own businesses.

We call for support to be provided to sex workers who wish to further their education or to look for alternative employment.

**WE DEMAND** that anti-discrimination legislation be applied within the sex industry. We further demand that, given the specific difficulties sex workers face as a consequence of stigma, anti-discrimination legislation be applied to sex workers seeking alternative employment.

## Taxes and welfare

We acknowledge citizens' obligations to financially support the society in which they live. However, given that sex workers do not receive the same benefits as other citizens, and given that our right to equal protection under the law is routinely denied, some sex workers do not feel this obligation.

**WE DEMAND** that we have access to social insurance, including the right to unemployment and sick-leave benefits, pensions and health care.

Sex workers should pay taxes on the same basis as other employees and independent contractors, and should receive the same benefits. Taxation schemes should not be used as a means to register sex workers, and should prioritize efforts to remove stigma and protect confidentiality. Information on taxes must be accessible and easy to understand, and must be provided in many languages for migrant workers. Tax collection schemes should be transparent and easily understood by workers in order to avoid exploitation and abuse by employers.

The purchase of appropriate goods and services—including health services, where paid for—should be tax deductible.

## Health and safety at work

Our bodies are our business. In order to maintain our health, we require free or affordable safe-sex products and access to health services.

**WE DEMAND** that our governments prohibit authorities from confiscating condoms and other safe-sex products from sex workers and sex-work establishments.

**WE DEMAND** that our governments provide free or affordable access to sexual health care for *all* sex workers, including access to vaccinations for preventable diseases.

**WE DEMAND** that the health-care needs of sex workers be included in all health insurance schemes and that, as with other occupations, sick pay be available for work-related illness.

Violence within any workplace is a health-and-safety issue. Our employers have an obligation to protect us and to take action against those who violate our safety while we're engaged in work.

**WE DEMAND** that our governments take our health and safety seriously, and promote safe working environments in which violence and abuse will not be tolerated. To this end, we urge governments to establish emergency helplines through which sex workers can anonymously seek advice and report abuse.

## Working conditions

The fact that we engage in sexual activities for a living does not preclude our right to decide whom we have sex with, which sexual services we provide, and the conditions under which we provide those services.

We assert the right to engage in sex work without coercion; to move within the sex industry; and to leave it, if we choose.

No other person must be allowed to determine the nature of the services we provide or the conditions under which we provide them, whether we are employees or "self-employed." We reserve the right to refuse any client and to refuse to provide any service.

**WE DEMAND** the right to fair conditions of work, including entitlement to the minimum wage, to work breaks, to minimum rest periods, and to annual leave. Such conditions should also apply to those who are nominally "self-employed" within a collective workplace.

**WE DEMAND** an end to unacceptable practices such as requiring sex workers to consume alcohol or drugs at work, or to pay excessive costs for food, drink, services, or clothing in the workplace.

**WE DEMAND** that health and safety be made a priority in our workplaces and, for those who work independently in public places, that their health and safety also be protected. We demand that employers comply with privacy protection legislation; that our personal information be treated confidentially; and that any abuse of such personal information be taken seriously by relevant authorities.

Legislation which regulates working hours and conditions is complex. It is important that clear and accurate information about our rights be

provided to sex workers, and displayed within our workplaces. Such information must be provided in many different languages to ensure that migrants can understand it.

To improve our working conditions, it is important that sex workers have opportunities to organise and to advocate for our rights. We call upon trade unions to support us in our efforts to organise and in our struggle for fair working conditions.

We call for the establishment of designated areas for street prostitution. Such area designations must be made in consultation with, and with agreement from sex workers. This is necessary in order to enable those who work in public places to do so safely, without compromising any individual's choice of work venue. Such areas would enable us to work collectively and would facilitate delivery of appropriate services for sex workers. In addition, police could ensure that sex workers within designated areas are protected from interference by criminals and other undesirables.

## Decriminalisation of sex work

As we have already stated, the criminalisation of activities related to sex work and the *de facto* criminalisation of sex workers are unacceptable. We have also already specified a number of areas where law reform is required, including our right to use our earnings to support our family and loved ones; our right to freedom of association; our right to freedom of movement within and between countries; and our right to have designated public areas where sex workers and clients may meet one another (without infringing upon an individual's right to work where they choose). The following demands identify other specific areas where law reform is required:

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***Umbrellas are followed by rainbows.***

PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)



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**WE DEMAND** the repeal of all legislation that criminalises us; our clients; our families; those we work with; and any employer, organiser or manager who follows fair practices.

**WE DEMAND** that our right to work individually or collectively, as either independent workers or as employees, with the full protection of labour rights, be respected.

**WE DEMAND** that our right to rent premises from which to work, to advertise our services, and to pay those who carry out services for us be respected.

**WE DEMAND** that sex-work businesses be regulated by standard business codes and that, under such codes, businesses, rather than sex workers, be registered.

**WE DEMAND** that criminal laws be enforced against those who perpetrate fraud, coercion, or abuse (including child sexual abuse), forced labour (including child labour), violence, rape, or murder upon sex workers in order to make sex work safe for all. □

♥ This English version of *The Sex Workers in Europe Manifesto* has been edited for clarity. The unedited version is available in French, German, Spanish and Russian, as well as English, on the ICRSE website at: <http://www.sexworkeurope.org>



PHOTO: A. Sorfleet