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Ten misconceptions about sex work and human trafficking

Many beliefs about prostitution or sex work are based on myths, stereotypes and misconceptions. This hinders the development of an effective approach to human trafficking and emancipatory prostitution policies that recognise the agency of women and their right to self-determination and bodily autonomy. The aim of this fact sheet is to dispel some of these misconceptions and provide a more realistic view of sex work and human trafficking.

Misconception 1: Human trafficking is inextricably linked to sex work

Many people still believe that human trafficking is intrinsically linked to sex work. However, In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that trafficking occurs in many sectors of the economy, including domestic work, healthcare, hospitality, construction, the meat industry, and agriculture. The core of human trafficking is coercion and the exploitation of people under forced labour or slavery-like conditions. These are crimes and a violation of human rights.

As in other industries, there is both voluntary and forced labour in the sex industry, with working conditions ranging from good to bad, and cases of exploitation and human trafficking occurring at the extremes. Some victims of human trafficking are forced into prostitution (or other forms of labour) against their will. Others have chosen the work themselves, but subsequently are forced to work in unfree and exploitative conditions in which they cannot dispose of their money, decide for themselves how they want to work or stop when they want to.

Misconception 2: No woman becomes a sex worker voluntarily

An unknown proportion of sex workers are forced into it or have ended up in it through deception and manipulation. Others enter the profession because they see no other way out or consider sex work the best option between the available alternatives. The choice for sex work can also be the result of discrimination and limited access to other work. This can apply, for example, to trans sex workers. Conversely, there is a large group of sex workers who are satisfied with their work. Some men, women and transgender people have consciously chosen sex work, while others ended up in it by chance or out of financial necessity. Earning relatively high wages, flexible working hours, independence, contact with colleagues, being appreciated by clients and feeling attractive are some of the advantages that sex workers experience in their work.

That is not to say that sex work is always 'good work', or that there is no exploitation in the sector. But something does not have to be good work to be considered work. As is the case for most people, you don't always have to love your job 24/7 to not want to lose it. And for most people, they work to earn a living. Whether sex workers enjoy their work or not, whether they work in good or bad conditions, they all have an interest in having their work recognised and in having the same rights and protections as other workers.

Misconception 3: But isn't human trafficking a very big problem according to the figures?

It is difficult to estimate the number of sex workers in the Netherlands or any other country, let alone the number of victims of human trafficking.[1] Also, not everyone understands human trafficking in the same way. For example, some people consider all sex work to be human trafficking or consider it coercion when people choose sex work for economic reasons. Most Dutch studies estimate that between 4 and 10% of sex workers have experienced coercion at some point. In the evaluation of the lifting of the ban on brothels in 2014, for example, 4% of the sex workers interviewed indicated that they had experienced some form of coercion. Two-

thirds believed that the majority of their colleagues worked on a voluntary basis.[2] These figures correspond with research conducted by Wagenaar et al. in 2013 in the Netherlands and Austria. In this study, approximately 10% of the sex workers interviewed indicated that they had ever been forced into prostitution or into working under unacceptable working conditions. Most of them had managed to escape from that situation on their own.[3] A small proportion of them reported the crime to the police.

Misconception 4. Human trafficking is about forcing girls and women into prostitution

The stereotypical image of trafficking in women is that of 'innocent' girls and women who are forced into prostitution. In reality, as with other forms of human trafficking, the majority of human trafficking cases involving sex work are not about the type of work, but about the forced working conditions. For example, research by the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings into 111 cases of sexual exploitation in 2009-2010 showed that only 22% of the criminal cases (and 16% of proven cases) involved deception about the nature of the work. The rest of the cases involved deception about the working conditions.[4] Contrary to the stereotype of the 'innocent' victim who is forced into prostitution against her will, these are often situations in which people have consciously chosen to engage in sex work or knew they were going to do so, but are then forced to work in unfree and degrading conditions, in which they are exploited and cannot stop when they want to.

The idea that victims must be 'innocent' is a form of 'victim blaming', as if sex workers are less entitled to protection against human trafficking and other forms of violence and abuse than other people. We also see this in rape cases, for example. This way of thinking is linked to the idea that women's right to protection from violence is determined by their sexual 'purity' or 'honour'. Discussions about the 'innocence' of the victim are always linked to the sexual behaviour and 'morality' of women, even though a significant proportion of sex workers and victims of human trafficking are men and transgender people.

Misconception 5: Decriminalising sex work promotes human trafficking

Just as accepting marriage does not imply acceptance of domestic violence, decriminalisation of sex work does not imply acceptance of human trafficking or other forms of coercion and violence. Removing sex work from criminal law has actually demonstrated to be an effective means to protect sex workers' human rights and combat trafficking and other abuses, especially when combined with policies to improve the position of both sex workers and victims of violence and abuse.

When prostitution does not have to take place in secret and sex workers have the same rights as other workers, they are better able to take care of their safety and defend themselves against coercion and violence. It will also enhance trust between the police and sex workers, and enable them to report abuses without fear of negative consequences, such as fines, eviction, or involuntary outing. In order to combat abuse of power and exploitation, we have developed labour law since the end of the 19th century as a far more effective tool for combating exploitation and other abuses than criminal law. This principle also applies to addressing abuses in sex work.

Research also does not provide any reliable conclusions about the impact of sex work policies on the extent of human trafficking. The main conclusion of a 2016 meta-study was that existing studies are not sufficiently valid and reliable to make useful estimates of the effects of sex work policy on the extent of human trafficking. The researchers found no evidence that legalising or regulating sex work would lead to more human trafficking or, conversely, that criminalising sex work would lead to less human trafficking or a decrease in the demand for sexual services.[5]

However, there is ample evidence that criminalising sex work has a negative impact on the safety, health and rights of sex workers. It does not lead to less sex work, but demonstrably leads to a (severe) deterioration in the working and living conditions of sex workers. For example, a recent study on sex work policy in European countries shows that the various forms of criminalisation and sanctions against sex workers, clients or third

parties have negative consequences in terms of healthcare, prevalence and risk of HIV and STI infection, stigmatisation and discrimination, risk of physical and sexual abuse, and marginalisation.[6] This is also why major human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch advocate for the full decriminalisation of sex work.[7]

Misconception 6: Illegal prostitution and forced prostitution are the same thing.

The term 'illegal' is used in different ways, which often causes confusion. Illegal prostitution in the Netherlands can mean that operators run a sex business without a licence when they are required to have one. It can also refer to independent sex workers who work home-based in municipalities where this is prohibited. A growing group of sex workers want to determine their own working conditions, such as being able to refuse certain clients and choose their own working hours, and therefore work independently home-based. They are often registered with the Chamber of Commerce and pay tax. However, many municipalities prohibit working home-based or require a licence that is not granted. Sex workers who are 'caught' run the risk of fines, eviction or involuntary outing. Also when someone does not have a valid residence permit to work in the Netherlands, it is called illegal prostitution. Forced prostitution is something else. Forced prostitution and human trafficking involve deception, deprivation of liberty, (sexual) violence and exploitation.

Misconception 7: Registering sex workers provides insight into the prostitution industry and helps in the fight against human trafficking

Some political parties believe that mandatory registration of sex workers in a national database, as proposed in the Wrs (Sex Work Regulation Act), will give the government more insight into the sex industry and enable it to combat human trafficking more effectively. However, sex workers will generally want to protect their privacy and avoid registration. This is especially true when it is unclear how well their data will be protected and what the consequences will be for their privacy, their ability to work independently, and their future employment prospects. They do not believe that inclusion in a national database will increase their safety; on the contrary. The stigma attached to prostitution is still significant in the Netherlands and sex workers experience discrimination at various levels, including access to financial services, housing and health care. Male and transgender sex workers face additional discrimination.

Many sex workers will not want to register because of fear that it will become known that they are involved in sex work. Others are not able to register, for example because they do not have the right papers or because they work at home in a city that prohibits it. This creates a divide between registered and unregistered sex workers. The latter group is no longer accessible to support services and will not go to the police if something is wrong. This makes them vulnerable to violence and blackmail. Clients and malicious individuals can take advantage of this. In Germany, which introduced compulsory registration in 2017, federal figures show that after three years, only slightly more than 20% of the estimated number of sex workers have registered.[8] This means that a large proportion of sex workers who previously worked legally have disappeared into illegality.

One argument is that civil servants will be able to identify victims of human trafficking during the registration process. However, if it is difficult even for experienced police officers and social workers to identify human trafficking in a conversation, it is completely impossible for a local government official. As with domestic violence, many victims do everything they can to hide their situation. This makes building a relationship of trust imperative. This takes time and cannot be achieved in a single mandatory conversation.

Furthermore, sex workers who can do so will avoid compulsory registration for reasons of safety and privacy protection. Registration therefore creates a false sense of security. After all, it says nothing about whether someone is a victim of human trafficking or might become one in future. Registration therefore carries the risk that the government in advertently will legitimise the exploitation of forced sex workers.

Misconception 8: Human trafficking is a migration problem.

It is a misconception that victims of human trafficking are always migrants. Approximately half of the victims registered by CoMensha (Coordination Human Trafficking) are Dutch. International human trafficking is not solely a migration problem either. People migrate in search of better living and working conditions, to earn money or to flee violence. Conversely, Dutch consumers want to obtain goods and services as cheaply as possible. However, our restrictive migration policy often makes legal migration impossible, especially for low-skilled and poorly paid work in the informal sector and for so-called 'women's work', such as domestic work, care work and sex work. Traffickers take advantage of this. When people are here illegally and have no rights, they are easy to exploit. After all, they cannot go to the police without risking deportation.

It is often assumed that men migrate voluntarily and deliberately, whereas women are seen as victims of deception and exploitation. In reality, most women migrate just as consciously as men. Sometimes for sex work, sometimes for labour in other sectors. And both men and women can find themselves in a situation of coercion during their migration journey.

Misconception 9: Criminalising clients helps combat human trafficking.

Some parties want to criminalise clients of sex workers in order to combat human trafficking. However, research into the experiences of countries that have done this, such as Sweden, Ireland and France, shows that criminalising clients directly compromises the safety, health and autonomy of sex workers.[9]

Sex workers describe how contacts have to take place in remote locations because clients are afraid of being caught. Mutual social control is impossible because sex workers working in groups attract too much attention. Fearful clients mean that sex workers have too little time to properly assess the reliability of the client. Sex workers have less bargaining power and are forced to accept clients they would otherwise have refused and take more health risks because soliciting clients is much more difficult. Because it is more difficult for sex workers to organise their work independently, the number of pimps is increasing. It is also becoming more difficult for social services and healthcare providers to reach sex workers.

Misconception 10: Prostitution should be banned altogether.

The desire or need of sex workers to earn money will not disappear with a ban, nor will a ban change poverty or address social, economic and gender inequalities. Nor will the demand for sexual services simply decrease. Clients and sex workers will find new ways to meet each other. The fact that sex work also occurs in countries where it is banned teaches us that prohibitions are not very successful. Research confirms that different types of prostitution policies have virtually no effect on the number of sex workers. However, they do have a major impact on the working conditions and the safety and health of sex workers.[10]

January 2026
SekswerkExpertise, platform for the advancement of sex worker rights

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