

FACTSHEET SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS ARE WOMEN'S RIGHTS – 4 FEBRUARY 2026

This submission presents recent data on human trafficking in the Netherlands, alongside brief observations on criminalisation of sex work and sex workers' rights, as well as an update on legal developments and relevant measures set out in the current Dutch coalition agreement.

1. Human trafficking in the Netherlands: Overview and Data

Estimates of human trafficking in the Netherlands vary widely, partly due to differences in datasets and definitions. Some older figures cited in the MAAT shadow report come from the 2018 report of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings. Based upon the available data from 2013 to 2017, it was estimated that there were potentially between 5,000 and 7,500 victims each year. Of these, around two-thirds (67%) were estimated to be victims of sexual exploitation, of whom the biggest part are Dutch ($\pm 3,000$). Of the estimated total of potential victims only 19% were registered with CoMensha, the national reporting centre ([NRM, 2018](#)). However, the reliability of the estimates and the suitability of the statistical method used are questionable. Furthermore the concept of sexual exploitation was not further defined so it is not clear what exactly was measured ([Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2019](#)).

The most recent data (NRM, 2025) shows 944 reported cases of trafficking, with a notable increase in victims under the age of 18, particularly in regard to criminal exploitation, and an increase in reported cases of labour exploitation. Overall, it is estimated that annually around 5,000 people are affected by human trafficking. Reported trafficking cases by type show that labour and criminal exploitation now surpass domestic sexual exploitation. While the Netherlands has a comprehensive policy to address trafficking, which a.o. results in an increased visibility of trafficking, improvements remain necessary. These include strengthening governance and coordination, updating legislation to cover all sectors, improving detection and prosecution, increasing victim reception capacity, and extending NRM monitoring to the BES islands ([Annual figures on human trafficking for 2024, NRM, 2025](#)).

2. Need for rights, not criminalisation

Two legislative proposals currently under development in the Netherlands risk undermining the legal position and safety of sex workers: the *Municipal Supervision of Sex Establishments Act* (Wgts) and the *Sex Work Regulation Act* (Wrs).

The first proposal would allow municipalities and brothel operators to collect sensitive personal data from sex workers, including ethnicity and sexual orientation, which conflicts with fundamental privacy rights. The second proposal introduces a mandatory licensing system that obliges sex workers to register and be assessed for “self-reliance”. This creates a unique and disproportionate barrier not applied to any other profession and risks exposing individuals' occupation. Due to stigma, many sex workers are unlikely to register, which will lead to an increase in clandestine and unsafe working conditions. Experiences in other countries, such as Germany, show that similar regulatory frameworks push sex workers underground, reducing their access to support services and compromising their safety.

In its 2010 Concluding Observations CEDAW already expressed its concern that compulsory registration might lead the majority of sex workers to work illegally, risks to undermine efforts to combat sexual exploitation, increase the vulnerability of prostitutes who are not able or not willing to register, and may

create serious risks for registered prostitutes' privacy and safety (Concluding Observations, nr. 30 & 31, CEDAW/C/NLD/CO/5).

Research shows that criminalising sex work, including of clients, endangers the safety, health and human rights of sex workers and exacerbates their working and living conditions, without reducing the extent of sex work or trafficking. Punitive policies increase health risks, stigma, discrimination, and exposure to violence. They undermine women's safety, agency and access to remedies, thereby entrenching rather than preventing harm.

For these reasons, leading international human rights and anti-trafficking organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), as well as national advocacy organisations such as SekswerkExpertise and the Sex Work Alliance Destigmatisation (SWAD) advocate the full decriminalisation of sex work, recognising that protecting sex workers' rights is paramount to the realisation of women's rights. In line with CEDAW, making sex workers' rights an integral part of women's rights is vital in order to protect their labour and human rights, their safety, health and recourse to justice, including of those in exploitative or abusive situations.

3. Update new coalition agreement (January 2026)

The latest government coalition agreement aims to raise the minimum age for sex work from 18 to 21, citing the vulnerability of young workers. While well-intentioned, there is overwhelming evidence that criminal law and repression do not reduce harm but rather exacerbate existing (risk of) harm and restrict survivor's access to care and justice. History and research show that criminalisation of a marginalized group of people - such as LGBTQI+ people - does not lead to greater health, safety, or justice outcomes. For example, the Netherlands rightfully struck the criminal law article raising the age of consent for same-sex acts, which has add to the acceptance of gay relations and the wellbeing of young gay people. Raising the age of consent and indirectly criminalising young sex workers rather than ensuring them access to care, rights, and protections, risks repeating outdated mistakes and undermining women's equality.

4. Recommendations for CEDAW

Based on scientific evidence and international human rights standards, including those entailed by CEDAW, we recommend the Committee to urge the government to:

1. **Withdraw and revisit both legislative proposals** and make sure to **engage sex workers and their representative organisations** when making new laws.
2. Improve sex workers' safety, health and access to justice by **fully decriminalising sex work**
3. **Strengthen sex workers' labour and social rights**, by ensuring fair working conditions, adequate healthcare, social support and legal protections, including for those in exploitative situations and those who wish to leave the industry.
4. **Combat stigma and discrimination** by ensuring that policies uphold equality, recognize sex workers' agency, and acknowledge sex workers' rights as integral to women's rights.
5. **Adopt an evidence-based approach**, basing laws and policies on research and historical lessons from the criminalisation of marginalised groups, in order to avoid outdated and harmful approaches.