

# Launch of European Coalition on Sex Workers' Rights and Inclusion: Public Statement



13 October 2022

Today, on the occasion of European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance's first Congress, 15 European and international organisations have come together to proudly announce the launch of the European Coalition on Sex Workers' Rights and Inclusion.

The organisations who make up the Coalition are: Aids Action Europe (AAE), Amnesty International, Correlation European Harm Reduction Network (Correlation EHRN), European Aids Treatment Group (EATG), European Digital Rights (EDRi), European Network Against Racism (ENAR), European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), Equinox - Racial Justice Initiative, Fair Trials, Human Rights Watch, International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN), International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe (ILGA-Europe), La Strada International (LSI), Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), and Transgender Europe (TGEU).

Sex workers in Europe face high levels of discrimination, violence and human rights violations<sup>1</sup>. Despite decades of self-organising, community building and advocacy, sex workers and their organisations are too often discriminated against and their rights attacked, by both private and public actors. Sex worker rights defenders - who are experts in the needs of their communities - are often defamed, stigmatised, and threatened<sup>2</sup>. Sex workers' voices are rarely heard - and their needs rarely met - by policy makers.

Our organisations are leading civil society networks and human rights organisations. They have decades of experience and expertise in human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, HIV, harm reduction, LGBTQI rights, digital rights, anti-trafficking, migration, racial justice and criminal justice. Within these numerous fields of expertise, all 15 organisations have come to the same conclusion: **criminalisation is not the solution**. It is only by adopting a human rights approach, decriminalising sex work, and meaningfully including sex workers and sex worker rights defenders in decision-making that sex workers can be protected.

The criminalisation of sex work - including sex workers, clients and third parties - continues to negatively impact sex workers' lives and their access to health and justice in particular. Despite calls by some organisations to 'abolish prostitution' in order to protect and 'rescue' people who

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<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/05/amnesty-international-publishes-policy-and-research-on-protection-of-sex-workers-rights/>

<sup>2</sup> [First Global Report on Sex Worker Rights Defenders at Risk](#)

sell sex, there is no evidence that criminalising sex workers, their clients or third parties has any positive impact on the lives and human rights of sex workers. On the contrary, decades of evidence from academic research, civil society organisations and sex workers themselves proves beyond doubt that repressive policing and criminalisation -including the criminalisation of clients also known as Swedish Model - directly impact the health, well-being and social inclusion of people who sell sex, in particular those marginalised in multiple ways such as racialised, LGBTIQ, and undocumented migrant sex workers.

The COVID-19 crisis has further exposed the urgent need to include marginalised communities such as sex workers in policy making during public health crises: the lack of inclusion and meaningful consultation of sex workers in epidemic and pandemic responses - including HIV, COVID-19 and Monkeypox - hinders global responses to these crises.

Similarly, the spread of biometric mass surveillance, attacks to privacy and confidentiality of communications puts sex workers at risk. We support policy and campaign initiatives in Europe that empower people to enjoy their right to privacy and protect them from all forms of surveillance.

Sex workers' rights are also a racial justice issue. In many Western European countries, the vast majority of sex workers are migrants, often undocumented, asylum seekers or refugees. Repressive policing, surveillance, (racial) profiling, and criminalisation in the context of migration lead to harm, exclusion and exploitation. Migrant and racialised sex workers therefore face multiple layers of criminalisation and intersectional discrimination as sex workers, as migrants, and as racialised people. The conflation of trafficking and (migrant) sex work has been - and continues to be - instrumentalised to push for a pro-criminalisation agenda that is at odds with a human rights, migrants' rights and racial justice approach. In particular, addressing discriminatory policing - such as 'rescue raids' - of racialised communities has been at the center of racial justice organisation and movements' demands and aligns with demands of sex workers' rights organisations.

The combination of gendered poverty, trans/homophobia and policies that criminalise sex work - with their ensuing consequences on sex working communities - make sex workers' rights a gender justice issue. While those proposing various forms of criminalisation (often known as the Swedish model) purport to be 'protecting women', these policies have been shown to only further entrench women in poverty, increasing their risk of exploitation. Due to stigma and discrimination, LGBTIQ people - in particular trans people - are often excluded from traditional

labour markets, with sex work being their only feasible source of income. Criminalisation is often associated with abusive and discriminatory police practices; trans women are disproportionately targeted by - and face severe violence from - police. Sex workers' human rights are therefore not incompatible with gender justice issues; on the contrary, they are inextricably linked.

In this context, our organisations are proud to stand in solidarity with sex workers, sex worker rights defenders, and their organisations. Our recommendations and demands echo those of sex workers and must be implemented urgently by all political actors:

- Oppose all laws and policies that criminalise or penalise directly or in practice the consensual exchange of sexual services between adults for remuneration, including the criminalisation of clients and third parties.
- Protect sex workers from mass surveillance from corporations and governments alike.
- Include sex workers and their organisations in the development and evaluation of laws, policies and programmes that affect their lives.
- Support the self-organisation and self-determination of sex workers.
- Fund and provide technical support to sex workers' organisations and sex worker rights defenders, in line with the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders.
- Fund and support evidence-based and person-centred policy-making to ensure equal access to health, housing, decent work and justice for all sex workers, regardless of their residence status. This requires a rights-based and social justice approach for tackling labour exploitation, coercion, violence and human trafficking, which includes safeguards against immigration enforcement and pathways to access secure residence status.

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