

# Sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality

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The European Parliament adopted by 343 votes to 139, with 105 abstentions, a resolution on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality.

Prostitution and forced prostitution are gendered phenomena with a global dimension, involving around 40-42 million people worldwide, with the vast majority of prostituted persons being women and under-age females.

EU data shows that the current policy to combat trafficking is not effective and that there is a problem to identify and prosecute traffickers so that the investigation of sex-trafficking cases and the prosecution and conviction of human traffickers need to be strengthened.

In an amendment adopted in plenary, the Parliament recognises that prostitution, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation are highly gendered issues and violations of human dignity, contrary to human rights principles, including 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.

Parliament underlines that the health rights of all women must be respected, including their right to their bodies and sexuality and to be free of coercion, discrimination and violence. It stresses in particular that there are several links between prostitution and trafficking, and recognises that prostitution both globally and across Europe feeds the trafficking of vulnerable women and under-age females, a large percentage of whom are between 13-25 years old.

Parliament also indicates that, as shown by data from the Commission, a majority of victims (62 %) are trafficked for sexual exploitation, with women and under-age females accounting for 96 % of identified and presumed victims, with the percentage of victims from non-EU countries showing an increase in the past few years.

The lack of reliable, accurate and comparable data among countries, owing mainly to the illegal and often invisible nature of prostitution and trafficking, keeps the prostitution market opaque and hinders political decision-making.

Prostitution and public health: Parliament stresses that prostitution is also a health issue, as it has detrimental health impacts on persons in prostitution, who are more likely to suffer from sexual, physical and mental health traumas, drug and alcohol addiction, and loss of self-respect, as well as a higher mortality rate, than the general population; adds and stresses that many of the sex buyers ask for unprotected commercial sex, which increases the risk of detrimental health impacts, both for persons in prostitution and for the buyers

The plenary also recognises that prostitution and forced prostitution can have an impact on violence against women in general, as research on sex buyers shows that men who buy sex have a degrading image of women. Parliament therefore suggests to the competent national authorities that the ban on the purchase of sexual services should be accompanied by a campaign to raise awareness among men.

At the same time, Member States are invited to:

- introduce, in accordance with national law, regular, confidential counselling and health checks for prostitutes, on premises other than those where prostitution takes place;
- exchange best practices on ways to reduce the dangers associated with street prostitution;
- combat child prostitution (involving persons under the age of 18) as energetically as possible, as it is the most serious form of forced prostitution;
- conduct special, age-specific educational awareness-raising and preventive campaigns in schools and colleges;
- give the police and the authorities responsible for premises where prostitution takes place the right to enter such premises and to carry out checks at random;
- transpose Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA, into national law as rapidly as possible, particularly with a view to protecting victims;
- encourage police authorities to cooperate with the victims and encourage them to testify;
- encourage the existence of specialised services within the police and to employ police women and improve judicial cooperation between Member States in this field;
- tackle the underlying social problems that force men, women and children into prostitution (such as poverty, social exclusion);
- evaluate both the positive and negative effects of criminalising the purchase of sexual services on reducing prostitution and trafficking;
- put in place strategies for demand reduction;
- take measures to discourage the practice of sexual tourism inside as well as outside the EU.

Stop regarding prostitutes as criminals: Parliament calls on the Member States to refrain from criminalising and penalising prostituted persons, and to develop programmes to assist prostituted persons/sex workers to leave the profession should they wish to do so. It therefore calls on all Member States to repeal repressive legislation against prostituted persons and warns that sexual liberty must not be interpreted as a license to disregard women.

Nordic model: the resolution considers that the most effective way of combating the trafficking of women and under-age females for sexual exploitation and improving gender equality is the model implemented in Sweden, Iceland and Norway (the so-called Nordic model). This model is currently under consideration in several European countries, where the purchase of sexual services constitutes the criminal act, not the services of the prostituted persons.

As prostitution is a cross-border problem, the Member States should assume responsibility for combating the buying of sex outside their own territory.

Parliament emphasises that some data confirm the Nordic models deterrent effect on trafficking into Sweden, where prostitution and sex trafficking have not increased, and that this model is increasingly supported by the population, especially by young people.

Parliament considers that looking upon prostitution as legal sex work, decriminalising the sex industry in general and making procuring legal is not a solution to keeping vulnerable women and under-age females safe from violence and exploitation, but has the opposite effect and puts them in danger of a higher level of violence, whilst encouraging the growth of the market in prostitution, thus increasing the numbers of women and girls persecuted.

Prostitution and the economic crisis: Parliament draws the attention of the national authorities to the impact of the economic downturn on the growing number of women and under-age females, including migrant women, forced to enter prostitution. It points out that economic problems and poverty are major causes of prostitution among young women and under-age females, and therefore recommends:

- gender-specific prevention strategies;
- national and Europe-wide campaigns specially targeted at socially excluded communities and those in situations of increased vulnerability;
- measures to reduce poverty and to raise awareness among both the purchasers and suppliers of sex, especially among migrants.

Lastly, the report urged the Commission: i) to evaluate the impact that the European legal framework designed to eliminate trafficking for sexual exploitation has had to date; ii) to mobilise the necessary means and tools to fight trafficking and sexual exploitation and to reduce prostitution; iii) to undertake further research on patterns of prostitution, on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and on the increased level of sex tourism in the EU, and iv) to promote the exchange of best practices among the Member States.

The Commission should continue funding projects and programmes to fight trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation. The EEAS should also take measures to stop the practice of prostitution in areas of conflict where EU military forces are present.

It should be noted that a proposed replacement resolution presented by the ECR ad Alde groups as well as several members of the Greens/EFA Group (Ulrike LUNACEK (AT), Marije CORNELISSEN (NL), Raül ROMEVA i RUEDA (ES) and Iñaki IRAZABALBEITIA FERNÁNDEZ (ES)) was rejected in plenary.