

FAILED PROMISES:

THE HISTORY OF LEGAL PROSTITUTION AND
SEX TRAFFICKING IN THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS





The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) is one of the oldest international organizations working to end the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls. Through an approach rooted in women's rights and human rights principles, we advocate for strong laws and policies, raise public awareness and support survivor leadership.

See more at catwinternational.org

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Content warning:

This report contains strong language and examples of sexual violence, pornography, racism, and violence against women, which some readers may find distressing.

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Note: In the Netherlands, laws addressing all aspects of prostitution - at the national and municipal levels - are constantly evolving. As such, it is worth noting that this report reflects the legal landscape of 2024.



Acronyms and Terms

1949 Convention: The Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949)

The 2000 law: The Prostitution Act, the amendment to the Dutch Penal Code taking effect on October 1, 2000 that lifted the general ban on brothels and the ban on pimping in the Netherlands.

ACS: Amsterdam Center for Sex Workers

CEDAW: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)

CEDAW Committee: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

Code of Hammurabi: Legal text adopted by Babylonian King Hammurabi (reigned from 1792-1750 BCE), which contains nearly 300 laws covering property, commerce, family, and criminal matters

CSAM: Child Sexual Abuse Materials, formerly known as “child pornography”

De Wallen: Amsterdam’s red-light district

ECJ: European Court of Justice

European Communities Associations Agreements: European Union Agreement establishing an association between the European Union and a non-EU country or bloc of countries

EU: European Union

EU/EFTA: European Union/European Free Trade Association

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GRETA: The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

GWC: Dutch West India Company (Geotroyeerde West-Indische Compagnie)

NGO: Non-governmental organization

OHCHR: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Palermo Protocol: The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000), also known as the UN Trafficking Protocol

PPS: Netherlands Public Prosecution Service

Project 1012: Amsterdam Municipality project to reduce criminality and neighborhood nuisances of window brothels

The Red Thread (De Rode Draad): Dutch advocacy group supporting prostitution as labor

Sex buyers: Individuals, almost always men, who purchase people, overwhelmingly women, for sexual acts. This is an imperfect term which does not recognize that the essence of purchasing sexual acts is about exerting power, control, and many forms of violence, including sexual violence, on other individuals.

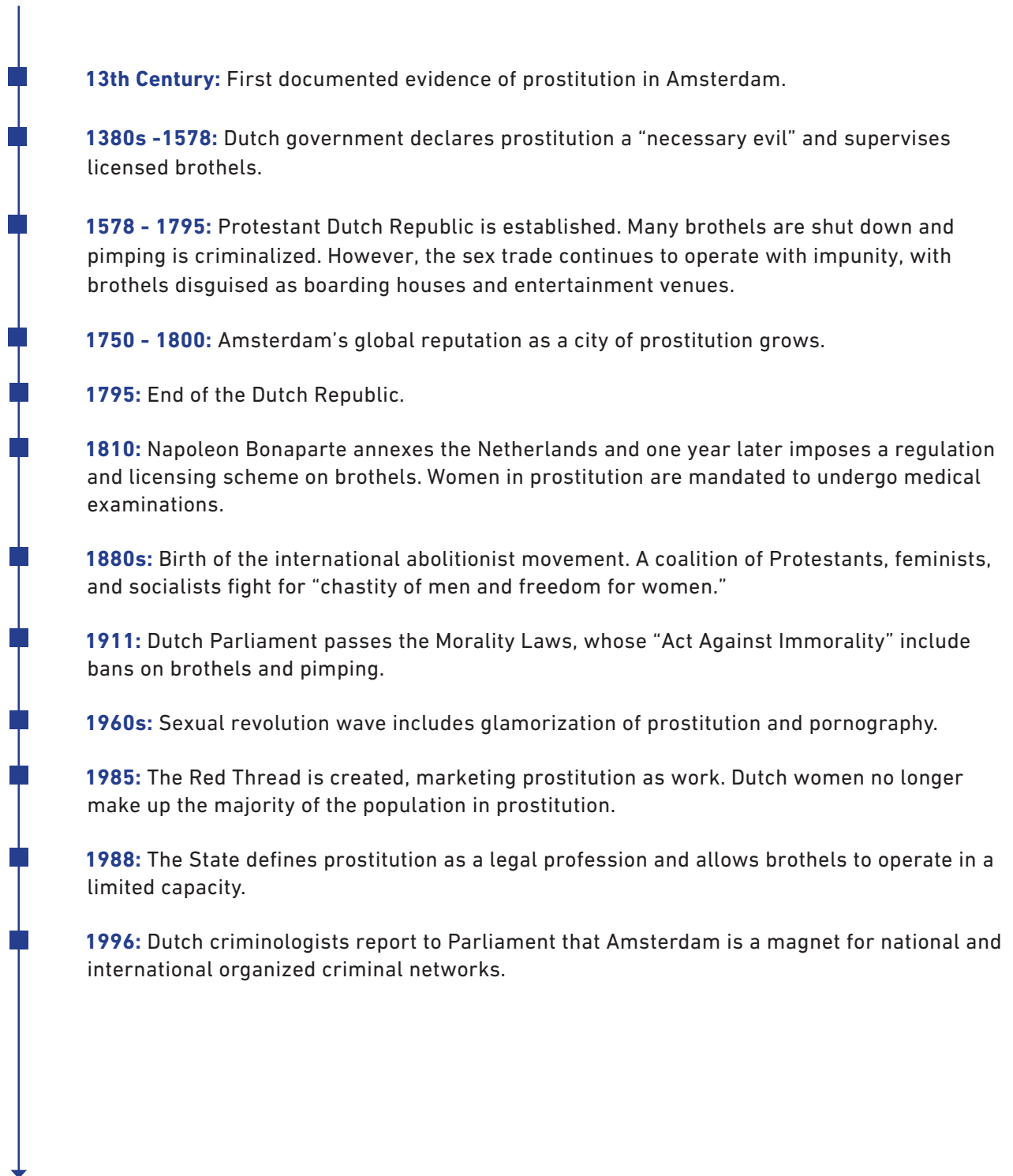
Sex trade lobby: Organizations and movements advocating for the legalization of prostitution and the decriminalization of the sex trade, including sex buying, pimping, procuring, ownership and management of brothels and other commercial sex establishments, sex tourism, and all forms of online prostitution

SHOP: The Relief and Shelter Prostitution and Human Trafficking Foundation

STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection

VOC: Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie)

Select Timeline of Prostitution in the Netherlands



Select Timeline of Prostitution in the Netherlands, cont.



Introduction

“ Since the legalization of 2000, things have changed. The law was created for voluntary prostitution but these days we see trafficking of women, exploitation, and all kinds of criminal activity [...] Women are now moved around more, making police work more difficult. [...] You can't normalize this business. [...] We've realized this is no longer about small-scale entrepreneurs, but that big crime organizations are involved here in trafficking women, drugs, killings and other criminal activities. ”

- Job Cohen, former Mayor of Amsterdam, 2001-2010

On October 1, 2000, the Netherlands legalized prostitution and lifted the ban on brothel owning, effectively decriminalizing pimping. With this law, the government hoped to curb sex trafficking, protect children from sexual exploitation, end the rampant violence in prostitution, and provide social safety nets to prostituted individuals.

Since the passage of the law 24 years ago, the opposite has happened: adults engaged in prostitution experience high levels of abuse, annual figures of sex trafficked children remain high, investigations and prosecutions of human trafficking cases have diminished, while the pervasive violence and stigma inherent to prostitution persists.

Given these obvious failings, why is the Dutch government so attached to the system of prostitution as a form of labor and a manifestation of self-empowerment and bodily autonomy for women? To answer this question, one must not only consider a country's cultural ethos, but also examine the historical trajectory of women's and girls' rights - and lack thereof - which dates long before the forging of most nation-states.

The feminist historian, **Gerda Lerner**, posited that in 1750 BCE in ancient Mesopotamia, **the Code of Hammurabi** etched in stone the inferiority of women and girls. The Code, which influenced the world's legal systems, categorized girls and women as beings unworthy of equality, to be subjugated to their fathers, their husbands, their community, and to the state. It solidified, for millennia to come, the second-class citizenship of women and girls in law and in practice around the globe.

In sanctifying male supremacy as dogma, Hammurabi's Code also formalized prostitution as a system designed to protect "honorable" women from rape, setting apart women by class, status, and origin. Prostitution, like female genital mutilation, polygamy, girl marriage, and myriad other harmful cultural practices sanctioned or tolerated by states, offers the bodies of women and girls to serve the goals of the patriarchy. It guarantees that men maintain their superiority in all spheres of society, including the purported right to sexual access to women's bodies.

Introduction

The Dutch government's embrace of the commodification of women is intricately linked to this history, as well as its 230-year-old legacy of trafficking and enslaving millions of human beings for the growth and glory of **the Kingdom of the Netherlands**.^{*} Like other colonizing powers of the 15th century, the Netherlands subjugated peoples it deemed inferior, and exported the sex trade everywhere they landed. Remarkably, this small country, at constant threat of being swallowed by the sea, played a disproportionate role in shaping the history, economics, and culture of the territories they invaded.

To be clear, the Netherlands did not invent the system of prostitution; the sex trade exists today in every country around the world with varying degrees of acceptance, legality, and visibility. Sixty-four countries around the world have some form of regulated prostitution, and even those who criminalize it accept the sex trade in their culture and practices.

However, under the guise of self-described progressivism and laissez-faire neoliberalism, the Netherlands remains an aggressive promoter of prostitution as a form of sexual liberation for women and decent labor. It funds movements worldwide that call for the legalization of prostitution and champions the sex trade, including within the United Nations and regional bodies, as an employer like any other.

No government has the capacity or power to protect women in the sex trade from **sex buyers**, exploiters, or the physical and psychological harms of prostitution itself. No government has developed the tools and protocols to gauge who entered the sex trade of her own free and independent will. Whether a nation allows men to pay for prostitution with impunity has never been about morality or resources, but always about maintaining male dominance over the "other" for power and profit.

We hope this report will serve as an advocacy and educational tool for the public and to remind governments that the system of prostitution contravenes the international laws and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** they have pledged to honor.

We stress that this report is not an indictment or condemnation of the Dutch people. Most populations around the world do not pay close attention to the mechanics of the sex trade or how it affects the lives of millions, mostly women and children, and society itself. Our collective understanding of how the system of prostitution annihilates human beings and any hope for equality is a work in progress.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women partners with sex trade survivors from former Dutch colonies, including from the United States, Suriname, and South Africa. Their journeys are deeply intertwined with the Kingdom of the Netherlands, its history, and its enduring embrace of prostitution.

These survivors ask us to remember not only the ones left behind, forgotten in the ashes of the sex trade, but invite us to rise from the darkest chapters of history, to reckon with truth and demand justice. Prostitution was never inevitable - it was invented and therefore can be undone by all of us.

^{*} The Netherlands, together with the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten today form the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although semi-autonomous entities, Aruba, Curacao, and Sint Maarten rely on the Kingdom for certain policies.

1 The Journey to Legal Prostitution in the Netherlands



The Early History of Prostitution in the Netherlands

In the 13th century, the Dutch built a bridge connecting Amsterdam's islands, from which an area known as "**De Wallen**" (the Rampart) emerged. At the time, Amsterdam was a bustling trading port and sailors frequently visited the De Wallen brothels, which were operating under some degree of state regulation.

The Dutch government viewed prostitution as a "necessary evil" that prevented the rape of "honorable women" - a notion first codified in the Code of Hammurabi in Ancient Mesopotamia in the 1700s BCE, which influenced philosophers, theologians, nation-states, and myriad national legal systems for millennia thereafter.

Throughout the Reformation era, across Europe, sexual norms and expectations began to change, requiring that husbands be faithful to their wives. Consequently, married and religious men were forbidden from entering De Wallen. In 1578, following the birth of the Protestant Dutch Republic, the new government outlawed prostitution. The sex trade moved underground, with brothels disguised as boarding houses and entertainment venues.



Despite efforts to prohibit the commercial sex industry, by 1675, there were an estimated 1,000 women in prostitution in Amsterdam alone.




The Dutch Empire, Slavery, and the Export of Prostitution

From the 17th to the 20th centuries, the Kingdom of the Netherlands invaded and controlled numerous port cities, coastal areas, and islands through two significant trade organizations: the Dutch West India Company (**GWC**) and the Dutch East India Company (**VOC**). In 1602, the VOC stretched from the Cape of Good Hope to Japan and in 1621, the GWC expanded its trading, including in human beings, in West Africa and throughout the Americas.

Resistance and riots by Indigenous people against GWC and VOC were rarely successful and met with ruthless brutality, including floggings and executions. For instance, the VOC committed genocide in the Banda islands (today part of Indonesia), massacring, starving, or enslaving an estimated 14,000 inhabitants, leaving only 500 survivors.

In all the Dutch colonies, Indigenous and enslaved African women were targeted for sexual violence and commercial sexual exploitation. The colonists differentiated between “civilian women” - deemed worthy of protection from rape - and the Indigenous and enslaved women, who were seen as “inherently immoral” and therefore consigned to brothels for men’s sexual access.



Slavery was not abolished
in the Dutch colonies until
1863, decades after other
empires such as Great Britain,
Spain, and France.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Netherlands, together with the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten today form **the Kingdom of the Netherlands**. Although semi-autonomous entities, Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten rely on the Kingdom for certain policies.

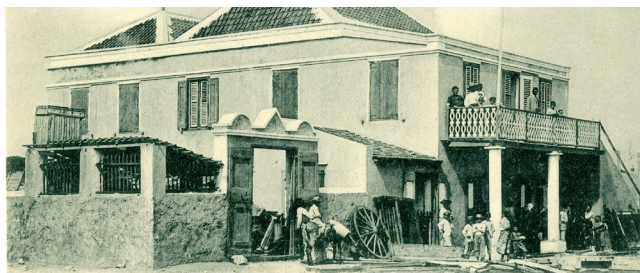
While the Dutch also invaded Suriname, Indonesia, and South Africa, today each country is autonomous. Nevertheless, the Dutch influence in these nations remains strong.

WARUBA is a semi-autonomous entity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

In the early 17th century, the GWC turned Aruba into a trading port and forced enslaved Africans and the surviving Indigenous people to mine the island first for gold, and later for salt.

In the 1920s, significant demand for prostitution generated by the men working in oil refineries led the government to designate an official red-light district, known as the “De Wallen of the Caribbean.”

Today, as is the case across the Dutch Caribbean, despite their legal status, brothels often pose as “bars” or “dance clubs.” The brothels in Aruba exploit mostly migrant women from Latin America and the Caribbean who are granted temporary visas and are forced to undergo regular medical exams to appear “clean” to sex tourists. Aruba remains a site of sex trafficking, particularly of women from Venezuela who are promised employment or legal residency via marriage.



Commercial establishment, Aruba, 1907



Curaçao, 1910

WCURAÇAO is a semi-autonomous entity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Until owners filed for bankruptcy due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Curaçao was the site of “**Campo Alegre**” (“Happy Field”), the world’s largest open-air brothel. Established in 1949 with the explicit involvement of the Governor, the Chief of Police, the Dutch Health Minister, representatives of the Catholic Church, the U.S. military, and the Dutch Savings Bank, 100-150 women were placed in a walled camp for purposes of prostitution. The camp included a bar-restaurant, casino, small shop, health clinic, and administrative office, all to serve the tens of thousands of men and sailors who docked on the island every month. By 2015, the “camp” was receiving 700-1,000 sex buyers per day.

Because sex buyers favored lighter-skinned women, brothel owners - with the approval of the Curaçao government - advertised to lure economic refugees from South American countries. The government offered the women temporary residency if they paid brothel room rent, registered with the state, and underwent weekly medical exams, all in compliance with Dutch registration requirements. In the 1980s, concerned about overcrowding in the brothels, the authorities limited the time that women could engage in prostitution to just four days in total. After this period, the government stamped the women’s passports and banned them from Curaçao for life.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands

W **SINT MAARTEN** is a semi-autonomous entity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

In the 17th century, the arrival of European colonizers nearly decimated the island's Indigenous population. The Europeans wrestled for control until France and the Netherlands agreed to split the island. The Dutch took control of the southern half and used the land for sugar plantations.

In the 1960s, legal brothels were set up to cater to men working in the local fishing and emergent tourist industry. In the 1980s, there were many documented cases of sex trafficking of women by organized criminal networks. In 1985, 28 Dominican women suffocated in a shipping container, suspected to have been operated by U.S.-based mafia for purposes of sexual exploitation.

Reports indicate that proportional to the population, the number of prostituted women in Sint Maarten is six times higher than that of Amsterdam. Sint Maarten remains a destination for sex trafficking, particularly via “dancers’ visas” for prostitution in strip clubs.

Like in most countries, prostituted women in Sint Maarten are segregated by race and ethnicity in negative stereotypical patterns. For example, Haitian and Dominican women are sold in the lowest rungs of prostitution establishments, often followed in rank by lighter-skinned Venezuelan and Colombian women, and Ukrainian women - especially since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine - are trafficked into “high-end” commercial sex establishments or escorting.

In 2023, Sint Maarten did not convict a single sex trafficker, nor did it have any infrastructure to support victims, despite evidence that sex trafficking remains a problem on the island.

W **SURINAME** remained under Dutch control until 1975 and is today an independent country.

For enslaved African-descended women, sexual violence and exploitation were part of daily life. When slavery was abolished, plantations in Suriname moved on to exploiting indentured laborers from Java, whose living conditions remained slavery-like, even though they could “earn” their freedom.

In the late 19th century, a gold rush led to an influx of single men to the country, which coincided with the establishment of brothels near mining sites. Later, WWII brought U.S. troops to the country, which further expanded the sex trade.

In 1942, in order to prepare for a visit by Princess Juliana of the Netherlands, authorities imprisoned a significant number of prostituted women to “clean up” the streets. Some of the women were not released from prison for two years. In 2023, Suriname remains a hot spot for sex trafficking, especially of women and children, particularly from Brazil and Guyana.



Suriname, 1909



VOC SOUTH AFRICA In 1652, the VOC invaded South Africa and established the first Dutch settlement in what is Cape Town today. A trading and “recreation” station, the town became a hub for the slave trade. The Company Slave Lodge, a particularly inhumane housing unit for enslaved people, was also used as a brothel with the dual purpose of prostitution and forced pregnancies to grow the enslaved population.

Sarah Baartman was born in 1789 to a Khoekhoe family in South Africa. A Dutch colonist enslaved Sarah, nicknamed her “Saartje” and imposed the surname Baartman, meaning “bearded,” “barbarous,” or “savage” man. He subsequently sold Sarah to a British doctor who trafficked her to Europe. Advertised as the “Hottentot Venus,” Sarah was exhibited in London’s Piccadilly Circus as a freak of nature. Her exploiters later prostituted her in rich salons in Paris, inviting guests to touch her naked body as entertainment. Sarah died of alcohol-induced and other illnesses at age 26. Her corpse became the object of medical research and a symbolic depiction of African women as “savage, naked, and untameable,” which formed the bedrock of European ideas about black female sexuality that still resonate today. In 2002, almost 200 years after Sarah’s death, President Nelson Mandela succeeded in repatriating her remains back to South Africa.

JUST ARRIVED FROM LONDON,

And, by Permission, will be Exhibited here for a few Days,

At Mr. James’s Sale Rooms, Corner of Lord-street,

THAT MOST WONDERFUL

Phenomenon of Nature,

THE

HOTTENTOT VENUS.

The only One ever exhibited in Europe.


In viewing this Wonderful LIVING Production of Nature, the Public have a perfect Specimen of that most extraordinary Tribe of the Human Race, who have for such a Length of Time inhabited the most Southern Parts of Africa, whose real Origin has never yet been ascertained, nor their Character, which has been so differently described by every Traveller who has visited those remote Regions of the World; and considering the natural morose Disposition of those People (who are scarcely ever observed to laugh) she is remarkably mild and affable in her Manners. She has had the Honor of being visited by His Royal Highness the PRINCE REGENT, and several Branches of the ROYAL FAMILY, also the principal NOBILITY, of both Sexes, in England, and declared to be a great natural Curiosity, well worthy the Attention of the Public. She is particularly obliged to the Female Sex who have so liberally patronized her Exhibition, and more especially after the malicious Reports circulated to her Disadvantage after her Arrival in this Kingdom; but which have been long since proved to be groundless. Over her Clothing, which is suitable to this Climate, is worn all the rude Ornaments used by that tribe on Gala Days.

N. B. Elegant Engravings of the Venus, by Lewis, sold at the Room.

ADMITTANCE—ONE SHILLING.

CHESTER, PRINTED BY J. FLETCHER.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands

 **INDONESIA** is an island nation located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans in Southeast Asia.

In 1619, the Dutch conquered Jakarta, Indonesia's capital and largest city, renaming it "Batavia." Sexual violence and exploitation of local women took various forms: domestic servants were routinely abused by their employers, to the point that one governor banned the hiring of Indigenous women in Dutch households.

All of these dynamics converged with the emergence of "sailors' brothels," segregated by race and class and hubs for the opium trade. These establishments proliferated despite the government's efforts to curb the rise of **STIs**, abortions, and adultery.

By the 1940s there were an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 women in prostitution in Batavia with prices so low a man could purchase sexual acts for the equivalent cost of a pack of cigarettes.

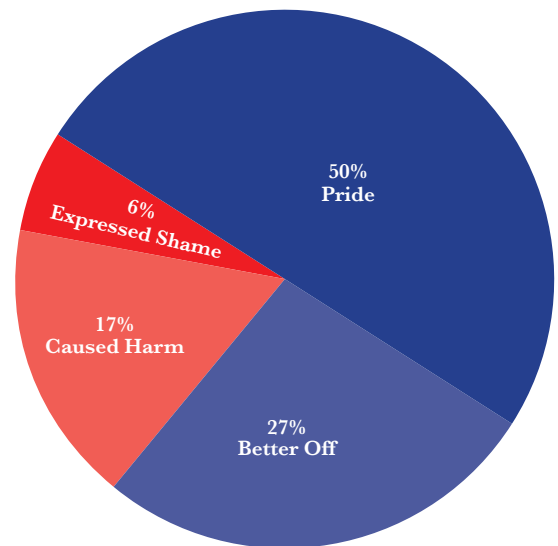
Today, sex trafficking in Indonesia is driven by demand from male sex tourists and enabled by the government's weak response. In 2022, nearly 30% of the trafficking victims were minors, mostly girls.

Batavia, 1948

Legacy of the Dutch Empire

The historical realities of slavery and sexual exploitation are often sanitized or ignored, leading to a widespread view that the Dutch Empire was a mere “trading power” and “benevolent colonial master.” This contributes to the modern conception of the Netherlands as a particularly tolerant and progressive country.

The Dutch reckoning with its colonial past has been slow; the history of the country’s role in slavery was not added to the school curriculum until 2006. Surveys show that, among European countries, the Dutch are proudest of their former empire. However, only 27% think that colonized nations are better off as a result.



Dutch attitudes towards their former Empire (YouGov, 2019)

In one survey, only 6% of Dutch people expressed shame regarding the country’s colonial past, 17% stated colonization had caused harm, and 50% expressed outright pride in the country’s colonial past.

A report published in June 2023 revealed that the Dutch royal family profited greatly from slavery, pulling in the modern-day equivalent of \$595 million. In July 2023, on the 160th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Netherlands, King Willem-Alexander said, “On this day that we remember the Dutch history of slavery, I ask forgiveness for the obvious lack of action against this crime against humanity.”

Six months prior to the King’s public comments, Prime Minister Mark Rutte also issued a formal apology, stating “for hundreds of years, people were made merchandise, exploited and abused in the name of the Dutch state.”



King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands on Inauguration Day, 2013



Sojourner Truth, 1870

Dutch Reckoning with their Colonial Past: The Life of Sojourner Truth

Johannes Hardenbergh owned an estate and a number of enslaved human beings of African descent in Swartekill, a town belonging to a Dutch colony in New York state. Among Hardenbergh's slaves were James and Betsy Baumfree, who welcomed Isabella, in or about 1797, the 11th of their 12 children. Hardenbergh sold each of the couple's children, except for Isabella, known as Belle, and her younger brother. Belle's first language was Dutch, and only learned English around nine years old when she was first auctioned for sale after Hardenbergh's death. Belle had a Dutch accent her entire life. In 1843 she took the name of **Sojourner Truth** and became one of the world's most formidable abolitionists of slavery, and a crusader for women's rights, voting rights, and equal pay.

Reverberations of Racist Traditions

The national ambivalence around race is exemplified by the ongoing controversies around "**Zwarte Piet**" (Black Pete), a tradition of dressing up as a helper of Santa Claus. Black Pete has been variously portrayed as a soot-covered person or a demon, morphing in the 19th century into a racist depiction of an enslaved Black man. Today, dressing as Black Pete usually involves a form of blackface and a "caricature born of white colonial nostalgia," accompanied by Afro wigs, thick red lips, hoop earrings, and 16th-century clothing. "I think that every Black person you ask will tell you that they were called Black Pete a few times in their childhood," said a Black student living in Amsterdam.

In fact, 7 out of 10 people belonging to ethnic minorities in the Netherlands say they encountered institutional racism in education, employment, and housing. 1 in 3 experienced racism in interactions with the police, and more than 1 in 2 experienced racial discrimination in shops and businesses. For women of color, the legacy of being perceived as "less smart, less beautiful, but inherently sexual" is still alive today.

In 2020, **Black Lives Matter** protests erupted across the Netherlands, raising awareness of police brutality against Black men. In reaction, three teenage girls created a petition signed by 60,000 people to introduce education on modern racism into the Dutch school curriculum.



"Black Pete" reveler, 2009

The Tugs of War in Regulating Prostitution

In the 19th century, Napoleon's army arrived in Amsterdam, his soldiers quickly becoming regular patrons of the city's many underground brothels. In a bid to keep his troops "happy," Napoleon lifted the ban on brothels in 1811 and commanded women to register with police as well as undergo mandatory, invasive physicals to ensure his men would not contract venereal diseases. Many treatments were not scientifically sound and often caused harm to the women (e.g., mercury baths for syphilis). Any woman found to be engaging in prostitution while ill could have her permit revoked.

In the late 1880s, an anti-prostitution movement gained traction with a coalition forming between Christian Puritans and Dutch feminists. The feminists asserted that prostituted women should not be punished for the harm being done to them by the sex buyers and brothel owners, while the Christians argued that prostitution was immoral.

Brothels operated legally until 1911 when Parliament passed the **Morality Laws**, which focused on perceived social ills including banning most abortions and contraceptives, raising the age of consent for homosexuality (to 21 as compared to 16 for heterosexuality), as well as criminalizing brothel-keeping and expanding the definition of trafficking (but targeting neither women in prostitution nor sex buyers). However, the "Act Against Immorality," which banned brothels and pimping, was largely ignored and followed by an era of *de facto* tolerance of both that continues today.



Embracing Prostitution in the 20th Century

In the mid-20th century, the Dutch government officially began exerting influence in promoting the system of prostitution within international regulatory bodies, including by refusing to recognize the links between sex trafficking and the sex trade.

Reportedly because it conflicted with its operation of the open-air mega-brothel “Campo Alegre” in Curaçao (see p.14), the Netherlands refused to sign the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (**the 1949 Convention**). The Dutch government criticized the 1949 Convention, stating that it failed “to make a distinction between prostitution and trafficking and presents them as synonyms.”

In 2005, the Netherlands ratified the **Palermo Protocol**, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (**CEDAW**), and in 2010, signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, each of which makes the connection between trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution. However, the Dutch Caribbean islands remain subject to weaker laws or delayed ratification of these conventions. As an example, the Council of Europe Convention is not applied to the Dutch territories other than in Aruba.

At the national level, in the 1960s and 1970s, police and other reports suggested that poverty and organized crime drove the market for prostitution. Many cities in the Netherlands declined to prosecute prostitution cases, as the country became a central site for the emergent movement marketing prostitution as “labor.”

This so-called liberalism extended to the pornography industry, including the distribution of child sexual abuse materials (CSAM, formerly known as “child pornography”). Notorious pornographer **Joop Wilhelmus** (later convicted of raping his own children) won his case defending the right to distribute his publications circulating adult pornography; as a result, a loophole in the law enabled *de facto* decriminalization of distributing CSAM.

While stronger laws were introduced in the mid -1980s, it took until 2002 for recorded child sexual abuse to be fully re-criminalized, when the minimum legal age was raised from 16 to 18 years old. In 1985, the Dutch government hosted the first “World’s Whores Congress,” funded in part by the **Mama Cash Foundation**, which to this day is one of the largest donors of the global movement calling for the legalization and decriminalization of the sex trade. The American group COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), whose founder was a convicted pimp, also organized the event. COYOTE is credited with coining the terms “sex positivity” and “sex work,” labeling the sex buyer as a “client,” the pimp as an “employer,” or “manager,” and prostitution as an “empowering” sexual activity. Half of the Congress’s attendees were academics, law enforcement, politicians, and sex trade profiteers, not themselves engaged in the sex trade.

The same year, **The Red Thread** was founded. This group was often misrepresented as a “sex workers’ union,” but in reality, they were a small but influential lobbying organization made up in part of pro-prostitution academics and lawyers, operating initially with 100% Dutch government funding. Their lobbying efforts were fruitful; municipal politicians began to openly discuss decriminalizing brothel-keeping during this period.

The public’s perception of the sex trade began to shift as well: the “sex work” narrative swayed much of public opinion during the 1990s. By 1997, 74% of the Dutch population regarded prostitution as “labor.” That same year, the Netherlands used its presidency of the **EU Council** as an opportunity to give grants and advisory status to various pro-prostitution organizations around the continent, while disregarding **NGOs** with a critical stance towards the sex trade. With support from key players like the Dutch Foundation against Trafficking in Women (now known as **CoMensha-La Strada** Netherlands) and the formerly abolitionist De Graaf Foundation, the support for decriminalizing brothel-keeping grew.

The 2000 Prostitution Law

In October 2000, the Netherlands legalized prostitution and lifted the ban on brothels by removing articles 250 (which stated that owning a brothel and/or providing means for someone to become a prostituted person is illegal) and 432 (which outlined the punishment for convicted pimps) from the Criminal Code. Additionally, new regulations were put in place that required brothels and prostituted persons to be registered and licensed. Municipalities also played a key role in decentralizing prostitution by adopting specific by-laws that regulated how and where prostitution would unfold in their localities.

City Councils could, for example, deny a license for a commercial sex establishment if necessary to protect the public order, “quality of life” in the municipality, or shield their constituents from any harm generated from prostitution activities. The law allows this “zero tolerance” for prostitution as long as the local councils do not base their ordinances on moral or religious grounds.

The government deemed the law a “liberal” and “progressive” approach that avoided moralism and respected individual choice and agency. Lawmakers believed that the system of prostitution was inevitable, and, as such, imposing regulations on it would be more effective than combating it.

Twenty-four years after the law’s enactment, the Dutch government continues to fail in achieving the law’s stated goals.

THE 2000 LAW’S THREE GOALS

1. Support Women in Prostitution with Health Services and Anti-Violence Strategies

2. Curb Human Trafficking

3. Protect Children from Commercial Sexual Exploitation

2 The 2000 Law's Failure to Support Women in Prostitution



Life behind the Windows

By law, brothel owners may not determine a woman's hours, prices, clothing, "clients" or "services." However, women rent the windows at exorbitant prices from brothel owners, who are the ones who decide which women sit or stand in them. In practice, the government fails to prevent brothel owners and managers from exercising tight control over the women.

“

Officially, the operator has no authority over you, but the reality is different. The operator determines what hours you work [...], the prices customers pay, et cetera. If you don't stick to that, you don't fit in the team. You are employed by the operator, you just have to comply with their rules. You are an entrepreneur for tax purposes: you do not accrue a pension, you are not entitled to payment in the event of illness or holiday pay, you are not entitled to unemployment benefits, you are not entitled to money if there are no customers.

”

Woman in prostitution

On average, renting a window in Amsterdam costs 90 to 180 euros, depending on the location of the brothel and whether it is for the day or night shift. The cost to purchase prostitution starts at 50 euros for 20 minutes; a woman will typically see an average of 10-12 sex buyers per shift. Since the Netherlands deems prostitution a form of employment, the women are taxed (at 20% of their earnings), but they do not accrue a pension, have no sick or holiday pay, and are not entitled to unemployment benefits or support if there are no sex buyers. A government-commissioned 2011 report also showed that the monopolization of brothels had gotten worse after the **2000 law**, giving owners extra power over women.

A language barrier is an additional issue in accessing rights for many prostituted individuals: A 2008 report about the sex trade conducted by Amsterdam's City Council found that 75% of the capital's estimated 8,000-11,000 prostituted people were from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Fear of violence is a daily aspect of prostituted women's lives. Contrary to one of its stated goals, the 2000 law has not made prostitution any safer. To cope, many women abuse substances such as alcohol and hard drugs. Several reports from pro-prostitution lobby organizations affirm this assessment. In addition to physical violence, women in prostitution - specifically in De Wallen - experience daily harassment from tourists. In one study, about a third of the women expressed distress at the treatment from tourists, describing the experience as "humiliating" and "traumatizing."

Who is Buying Sex?

In Dutch, sex buyers are called *wanderlaars* ("wanderers") or *lopers* ("walkers"), sometimes *hoerenlopers* ("whore runners"), referring to the historic practice of wandering around the country's many open-air red-light districts, examining the women in windows until they make a decision.

There isn't much data about this population, as they enjoy cultural and legal impunity, though surveys indicate that the number of Dutch men who admit to buying sexual acts at least once in their lifetime has increased from about 1 in 10 in the 1960s to 1 in 5 in 2017.

**About 200,000
men visit the
red-light districts
in Amsterdam every
year and proceed to
pay for sexual acts.**

Who is Buying Sex?

As is the case in other countries, sex buyers in the Netherlands tend to be ordinary men (a female sex buyer market is almost non-existent) in terms of income, education, employment, and relationship/marital status, i.e. they're not exceptionally lonely men, nor do they on average struggle with dating.

According to some studies, their number of lifetime sex partners (unpaid) is even above average. In some Dutch municipalities, it is legal to pay for sex acts starting at age 16 - before teenagers may purchase alcohol, drive a car, or vote in elections. Moreover, there is no ban on Dutch soldiers making use of prostitution in zones of conflict and war-torn regions today.

In addition to the Dutch population, sex tourism accounts for a large portion of sex buyers. The biggest group of foreign men to visit Dutch brothels are wealthy sex tourists from England, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the US. It is estimated that more than 50% of window prostitution buyers are tourists, many of whom also dabble in drug experimentation in the nearby legal "coffee shops" selling marijuana, mushrooms, and other "soft drugs." As of 2024, the drug and prostitution trade jointly brings in 4.5 billion euros in yearly profit (0.5% of Dutch **GDP**). Many tourists come for the experience of window brothels in particular, expressing that the cultural acceptance evident by this form of prostitution makes them feel at ease and confident that violence and trafficking are not happening.



“

I visit De Wallen for a shag, not to enrich myself culturally. Weed and magic mushrooms is grand, too. If that makes me a nuisance tourist, well, Amsterdam spent decades marketing itself as the destination to get laid and get high... ”

English-speaking sex tourist

The Online Windows

The De Wallen windows are the most visible form of prostitution, but much of the Dutch sex trade operates online in the form of both advertising and review sites. In the latter, men can filter profiles of women not just by location and availability, but by age, race, ethnicity, body type, breast cup size, height, and hair color. In explicit photos often revealing their faces, women present themselves in a highly objectified manner with personas such as “nympho,” “school girl,” or “exotic foreigner.” Sex buyers can visit online review forums to grade the “experience” with a given woman or gather intelligence on her from other men.

Beyond a mere preference for a certain look, the kind of language and images found in prostitution ads suggest that many sex buyers hold misogynistic and racist views; derogatory terms for women’s body parts are common, as are descriptions like “hooker,” and transwomen are routinely referred to as “shemales.”

It is impossible to know precisely how many men use these websites, but one large sex tourist forum dedicated to the Netherlands hosts about 33,000 registered accounts, with many more anonymous guests at any given time.



A post from an English-speaking sex tourist on a review forum

I'm planning a trip in 2024, hoping I can get leads to some current working ladies that check all my boxes:

1. Natural woman (not judging, but no interest in post-ops or trans).
2. As young as legally allowed, no older than mid-30s, Caucasian.
3. Not overweight, don't need a super fit girl, but don't want a fatty.
4. Pretty, friendly, feminine demeanor, smiles, shows a good time.
5. Skilled at oral, preferably deepthroat.
6. Big boobs, I like enhanced tits that don't sag. Porn star tits drive me wild, 1990s style, if you know what I mean.
7. Blonde with blue eyes first, red hair, and green eyes second, but I'll take brunettes or other naturals if most other boxes are checked.
8. Preferably Dutch, German, Nordic, or other European ancestry.
9. Cum-In-Mouth or Cum-On-Face would be icing on the cake.

The Pervasive Violence in the Sex Trade

The reduction of violence in prostitution is one of the 2000 law's stated goals, yet reports indicate that the law has failed in this regard. Though police harassment and abuse by pimps is common, women in prostitution suffer the majority of violence in the sex trade at the hands of sex buyers, and in all sectors: streets, brothels, windows, and escorting. In a 2018 survey, 90% of prostituted women stated they experienced at least one form of violence by sex buyers in the last 12 months; in the majority of cases, the perpetrator was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. 79% of women acknowledged never reporting a single violent incident to authorities.

Despite the law's intention of destigmatizing prostitution by classifying it as "labor," respondents to the 2018 survey expressed fears of public exposure of being in prostitution if they reported the violence, thus risking eviction, tax audits, denigration, or expulsion from their homes.

Native Dutch women are overrepresented in this 2018 study, with 52% of respondents being born in the Netherlands (however this study does not identify the women's race or ethnicity). The findings from the report indicate that the sex trade is violent and dangerous for all women, even those with Dutch citizenship.

Financial Violence

24% of women reported financial violence by sex buyers such as refusal of payment, theft, or robbery. Sex buyers punish women for perceived poor or inadequate service by leaving bad online reviews, which can cause a marked decrease in income. The threat of this alone can lead a victim to "agree" to particularly violent or unsafe acts.

Psychological Violence

While window prostitution may slightly decrease the risk of some types of violence, harassment in the form of leering, unwanted photos, and even public masturbation is nearly constant, with 53% experiencing this behavior from men. 47% experienced stalking crimes overwhelmingly by obsessive and/or "jilted" sex buyers. The real number of crimes may be higher as researchers point out that many women struggle to name violence unless it is strictly physical.

“

In many [massage] businesses*, the client is allowed to touch the breasts and buttocks of the masseuse, but not the vagina.

My experience is that really more than half of the men always try to get a hand between your legs and there is not always a friendly response to rejection.

”

Woman in prostitution

*The source is not clear whether these are brothels posing as "massage parlors" or whether they are "erotic massages" performed in legal brothels.

The Pervasive Violence in the Sex Trade

Sexual Violence

Sexual harassment is so common in the Dutch system of prostitution that many surveyed women felt it was a “part of the job.” In one study, 78% reported some form of sexual violence; in another, it was 100%. 42% experienced unwanted acts (e.g. ejaculation on the face), 39% experienced assault or rape, again overwhelmingly at the hands of sex buyers. This also occurs in the De Wallen windows, where some women have reported that the panic buttons do not work.

Researchers describe how sexual violence perpetrated by sex buyers often stems from a specific desire to violate a stated boundary when they don’t get their way, including threats of physical violence to extort sex acts or produce pornography. Men refusing or pulling off condoms or otherwise acting violently when women insist on using protection happens frequently. In one study, only 54% of surveyed women were able to enforce condom use at all times.

Physical Violence

41% of women reported physical assaults by sex buyers. Forms of physical violence included hair pulling, pinching of nipples, lip biting, pushing her head down for oral sex, as well as punching and beatings. Physical attacks by sex buyers due to “feeling cheated by bad service” are also common.

Men using their strength to stop a woman from using condoms happens regularly, as there is a significant overlap between physical and sexual violence.

“

The agreement was 20 [euros] for blowjobs, but he wanted absolutely to fuck. [...] He pushed me into the bushes, I got branches in my back and it hurt like hell. I was in a lot of pain. He then threw me on the ground and raped me.

”

Woman in prostitution

“

I said I’d do a little cuddling and kissing. And then I got there, and he wanted to tie me up and that wasn’t the deal... He tied me up and fucked me... But at that moment I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t say anything.

”

Woman in prostitution

“

Last year a man came to my window. When he came in he immediately said, “Close the curtain!” [...] He tore off my clothes and threw me on the bed. And he said ‘If you don’t do what I tell you then you soon won’t have eyes!’ How I managed it I don’t know. I was able to shove him. Now you wouldn’t believe it, but the alarm button didn’t work. [...] But, when I gave him a shove, he stumbled back a little bit. [...] I opened the curtain. [...] So I was standing there stark naked, saying: ‘Get out! Right away!’ I must have been upset about that for weeks. ”

”

Woman in prostitution

The Pervasive Violence in the Sex Trade

Lethal Violence

Between 1987 and 2017 there were 127 known murders of women in Dutch prostitution, with 85 remaining unsolved due to the clandestine nature of the sex trade, despite its legalization, and the large pool of suspects, most often including recent and repeat sex buyers. Murders occur especially in street prostitution as perpetrators are able to drive the victim to a secluded location. However, murders of women prostituted in windows and “high-class” escorting also occur.

Sex buyers who encourage drug use are at times also responsible for overdoses of the women they purchase for prostitution. The patronizers’ own consumption of alcohol or other mood-altering substances can increase aggression and lower inhibition.

Perpetrators target prostituted women due to their marginalized status. In 2017, a forensic psychologist reported to a news outlet how two men in Almere, Netherlands, upon being apprehended for kidnapping, raping and drowning a prostituted woman, remarked to police, “Prostitutes, you can do anything with them.”

“

I tried to flee [the upscale hotel], but he pulled me back by my hair and threw me onto the bed. He kicked and hit me with his fists and a belt. Because the music was so loud, no one heard my screaming. ”

Woman in prostitution



A Lack of Services

The Dutch government vowed under the 2000 law to offer protections such as specialized health services to people in prostitution.

Today, there are two major health and legal centers in the Netherlands for those in prostitution: the Amsterdam Center for Sex Workers (**ACS**) and The Relief and Shelter Prostitution and Human Trafficking Foundation (**SHOP**).

ACS provides legal advice, social workers, and health care. Its website home page features a quote from a client stating that they appreciated the Center's discreet location. Whether the Center's clients desire anonymity due to social stigma or because they fear reprisal from pimps or sex buyers, it's an indictment of the inherent violence of the sex trade and legalization's failed promise to normalize prostitution as labor. Furthermore, ACS provides support in exiting the Dutch sex trade, as well as entering it, suggesting that getting into the commercial sex industry can be a good decision if only armed with the right information.

SHOP calls itself a "knowledge and expertise center for sex work and human trafficking." They provide free education to those in prostitution as well as workshops to young people about STI prevention and protecting personal boundaries. Spot46 is a SHOP-sponsored health center that offers advice about life in the sex trade, along with STI testing, contraception, Hepatitis B vaccines, and legal consultations.

Reasons women seek help from ACS & SHOP

STIs	PTSD
Physical injuries	Traffickers/pimps
Assault, rape	Debt
Contraception	Homelessness
Unwanted pregnancy	Trying to exit the sex trade

FAQ section on SPOT46's site

- Q:** I am a student and would like to earn some money on the side by doing sex work. How do I begin?
- A:** Call us and we can give you advice. In most cases, sex work can be balanced with your studies.

There remains widespread uncertainty around legal rights and conditions for people in prostitution. Those who fail to meet the government's registration requirements are pushed into the "black market," which can lead to criminalization around taxes and migration. Efforts to unionize people in the sex trade have failed, and many prostituted people cannot access basic health insurance, including for medical conditions as serious as internal injuries, STIs, unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, and botched plastic surgeries.

In 2008, the Dutch Ministry of Justice (now known as the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security) created the "Exit Programmes for Prostitutes Scheme," which funded exit support for those in prostitution. A total of 13 exit programs were created across the Netherlands. However, the subsidy only lasted until 2011, thus becoming the municipalities' responsibility to continue funding the exit programs. The Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice still funds exit support through municipal organizations under certain conditions. However, the application process and requesting support remain complicated. Women report that exiting prostitution remains difficult for a multitude of reasons, including language barriers and accruing debts to loan sharks.

COVID-19 and Lack of Emergency Relief

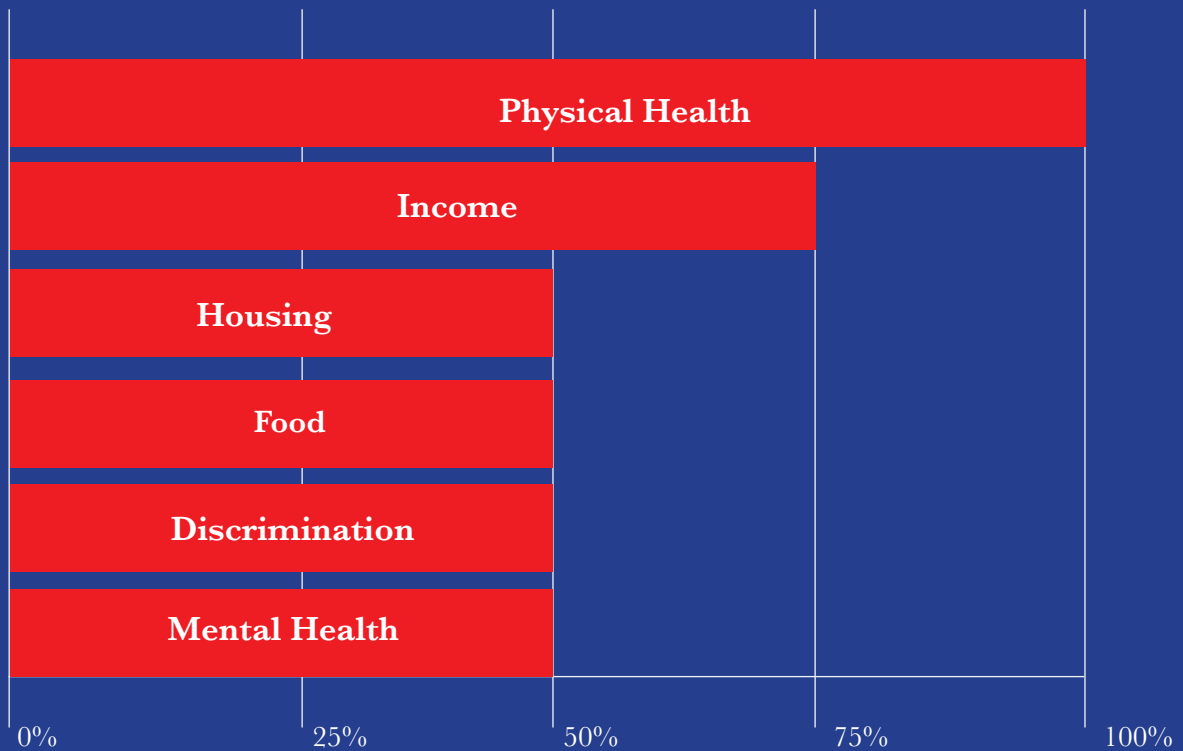
During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2023, not only did the sex trade “business” significantly slow down, affecting the income of prostituted people, but the government reverted to the criminalization of prostitution in spite of the 2000 law. As an “occupation” that requires the exchange of bodily fluids, the government could fine anyone found engaged in prostitution and even conduct house searches. Many people in the sex trade lost their source of income overnight yet were ineligible for pandemic relief. Eligibility for relief required proof of loss of at least 20% of base income, a difficult standard to meet, so many were rejected. Women in the sex trade themselves organized limited emergency relief.

According to multiple surveys, this led to many women illegally engaging in prostitution, risking both infection with a potentially deadly or disabling illness and punishment by law enforcement. Instead of viewing these women as a vulnerable group in need of services, the Dutch government suddenly deemed all prostitution “black market work” and a “danger to public health.”

Throughout the pandemic, the Dutch sex trade went through phases of closing and reopening, initially under legal requirements such as practicing consistent disinfection, handwashing, and changing of sheets after each transaction, as well as verifying that the sex buyer was free of the COVID-19 virus. During this time, recorded women’s earnings did not reach pre-pandemic levels. Many migrant women were forced to leave the country and not allowed to return until further notice. Furthermore, research shows a decline in mental health among prostituted women during the pandemic, including suicides.



Survey of Prostituted People's Reported Concerns During the COVID-19 Pandemic



41%
reported violence
in prostitution

21%
of those went
to the police

4%
ended up having their case
taken up by law enforcement

3 The 2000 Law's Failure to Curb Human Trafficking



By the Numbers: The Victims

A central goal of the 2000 law was to help the Dutch government combat organized crime. By creating legal room for “ethical” brothel-keeping and pimping, the government believed that the oversight and licensing requirements would encourage legitimate business people and discourage undocumented people, as well as human traffickers, from “participation” in the Dutch sex trade.

While the Dutch government finds it difficult to calculate the number of trafficking victims in the Netherlands, estimates range from 5,000 to 8,000 annually, with about two-thirds being trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation. About one-fifth of sex trafficking victims are identified by authorities. About 20% of the presumed victims were Dutch citizens; however, since the government does not categorize individuals by race or ethnicity, data showing the percentage of Dutch citizens of color in the sex trade is non-existent.

In recent years, the Netherlands has topped or been near the top of the list of European countries with the most registered victims of trafficking per inhabitants. However, varying levels of identification efforts and differing legal definitions of human trafficking make an exact comparison among countries difficult. The Netherlands, for instance, did not recognize domestic sex trafficking until 2005.

The victims are overwhelmingly women and girls aged 17-35 from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, or the Netherlands. Many of the foreign victims are trafficked to the Netherlands at a young age, unable to speak Dutch or English, and often unaware of their legal rights and obligations. Individuals without EU-residency permits are in a particularly dire situation as they seek to avoid deportation.

Estimated Percentages of Types of Trafficking in the Netherlands

46%

domestic sex trafficking

21%

cross-border sex trafficking

33%

forced labor & forced criminal activity

Victims of Human Trafficking, Periodical Report 2012-2016, the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence Against Children, 2018.

“Look, we’re not here to have a conversation. Where they come from, what they do with their money, this is not my problem. I come, I pay and that’s it. It’s strictly business.”

English-speaking sex tourist

By the Numbers: The Perpetrators

Studies from the National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking, as well as reports from the city of Amsterdam, show that sex traffickers are mostly men in their 30s from a Turkish, Hungarian, Dutch, or German background. While some operate individually, many maintain networks that manage to simultaneously exploit a large number of victims among them.

Targeting criminal enterprises involved in prostitution, as well as monitoring the legal commercial sex industry, has proven difficult for law enforcement. Surveilling legal brothels for criminal activity requires time and resources that municipal authorities often lack. Furthermore, investigating the illegal sector of the sex trade is neglected almost entirely. Additionally, the legal burden of proof is so high that the cases rarely result in convictions.

In practice, only about a fifth of registered trafficking incidents also record a suspect. 4 out of 10 cases that do go to court end in a so-called “technical dismissal,” usually due to insufficient evidence. In 2022, the Netherlands recorded the lowest conviction rate of trafficking defendants in the last five years and a significant increase in the number of acquittals. This development caught the attention of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on action against trafficking in human beings. GRETA expressed concerns in their 2023 evaluation of the lack of convictions in the Netherlands for both labor and sex trafficking.

“

It is a long time since that image of a prostitution sector populated exclusively by articulate Dutch prostitutes working behind the windows and in brothels - and the ‘student earning a little extra’ in the escort business - has matched the reality.

”

Dutch Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, 2014

Red-Light Districts: A Criminogenic Industry

Throughout the Netherlands, the local sex trade is a profitable business. In 2024, Dutch researchers estimated that the sex trade generated 700 million euros in profits (in 1995, the sex trade brought in an estimated 350 million euros). In Amsterdam's red-light districts alone, sex buyers bring in 70 million euros per year.

“

We've realized this is no longer about small-scale entrepreneurs, but that big crime organizations are involved here in trafficking women, drugs, killings and other criminal activities.

We're not banning prostitution, but we are cutting back on the whole circuit: the gambling halls, the pimps, the money laundering. ”

Job Cohen, Mayor of Amsterdam, 2001-2010

In 2006, Amsterdam's mayor at the time, **Job Cohen**, commissioned the city to determine whether organized criminal networks had waned since the 2000 law. The report concluded that the legalized environment in part actually gave cover to organized trafficking networks entrenched in Amsterdam's legal red-light district areas.

The law allows third party exploiters to rent rooms for their victims, which can create the illusion that the women are in the brothels of their own free will. Likewise, the required registry at the Chamber of Commerce is no barrier to pimping, as there are no legal grounds to refuse permits to women if their papers are in order, even in instances with visible presence of sex traffickers.

How Women are Trafficked into Legal Dutch Brothels and Escorting



Victims are coerced or deceived (e.g. using the “loverboy method”) into believing that perpetrators are doing nothing harmful or illegal and there is no need to alert authorities.



Alternatively, victims (and their families) are intimidated or incriminated so they fear reprisal from their traffickers or authorities if they ask for help.



Victims are coached to appear as if there is no third party influence when renting a window/room in a brothel or reserving a spot at an escort agency.



Victims are regularly moved from place to place, city to city, to avoid suspicion, thwart relationships with locals, and to maximize profits (since sex buyers want “fresh goods”).



Traffickers purchase or manage windows/brothels/escort agencies or otherwise ingratiate themselves to the red-light district network, increasing the likelihood that other profiteers will warn them of periodic inspections by authorities (giving them the chance to hide evidence of criminal activity).



If traffickers have a criminal record, they have an intermediary take their place in any official business dealings.



Traffickers can launder money to fund other lucrative criminal enterprises such as drugs or weapons dealing in the process.

Money flows freely between brothel keepers, traffickers, and the owners and suppliers of “coffee shops” where soft drugs, like marijuana and mushrooms, are sold legally. Much like the Dutch prostitution sector, the soft drug industry remains entrenched in criminality, as 78% of involved actors have a criminal record (usually for serious offenses such as aggravated assault, selling hard drugs, weapons dealing, or manslaughter). Pimps often wait in “coffee shops” for their victims’ shifts to end, watching the comings and goings of brothels from local security cameras and brokering deals with brothel owners.

As per Mayor Job Cohen’s report, 1.85 billion euros are laundered each year through brothels, as well as illegal gambling parlors and twice as much via the legal drug trade. The fact that sex buyers prefer paying in cash in order to have their payments untraceable (e.g. by their spouse) is convenient for this purpose.

“
[Prostitution legalization
is] the biggest money
laundering operation in
Dutch history. ”

Dutch civil servant

The Trafficking Case that Planted Seeds of Doubt

Though a 2007 government evaluation found that pimping was “still very common” and “did not seem to have decreased” since the 2000 law, it wasn’t until a highly publicized trafficking case that the Dutch public became aware of the exploitation occurring despite the law.

In 2008, a group of pimps with ties to a Turkish-German mafia network was sentenced for the trafficking of over 100 women in legal brothels, including in Amsterdam’s red-light district windows. The media reports of the brutality were unsparing - routine beatings, rapes, forced plastic surgery, forced tattoos, and forced abortions. This investigation, which became known as the “**Sneep case**,” became the largest trafficking case in Dutch history. Police units took years to investigate, arrest, and charge the perpetrators who had been operating undisturbed for a decade due to the legalized regime of prostitution and the general lack of urgency regarding the detection of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Intensive coordination between law enforcement and other Dutch government authorities was key in the successful detection and prosecution of this case.

The Sneep case also shattered a number of misconceptions underpinning the 2000 law, and underscored the following points:

1. Sex trafficking and legal prostitution have strong links to each other.

2. Domestic sex trafficking is as widespread as cross-border trafficking from developing and Global South countries, if not more (many of the victims in the Sneep case were Dutch).

3. With the legalization of prostitution, the Dutch government faces significant barriers in the prevention of sex trafficking and detection of victims, who find it almost impossible to report their own exploitation.

Why Sex Trafficking is Challenging to Detect and Prosecute Under Legalization



Undocumented foreign victims do not report out of **fear of deportation.**



Social workers fear **victims breaking off contact** if they're too forceful about suggesting escape or reporting abusers.



Sex buyers do not report about trafficking out of **self-interest.**



Local authorities do not want to be at the center of **"scandals."**



Brothel and escort agency owners are concerned about **profit maximization**: sex-trafficked women can be exploited for the longest hours for the least pay so profiteers have motives to participate in the cover-up.



Police are **unlikely to take up cases** that risk turning cold, as cold cases impact the public's confidence in the police.



Prosecutors worry about unreliable witnesses and **unsuccessful court cases.**

3-

The Sneep operation is not the only case of its kind. In recent years, there have been reports of smaller but no less brutal sex trafficking rings across the Netherlands. Figures from the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings show that after a detection increase between 2018 and 2019 in the number of victims, especially young and foreign women, that rate leveled at an estimated 20% in 2022. In 2023, law enforcement found organized trafficking networks exploiting women from Thailand and South America on legal prostitution websites.

Sex Buyers' Role in Sex Trafficking

A number of studies have found that sex buyers are acutely aware of the signs and mechanics of sex trafficking, and are largely indifferent to them when they purchase sexual acts. For example, a 2021 study showed that Dutch sex buyers recognized signs that a woman might be a trafficking victim, including:

- 24/7 availability
- Offering any and all sex acts
- More than 7-8 sex buyers per day
- Poor language skills
- "Negative mood"
- Prominent tattoos
- Visible injuries
- Presence of third parties

Proponents of legalization often assert that this legal framework improves relationships between law enforcement and those involved in the sex trade, including that sex buyers will be more likely to report suspicions of sex trafficking should they encounter it. Yet research shows that most Dutch sex buyers do not feel either responsible or concerned about sex trafficking; anonymous tips to authorities reporting purported signs of sex trafficking are extremely low. In a 2009 study, 30% of men admitted to having paid for sexual acts from women suspected to be trafficked. In another study, a sex buyer pointed out that it is impossible to reliably identify trafficked women as they, too, may appear cheerful at times.

“

If I go to buy a loaf of bread at the bakery and the baker is friendly, he greets me, he makes small talk and I leave and there is nothing wrong and I am told later that there was someone in that back room with a shotgun to his neck saying ‘yes, you have to do this,’ can you blame me? ”

Dutch sex buyer

The Impact of the Russian War Against Ukraine

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, reports emerged about the sexual exploitation of Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands. Local NGOs sounded the alarm with reports that men were preying on Ukrainian women and children on social media, as well as waiting for their arrival at train stations throughout Europe. This led to the creation of various counter-programs, including the distribution of flyers to at-risk persons, and networking among civic organizations, regional institutions, and international law enforcement such as Europol.

Although Ukrainian refugees have the right to live and work in the Netherlands, it has not been possible to reliably register the people arriving or the host families receiving them. By March 2022, there were reports of hotels illegally used for prostitution "offering rooms" to women from Ukraine. By June 2022, there were multiple reports of sexual abuse of refugees, including an illegal brothel filled with Ukrainian women found in The Hague. Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema commented that this was not "exploitation" but merely "illegal prostitution."

Human trafficking cases take years, sometimes decades, to investigate and prosecute, and are often complicated by victims being falsely classified as "illegal prostitutes." As such, a proper estimate of the extent of the abuse against Ukrainian refugees will take time. However, demand for Ukrainian women by Dutch sex buyers is significant, as demonstrated by advertisements posted on prostitution websites since the onset of the war. As of December 2022, a purported sex buyer stands accused of having brutally murdered a prostituted Ukrainian woman in his private residence.



4 The 2000 Law's Failure to Protect Children from Sexual Exploitation





Child Sex Trafficking Persists

Along with curbing the sex trafficking of adult persons, the 2000 law endeavors to protect children from commercial sexual exploitation. Article 248b of the law prohibits any involvement, recruitment, or exploitation of minors under the age of 18 and criminalizes sexual intercourse with a child between the ages of 12 and 16 years old, independent of a filed complaint by the child. It also makes it a criminal offense to engage in paid sexual acts with minors aged 16-17.

However, the sex trafficking of children does not meet the severity of penalties conferred in cases of rape. Instead, the crime is punishable with imprisonment of a maximum of four years or a fine of a maximum of 20,500 euros, at the same level as theft.

Additionally, public sympathy was often reserved for "...the poor clients who had only visited a prostitute and were not aware of doing anything wrong," with little consideration given to the exploited child (as per a 2015 report from the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children).

In 2014, with the publicity surrounding several of high-profile child sex trafficking cases (see p. 51), public opinion began to evolve, viewing the purchase of adolescents for sexual acts as abhorrent. Today it is no longer politically viable to defend the "sexual freedom" of minors.

However, the broader cultural acceptance of prostitution has influenced young people into normalizing the sex trade. Just five years after the passing of the 2000 law, some Dutch social service providers observed an increase in the number of sexually exploited minors.

“

I feel that voluntary prostitution among minors is becoming increasingly common. I am talking about prostitution for small amounts of money. [...]

The morals about prostitution have changed.

Girls are more aware of the fact that they can make money with sex and have less hesitation. Earning and buying material things with the help of sex is not so stigmatized anymore.

”

Dutch Bureau of Youth Services

Victims

While the majority of child sex trafficking victims in the Netherlands are girls (at a scale similar to adults: about 93% female versus about 7% male victims), it appears that on average, boys are first exploited at a younger age. Between 2010–2014, law enforcement identified a total of 592 minors exploited in the sex trade, with 169 of the victims under the age of 16, with the youngest being 11 years old.

As with adults, refugee children are particularly vulnerable. Between 2003 and 2005, at least 13% of child sex trafficking victims were undocumented migrants not granted residence in the Netherlands. Between 2017 and 2022, at least 1,600 foreign children left Dutch refugee centers for unknown destinations, rendering them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Children from Romania and Bulgaria in particular, often of Sinti and Roma origin, have been identified as being at high risk of human trafficking. In addition, a 2013 UNICEF Netherlands report cited increased vulnerability for children with mental disabilities, as well as for children experiencing neglect or abuse by their families (seeking emotional safety is the most common vulnerability factor identified among trafficking victims).

Furthermore, these children are susceptible to compounded exploitation. Reports show that 45% of police-identified trafficking victims suffer other serious offenses, such as assault, sexual violence, and other types of exploitation such as forced begging and human trafficking within five years of their initial identification.

In 2024, the Netherlands was reported to host the largest proportion of CSAM on the internet, and has one of the most significant demand-side markets for CSAM globally, with the highest prevalence of buyers of online sexual exploitation of children in Europe.

Perpetrators

Individuals who sexually exploit children are primarily men, with an average age of less than 35 years old. Older men often initiate younger men into “loverboy” pimping. The countries of origin for these individuals include the Netherlands, Morocco, and Turkey. Cross-border child trafficking is usually carried out by extensive criminal networks, while domestic traffickers tend to operate in smaller groups or act as individuals.

Perpetrators often break victims psychologically through rape or gang rapes, which may also be filmed for blackmailing purposes. In slightly under 50% of cases, traffickers employ the “loverboy” method, mostly targeting domestic victims. Throughout the course of their exploitation, many victims are also coerced into recruiting other victims, potentially opening them up to criminal prosecution.

According to a 2015 study conducted by the Dutch police, perpetrators who pay to sexually exploit children are 93.5% male, 3.3% female, with the rest unrecorded. The average age is 56 years old. The U.S. State Department’s 2022 Trafficking in Persons report notes that the Netherlands is a source country for foreign tourists specifically seeking to sexually exploit children. Perpetrators often also pay for children via livestreaming; the exploitation frequently starts online and then escalates to offline. Almost half of apprehended perpetrators against children were previously unknown to the Dutch justice system.

The first national report in 2012 on CSAM found that this form of child trafficking is on the rise and overwhelming the Dutch criminal justice system by its sheer volume. Consequently, a dedicated task force was set up to work both in prevention of this abuse and apprehension of offenders.

“

These girls are often so damaged. They think it's normal for them to be abused, they've earned it, they think, so you shouldn't whine. The men expect them to bring other girls back into the network, otherwise, they will be beaten again. The environment is getting harsher. A client of mine saw an automatic firearm in the back seat of her boyfriend's car. People don't realize how ruthless that world is, it's so rough. There is a new way to pressure, which is to rape girls with a group of men, film it, and then blackmail them.

”

Social services counselor, Amsterdam

Media Spotlight Propels Action

Just like with the Sneep case – where the media sounded the alarm over the prolific adult sex trafficking occurring in the Netherlands – it took extensive media coverage and public debate regarding a prominent child sex trafficking case for Dutch authorities to act with urgency.

At the end of 2014, Dutch police discovered a 16-year-old girl and her trafficker in a hotel in **Valkenburg**, in the province of Limburg. Authorities found DNA from used condoms left in a wastebasket, as well as a “client list” on the trafficker’s phone, making it possible to identify the men who had paid to rape the child. The prosecution and sentencing of 24 perpetrators in this case was the first large-scale operation of its kind, which had lasting effects on the police’s and prosecutors’ approach in addressing child sex trafficking. A similar case surfaced around the same time, in which a “loverboy” trafficker and his accomplices held a 16-year-old girl in a basement in the city of Schiedam. The government charged several men who claimed not to have known the victim was a minor.

As a consequence of public scrutiny, the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (**PPS**) registered as many child sex trafficking cases in 2015 as it had in the preceding 14 years. However, to this day, many child sex trafficking offenders merely receive sentences of community service or less than a year in prison.



The Difficulty of Quantifying and Fighting Child Trafficking

A 2017 review of the impact of Article 248b found that in the first 14 years following enactment, apart from an initial uptick of reported cases, very few perpetrators were apprehended and prosecuted. Although it remains difficult to find reliable data and many experts do not feel confident enough to estimate the real number of victims, the Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking asserted in 2017 that over 1,300 girls are sexually exploited in the Netherlands every year - 22% of all estimated trafficking victims (labor and sex). However, in 2017, just 13% of cases reported to CoMensha involved a child victim. In 2022, the Dutch National Rapporteur spoke of 35 detected domestic child sex trafficking victims and a handful of detected cross-border child sex trafficking victims.

In order for the Dutch government to uncover the true extent of the sex trafficking of children, a number of components must be in place, including:



Political Will

Child sex trafficking must be high on the list of priorities among police, prosecutors, and the public and addressed with uniform official rigor. Currently, proactive law enforcement is uneven and the sentencing of accused perpetrators varies widely depending on individual judges. Furthermore, the Dutch cultural acceptance of purchasing sexual acts allows perpetrators to argue in court that they didn't intentionally seek out a minor, but committed "accidental" abuse, which can mitigate their sentencing.



Legal Distinction

Perpetrators who pay to sexually abuse minors under the age of 16 are charged with the same crime as those who do not exchange money to rape, therefore no data is available on the convictions for the sexual exploitation of this age group as a distinct crime. Also, traffickers of 16–17-year-old minors are often charged with crimes other than sex trafficking (e.g. child abuse), which results in lesser penalties.



Data Tracing

Many child sex trafficking cases are not prosecuted for reasons similar to those in adult trafficking cases (see p. 43), meaning that the gap between convictions and the pervasiveness of sex trafficking is significant. For a more accurate overview, the government must include in its official review cases that are reported to NGOs but never reach the police or court system.



Nature of the Crime

According to Dutch experts, underage victims are especially unlikely to testify against their perpetrators due to trauma bonding, intimidation, and manipulation. Many sex trafficked children do not perceive themselves as victims, distrust the justice system, risk retaliation and stigma, and fear long-term placement in government facilities. Furthermore, the legality of patronizing prostitution in the Netherlands clouds the government's understanding of the role that sex buyers play in sex trafficking (see p. 44), making it difficult to apprehend these sexual exploiters. Finally, child sexual exploitation is increasingly initiated and conducted online, which experts say is harder to detect.

5 The Government's Struggles with the 2000 Law



Amending the Law

Less than a decade after the Netherlands enacted the 2000 law, reports indicated that trafficking and violence against women in the Dutch sex trade had not diminished. Throughout the years, Dutch lawmakers proposed several amendments, usually imposing stricter requirements on the prostituted women rather than the sex buyers or third-party exploiters.

Apart from legalizing brothel-keeping and pimping nationwide, the Dutch government left it to local authorities to propose and enact additional policies regarding prostitution. As such, cities throughout the Netherlands have imposed different regulations at varying times (for instance, Amsterdam raised the age to engage in prostitution to 21 years old in 2013).

At the national level, the government issued a number of amendments and laws in reaction to the results of the 2000 law, attempting to improve oversight of the commercial sex industry and decrease related criminal activities.

National Laws and Amendments Attempting to Address the Failures of the 2000 Law

- 2009:** Prostituted women must register with authorities
- 2011:** Mandatory taxation for prostituted women
- 2019:** Raised the minimum age to engage in prostitution to 21 years old
- 2020:** Prostituted women must be interviewed by municipality officers to receive a license. Brothel owners/operators also must acquire a license
- 2021:** Criminalized sex buyers who knowingly solicited or had reasons to believe they were soliciting a sex trafficking victim
- 2022:** Prohibited fining unlicensed women in prostitution while maintaining penalties for those facilitating and purchasing unlicensed prostitution



Before you start working in Amsterdam

In order to be a sex worker in Amsterdam, you must have the following:

- Registration at the Chamber of Commerce (KvK)
- Dutch nationality or the nationality of another country in the European Economic Area (EEA)
- Valid residency status
- A registered address in the Municipal Records Database (Gemeentelijke Basis Administratie, GBA)
- A Citizen Service Number (Burgerservicenummer, BSN)
- A bank account

In addition, you must:

- Be at least 21 years of age
- Speak Dutch or English, German, Spanish
- Be known to the Tax and Customs Administration (Belastingdienst) This will happen automatically when you register at the Chamber of Commerce.

Efforts to Combat Sex Trafficking

Even before the Sneep case (see p. 42), the city of Amsterdam city was increasingly concerned about its “sleazy” reputation. In 2007, the city introduced **Project 1012**, an initiative that confined prostitution to two streets, Oude Nieuwstraat and Oudezijds Achterburgwal, and shut down 112 prostitution windows. The city then purchased 51 windows from notorious brothel-chain owner Charles Geerts to repurpose them into art-related businesses such as design and photography studios. Geerts had previously lost window permits over accusations by public administrators of his participation in money laundering and his alleged links to drug-related criminal networks. Furthermore, specialized “vice-inspectors” squads were established in 2010 - first in Amsterdam and then across the country - in order to improve the monitoring of irregularities in prostitution establishments (such as verifying women’s ages and countries of origin). These squads, however, do not have the capacity to conduct long-term investigations and therefore only target traffickers who may not be linked to large organized criminal networks.

The unrestrained growth of the sex trade following the 2000 law – in both the illegal and legal sectors – fueled additional reforms to regulate the sex trade (see table on p. 54). Other cities decided to close their red-light districts altogether over human trafficking concerns, like Utrecht did in 2013. However, the closure in Utrecht did not last long; brothels reopened in 2016, with 162 prostitution rooms with brothel managers running up to 32 rooms each.

In opposition to the plethora of brothels, the government offers limited options to victims of human trafficking who need services. Adult victims of sex trafficking are usually sent to women’s shelters, while child sex trafficking victims can go to youth care facilities, managed at the municipality level.

“

Arrested pimps are often acquitted by the judge due to lack of sufficient evidence, because no one wants to testify. And the human traffickers who receive a sentence (often no more than two to three years) are then free to take up their old ‘profession.’ ”

”

Maria Genova, journalist in the Netherlands

In the last few years, the government has attempted to assess sex buyers' role in the perpetuation of sex trafficking. In 2021, lawmakers passed an amendment criminalizing the sex buyer if he "knows or should reasonably suspect" that a person is a victim of human trafficking, which can result in a maximum prison sentence of four years or a 4th category fine (maximum of 20,500 euros). The government launched a month-long media campaign to encourage "responsible client behavior." As of September 2023, there hasn't been a single conviction of a sex buyer who "knowingly" purchased a sex trafficked person, despite increased awareness among authorities that this crime is common (see p. 44).

“

There is a customer group that is certainly aware of it. When you enter a dirty cellar the victim clearly says that she does not want to, you as a customer use violence or when you come to the victim's home and have to give the parents money to have sex with their child. [...] Without customers you have no criminal business model, so they are essential in tackling human trafficking.

”

Shamir Ceuleers of The Center against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking (CKM)

Erotic Center Proposal

After years of Amsterdam residents' complaints regarding the area's rampant sex tourism, violence, noise, overcrowding, and sex buyers peering into private homes, Mayor Femke Halsema banned official tours of De Wallen in 2020. Furthermore, in 2023, the city reduced the operating hours for brothels, leading to protests from people in the sex trade, including women struggling to earn more than the daily 90-180 euros required to rent a brothel window.

Also in 2023, Mayor Halsema presented a plan to move the red-light district to an "erotic center" or "prostitution hotel" outside of the city center, a measure debated since 2019. The high-rise "hotel" would also offer social and health services, security, hospitality, entertainment, and educational and cultural events.

The idea of a "prostitution hotel" is not novel. Germany, where prostitution is also legal and pimping is decriminalized, is famous for chain brothels that are riddled with crime and sexual exploitation. For example, the owners of the mega-brothel **Paradise** in Stuttgart boasted for years about their "ethical system," which included an in-house gynecologist. In 2014, German law enforcement charged Paradise's owners for systematic human trafficking. The current biggest brothel in Europe, **Pascha**, in Cologne, and which serves as inspiration for Amsterdam's planned "erotic center," has been the site of both trafficking and multiple attempted murders of women.

There is no reason to believe that Amsterdam's anticipated "erotic center" will yield different results from the mega-brothels in Germany or, closer to the Dutch experience, Curaçao's "Campo Alegre" (see p. 14). Anticipating an influx of crime and drugs, residents in the proposed center's area are fiercely protesting the move from De Wallen.

Pascha, a mega-brothel in Cologne, Germany



6 Is Prostitution a “Job Like Any Other” or Not? Contradictions in Language, Culture, and Law



Are People Engaged in Prostitution “Sex Workers” or “Prostitutes”?

Despite the increasing visibility of the term “sex worker” to describe prostituted people, its usage is not uniform in either Dutch laws, media, or public life. For example, official government documents and legislation will use “sex worker” and “prostitute” interchangeably, sometimes in the same sentence. Likewise, both terms are found on signs around De Wallen and in the Amsterdam Museum of Prostitution. However, “prostitute” is still the term most used in official government documents and news articles.

Furthermore, contrary to national and international laws, Dutch research organizations, NGOs, and government documents often refer to child sex trafficking victims as “prostitutes” or “underaged sex workers” and the abusers of these children are identified as “clients.”

*Note on terminology

As noted on page 21, the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” were coined and aggressively promoted by a movement that lobbies to legalize or decriminalize the system of prostitution. The characterization of prostitution as a form of labor normalizes the sex trade and conceals its inherent violence. The International Labour Organization states that “decent work involves opportunities that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace, and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration...”. The sex trade offers no such opportunities.

Historically, the word “prostitute” has been used to degrade women in prostitution. It is also used to denote criminality. In many penal codes, “prostitute” is the identifier of someone committing a listed crime; however, the codes don’t identify people as “murderer,” “thief,” “carjacker,” etc. The word “prostitute” implies that she has full control of the ecosystem that is harming or exploiting her, erasing sex buyers, third party exploiters, and the sex trade itself as actors responsible for the injuries perpetrated against her. It is also a term to stigmatize her, although prostitution is inherently stigmatizing in every country around the world.

Better terminology is “prostituted woman/person” or “woman/person in prostitution” to reflect what is done to that woman or person.

If Prostitution is a “Job” Like Any Other...

Why is the Dutch government unable to determine how many people are “working” in the sex trade?

Despite the 2000 law and other attempts to recognize prostitution as a form of labor that meets the government’s standards of other workplaces, the underground nature of the sex trade remains unchanged. The Netherlands fails to quantify the exact number of individuals in prostitution, who are overwhelmingly women, offering estimates ranging from 6,000 to 30,000. In 2016, Dutch government representatives presenting before the CEDAW Committee admitted that “a large-scale baseline measurement of prostitution was conducted in 2014, from which it emerged that it is impossible to estimate the number of prostitutes [sic] working in the Netherlands.”

Why do women in prostitution still have to protect their identity?

Women in the sex trade still exist on the margins of society, despite the promises that policies of legalization and decriminalization remove the stigma related to prostitution. The Dutch government itself acknowledges the “institutional prejudice” experienced by women in prostitution when opening bank accounts or seeking aid from law enforcement. Consequently, most women still wish to hide their involvement in the commercial sex industry, despite its legality.

“

Why do I find it scary to file tax returns?
Of course, I don't want a tax collector
on my doorstep. Or for my number to be
known everywhere. For myself, it doesn't
matter, but I have an eight-year-old
daughter. I don't want her to be bullied...
So, [...] I protect her from my work.

”

Woman in prostitution



If Prostitution is a "Job" Like Any Other...

Why were women in prostitution criminalized and not offered aid during the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the height of the COVID-19, the Dutch government reverted to the criminalization of prostitution, despite the 2000 law. As an "occupation" that requires the exchange of bodily fluids, the government could fine anyone found engaged in prostitution and even conduct house searches. Many people in the sex trade lost their source of income overnight yet were ineligible for pandemic relief as it required proof of loss of at least 20% of base income, a difficult standard to meet. Women in the sex trade themselves organized limited emergency relief (see p. 33).

Why are there no labor unions?

Though several groups claim to function as unions for women in prostitution, these organizations do not routinely facilitate negotiations with brothel owners nor do they have tangible impact on women's day-to-day lives.

One such group - The Red Thread (see p. 21) - assisted women with court cases (for instance, discrimination encountered in banks or nurseries), but also promoted the interests of commercial sex industry profiteers. They played an instrumental role in the 2000 law legalizing brothel-keeping and introduced a scheme to funnel women into prostitution through temp agencies. By The Red Thread's own admission, it was never a labor union, but a support and lobbying group to encourage people to accept prostitution as a legitimate profession.

In 2015, The Red Thread was succeeded by PROUD, an association run by people currently or formerly in prostitution. PROUD offers harm reduction services to people in the sex trade, such as legal aid, health and safety workshops. The founder of PROUD also opened the Prostitution Information Center in De Wallen, "an information and education center about 'sex work'" that caters to tourists.

They also lobby politicians to maintain the option of "self-employment in prostitution." Their current campaign focuses on keeping the Amsterdam red-light district in De Wallen and promoting prostitution as a job, including designating January 15th the "Day of Paid Love."

Why does it require such strict zoning?

Municipal laws governing the sex trade vary widely across the country and can be restrictive. Although the Dutch central government has proposed the highly controversial Sex Work Regulation Act - which would allow people engaged in prostitution to operate independently from home like other "independent professionals" such as hairdressers, nail technicians, and masseuses - currently, most Dutch municipalities ban the practice, and zoning plans often prohibit prostitution from occurring in residential locations. Additionally, many Dutch municipalities have attempted to limit the commercial sex industry as much as possible by licensing brothels in existence prior to the 2000 law but preventing the establishment of new brothels.

Small rural towns attempted to redraft urban planning schemes so that there would be no suitable areas for prostitution, leading to legal conflicts with brothel owners' associations. Sex trade profiteers tried to evade zoning by setting up caravan brothels in parking lots along provincial highways, but the authorities condemned them. Large cities such as The Hague and Amsterdam have experimented with imposing opening and closing hours on brothels, resulting in vehement protest and even legal challenges from brothel keepers. Unfortunately, women in prostitution often bear the brunt of these policies that affect their ability to pay off their debts and cover rent for their brothel rooms.

If Prostitution is a "Job" Like Any Other...

Why is it not safe enough to start at 18 years old?

In the Netherlands, an 18-year-old can purchase alcohol, obtain a driver's license, and at 17, join the Dutch military. However, municipalities gradually raised the minimum age for entry into prostitution to 21, with Amsterdam doing so in 2013. In 2019, after much debate, the national government changed the official age of legal entry to 21 years old.

Why is sex buying still sometimes stigmatized?

Among the general Dutch population, purchasing sexual acts and visiting red-light districts is acceptable behavior. However, public officials are held to a different standard.

In one case, Rob Oudkerk, a former politician and alderman of Amsterdam, was forced to resign in 2004 after telling a journalist that "he frequented prostitutes" at an Amsterdam industrial site, an unregulated prostitution zone.

While a poll revealed that 63% of the Dutch public felt Oudkerk's "indiscretions" did not warrant his resignation and 73% maintained that elected officials should be allowed to visit brothels without consequence, his peers decided that his actions were untenable given his position as an elected official.

Why is drug and alcohol use presented as potentially beneficial for those in the sex trade?

The health section of the ACS (see p. 32) website provides advice about using substances in prostitution. Among the reasons why an individual might use drugs or alcohol: "You dare more and have fewer inhibitions," "you think less about what you are doing," and "sexual acts are easier." While the ACS lists the dangers of substance use and offers in-person consultations, they ultimately leave the responsibility with the individual, stating, "... ensure that you have safeguards in place for anything that might happen."

Why can't you take pictures in the red-light districts?

Amsterdam does not shy away from promoting its red-light districts as among the city's main points of attraction. Around the world, it is generally acceptable to take photographs of individuals working at tourist attractions; yet, the city of Amsterdam forbids tourists from taking photographs of the famous brothel windows and the women inside them. This prohibition is an acknowledgment of the persistently clandestine nature of the sex trade and its innate objectification of women. The women in the windows do not want to be photographed for a number of reasons, including fear of being identified to family and friends, stigma, shame, and the emotional distress of being objectified and having no control over the distribution of images.



7 The System of Prostitution's Effects on Society



The impact of prostitution is not just consigned to those engaged in it or to the locations in which it occurs. The occurrence of prostitution, especially if a state endorses it, spills out into the broader society, shaping negative socio-cultural attitudes, stereotypes, and dehumanization not just vis-à-vis prostituted women, but all women and girls.

“Monkey Watching”

Until Mayor Femke Halsema banned the practice in 2020 (see p. 58), Amsterdam offered official tours through De Wallen’s streets and canals to gawk at the women behind windows, a practice some locals nicknamed *aapje kijken* (“monkey watching”).

Incidentally, many of these windows are part of historic houses built during the Dutch “Golden Age,” financed by the slave trade and the exploitation of overseas colonies. Some of these buildings today house and host events for university fraternities.

“

Day in and day out another couple of passersby laugh at you... You get comments such as: ‘There’s another dirty whore.’ Or ‘Look at that one, she should be the one paying, she’s so ugly...’ Those are the things you have to hear.

”

One or two of every 200 De Wallen visitors will purchase sexual acts, while the rest, including families and school classes of all ages, simply come to stare at the brothel windows (see p. 21). Tourists will often harass the prostituted women by laughing, pointing, yelling insults, and snapping photos of them.

In a comprehensive 2009 study, sex buyers expressed pleasure in walking past the windows, taking their time to appraise the women before making their choice. Respondents indicated that this selection process is preferable and “more romantic” than cruising other types of prostitution. The public visibility of the windows also lulls many to falsely conclude that trafficking and sexual exploitation do not occur in the De Wallen brothels.

A woman in street and window prostitution

TEN COMMANDMENTS

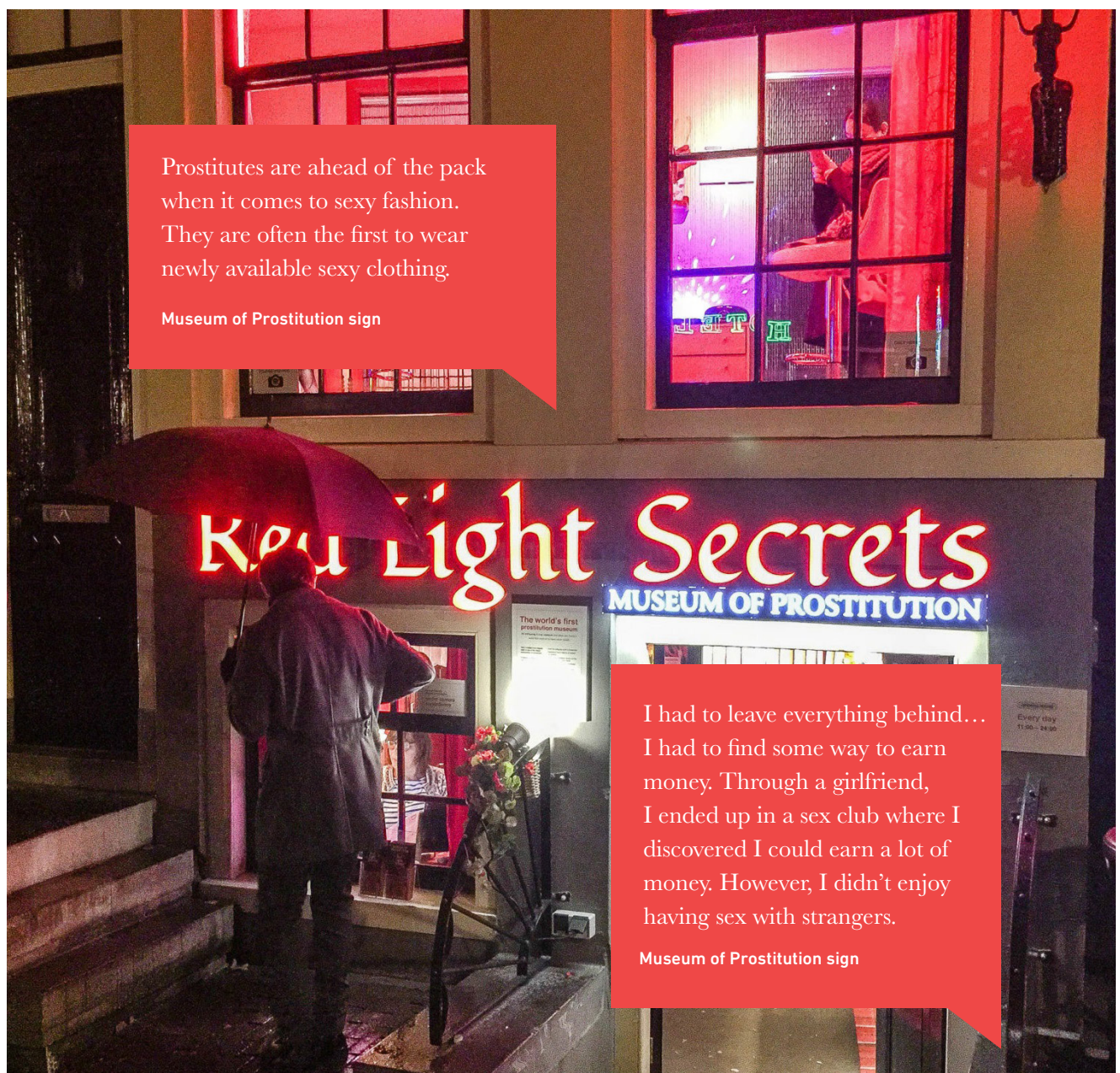
Principles of behaviour towards prostitutes

1. Do not take photographs or film
2. Do not tap or spit on the window
3. Be respectful toward the women
4. Do not peek through cracks in the curtains
5. Do not stand in front of the doors or windows
6. When visiting, pay in advance and discuss beforehand what is and is not permitted
7. Never have unprotected sex
8. Be hygienic (clean and well-groomed, not intoxicated)
9. When you suspect force or coercion, call the police on 0900 8844
10. Aggression is not tolerated

The Museum of Prostitution

In 2014, Amsterdam opened the Museum of Prostitution (also known as the “Red Lights Secrets Museum”), marketed as “the world’s only museum dedicated to prostitution.” The former brothel features videos and written anecdotes from prostituted women, as well as personal effects left behind by sex buyers. One room includes a “red light window” so visitors can simulate the experience of being assessed by tourists and potential sex buyers. Visitors can also explore a variety of reconstructed interiors of brothel rooms, spaces dedicated to “entertaining clients.”

Equal parts aggrandizing and matter-of-fact, the Museum is a funhouse mirror reflecting Amsterdam’s unsettling acceptance of prostitution as both entertainment and an inevitable necessity.



HOW TO

Become a successful prostitute

10 insider tips

- 1. Posture**
Pout those lips and work those hips. Stand upright and accentuate your curves.
- 2. Cheerful**
Make sure you look cheerful. Men don't enjoy spending money on a surly woman.
- 3. Stand out**
Sitting quietly like the Mona Lisa will not get you attention. When you go unnoticed, you will have no business. Make sure to stand out.
- 4. Make contact**
Did you grab someone's attention? Try to make eye contact. When he looks back, flutter your eyelids. Look coy.
- 5. Smile**
Smile at the man, but not too much. He might think you're making fun of him. An inviting, seductive smile - mouth slightly open - works best.
- 6. Lick your lips**
Have you still got his attention? Gently lick your lips, as you keep looking into his eyes.
- 7. Use your hands**
Your hands are important. Don't hide them, use them to draw attention to your curvaceous body.
- 8. Hair**
Do you have long hair? Put it to good use! Stroke your hair with your hands, throw it back ... flaunt it!
- 9. Beckon**
Make your customer believe you want him. That he is the only one for you. Beckon your client into your boudoir.
- 10. Fall-back option**
Is your customer still in doubt? Use your assets to convince him: your breasts, your behind, your thighs ... show yourself from your best side. Do what you need to do!

The Realities of Living Next to a Legal Brothel

The residents of and nearby red-light districts, including the sought-after historic neighborhood of De Wallen, live with the daily realities of legalized prostitution and its negative consequences. Coupled with high levels of tourism (18 million people visit Amsterdam, and De Wallen in particular, every year) and a culture of public drug consumption, many residents complain of a toxic living environment, including nightly noise levels comparable to New Year's celebrations, heavy car traffic and ambulance sirens, widespread littering, drunkenness, and public urination. More serious crimes such as illegal drug dealing, assault, theft, and robbery also occur at high rates in De Wallen.

“

I think they should just put the red-light district right on Schiphol Airport. They can put the girls over there. It's the only thing those tourists come here for anyway.”

Resident of De Wallen

The Job Center to Brothel Pipeline

When the 2000 law went into effect, job centers were permitted to post ads for entry into prostitution. Brothel owners and traffickers were eager to take advantage of this initiative, as they admitted to struggling with a shortage of “volunteers” signing up for prostitution. A slightly paraphrased version in the town of Heerlen’s job center read:



After the ad’s publication, which lists benefits that are extremely rare, journalists flocked to Heerlen and reported that at least two women had expressed interest. Two weeks later, following criticism from women job seekers, the job center reworded the ad but defended itself, stating prostitution was “a legal profession.” Since then, job boards have occasionally featured positions in brothels, strip clubs, and camming companies. The lack of sufficient “volunteers” remains an ongoing phenomenon, leading to pervasive sex trafficking into the Dutch commercial sex industry.

The Normalization of Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination

When the state normalizes the system of prostitution and the purchase of sexual acts, it creates a culture whereby women are viewed as purchasable “sex objects” and “public goods” – making gender equality impossible. Although the Netherlands has a 77.9/100 score on the European Gender Equality Index, ranking second in the EU, it still struggles with equality in the domain of the workplace and in combating violence and discrimination against women. Reflecting UN statistics globally, 33% of women in the Netherlands have experienced violence by an intimate partner in her adult life. In the 2022-2023 period, 41% of women in the workplace have experienced sexual harassment. In a 2017 survey, 1 in 11 Dutch men admitted to having violated the sexual boundaries of a woman or girl, while 1 in 10 said he believed he had gone too far in attempts to flirt. In the same survey, 47% expressed concerns that the #MeToo discussion was bordering on a “witch hunt.” *Hoertje* (“whore”) remains a common slur Dutch men use when harassing women.

A 2014 EU Survey of Dutch Women’s Reported Rates of Lifetime Gender-Based Violence Since Age 15

73%

experienced sexual harassment

51%

had avoided situations or environments in the past year for fear of physical or sexual violence

45%

experienced some form of physical or sexual violence (above the European average of 33%)

26%

suffered stalking

25%

were physically or sexually assaulted by a partner or ex-partner

20%

had experienced sexual violence

10%

were raped

As is the case with gender-based violence across the globe, most perpetrators are male and known to the victim. Childhood sexual abuse remains a significant problem with 20% of Dutch women experiencing it before the age of 16. 50% of those are later revictimized as adults.

Studies on women in prostitution indicate that childhood abuse is often a precursor to entry into the sex trade. In one comprehensive study of women in Dutch indoor prostitution, 76% suffered emotional and 59% physical neglect, while 54% endured emotional, 42% sexual, and 34% physical violence in childhood. In practice, there is no neat separation between the prostituted and non-prostituted population and the Dutch state must fulfill its obligations to prevent the abuse of girls, which can foster sexual exploitation in their adulthood.

Sexual Harassment and Violence Against Undocumented Migrant Women

Life in the Netherlands is particularly dire for women with precarious migration status - a population also vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation by intimate partners, asylum professionals, and traffickers.

Since 1998, undocumented migrants have been ineligible for social security or legal employment in the Netherlands and live under the constant threat of deportation. Homeless and domestic violence shelters have no legal obligation to support undocumented women and although some Dutch municipalities provide beds, women are repeatedly turned away based on their migration status. Non-EU migrant women married to a Dutch man must stay married for five years before they can obtain independent residency. Such dependency creates an acute vulnerability that sex traffickers are eager to exploit.

Survey of Refugee Women's Reported Rates of Gender-Based Violence Since Arriving in the Netherlands

62%
experienced
emotional/psychological violence

56%
experienced
sexual violence

33.7%
experienced
financial violence

47%
experienced
physical violence

Sexual Acts as a Form of “Currency”

In the Netherlands, it is legal to pay for a variety of services – such as driving lessons – with sexual acts, as long as the person providing the service (in this instance, the driving instructor) is the party who makes the offer to engage in sexual acts in exchange for the service. Both parties must be over 18, use condoms, and carry the acts out in a private setting. As the government does not classify this exchange as a form of prostitution, it does not require any regulations related to prostitution. Dutch conservatives have critiqued the practice, arguing it constitutes “illegal prostitution” and should be regulated and taxed.

In 2022, after requests for clarification, the Dutch Justice Minister defended the law, arguing that “sex-for-service” arrangements were uncommon. However, a Dutch newspaper reported in 2021 that such arrangements occurred in a variety of industries, such as photography, car mechanics, gardening, and accounting, without any institutional oversight. Rotterdam police conducted at least one investigation over concerns of sexual exploitation and related criminal activities. The Justice Minister was firm that “sex-for-service” arrangements were acceptable as long as practiced between “equal” and “consenting adults” and that abuse of young people could be prevented through proper sex education. In 2023, a major Dutch news outlet reported and strongly condemned lawyers asking female clients for “sex” instead of payment.



Sexual Coercion and Harassment in the Healthcare Industry

The Dutch government fosters the widespread assumption that women in health or caregiving professions can provide “sexual services” in the course of their workday.

Recent studies have found high rates of sexual harassment of nurses in the Netherlands (up to 37%) as well as caregivers (27%) and physical therapists (18%). In 2010, NU'91, a Dutch healthcare worker union with 40,000 members, launched a campaign to combat said harassment, plainly stating: “We do not provide sexual services.” A 24-year-old nursing student inspired the campaign after observing that her older colleagues felt obligated to acquiesce when male patients asked to be masturbated. When she refused to do the same, she was deemed “unfit to provide care” and let go. She reported her case to mediation, NU'91, and the police. Patient representatives issued a public statement saying, “Every client is free to ask for what he or she wants. And every carer is free to respond or not.”

Sex trade lobbyists have muddied the waters further by promoting prostitution as a “healing profession,” highlighting its supposed importance for elderly and disabled men. Even prior to the 2000 law, projects were in place to offer men access to prostitution when deemed “in need” of sex. In 1997, the Club d'Amour brothel in Maastricht partnered with a local psychiatric hospital to offer reduced prices to male patients so they would cease the reported chronic harassment and rape of female patients and staff. Today there are six Dutch municipalities (out of the 22 largest) in which men with disabilities can be reimbursed by the government for their use of prostitution. The designation of “sex aid providers” as a profession (with 150 people registered as such in the Netherlands and charities that connect them with demand) is intended to shield nurses from harassment without success. Rather than analyzing male sexual entitlement and objectification of women as unacceptable practices and drivers of gender inequality and discrimination, Dutch institutions appear to see an equivalence between caregiving professions - mostly staffed by women - and prostitution.



“
Every client is free
to ask for what he
or she wants. And
every carer is free to
respond or not.”

Dutch patients' advocacy group

A woman in a light blue uniform stands in the center of a hallway lined with lockers. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, creating a somber and institutional atmosphere. The woman's hands are clasped in front of her, and she looks directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

“ We do not
provide sexual
services. ”

Dutch healthcare worker union

8 International Impact and Scrutiny: United Nations Systems and Regional Institutions



United Nations, International and Regional Instruments: The Netherlands, a Lead Architect of “Forced Prostitution”

The Dutch government’s commitment to the legalization of prostitution and the decriminalization of pimping extends to the development of international laws and policies, and its influence in the United Nations’ system, as well as across regional institutions.

In the 1980s, as a continuum of its influence in legitimizing the sex trade as a market force and a source of employment, the Dutch government advanced well-financed and deliberate national and international policies that supported the decriminalization of the sex trade.

Due to the extensive documentation on this subject, this chapter only offers a few examples of the Dutch government’s contributions to the drafting of international instruments related to prostitution and its engine, sex trafficking.



1949 Convention on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others

During the deliberations leading to the enactment of the 1949 Convention, the Netherlands expressed concerns about the draft text, particularly that it mandated signatories to use their national penal laws to combat the exploitation of prostitution of “independent adult women...who, of their own free will had consented to be exploited,” and therefore ratification would be incompatible with its national policies.

Therefore, the Netherlands – and surprisingly the United States – attempted to add “willfully” to the text as a restriction on the definition, delineating between desirable or undesirable forms of prostitution.

They did not prevail, nor did they sign the Convention (see p. 21), which mandates State parties to “punish any person who, to gratify the passions of another procures entices or leads away, for purposes of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of that person; or exploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of that person.”

“Whereas prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and the worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, the family and the community...”

Preamble, Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, 1949

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

In 1995, the United Nations convened the Fourth World Conference on Women, in Beijing, China, one of the most important international gatherings to focus on the protection of the rights of women and girls. At the conference, Member States adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which reinforces CEDAW and calls for its implementation.

The Dutch government played a notable role in preparing the European action plan for the Beijing Conference. Among its contributions was the incorporation in the preparatory documents of the terminology of “forced prostitution,” which the Dutch government had first introduced at a European Union conference (see p. 83).

As a result, although a few of the Beijing Platform’s strategic objectives call on governments “to eliminate trafficking in women and assist victims of violence due to prostitution and trafficking,” most of the references to prostitution have the qualifier of “forced.”

At the same time, the Netherlands applauded the European Union for acknowledging that trafficking in women can be effectively prevented and combated when government agencies and civil society cooperate with one another. The Netherlands called for the appointments of national rapporteurs on the prevention and combating of trafficking in women and was the first country to make such an appointment in 2000, the same year the law lifted the ban on brothels.

By segregating acts of prostitution into artificial categories of “free” versus “forced,” the law dismisses the reality that the men who buy sexual acts do not make those distinctions and impart the same harm and control over those they purchase in the sex trade. It also significantly impedes governments’ ability to address sex trafficking since the burden of proof required to determine who is in “free” or “forced” prostitution is rarely met.



Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

The **OHCHR** is the UN's entity responsible for assisting governments with implementing the international human rights laws they have ratified.

In 2001, a statement published by the OHCHR noted that the Netherlands recognized the acute attention it received on its 2000 law lifting the ban on brothels. The Ministry of Justice said that both the Dutch Parliament and the public were profoundly divided on the subject of prostitution and respected the views that prostitution was an affront to human dignity and, in opposition, that sex for money among consenting adults had nothing to do with human dignity and should, therefore, be allowed. The Dutch government further stated that prostitution and brothels are facts of life and that neither can be eradicated by legislation.

In 2023, the Report of the Working Group on OHCHR's Universal Periodic Review recommended that the Kingdom of the Netherlands "put an end to the high incidence of violence against women, including domestic violence; end sexual harassment, human trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation of women and girls, on the rise in the country." The government was praised for its strong commitment to the protection of human rights.

CEDAW Committee

Member States that have ratified CEDAW are required on a periodic basis to present to the CEDAW Committee their progress in implementing the Convention. In the Netherlands' mandatory reports to the CEDAW Committee in 2007, the government shared its concern about traditional attitudes and stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men in the family and in society, and that negative stereotyping of girls and women is still widespread in society. At the same time it pledged to redress these barriers to equality, the Netherlands also praised the benefits of legalizing brothels. In 2007, concerned about the increasing number of female trafficking victims in the Netherlands, the CEDAW Committee encouraged the government to appoint a neutral and independent body to conduct an impact assessment of the effects of the 2000 law, covering the risks of harm and health hazards related to prostitution, in particular for the women without residence permits who are especially vulnerable to exploitation and violence.

The CEDAW Committee again questioned the Netherlands in 2016, about the links between sex trafficking and prostitution and what measures the government was taking to address its highest recorded number of trafficking cases since 2000. The Dutch representatives reported that since prostitution was legal in the Netherlands, the country was not taking steps to reduce demand for prostitution, to combat tourism for purposes of sexual exploitation, or planning to make changes to its prostitution policy in Europe or the Caribbean.

In 2019, when the CEDAW Committee organized consultations in preparation for its General Recommendation No. 38 on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration, the Netherlands commented on the deliberations by praising the legalization of prostitution and urged other nations to stop seeing people in the sex trade as "either victims or criminals."

Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, its Causes and Consequences

After an official mission to the Netherlands in 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk, published a report focusing on domestic and intimate-partner violence, violence in the context of prostitution, and the situation of immigrant women seeking asylum and refuge in the Netherlands.

She found that while gender equality within Dutch society had advanced considerably, Dutch women were still underrepresented both in decision-making positions and faced myriad forms of gender-based violence.

The Special Rapporteur also noted that violence against women occurring in the context of prostitution remained a significant problem, particularly given that the majority of those women were immigrants from developing countries or Eastern Europe. Among numerous points of recommendation to the Dutch government to address the situation, she noted that an approach to examining violence in prostitution cannot be limited to concerns of societal integration or a law and order framework, “whereby some forms of violence become normalized and others are perceived as a cultural problem.”

In 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, Reem Alsalem, issued a report “Prostitution and violence” in which she highlights the “ride for a ride” law (see p. 74), condemning the Dutch government for facilitating a “sexist social pressure on the most precarious women and girls to accept the provision of a sexual act as a livelihood alternative, regardless of the inherent violence of it.”

In response to the report, Dutch government representatives stated, “The Netherlands has seen that a legalized sex work sector ensures visibility, legal workplaces, better and safer working conditions and Social Security for sex workers. [...] empowering sex workers through legalisation increases the protection and promotion of their rights.”

“Women in prostitution still face violence, despite the legalization and regulation approach and the Government’s efforts to enforce a zero-tolerance policy towards trafficking and sexual exploitation.”

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, 2006

The European Union

During the preparatory meetings that led to the enactment of the Maastricht Treaty establishing the European Union in 1993, the participants officially noted the rise of the prostitution and pornography market across Europe, recognizing the phenomenon as an important financial issue.

The Dutch government, which played a central role in this conference, agreed and offered an economic framework to the growth of its sex trade, saying: “Since the end of the seventies, significant changes have taken place in Dutch prostitution; more and more non-European women work in brothels and sex clubs. This international dimension modifies the forms of management of prostitution; it is managed on a large scale, and becomes highly industrialized. In the past, Dutch prostitution could be characterized as a small local market: now gigantic businesses have sprung up, while purveyors with international connections have secured total control of the market. The Dutch sex industry market is more or less an integral part of a European market.”

At this conference, reports indicate that the Netherlands introduced the concept of “forced prostitution” for the first time at a European government level, which it later expanded throughout the United Nations system (see Beijing Declaration, p. 80). The theory of “forced prostitution” gives license to the state to reframe prostitution as labor, also known as “sex work,” eliminating all connections to sex trafficking.

Three decades later, in 2022, the Women’s Rights and Gender Equality Committee of the European Parliament sent a delegation to The Hague to inquire what was being done to prevent and combat human trafficking. Their report recognized that trafficking in human beings for purposes of sexual exploitation is strongly connected with sexual violence and prostitution.

On Commercial Sexual Abuse Material of Children

In November 1996, at the Council of Ministers of Justice and Internal Affairs, almost all 15 EU Member States demanded stronger measures to combat CSAM. However, the Netherlands opposed Belgium’s proposal to make it a criminal offense to possess such material for “personal ends” and prevented the adoption of two major proposals put forward under the joint action plan. The possession of pornographic videos of children would no longer be regarded in Europe as constituting sexual exploitation, making it exempt from all sanctions (see p.21).

The EU is currently proposing regulation to prevent and combat CSAM, which would mandate Member States to hold accountable online platforms and internet service providers that fail to detect, report, and remove access to such material.

Contradictions within the Dutch Government: The European Court of Justice Decides

Four women from the Czech Republic and two women from Poland rented brothel “window rooms” in Amsterdam’s red-light district, respectively between 1993 and 1996.

Both countries were at the time parties to European Communities Associations Agreements. The women paid rent to the owners of the window brothels and taxes to the Dutch government. When they applied to the commissioner of the Amsterdam police for residence permits, the police rejected their application. They appealed to the Secretary of State, which affirmed the police’s rejection, on the grounds that prostitution was not a socially acceptable form of work and therefore not a regular job.

The women sued the Secretary of State of the Netherlands for the right to enter, reside, and freely establish themselves as “self-employed prostitutes.”

The Netherlands referred the case to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in *Aldona Malgorzata Jany and Others v. Staatssecretaris van Justitie*, 21. One of its arguments to the ECJ was that “prostitution cannot be treated as an activity performed in a self-employed capacity within the meaning of the [Association Agreement] because it is not possible to determine whether a prostitute has voluntarily moved to the host Member State or pursues her activities there freely.”

While the ECJ recognized the “difficulty of distinguishing between forced and voluntary sex workers,” it ruled that prostitution is an economic activity under the **Association Agreements**, and since the Netherlands legalized prostitution, the women could work there legally.

A few years later, when six other women in prostitution from Association Agreement countries applied for permanent residence permits as “self-employed prostitutes” in the Netherlands, the ECJ rejected their petition. In 2004, in *Lili Georgieva Panayotova and Others v. Minister voor Vreemdelingenzaken en Integratie*, 138,

the ECJ denied their claims, stating that they had failed to apply in their countries of origin for a valid temporary residency permit in the Netherlands, a precondition to receiving a residency permit.

The question remains whether these women would have been granted a temporary residency permit to the Netherlands from their countries of origin (in this case Poland, Slovakia, and Bulgaria), when individuals must possess sufficient financial resources for their “self-employment,” describe the nature of the enterprise, and show probability of reasonable chances of success. Reports indicate that the women were required to leave the Netherlands after the court’s decision.

Today, it remains unclear whether “self-employed” women in prostitution, who are not citizens of the European Union, could successfully petition to stay in the Netherlands. If you are a non-EU/**EFTA** national seeking permanent residency, you must prove that you’ve lived five consecutive years in the country (see p. 73), have a clean criminal record, earn sufficient income (at least 1,207.50 euros a month), and register in the Personal Records Database, criteria that may be difficult for people engaged in prostitution to fulfill.



Conclusion

“ When the sex trade is legalized and thus commercialized, the viewpoint of society changes: ‘It’s legal, so it must be okay.’ This opens the door to even more acceptance of abuse and exploitation of the women (and men) involved. It also creates a larger gray area where the exploitation is much harder to detect. With this the position of women and girls and how society views them will drop to a new depth. ”

- Arienh Autumn, Dutch sex trade survivor

The history of prostitution in the Netherlands exposes a system built upon the pillars of patriarchy, colonialism, militarization, profitable sexual exploitation, and cultural tolerance for male violence against women. While this history is not unique to the Netherlands, its global influence in promoting the legalization of prostitution and the decriminalization of pimping is at odds with its reputation as a bastion of progressivism and social equality.

Independent studies and evidence collected by the Dutch government itself shows that the 2000 law failed in meeting its stated goals of reducing violence, supporting those in prostitution, curbing human trafficking, and protecting children from sexual exploitation. As the myriad, and sometimes contradictory, amendments to the 2000 law indicate, the country continues to grapple with its own characterization of prostitution as a legitimate and regulated “job.”

For 24 years, the Netherlands has observed the destructive impact of legalized prostitution and the decriminalization of pimping on its society, without effective resolution. Its economy enjoys significant revenues from sex tourism and the associated drug trade, as well as from hosting the highest volume of child sexual abuse content worldwide. At the same time, the country continues to have an outsized global influence on the codification of prostitution as labor, including within the **United Nations** system, all at the incalculable expense of women and girls.

Many advocates in the Netherlands, including sex trade survivors, are calling on the government to change course. They are urging the country to recognize the pervasive violence and discrimination against women in prostitution, the sex trade’s endemic racism and misogyny, and the undeniable links between prostitution and sex trafficking.

These visionary leaders are fighting for a future without a marketplace selling the most vulnerable people on the planet, overwhelmingly women, for the sexual pleasure of men and the profit of the state. They are urging the Netherlands and every government around the world to uphold human rights and invest in realizing equality for all.

This report was written in solidarity with them.

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