

# External contribution

## Experiences in relation to diversity and vulnerability in the context of support for sex workers from Latin America

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This report is the result of a joint contribution between Alias, Boysproject, Espace P and Violet. Alias, Espace P and Violet are health and social care centres that provide medical care (linked to professional activities) and social assistance to sex workers (SW). Our activity is subsidised by the federal authorities, the communities and several local authorities. Violet operates in Flanders and Brussels, and Espace P in Brussels and Wallonia. Alias operates in Brussels and specifically targets men who have sex with men and trans people in the context of sex work. Lastly, Boysproject is a branch of CAW (Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk) in Antwerp, which offers social assistance to men and trans people in sex work and refers this target group to Violet's medical services. Our organisations only work with adult SWs.

Thanks to their experience in the field, they have become key players in the area of sex work. Health and social sector organisations at local, regional, national and European level call on our expertise. We are recognised and consulted by policymakers, and we advocate for improved rights for SWs.

### What is sex work?

When sex work is the subject of discussion or written material, stereotypes quickly come into play. This is why we would like to explain what constitutes sex work at the outset of this contribution. We define it as the exchange of sexual services for money or goods. Therefore, it is not only physical sexual services in return for payment, but also, for instance, erotic massages, online sex work or sexual services provided in exchange for accommodation.

This means that we also encounter people who do not identify as SWs or who do not define their services as sex work, but who can nevertheless be helped and supported within our organisations.

People generally choose to do sex work for economic reasons. Just like any other job, their goal is to earn money to meet their needs or to lead a more comfortable life for themselves or for their loved ones. In addition, sex work offers a certain flexibility and independence.

To reach as many SWs as possible, we employ a low-threshold approach, with no strings attached, free of charge and with respect for anonymity. We know the SWs by their working name, i.e. the name they use for their clients during their sexual activities. We do not organise an intake session, but work on a face-to-face basis (in our offices, in the street, at their workplace, online or by phone), during which we explain how our organisations can help them. We do not always ask them about their residency status, their family situation or why they are involved in sex work. Of course, these subjects are often raised at subsequent meetings or as part of advice on a specific request for help.

Our organisations provide both medical and social assistance to SWs. They can contact our medical teams for sexual health issues related to their work: information on safe sex, contraception, regular screening for sexually transmitted diseases and, if necessary, treatment or referral, pregnancy tests, etc. These consultations take place within our organisation, but we also make workplace visits to private houses, bars or erotic massage parlours, among other places, or we make home visits to SWs who receive their clients there.

<sup>202</sup> Espace P... is the official name of the organisation, but for the sake of readability, the name 'Espace P' is used in this contribution.

Our social assistance services are not limited to work-related issues. Of course, conversations often revolve around sex work. Given the stigma associated with it, we are often the only place where these people can talk about their work and their experiences, whether positive or negative. However, our social support services are broad-based and provide a point of contact for questions relating to many areas of life. These might include administrative concerns, financial problems, issues relating to their children such as school enrolment or childcare, housing, social security rights, right of residence, reorientation, support after facing violence, etc. We offer help if these issues fall within our area of expertise and connect them with mainstream legal services or assistance through referral, mediation or by visiting the service in question with the client.

Together, Violett, Espace P, Alias and Boysproject reached around 4,000 SWs in 2023<sup>203</sup>, although it is difficult to estimate the exact number. This population is on the move, working in a wide variety of locations that are sometimes less visible, and combine activities in different places. It is not always easy to identify them. The fact that sex work was in a grey zone before it was decriminalised in June 2022 undoubtedly has something to do with this. Even today, the stigma attached to sex work means that not all SWs (want to) identify themselves as such. This is why the number of SWs in Belgium is difficult to quantify.

The 4,000 SWs we have reached make up a particularly diverse group. Some are new to the sector or first approached our organisations in 2023, while others we have known for many years. We have encountered SWs from all sectors (private houses, bars, escorts, erotic massage parlours, windows, the street, parks, etc.), of all ages, with or without a migration story. There are both men and women, but also trans people<sup>204</sup>. Some SWs carry out this activity on a daily basis, while others do so sporadically, alongside another possible job. In view of the diversity of the group, we should be wary of making general statements about 'the' sex worker.

## Latin American SWs in the context of specialised support

In the rest of this contribution, we will focus on SWs of Latin American origin. Once again, this is a very diverse group about whom it is not possible to make general statements.

In recent years, more and more Latin American SWs have approached our organisations. There are a number of reasons why we are better able to reach this group. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic made the group more visible in the eyes of certain organisations and made it possible to establish contacts with SW who did not already know us: they were often unable to return to their country of origin because of the lockdown and came to us for financial assistance or to be vaccinated against COVID-19. In addition, in recent years we have (further) stepped up our online outreach activities, actively informing SWs who use sex websites to post their adverts, about what our organisations have to offer. This way, we can reach more SWs who work as escorts or in less visible places such as private homes and their own homes. SWs of Latin American origin often work in these sectors. Finally, we have found that word of mouth helps to raise awareness among SWs. Latin American SWs are very connected to each other, which encourages them to share our contact details.

The fact that our organisations reach a higher proportion of Latin American SWs does not necessarily mean that there are more of them working in Belgium, but rather that we are more successful in reaching them.

In 2023, one out of every three SWs encountered was of Latin American nationality. Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Ecuador were the nationalities most frequently encountered. Gender diversity is also observed within the group of Latin American SWs, which includes women, men and trans people. Their residency status varies: some are legally resident in Belgium or another EU country, while others are illegally resident.

<sup>203</sup> This figure is based on the number of SWs that we reach through our medical and social services. Some SWs are monitored by both our medical and social services, and others are known to several of our organisations.

<sup>204</sup> By trans people, we mean anyone who identifies differently from the gender assigned to them at birth, regardless of their (possible) physical transition process. These are therefore people who identify as transgender, transsexual, transvestite or non-binary.

Latin American SWs operate in different sex work sectors and often combine activities in other sectors. Figures provided by Violett<sup>205</sup> show that in Flanders, the majority work from home or in private premises (42%), receiving their clients in their own home or in a flat rented exclusively for this purpose. Among this group, 23% work in a private house, where several SWs work and live together. The third most popular sector is escort work, which employs 15% of Latin American SWs. Window work attracts 11% of them. The rest work in bars, erotic massage parlours or public places (on the street or in non-erotic cafés). In Brussels and Wallonia, Latin American SWs also operate mainly in private homes. Around 80% of the Latin American SWs encountered by Espace P work in Airbnb rentals, aparthotels or private homes. They regularly change location, work and town, and use sex websites and WhatsApp groups to find their clients.

As mentioned above, we do not always ask our clients to tell us about their migration history or the reasons why they came to Belgium or Europe. However, Latin American SWs tell us that they travelled to Europe mainly for economic reasons. For trans people and men who have sex with men, discrimination and violence are often among the main reasons for leaving their country of origin.

Latin American SWs also tend to engage in sex work for financial reasons. Trans people sometimes opt for sex work in order to raise the financial resources needed for their transition.

A large proportion of Latin American SWs find themselves at the intersection of several vulnerable situations: they are sex workers, have a migratory background, find themselves in a precarious residence situation, do not speak the language and/or are LGBTI. The combination of these factors makes them vulnerable to discrimination, which exposes them to an increased risk of exploitation. In addition, their access to medical care is complicated by the lack of health insurance. Financial pressure makes it more difficult for SWs to properly control their boundaries with clients. They sometimes provide sexual services that they would prefer to avoid, such as unprotected sexual contact, in order to have more clients and therefore more income.

These same vulnerabilities may also prevent them from contacting the public authorities or the police if they are victims of discrimination or other punishable acts. More specifically, men who have sex with men are employed in the most hidden sectors of sex work and feel an additional stigma with regard to their homosexual encounters. In addition, many SWs distrust the police or other public services, due to bad experiences in their country of origin, in Belgium or in other countries. It is therefore difficult to measure the vulnerability of Latin American SWs, as this cannot be quantified by the number of reports or convictions, owing to the large number of dark figures in this area.

As we have seen, a large proportion of Latin American SWs work in private homes or as escorts. As a result, they often, and increasingly, rent an Airbnb, hotel room or other tourist accommodation. The rents are high, which is often considered by the administrative and judicial authorities to be a form of exploitation.

We have found that SWs generally pay the same price as city trip tourists, for instance, to rent a room or flat for a week. While the fact that SWs rent these flats at a higher price is not necessarily a sign of abuse, there may be exploitation if the offer of such expensive accommodation is specifically aimed at SWs in a precarious situation.

SWs, particularly those in precarious residency situations, often have little or no access to the regular housing market, forcing them to resort to Airbnb or similar accommodation. The lack of alternatives, the shortage of affordable and quality accommodation, and discrimination in the housing market, make SWs vulnerable to abuse or situations of exploitation.

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205 Based on Violett data for the year 2023.

## Exploitation and human trafficking

SWs help each other a lot. The same is true of SWs of Latin American origin: we see that those with the most experience or who have been working in a country or town for much longer, show new SWs the ropes. They show them potential workplaces, help them to rent a window or to publish an advert online. New SWs in a specific place regularly find a first port of call with their more experienced colleagues.

Their precarious (residence) status often prevents Latin Americans from working officially, thus limiting their opportunities to earn money. Hence, sex work is one of their few options. This makes them vulnerable to abuse. Although mutual aid generally works well, the balance is sometimes lost, with the more experienced sex worker demanding an increasingly large financial contribution (for example for accommodation or a percentage of the income from sex work) or keeping the other person in sex work in order to gain a financial advantage themselves.

However, the SWs do not always consider these situations as amounting to abuse or exploitation. Their idea of exploitation or human trafficking is the stereotype of a person forced into sex work and locked up, without a choice. As a result, they often do not consider themselves to be victims of trafficking. Therefore, it is difficult to start working on these cases straight away within the framework of our support programmes.

Of course, we remain alert to situations of exploitation or human trafficking. We sometimes see or hear of cases where a sex worker receives help to travel to Europe and then engages in sex work to pay off their debts. In most cases, they know before they leave that they will be doing sex work. However, we sometimes hear of situations in which these people have been misled about the income they could potentially earn in Belgium, forcing them to work as sex workers for much longer than they initially thought, in order to pay off their debts.

When we suspect human trafficking or exploitation, we try to approach the subject with caution. This is because the SWs do not always perceive their situation as problematic. We explain to them that some people are forced to prostitute themselves or hand over a large part of their income, and that specialist help is available for this type of situation. We do not give up. We continue to offer support and maintain warm relations with them, so that when they are ready to talk about trafficking or exploitation, we are there for them.

We then contact one of the support centres for victims of trafficking with which we work closely. If the client so wishes, we can also attend the intake meeting together. In the fight against human trafficking, all the stakeholders are necessary, but each one must also be able to play their role. The role of the medical and social care centres is to inform the SWs, establish a relationship of trust, pick up on signals, help them and improve their social status. The SWs remains in control throughout this process. Exceptionally, if there is an immediate risk to the client's safety, we may take the initiative to inform the police or the public prosecutor's office, for instance.

## Conclusion

As grassroots organisations, we meet many Latin American SWs. This group is characterised by a high degree of diversity. A large proportion of them find themselves at the intersection of different vulnerabilities, because of their residency status, their migratory status, their sexual orientation, their gender, their sex work, etc. This makes them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation or human trafficking. In order to detect them and take action, every link in the chain (grassroots organisations, trafficking victim support centres, police, public prosecutors, etc.) must be able to play their part. Our job is to stand by the SWs unconditionally and non-judgmentally, to discuss the situation and to be there when they are ready to take action.

You can find more information about our organisations on our websites:

[www.alias.brussels](http://www.alias.brussels)  
[www.boysproject.be](http://www.boysproject.be)  
[www.espacep.be](http://www.espacep.be)  
[www.violett.be](http://www.violett.be)