

POLICE VIOLENCE

Against Sex Workers in Europe



RESEARCH REPORT | May 2025

European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance | eswalliance.org



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INTRODUCTION

The criminalisation of sex work, along with other restrictive laws targeting sex workers, is a key factor that adversely affects sex workers' rights, physical and mental health, and vulnerability to violence. Research indicates that repressive policies drive enforcement strategies that focus on surveillance and punishment, rather than ensuring sex workers' safety and well-being. These policies also hamper sex workers' access to justice and state protection when they experience harm.¹ Furthermore, punitive and enforcement-oriented policing strategies contribute to a significant power imbalance between sex workers and police, creating opportunities for misconduct and abuse of power by law enforcement officers. Multiple studies document violations of sex workers' rights at the hands of police, revealing a vast array of abuses including deliberate neglect, harassment, stigmatisation, and discriminatory treatment. Alarming, research also reveals that police officers — state agents whose assumed role is to provide protection and care — themselves

perpetrate violence against sex worker communities globally.²

Sex workers in Europe have a long history of organising collectively against police violence and abuse. One of the most significant moments in this struggle took place in June 1975, when approximately 100 sex workers occupied the Church of Saint-Nizier in Lyon, France, for over a week. Their protest aimed to denounce police harassment and repression while demanding social justice and protection. Often regarded as the symbolic birth of the sex workers' rights movement in Europe, the Lyon occupation inspired similar church takeovers in other French cities and led to the formation of numerous sex worker collectives across Europe, all committed to exposing police abuses and advocating for their rights. To this day, European sex worker collectives continue to mobilise against police violence and harassment, document

1 Oliveira, A., Lemos, A., Mota, M. & Pinto, R. (2023). Understanding the Impact of EU Prostitution Policies on Sex Workers: A Mixed Study Systematic Review. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20, pp. 1448–1468. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-023-00814-2>; Platt, L., et al. (2018). Associations Between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies. *PLOS Medicine*, 15(12), e1002680. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.

2 Benoit, C., et al. (2016). Lack of Confidence in Police Creates a “Blue Ceiling” for Sex Workers' Safety. *Canadian Public Policy*, 42(4), pp. 456–468. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cpp.2016-006>; Crago, A.-L. (2015). *Failures of Justice: State and Non-State Violence Against Sex Workers and the Search for Safety and Redress*. Budapest: Sex Workers' Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN); Platt, L., et al. (2018). Associations Between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies. *PLOS Medicine*, 15(12), e1002680. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.

human rights violations by law enforcement, support their communities in accessing justice and protection, and fight for legal reforms that would enable them to live free from police abuse.

This policy brief builds on and contributes to these community efforts by documenting the scale and various forms of police violence experienced by sex workers in Europe. It focuses specifically on sex workers' exposure to physical, sexualised, and emotional abuse, as well as threats, blackmail, and coercion from police officers.

This occurs in the context of everyday policing, punishment- and enforcement-oriented interventions, and in situations where sex workers encounter police officers as victims of crime. It also explores how different factors, including legal models of sex work, working arrangements and settings, and demographic characteristics such as migration status and gender, impact sex workers' vulnerability to police violence. Finally, it examines the role of police violence in exacerbating risks to sex workers' safety and vulnerability to work-related violence and abuse.

Content note

This report contains accounts of abuse, harassment, and violence, which may be unsettling for the reader. We have chosen to include interview quotes not out of morbid curiosity or to sensationalise participants' experiences, but because they are crucial to highlight the often violent and shocking realities of sex workers' encounters with police. The quotes included here are not gratuitous; they are shared as empirical evidence to illustrate our findings. Therefore, a content note is necessary, as this report contains descriptions of extreme acts of police cruelty and brutality.

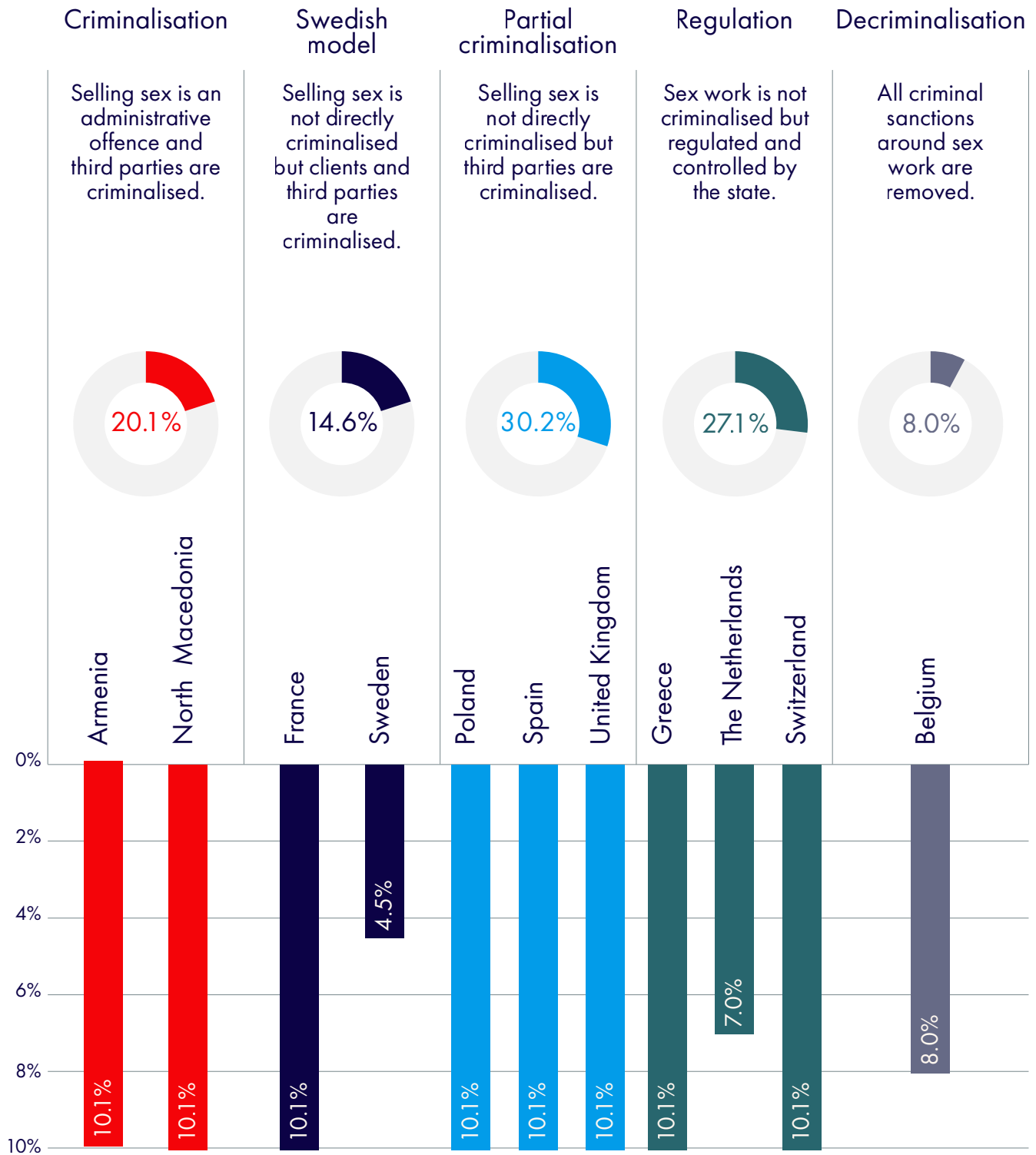
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this policy brief draw from a larger research project developed by the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance in cooperation with 13 national partner organisations. Conducted between 2022 and 2024 and described in more detail in the research report [*"Exposed from all sides": The Role of Policing in Sex Workers' Access to Justice*](#), this ESWA project focused on sex workers' everyday policing and the role of police in their access to justice. It builds on the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) framework, which fosters structural change and engages affected communities at all stages of the research process. Sex worker-led and sex workers' rights organisations were involved in defining the project's goals, designing its research methodology, and collecting and analysing the data.

The research findings draw on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with sex workers conducted by peer researchers in 11 European countries. The interview transcripts were analysed quantitatively to provide statistical insights and qualitatively, through thematic coding, to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences with police. A total of 199 sex workers were interviewed, following a purposive sampling strategy aimed at reflecting the diversity of their working conditions and arrangements, as well as their migration status, sexuality, and gender.

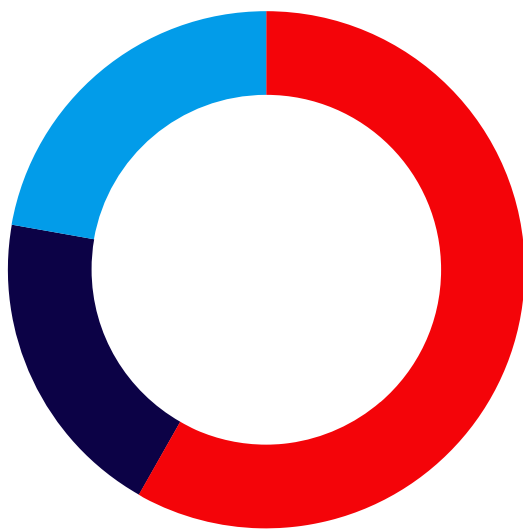
Of the 199 research participants, 20.1% worked under criminalisation (in Armenia and North Macedonia) and 27.1% under regulation (Greece, the Netherlands, and Switzerland). At 30.2%, the largest number of participants operated under partial criminalisation (Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom), while sex workers working under the Swedish model (France and Sweden) constituted 14.6% of our sample. Eight percent of participants worked under decriminalisation (Belgium). Given that this legal model was only recently introduced in Belgium and may not yet have significantly impacted policing strategies, for the purposes of our analysis, we have grouped it with countries where sex work is regulated.

FIGURE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY LEGAL MODEL AND COUNTRY



Participants engaged in various forms of sex work, including full-service work in the open and closed scene, stripping, online work, BDSM services, and other types of sex work such as erotic theatres, pornography, phone sex, erotic massages, or window work. Of the 189 participants who worked in person with their clients, 58.2% reported working exclusively indoors, 19.6% exclusively in the open scene, and 22.2% in both indoor and outdoor settings.

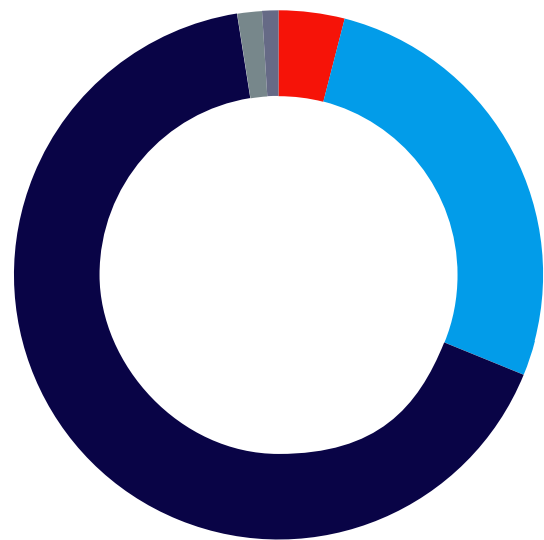
FIGURE 2: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY SEX WORK SETTING



- Closed scene — 58.2%
- Open scene — 19.6%
- Both — 22.2%

The majority of research participants (66.3%) worked independently, while 4% worked solely under management, and 27.1% reported experiences working both independently and with a third party.

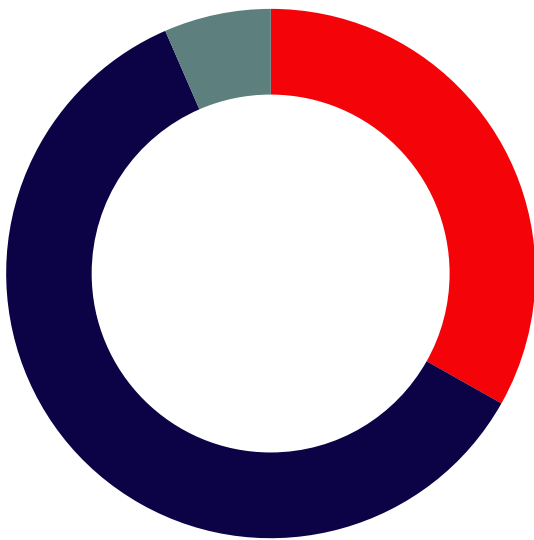
FIGURE 3: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY WORKING ARRANGEMENT



- Independent — 66.3%
- Both independent and under management — 27.1%
- Under management — 4.0%
- Undisclosed — 1.5%
- Unclear — 1.0%

Regarding their migration status, 33.2% of research participants were migrants, 60.3% were non-migrants, and 6.5% did not disclose this information.

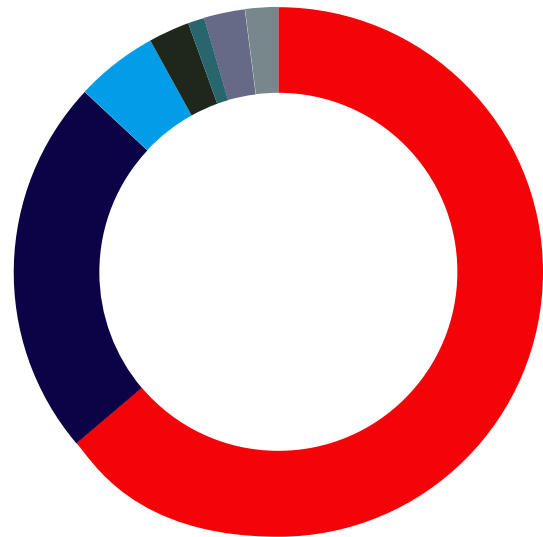
FIGURE 4: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY MIGRATION STATUS



- Non-migrants — 60.3%
- Migrants — 33.2%
- Undisclosed — 6.5%

In terms of gender identity, 63.8% of participants identified as cis women, 23.1% as trans women, 5% as cis men, 2.5% as non-binary, and 1% as trans men. A further 2.5% of participants selected a gender identity outside of these options.

FIGURE 5: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS BY GENDER



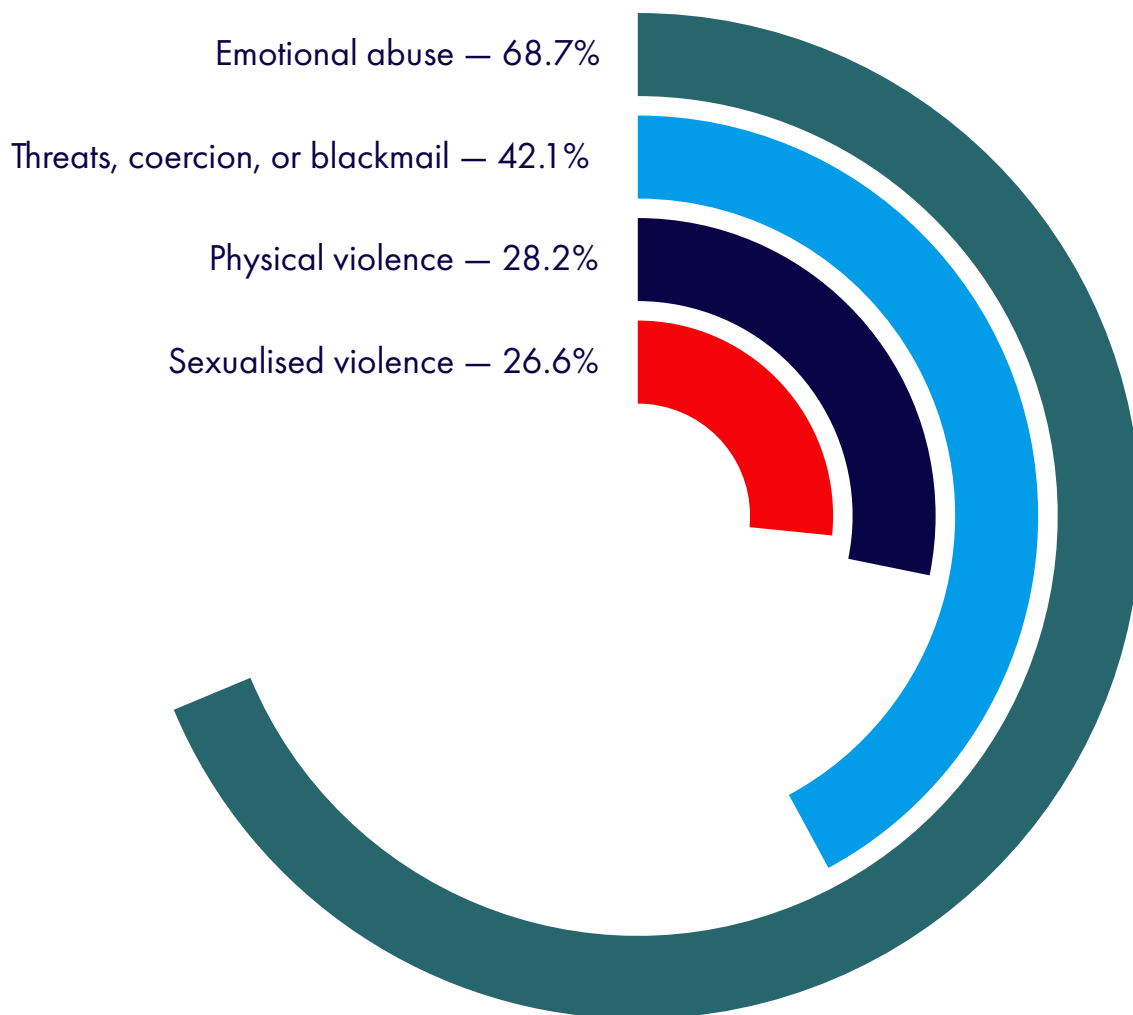
- Cis women — 63.8%
- Trans women — 23.1%
- Cis men — 5.0%
- Non-binary — 2.5%
- Trans men — 1.0%
- Other — 2.5%
- Undisclosed — 2.0%

POLICE AS PERPETRATORS OF VIOLENCE: RESEARCH RESULTS

This research documents the widespread and systemic nature of police violence perpetrated against sex workers throughout Europe. Participants across all work settings included in this research reported

experiencing physical, sexualised, and emotional abuse, as well as threats, coercion, and blackmail from law enforcement officers.

FIGURE 6: POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST SEX WORKERS



Of the 190 research participants, 146 (76.8%) reported experiencing at least one form of police violence mentioned above. Among these 146 participants, 68.5% had been subjected to multiple forms of police violence.

FIGURE 7: POLICE VIOLENCE BY TYPE/FREQUENCY

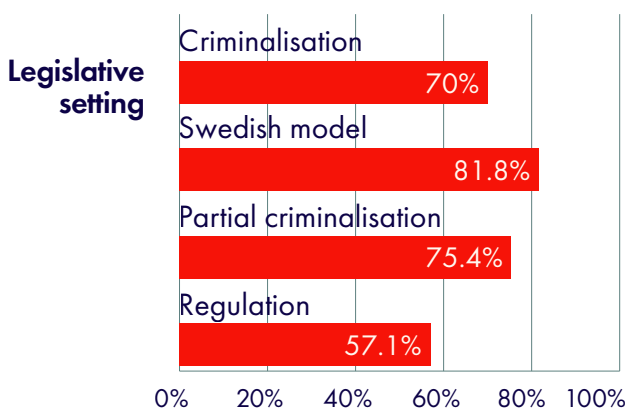


EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT

Our research identified emotional abuse and harassment by the police as the most prevalent form of violence reported, affecting up to 68.7% of participants (n=182). This included insults, slander, swearing, rudeness, contempt, and hostility. Many participants also described instances of humiliation, mockery, ridicule, and being dismissed or not taken seriously by police officers. Frequently, this abuse was rooted in stigma and manifested as whorephobic, transphobic, homophobic, sexist, xenophobic, and racist remarks.

Emotional abuse and harassment were widespread in all countries and legal frameworks examined in this research. Participants working in Swedish model contexts reported the highest incidence of emotional harassment at 81.8%, followed by those in partially criminalised contexts (75.4%), criminalised settings (70%), and regulated contexts (57.1%).

FIGURE 8: EMOTIONAL ABUSE AGAINST SEX WORKERS: BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS



Sex work is frowned upon by the police, and they don't take us seriously.

Selina, France

I have experienced a lot of abuse and harassment from the police. Things like them mocking me, calling out my name, and generally being very harassing.

Jessica, UK



They treat you like cockroaches. They think you are disgusting, repugnant, a worm.

Vanessa, Spain

The police treated us disrespectfully and cruelly, with rude words and manners.

Amira, Armenia

The police officer treated me like I was less than nothing.

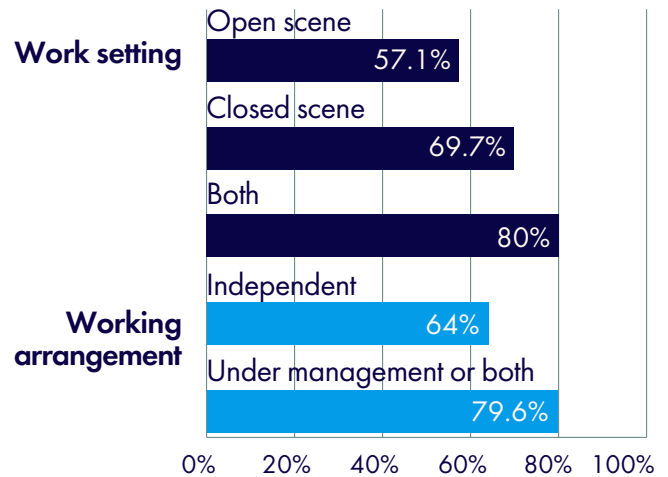
Mathéo, Belgium

So imagine being a sex worker. The police don't look at you kindly because they treat you like a criminal. Like shit. Like the scum of society.

Catalina, The Netherlands

Among participants, 79.6% who worked both independently and under management reported experiencing emotional abuse by police, compared to 64% of those working solely independently. Similarly, 69.7% of those working in closed scene settings had experienced such abuse, compared to 57.1% in the open scene. Notably, as many as 80% of sex workers working in both indoor and outdoor settings had been exposed to emotional abuse by police.

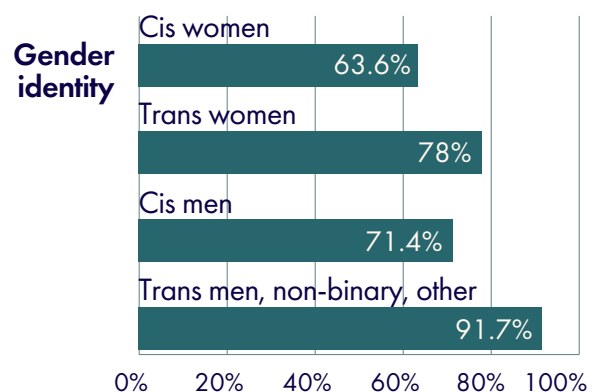
FIGURE 9: EMOTIONAL ABUSE AGAINST SEX WORKERS: BREAKDOWN BY WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND SETTINGS



When the police officers stop you, they don't even ask you many questions. They go straight to the point. They start treating you like shit because they already have in their head that this is the type of treatment you deserve.

Eva, Switzerland

FIGURE 10: EMOTIONAL ABUSE AGAINST SEX WORKERS: BREAKDOWN BY GENDER



Emotional abuse by police was reported by 78% of trans women and 63.5% of cis women. Furthermore, a significant majority of cis men, trans men, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants had also been subjected to emotional harassment by police. Numerous trans sex workers reported being systematically ridiculed, mocked, misgendered, and dehumanised by police.



Whenever they see us on the street they call us men's names. They make fun of us and laugh at us.

Ángela, Spain

They took our IDs and then one started to laugh and said, "Oh, looks like we have a couple of ladyboys in tonight. Who wants to take these?" [...] The officers also made offensive jokes and sexist, transphobic, and racist comments, saying things like, "So it was like he ordered a Thai bride and got more than he expected?" or "Just so you know, love, I wouldn't return you, I'd just turn you over."

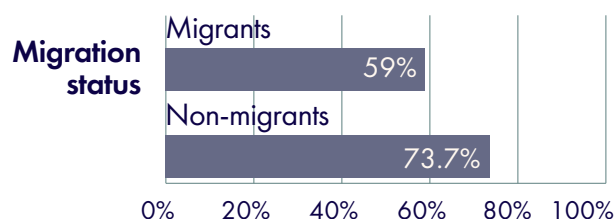
Mali, UK

It has also been reported that police sometimes go so far as to out trans sex workers to clients, claiming they are 'tricking' them — thereby potentially inciting transphobic violence from clients or passers-by.

They spy on us for the clients, say that we are gay, that we are not women. They will tell the client, "Hey, you were with a fag, you weren't with a woman, huh? Go get your money, don't be stupid." This has happened to me many times.

Albiona, North Macedonia

FIGURE 11: EMOTIONAL ABUSE AGAINST SEX WORKERS: BREAKDOWN BY MIGRATION STATUS



Participants' migration status appeared to influence their experiences, as migrant sex workers reported a somewhat surprisingly lower incidence of emotional abuse by police (59%) compared to non-migrant workers (73.7%). Furthermore, many racialised participants reported experiencing emotional harassment through insults, ridicule, and offensive behaviours. For example, Dingtang, a Chinese migrant working in the open scene, told us that French police in Belleville went so far as to learn some Chinese to insult sex workers in their native language.



Sometimes police officers learn the word ‘whore’ in Chinese and use it to insult us. It’s all linked to the police checks, the police sweeps, the repression of prostitution.

Dingtang, France

Black and Romani sex workers participating in our research also experienced high levels of harassment and emotional abuse from police.

We were treated very badly. They said, “You are Gypsies.” They humiliated us. I’m sure they treated me very differently, because I’m Roma.

Rashida, North Macedonia

Alarming, our findings indicate that across all countries examined, sex workers were also subjected to humiliation and emotional harassment when attempting to report violence or seek justice. This pattern of mistreatment is one of the key factors deterring sex workers from seeking police protection when facing violence.³

3 ESWA (2024). *“Exposed from all sides”: The Role of Policing in Sex Workers’ Access to Justice*; Struyf, P. (2022). To Report or Not to Report? A Systematic Review of Sex Workers’ Willingness to Report Violence and Victimization to Police. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(5), pp. 3065–3077. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221122819>.

Every time that you go to the police station they treat you like shit.

Catalina, Spain

I asked a police officer for help. This is what the cop said: “You were looking for that, you dumb bitch.”

Adda, Greece

I had a break-in to my apartment. It was someone who had pretended to be a client and got into my flat. And when the police got there, it didn’t feel like they took me seriously. [...] It was really like, “You’re a whore, it doesn’t matter.”

Yasmin, Sweden

THREATS, COERCION, OR BLACKMAIL

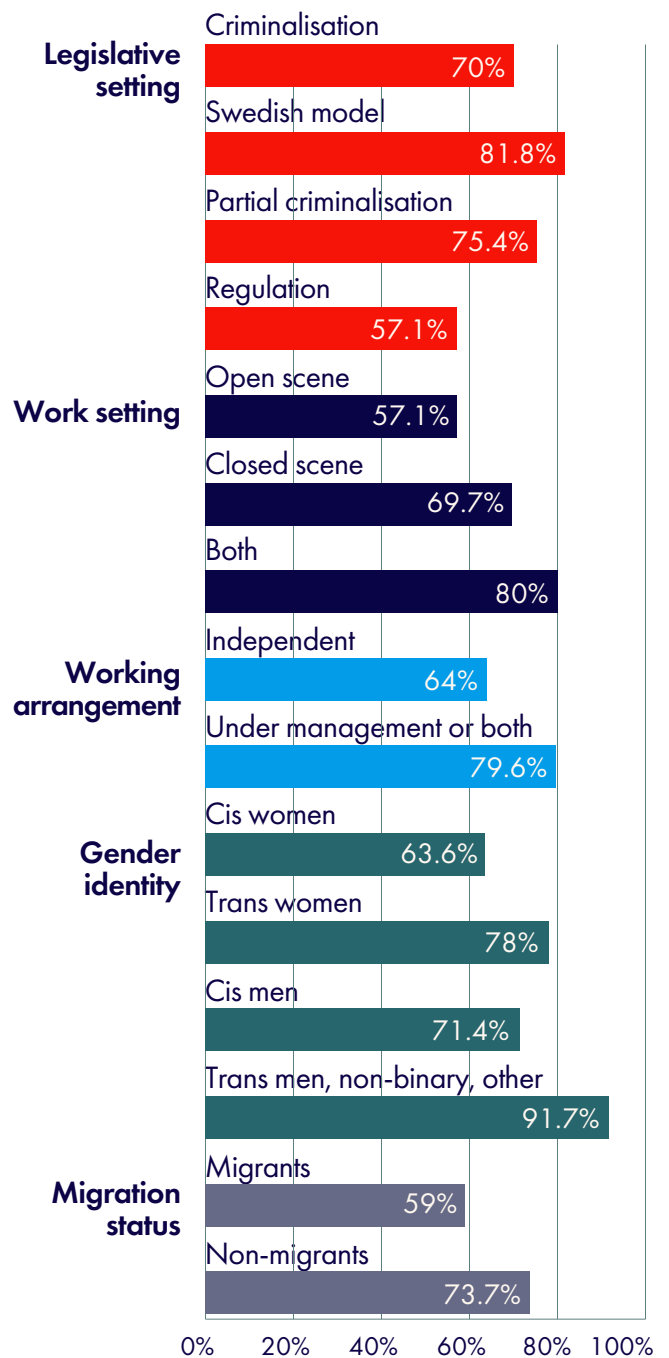
Our research also reveals the widespread use of threats, blackmail, or other coercive tactics by police officers throughout the European region. Notably, 42.1% of participants (n=178) reported being threatened, blackmailed, or subjected to coercion by law enforcement on at least one occasion.

In Swedish model contexts, 54.2% of participants reported being threatened by police. The incidence of threats, blackmail, or coercion was also considerably high in partially criminalised contexts (50.9%) and under criminalisation (40%). While somewhat lower, the rate in regulated contexts remained substantial at 26.7%.

Among our participants, 35% of migrants and 47.3% of non-migrants had been threatened, coerced, or blackmailed by police, an experience shared by 46.6% of cis women and 34.2% of trans women. Threats by police were reported by 45.5% of trans men, non-binary, and gender non-conforming participants, a significantly higher rate compared to cis men (25%).

When examining participants' work settings, there was only a small variation in the incidents of threats, coercion, or blackmail. Among those working in closed scene settings, 40.2% reported experiencing this form of violence, compared to 41.2% of those working in the open scene.

FIGURE 12: THREATS, COERCION, OR BLACKMAIL: BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS



A slightly higher percentage of participants with experience working both indoors and outdoors reported being subjected to threats, coercion, or blackmail by police (56.4%).

Two out of three participants working under management (66.7%) had experienced threats from police, compared to 32% of independent workers. This disparity can be attributed to the harsh criminalisation and policing of collective and managed workplaces across various legal frameworks.

In many instances, police used threats and blackmail to force sex workers to comply with officers' demands. Threats of fines, detention, arrest, or prosecution were widespread across all legal frameworks. Sex workers operating in criminalised or partially criminalised settings, and those working in the open scene, were particularly vulnerable to arrest threats — often used by police officers to displace them to more remote or dangerous locations. Additionally, several participants working in the open scene in Greece, where sex work is regulated but only allowed in state-licensed brothels, reported being threatened with arrest during patrols or while being detained.

“

They'd say, "If I find you here again, and every time I find you, I'll take you in."

Katerina, Greece

Other tactics used by police against participants included threats to disclose their sex work status publicly, inform their families or communities, or to initiate child custody proceedings. Threats of physical assault were also used to ensure participants' compliance. Several participants in Sweden and France reported being threatened with eviction, as police officers implied they would inform the sex workers' landlords or charge them with procuring.

In many instances, police used participants' migration status — and their implied deportability — to coerce their cooperation or to discipline them. Carolina quoted a police officer whom she dared to challenge.

“Don't talk to me like that. I can take you to jail, you will be arrested. I can even send you back to your country.”

Carolina, Spain

One of my friends told me she had experienced that. She is an immigrant with no legal status in the UK. She said that one day the police came to raid the house where she worked and threatened her that she must tell them who her 'boss' is. And if she didn't give them that information, they were going to take her to the immigration centre and deport her.

Mary, UK

As the case involving Mary's friend illustrates, threats and blackmail were commonly used to coerce participants into cooperating with police or acting as informants. For example, the police used threats in an encounter with Athena, who worked in an unlicensed brothel in Greece.



In a brothel that we had, they threatened me that if I didn't cooperate, in the sense of giving money or saying that I knew any traffickers of women, they would arrest me every day. And they did.

Athena, Greece

A total of 31 participants reported that police officers used threats, blackmail, and other unlawful tactics to coerce confessions from them while testifying — whether as suspects, witnesses, or even as victims of crime.

I was told that if I didn't tell them the truth, they would lock me up at any time. And I was blackmailed and threatened with arrest three times during the interrogation.

Kornelia, Poland

Police also used threats and blackmail to extort money from sex workers. We documented cases of money extortion, i.e. police officers coercing sex workers to give away their earnings, in six countries under

study, including Armenia, Belgium, Greece, North Macedonia, Poland, and Spain. Money extortion was particularly prevalent in criminalised contexts, where sex workers were forced to operate outside the law. The lack of social or legal protections left sex workers vulnerable to police demands for money, often backed by threats of arrest, fines, or violence. In Armenia and North Macedonia, participants described systemic patterns of police extortion occurring during raids, detentions, and patrols.

Regardless of whether we had worked that day, we had to pay 400 dollars. That police officer used to come every week, and we always had to give him 400 dollars.

Hasmik, Armenia

Across various legal frameworks, the most vulnerable sex workers — including undocumented migrants — were especially exposed to extortion, often having to pay bribes to the police to avoid detention or deportation.

If you work in a flat or club and don't have any documents when the police come, then they harass, blackmail, or extort you. That's how it is.

Linda, Spain

Some participants compared police exploitation to that imposed by organised crime rings. Michelle, who was repeatedly coerced into bribing the police, stated:



They acted like our pimps. But since it was the police [...] we couldn't do anything because they pressured us.

Michelle, Belgium

We also documented numerous cases in which police officers used threats or blackmail to coerce sex workers into providing sexual services — often unprotected and unpaid — on a regular basis (sexualised violence

by police officers will be explored more extensively in the section [Sexualised violence](#)). On occasions where participants refused the sexual predation of police, they were beaten, threatened with graphic violence, or pushed into more dangerous working conditions.

They wanted me to have sex with them, but I refused. They threatened me that they would tie me to the car and drag me.

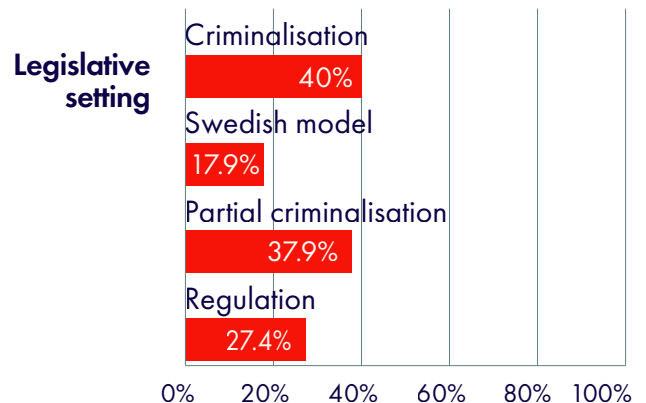
Anonymous, North Macedonia

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

Nearly one-third (28.2%, n=188) of all participants reported experiencing physical violence from police. Sex workers participating in our research were subjected to police violence in various contexts, including routine patrols, raids, arrests, detention, and even while reporting crimes committed against them.

Incidents of physical violence included: being pushed (6 participants), dragged (4), hit (12), beaten (15), grabbed by the hair (1), restrained, e.g. with zip-ties (2), beaten with objects (1), punched (4), choked (11), pinched or slapped (12), kicked (3), pinned to the ground or otherwise immobilised (3), tortured (4), grabbed (4), thrown to the ground (1), shot (1), or having bones broken (2).

FIGURE 13: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS



Physical violence perpetrated by police was experienced by participants across all legal frameworks, including by 40% working in criminalised contexts and 37.9% of those working under partial criminalisation. Rates of physical violence by police were lower but still significant in contexts governed by the Swedish model (17.9%) and under regulatory frameworks (27.4%).



They used to take us to the police station, and when I was detained, I called one of my friends for help. I remember someone coming and severely beating me for calling my friend. Then they sent me to the hospital because of the beating, and that officer ordered them not to let me out, even if it was revealed I was not guilty. Maybe he wanted to beat me more.

Narine, Armenia

I told them that they have no right to search me, that I would like them to call a woman officer to perform the search. He insisted on doing the search, but I said that I will not allow him to touch me. He slapped me for this. I even reported this at the police station, but they didn't do anything.

Dijana, North Macedonia

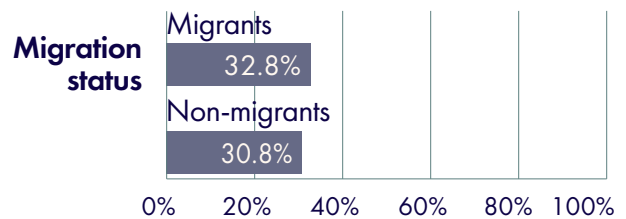
They only picked us up and took us to the station. They cuffed my hands behind my back. They pulled my pants down to humiliate me. I was screaming for help, but they grabbed me by the throat so I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe anymore; I couldn't scream anymore.

Thierry, France

She tackled me to the ground, and there were five police officers on top of me, putting a knee on my throat. They held me and I was trying to say that I could not breathe. They were pinning down my arms and legs, and I couldn't move. I am very small and thin, and with five police officers on me, I was having trouble breathing. I tried to get up, to tell them, but they just wouldn't move.

Chouchou, Belgium

FIGURE 14: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: BREAKDOWN BY MIGRATION STATUS



Migrant participants reported experiencing slightly higher rates of physical violence by police (32.8%) than non-migrants (30.8%).

They took me out of my house by force. I resisted and they took me out by force, they threw me to the ground, they kicked me.

Chumina, Spain

When I was being arrested for soliciting, the officer broke my arm.

Serena, UK

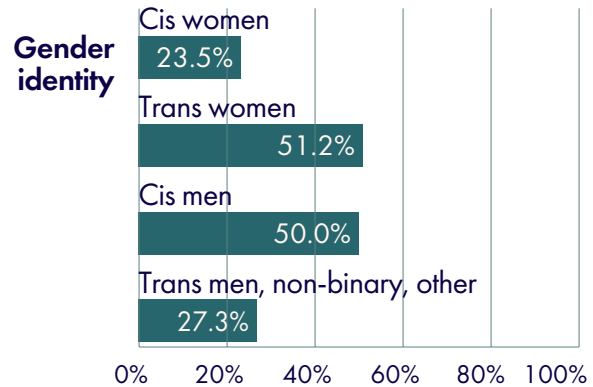
Racialised sex workers across legal frameworks also experienced high levels of police violence. They were disproportionately profiled for ID checks, fined, and subjected to other forms of punishment. For example, Laila was racially insulted and physically assaulted by a female police officer while out shopping. She was then taken to the police station, where once again she was assaulted.



I was walking down the street with some bags, when a policewoman said to me, “Go back to your country.” She kept insulting me. I told her, “You have no right to insult me. I have my rights. I’ve been here in Spain for 27 years.” And she hit me, beat me and grabbed me, the policewoman. [...] I didn’t do anything to that lady to make her treat me like that and talk to me badly. Apart from that, they have beaten me at the police station.

Laila, Spain

FIGURE 15: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: BREAKDOWN BY GENDER



A significant difference was observed between the experiences of cis and trans women (the latter accounting for a quarter of our sample). Specifically, 23.4% of cis women and a striking 51.2% of trans women reported experiencing physical violence at the hands of police. Additionally, 50% of cis men in our research reported having been subjected to physical police violence. The rate was lower — 27.3% — for trans men as well as non-binary and gender non-conforming participants.

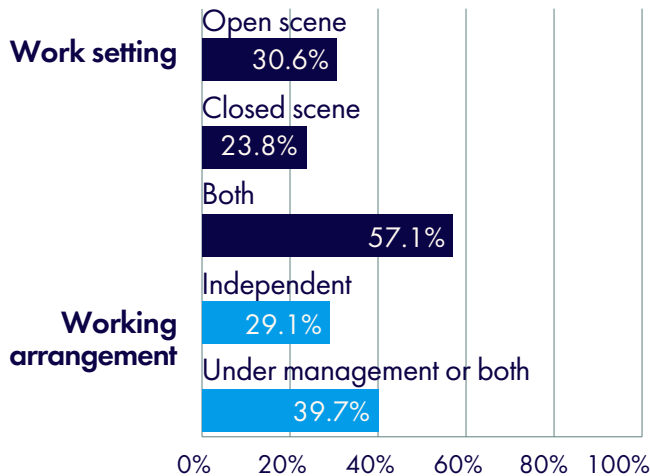
A police officer asked me for my documents, and when I gave them to him, he said to me, “You fucking faggot, shut up.” I said, “In my documents, it doesn’t say ‘faggot’.” Then the officer hit me. That’s when I told him, “You don’t have the right to hit me.”

Lilith, Spain

Sometimes we were pushed and insulted by the police officers. They do not take us or what we said seriously.

Aga, Armenia

FIGURE 16: PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: BREAKDOWN BY WORKING SETTINGS AND ARRANGEMENTS



Police violence was more prevalent in outdoor contexts. 30.6% of those working in the open scene had experienced physical violence, compared to 23.8% of those working in closed scene settings. Participants with experience of working in both closed and open scene contexts faced the highest rates of violence (57.1%). For example, Mia described experiencing physical violence during a police raid while working in the open scene.



When they managed to catch us after chasing us, they were beating us a lot. While in the cage, they were beating us even harder, because we dared to react.

Mia, Greece

Furthermore, 39.7% of participants with experience working for third parties had been subjected to physical violence, compared to 29.1% working independently. Many sex workers operating in managed or collectively run venues reported experiencing physical violence from police during raids and sting operations targeting their third parties or presumed traffickers. Several likened the excessive use of force by police to that of criminals or violent individuals.

During club raids, girls were thrown to the ground and treated as if they were carrying weapons or something, even though their hands were empty and they could see they had nothing. In the cold, they were carried out in their underwear from the clubs to the automobiles, since they couldn't get clothed or anything. [...] People in the clubs – specifically employees, but frequently also clients – were treated like criminals and demoted to the lowest social position. It's as if they didn't deserve to know what was going on. And no one cared how they felt or if, for example, they were scared and disoriented. They were perplexed. It actually degraded them terribly. As I have stated, there was a great deal of violence in these actions.

Rena, Poland



It was very aggressive, you know, like what you see in the movies. They broke down the doors and came in, shouting to stay on the ground, breaking into the rooms, and pulling us out. It is a frightening experience because you are scared they will shoot you on the spot or something, because it is chaos and you cannot think properly amidst all the noise. And you cannot see anything, what with the lights they are putting in your eyes. So even though they are shouting “Police!”, you don’t think it’s police because it’s like you are getting raided by a gang or something. So it’s very scary. I was in a room with a client, and they were pulling us out of the rooms. They grabbed us with only our underwear on and searched everything. There were a lot of men and they were very frightening, asking all kinds of questions. And some of the girls didn’t speak much English. It was like what you think they would do if they knew for sure there is some armed gangster or someone like that inside.

Mali, UK

Several participants were also physically assaulted when they tried to report violence experienced at work or seek help from the police.

I told them that I had been assaulted, but the police went straight to me and beat me up, after I had already been beaten up by the others.

Cesibel, Spain

We don’t go to the police because we end up being beaten. And it’s deemed our fault because we are considered provocative since we are trans.

Rafaela, Greece

I had a problem with a client, and just at the same time the police passed by and I told them. One of the officers pushed me, and they insulted me, saying that I’m Roma and that I can’t work here

Suni, North Macedonia

SEXUALISED VIOLENCE

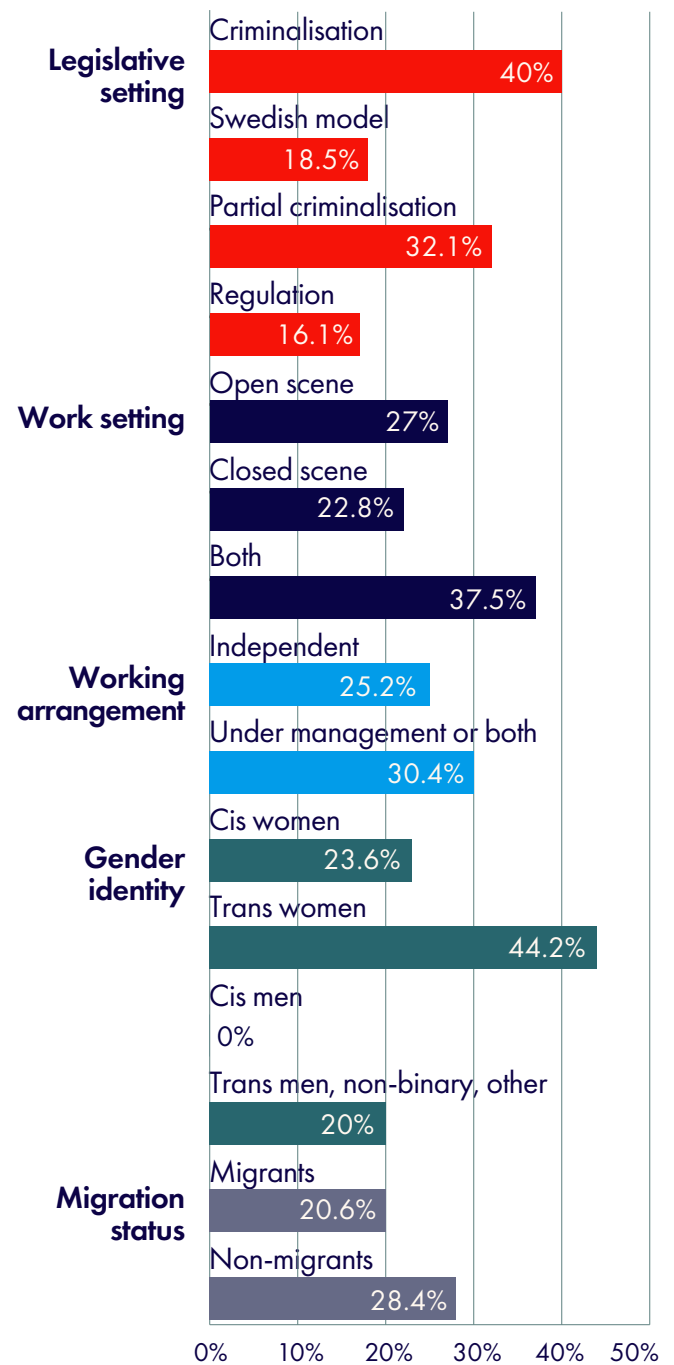
The extent of sexualised harassment and violence experienced by our research participants is deeply troubling. 26.6% of participants (n=188) reported experiencing sexualised violence by police officers at least once.

Participants in criminalised contexts experienced the highest levels of sexualised police violence (40%), followed by those in partially criminalised settings (32.1%), Swedish model contexts (18.5%), and regulated environments (16.9%).

28.4% of non-migrant participants and 20.6% of migrants experienced sexualised violence from police. A much greater difference could be observed between the experiences of cis and trans women, with 44.2% of trans women and 23.6% of cis women having experienced sexualised violence. Among trans men and non-binary and gender non-conforming participants, 20% had experienced sexualised police violence.

By work setting, 27% of participants working in open scene settings had experienced sexualised violence, compared to 22.8% in closed scene settings. Participants working in both closed and open scene settings experienced the highest rates of sexualised violence (37.5%). There was also a difference between those who worked independently (25.2%) and those with experience working for third parties (30.4%).

FIGURE 17: SEXUALISED VIOLENCE: BREAKDOWN BY LEGAL MODELS AND DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS



Some of the most common and prevalent forms of sexualised violence and harassment involved sexist and sexualised comments made by on-duty police officers during routine identity checks, interventions, and raids at sex work venues. These included offensive gestures and remarks on sex workers' occupation, appearance, advertisements, as well as explicitly sexualised innuendos and stares.



They commented on my appearance. For example, one said, “Good breasts” but another said, “But she’s a fat whore.”

Anastasia, Poland

One time, I swear, this cop had his legs open with his hand on his balls, on his dick.

Anonymous, Netherlands

A police officer said, “Wow, these photos... You are fine! You’ve got nice curves! Wow...” They told me it was necessary to take a photo of my front and profile. And they said, “Yeah, but we still wanted to photograph you a little bit further down.” They didn’t have the right to do that. I felt humiliated.

Louise, Belgium

They stop us when we come into work: “How’s business? Do you have work? How do you suck someone off? How do you do this or that? Will you come suck me off?” They would laugh at us. They will have females with them in the cars, their female coworkers, and they would also fuck with us [ridicule us]. They will stop us on the corner and ask us how we fuck, how we do things, if it hurts, if it doesn’t hurt. There is no justice here, there is nothing. They don’t see us as people.

Albiona, North Macedonia

One participant recounted an incident in which a police officer stole her underwear during a search.

I once had in my bag a little nighty and little panties, too. I had all that kind of stuff there in my bag. It disappeared. I saw that he was rummaging through my bag in a side room. I was told that I would get them back at the exit. But when I got to the exit, they had disappeared.

Chouchou, Belgium

Several participants also reported experiencing sexual harassment by police officers while interacting with them as victims of crime. Specifically, seven participants were subjected to sexist and sexualised comments by police, including attempts to solicit services, while reporting violence or seeking help.



I reported a crime at the police station and the officers were all like, “Hey doll, how much for an hour with you?” So you walk in, injured, to report that someone tried to kill you, beat you up, rob you, and they are like: “Heh heh, how much for an hour?”

Kamila, Poland

During raids or sting operations on sex work venues, sex workers were often denied clothing or made to undress to their underwear. During such raids, both Marina and Sandra were forced to sit in their underwear while being photographed by police officers without their consent.

So, they made me remove the robe I was wearing, so I was just in my underwear but not even a bra. I just had to stand there in front of them. It was distressing, and they were all men, but you cannot protest because you are scared. One of the police guys said he needed to make a call and moved to the other side of the room, and I knew exactly what he was doing. He pretended to text someone and was very obviously taking a photo, and then I saw this was true in the reflection of the mirror.

Marina, UK

All this time I was sitting in my underwear while they stomped around my apartment in their uniforms and took photos of everything. It felt humiliating.

Sandra, Sweden

Several participants were also forced to remain naked during police operations at their workplaces or were subjected to invasive body searches, including strip searches. Some described being compelled by police officers to strip naked in public under the pretext of drug searches — acts that served as a form of humiliation, punishment, or expressions of arbitrary power and cruelty. Enforced and prolonged nudity is recognised as a form of inhuman and degrading treatment, a type of sexualised torture, and an act of humiliation intended to undermine personal integrity, self-esteem, and human dignity.

I was not treated well. I was accused of something I didn't do. They searched me in the street and stripped me naked, and they shouted at me that I was carrying drugs on me. In other words, I was treated very badly. They did the same to a colleague. I don't think it's right that they strip you naked in the street, take your bag, throw everything on the ground in front of everybody.

Anonymous, Switzerland



Most of the time, I was brought far out of town, stripped naked to amuse police officers, and forced to walk back by myself, sometimes at night and in severe weather.

Rosa, Poland

One of the crucial findings of this research is that police officers often abused their position of power over sex workers to coerce them into sexual intercourse or other sexual acts. Instances of rape by police were reported by 20 participants in eight countries under study. Five participants in four countries were subjected to group rape by police.

Sexualised violence against sex workers, perpetrated and condoned by law enforcement officers, occurs in multiple contexts, including during routine patrols, raids, and sting operations targeting sex work venues, as well as during arrest and detention. Many participants described situations in which they were coerced into having sex with police officers in exchange for avoiding arrest, fines, or deportation, or in return for so-called protection.

I didn't undergo an identity check, and the cop who took me into his car without paying me, I don't know if he did it within the context of his duties or not. So I can't say a cop abused me in the name of crime prevention.

Beryl, France

On the second day when I started working on the street, a policeman came up. He told me that I had to get in the car. I got in the car and he said, "Either you show me your papers or you have to give me sex." It was like a threat, [...] it scared me. I remember that I had sex in the patrol car and near a lemon tree with a policeman in uniform, in a forced way, so that I wouldn't be deported to my country, as he told me.

Rosa, Poland

There is a policeman who, if we don't do what he asks, for example, pardon my language, if we don't suck him off, he won't leave us in peace to work. He will take us to the station and lie that we stole or did some other shit. We have to suck him off, so that he will leave us be. He even does this when in uniform. He comes here quite often. And even when we go in to complain, they don't see us as human beings. They chase us away and harass us, saying: "Come on, you are accustomed to this."

Albiona, North Macedonia



They demand sexual intercourse from me. It is this harassment with the traffic police. Every time I drive somewhere, the traffic police stop me and notice that I am a sex worker. From their behaviour it is already clear that they want sexual relations with me, not for money but free of charge. I have to yield to them and have sexual relations with them.

Monica, Armenia

They took me to my apartment, and there were many policemen who had their guns on the table. Two or three of them did ‘that job’ [rape] on me; forcing me to give them blowjobs and fucking me. I reported them to the police station purposefully, because I felt violated. The people from HOPS [Healthy Options Project Skopje] helped me a lot and took me to forensics to get samples, but I don’t know what has happened since then.

Lile, North Macedonia

Several participants in Greece also reported being coerced into sexual acts by police officers during detention or arrest. They were told they could only use the toilet if they provided sexual services to the officers.

In a detention centre that I remember, I wanted to go to the bathroom – not just me, other girls too. They would only let us go, if we gave blowjobs to the officers through the bars. From a certain point onwards, it was a daily routine for them and for us. Some gave in, some peed in the cells on purpose.

Mia, Greece

The cop told me back in the day, “If you want to go to the bathroom, you’re going to give me a blowjob.” And he showed me his dick right outside my cell.

Katerina, Greece

Our data also reveals that police officers frequently abuse their power when they come into contact with sex workers under the pretence of being clients. Eighteen participants reported violent and abusive experiences with on- and off-duty police officers posing as clients. In every case, the officers exploited the participants’ legal vulnerability to demand unprotected sex, reduced fees, or free services. All reported incidents amount to rape or sexual assault, and illustrate how police use their authority to manipulate, coerce, and violate sex workers.

They threatened me and used my services without paying me.

Hasmik, Armenia



When I was working at the house where we worked, I used to go out with two policemen, and the problem with them is that what they pay is merely charity. There are some who want to get bareback blowjobs. I say if you want a bareback blowjob, yeah, I'll do it with you, but you pay me 80 euros an hour minimum, then I'll do it. "No, but I'm your friend. Besides, I'm a policeman. If you need something, you call me. But I will pay you 20 euros."

Laila, Spain

There were instances when I have given sexual services to police officers who afterwards demanded that I give them the money back, because they are the police and they can arrest or detain me, or out me to their colleagues, etcetera.

Lila, North Macedonia

He came to me and didn't introduce himself as who he is. He asked me for a favour, an erotic massage. Finally, to avoid paying for my service, he showed me a police badge. He started threatening me. "Do you know that what you are doing is punishable?" [...] He didn't pay me, I was scared.

Mimi, North Macedonia

I spoke on the phone with a client, and we arranged where to meet. We met, went into his car, without me knowing that he was a police officer. We went to a hotel and I started doing my job, but I said, "Sir, I would like the payment in advance, because that's how it goes." He said that he can't pay now, he would pay afterwards. After we finished, I showered and got dressed. I asked, "Sir, you would need to pay me," to which he said, "I could take you to prison for this, because I am the police."

Dijana, North Macedonia

I was working in an open scene, and a car stopped by. At first, I didn't know it was a police officer. He asked me about the price, then I got into the car, and when we arrived in front of my building, he told me that he was a police officer and that he wanted a sexual service free of charge. And I had to give him what he wanted for no money.

Eli, North Macedonia

Additionally, 36 participants described incidents in which plainclothes police officers pretended to be clients and attempted to procure — or successfully procured — services as part of law enforcement operations. The use of undercover officers posing as clients, i.e. entrapment, was a common policing tactic across all legal frameworks studied, and was typically

used to gather information, surveil sex work venues, and incriminate sex workers. Five sex workers participating in our research reported having been subjected to sexual contact with officers conducting investigative work or collecting evidence against them. Undercover officers having sexual relations with members of the public as a method of evidence collection constitutes a human rights violation, including breaches of the right to private life and the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment. When penetrative sex occurs, such actions amount to sexual assault or rape.



About three years ago, a policeman posed as a customer. He was touching me, flirting with me, and lying to me so that I would trust him. He touched my body, he touched my tits, he touched my hair, he let me touch his genitals. [...] At that moment he tells me, “We are going to stop here for gas.” And he was talking on the phone. Since I didn’t understand any Dutch at the time, I was surprised when 10 cop cars came, and that was when he said that he was a policeman. [...] They asked me for my documents and asked where I lived, who was forcing me to do these things.

Jenny, The Netherlands

The police officer pretended to be a customer. He was in his underwear and that’s how we started having sex. However, during the sex act I was asked unusual questions, like, “At what age did you start giving blowjobs?” or “So for 150 euros I can fuck you as much as I want and do whatever I want?” It was a red flag when those questions started. After sex, he showed me a message on his cell phone and said, “Read it.” And this message said, “I’m a police officer and I’ve put money in your bag. Go quickly down the stairs and get out the left exit.” I put my clothes on as fast as I could and ran for the exit. Two police officers were waiting for me there. They first asked me for my ID and then said, “We know why you’ve come here.” They told me to open my bag, and they saw the money which was marked. They said that I offered sex in exchange for money and that’s illegal, and then they took me to the local station.

Katerina, Greece

Our research also documented three cases of police involvement in trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced sex work. We are withholding further details to protect the identities of the sex workers who were victimised by police officers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate the immense scale and prevalence of harassment and violence experienced by sex workers in Europe at the hands of police. Our data reveals that instead of providing protection and facilitating justice, the police create dangerous environments for sex workers, undermining their rights and safety, and directly exposing them to harm. Across all settings studied, sex workers are subjected to systematic physical, sexualised, and verbal abuse, as well as threats from law enforcement officers. Emotional abuse, harassment, threats, blackmail, and coercion are the most common forms of violence reported by sex workers across Europe, with the highest rates observed among participants in Swedish model contexts. Sex workers operating in criminalised and partially criminalised settings, trans women, and those working in the open scene are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexualised violence by police. Moreover, our findings highlight that whorephobia, racism, xenophobia, and transphobia are deeply embedded in policing strategies across the European region. This reinforces a long-documented history of (multiply) marginalised and criminalised groups experiencing high levels of police violence, particularly sexualised violence against women and sexual minorities.

The prevalence and widespread nature of police violence and harassment in Europe reflects harmful state policies that tolerate and normalise systemic and structural violence perpetrated against sex workers. Criminalisation and other repressive policies targeting sex workers, including stringent migration regulations, foster punitive and enforcement-oriented policing strategies that encourage police abuse and brutality. Advocates of the Swedish model and other punitive approaches to sex work place their trust in police institutions, believing that increased criminalisation of the sex industry will reduce the number of people selling or buying sex. This belief is based on the assumption that law enforcement will shield women who sell sex from violence. However, our data shows that all forms of criminalisation, including the Swedish model, partial criminalisation, and restrictive regulatory frameworks, as in the case of regularisation, fail to protect sex workers from police abuse. On the contrary, our evidence indicates that increasing the police presence in sex work venues and subjecting sex workers to intensified surveillance and control not only fails to enhance safety but actively increases their exposure to police harassment and violence. Rather than promoting safety and well-being, greater police involvement creates conditions in which abuses of power and police violence are allowed to flourish.

Abusive policing strategies and widespread police violence compromise sex workers' safety, health, well-being, and fundamental rights. These practices push sex workers into more hazardous work environments and dangerous conditions, depriving them of the means to protect themselves from harassment, exploitation, and abuse by violent clients, third parties, or passers-by. Police violence also severely limits sex workers' access to justice. Previous experiences of mistreatment, harassment, or violence by police are significant reasons why many sex workers choose not to report crimes committed against them.⁴ As a result, violent clients and other perpetrators often go unpunished, fuelling a sense of impunity and fostering predatory conditions. In these conditions, offenders exploit sex workers' reluctance to engage with law enforcement and the failure by police to act, emboldened by the belief that they are unlikely to face consequences.⁵ Furthermore, the normalisation of violence is reinforced when police mistreatment is routine or condoned, embedding a culture where abuse against sex workers is accepted.⁶ When abuse comes directly from law

enforcement, sex workers are seen as easy targets by others, increasing their vulnerability to further harm. Ultimately, when the police themselves commit violence, sex workers are left with nowhere to turn — violated and abandoned by the very institution meant to protect them, and denied any safe avenue to justice or support.

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- 4 ESWA (2024). "*Exposed from all sides*": *The Role of Policing in Sex Workers' Access to Justice*; Struyf, P. (2022). To Report or Not to Report? A Systematic Review of Sex Workers' Willingness to Report Violence and Victimization to Police. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(5), pp. 3065–3077. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221122819>.
- 5 Campbell, R. & Sanders, T. (2021). *Sex Work and Hate Crime: Innovating Policy, Practice and Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 6 Crago, A.-L., et al. (2021). Sex Workers' Access to Police Assistance in Safety Emergencies and Means of Escape From Situations of Violence and Confinement Under an "End Demand" Criminalization Model: A Five City Study in Canada. *Social Sciences*, 10(1), pp. 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010013>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Highlighting the prevalence of police-condoned violence against sex workers, the abusive nature of law enforcement, and the failures of the state and its institutions to ensure protection and equal access to justice for sex worker communities, this policy brief calls for a transformative justice approach as an alternative to criminalisation and the harmful policing to which sex workers are subjected. The transformative justice approach to ensure sex workers' access to justice and rights involves several key steps: the decriminalisation of sex work; the repeal of excessive police powers and divestment from policing; and investment in community-led responses to rights violations, violence, and harm.

Decriminalising sex work and repealing all laws that target sex workers, their coworkers, workplaces, or clients, is a crucial step in protecting sex workers from police harassment and violence. Increased criminalisation — as advocated by carceral feminists, policymakers, and anti-sex work activists who seek to eradicate prostitution and “rescue” those selling sex — only places sex worker communities at further risk of repressive policing and heightens their vulnerability to police abuse. Full decriminalisation is the only policy shown to offer protection from police violence

and harassment.⁷ It is also a necessary first step for addressing the prejudice and discrimination entrenched within police institutions and for enabling support services to serve sex workers and other marginalised communities effectively.

A transformative justice approach must also address the widespread nature of police abuse and the systemic lack of accountability. This research underscores the violent, corrupt, and discriminatory foundations of policing. Reforms such as increasing police diversity, implementing community policing models, or introducing ethics training have consistently proven inadequate, as they fail to address the structural stigma surrounding sex work, as well as deeply rooted racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia — all of which contribute to the mistreatment of sex worker communities.⁸ Police violence and brutality are structural problems that demand

7 Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024). *Protecting the Human Rights of Sex Workers*. Platt, L., et al. (2018). Associations Between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers' Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies. *PLOS Medicine*, 15(12), e1002680. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.

8 Kaba, M. & Ritchie, A. (2022). *No More Police: A Case for Abolition*. New York: The New Press; Stardust, Z., et al. (2021). “I wouldn't call the cops if I was being bashed to death.” Sex Work, Whore Stigma and the Criminal Legal System. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10(3), pp. 142–157. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.1894>.

structural solutions, including a reduction in police powers and a fundamental reduction in the role and influence of policing in society. Rather than expanding police authority, this policy brief calls for a significant curtailment of law enforcement prerogatives and a redirection of resources away from policing and the police.

Divesting from policing involves reallocating funding from law enforcement to non-carceral, community-led, and social justice-oriented services. Transformative justice prioritises investment in communities, based on the premise that communities themselves are best equipped to recognise, respond to, and prevent violence affecting their members. Informed by the lived experiences of sex worker communities, sex worker-led organisations and initiatives are uniquely positioned to deliver safety, support,

accountability, and meaningful change for sex workers across Europe. They also play a vital role in improving access to justice and protection from violence — including violence perpetrated by police — without causing further harm, oppression, or control.

National stakeholders and international policymakers, including the Council of Europe and European Union institutions, must prioritise the full decriminalisation of sex work, the limitation of police powers, and sustained investment in community-based, non-carceral responses to violence and rights violations experienced by sex workers. Sex workers must be afforded full legal protection and the unrestricted enjoyment of their human rights. Above all, they must be able to live and work free from police violence, harassment, and abuse.

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