

## World premiere or umpteenth sanctification of male sexual rights?

A 'world premiere'! The international press is buzzing with enthusiasm about the new Belgian law. As of 1 December 2024, 'sex workers' can sign employment contracts. While the intention to limit abuses, which are commonplace of such 'activity', is to be welcomed - it is difficult to subscribe to the naïve fleeting idealism when it comes to legitimising an activity based on women's sexual slavery.

Pimps become acknowledged entrepreneurs and 'sex work' a legitimate job in the same way as hairdressing or plumbing. For the Belgian association isala, drawing on its grassroots experience, this law's facade conceals a real step backwards for women's rights, which instead legitimise their sexual exploitation by 'clients' and pimps, without ending this activity's inherent violence.

Nine grassroots associations, including isala, took action and requested the Belgian Constitutional Court to repeal the law, a necessary step to open a real debate on this legislation.

The conditions of this 'job' are so unacceptable that the contract is riddled with exemptions. A person signing this contract could, in theory, refuse a 'client' or stop the sexual activity at any time. One has to be completely unknowledgeable of the brothels' logic, where the 'client' is king and the pimp is often involved in fraud and corruption, to believe for a single second that vulnerable women, strangled by precarity, could have the authority to demand respect for labour law! Displeasing the 'client' is displeasing the 'boss'. And for them, it will be dangerous, and sometimes fatal, to risk it. In fact, the Belgian law had to explicitly provide for the installation of 'emergency buttons' enabling the 'worker' to call for help...

Disguised as a generous proposal in support of the people concerned, the law rolls out the red carpet for pimps and traffickers. Because if the demand exists, those will be invited to find 'volunteers' from the inexhaustible pool of foreign women, migrants, or women made vulnerable by incest, rape and violence of all kinds. Pascale R., a prostitution survivor and activist, is well acquainted with 'their methods of coercion: withholding identity papers, drugs, beatings, threats' which will continue to be used to force people to sign contracts. In Germany, a country that has tried to make prostitution a profession like any other, the failure has been significant. In a legal conducive environment for exploiters, very few 'sex workers' want to be labelled as such. The vast majority remain underground, and traffickers smuggle, making the country 'the brothel of Europe'. 'One day, we will be ashamed', was a headline in *Spiegel* in 2023.

Moreover, the Belgian law leaves out one ‘detail’: the prostituting “clients”, who are thus comforted in their eternal “male sexual right”, the very foundation of patriarchy. The much-vaunted ‘emergency buttons’ are proof that the violence they perpetrate is common knowledge. How can we fail to see the aberration that this ‘oversight’ represents in the era of the #Metoo movement, the condemnation of sexual harassment, and the call for male responsibility in the face of the explosion of sexist and sexual violence? While at the Mazan trial, the irresponsibility of men prepared to do anything to sexually subjugate women was highly criticised, we seem to see no issue with encouraging men, through prostitution, to extract coerced consent from women in exchange for some cash... If responding to sexual harassment becomes a professional service, you can imagine the price to be paid by all working women. How can they dare to denounce acts that are recognised by society as a whole as legitimate?

As CAP International says, ‘the new Belgian law merely legitimises a system that perpetuates patriarchal, racist and class oppression. It sets in stone the commodification of the most marginalised women, reinforcing the power of pimps and ‘clients’. For isala, ‘it is not an employment contract that they are demanding, but support to help them find a long-term way out of prostitution’.

Today, international texts are converging on the urgent need to discourage, and even penalise, those who feed a system based on violence and trafficking in human beings. This was the choice made by Frankrijk in 2016, with an abolitionist law that is both protective and progressive... when it is applied. It has focused on supporting people who want to leave prostitution - the vast majority of those concerned - by creating state-funded pathways to exit, including access to a residence permit, accommodation, social and financial support and training, while at the same time criminalising men who feed a system of sexist and sexual violence that society no longer wants. Sweden, a true pioneer of this approach, has been implementing a similar law since 1999, which has not only led to a reduction in the demand for sexual acts, but has also changed attitudes and mentalities in society. Belgium would do well to take inspiration from it...

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