



The Dutch Sex Work Sector

Summary

- SUMMARY -

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Summary

Background

Since the lifting of the brothel ban in 2000, Dutch municipalities are responsible for formulating a prostitution policy. This has resulted in differences among municipalities. The general aim of the possible future act to regulate sex work (*Wet regulering sekswerk, Wrs*) is to uniformise supervision and enforcement in municipalities and to diminish policy differences among municipalities. To enable an investigation of the effects of this amendment at a later stage, the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Security and Justice commissioned Regioplan to carry out a zero measurement. Firstly, we investigated the size and nature of (parts of) the licenced and non-licenced sex work sector. Secondly, we focused on the organisation and results of supervision and enforcement.

Design of the study

First of all, we had [exploratory talks](#) with national and local organisations with insight into the sex work sector. In addition, all Dutch municipalities were requested to fill out an online questionnaire. Ultimately, the questionnaire was filled out by 157 of them (45% of all municipalities). In addition, we contacted 75 of the non-responding municipalities by phone and e-mail to ask them to answer three core questions. We also conducted case studies in six municipalities. In addition, we sent a request to the municipalities that are involved in the National Prostitution Programme (*Landelijk Programma Prostitutie*) and received the [administrative reports](#) of two municipalities. Moreover, we have monitored advertisement websites throughout the year 2021. We completed the study with an expert meeting with representatives of policy, science, and practice.

Delineation

The focus of the study involves limitations. For instance, it is difficult to describe the size of the licenced sector in terms of numbers of sex workers. Therefore, we focused on the number of licences issued in municipalities. Moreover, the sex industry is larger than the part we researched in this project. For instance, our Internet analysis focuses exclusively on sex work that is offered by means of public advertisement websites. Another important delineation is the focus on supervision and enforcement as part of municipal policy. This means that less attention was paid to other parts of policy, such as participation of sex workers in policy development or initiatives to destigmatise sex work.

Findings

1. What is the size and nature of the licenced sex work sector?

In a third of the municipalities in this study, licenced sex work occurred in 2021. Large municipalities nearly always have licenced sex work. In the 53 municipalities with licenced sex work in this study, 168 licences were issued. Relatively many municipalities choose to licence sex clubs and private houses (26 municipalities) and escort agencies (18 municipalities), and to a lesser extent independent escort (6 municipalities), window sex work (5 municipalities), and home sex work (1 municipality). Most licences issued by municipalities with licenced sex work are given to street sex workers (43 licences) and sex clubs and private houses (38 licences). Extrapolation to all municipalities leads to the estimation that there are 373 licenced companies in the Netherlands. This number is (much) lower than the number of licenced sex companies mentioned in previous research, namely 833 (Van Wijk et al, 2014). It should be noted here that the number of licences for a number of larger municipalities was not included in our study.

2. What is the size and nature of the non-licenced sex work sector?

At the advertisement websites we studied, more than 27,000 unique advertisements were posted in 2021. Per week, the number of posted and closed advertisements varies strongly. This suggests that the Internet sector is a dynamic sector with a large turnover. Despite these dynamics, the number of advertisements at any given moment in time is relatively stable. This number fluctuated between 6,500 and 7,000 advertisements per week.

Our analysis of the advertisements shows that by far most sex workers that advertise indicate that they are female, of non-Dutch origin, and that they mainly receive clients at home or offer escort services and ask an average of 167 euros per hour for their services. The average age indicated by sex workers in

the Internet sector is 30 years. Over the last year, prices have increased in the Internet sector. A distribution of the collected advertisements over the municipalities mentioned in the advertisements shows that sex work by means of advertisements occurs practically throughout the entire country. In larger municipalities more advertisements are posted in general. Which types of sex work are offered in municipalities varies strongly among municipalities. Only in a very limited number of advertisements we found clues that it concerns licenced sex work.

3. *What is the municipal policy for the sex work sector?*

A previous evaluation study shows that three quarters of the responding municipalities have a sex work policy (Van Wijk et al., 2014). This share has decreased sharply. The current study shows that a little over half of the municipalities (54%) indicate they have sex work policies. According to municipalities, the most important reason for them to refrain from formulating a policy is that sex work hardly, if at all, occurs in their municipality. In addition, experts indicate that municipalities are waiting for the new act to regulate sex work (Wrs) to take effect and therefore, they are not renewing their policies.

The large majority of municipalities with a prostitution policy decided on a maximum policy with regard to the number of permitted sex companies. In more than a third of the municipalities with prostitution policies, the policy is linked to spatial planning. A little over half of all municipalities with a prostitution policy have different policies for different types of sex companies; the remaining 43 percent indicate they have one policy for all types of sex companies. In most municipalities street sex work is prohibited and not tolerated either. In many municipalities window sex work is also prohibited. Municipalities that do licence window sex work, are often the larger municipalities. With regard to sex clubs and private houses, in most municipalities a maximum policy applies. In some municipalities, home sex work is not yet part of the (licence) policy. Other municipalities tolerate it and/or permit non-professional home sex work.

Municipalities mainly pay attention to licence requirements, establishment criteria, enforcement and supervision, health aspects, and counteracting human trafficking. Issues such as strengthening the social position of sex workers, exit policies, participation of sex workers in policy, destigmatising, and strengthening the labour market position occur in relatively few municipal prostitution policies. The study shows that municipalities that in principle want to enable sex work, on the one hand want to maintain a high threshold for people who want to abuse sex workers, while on the other hand they want to keep the threshold low for autonomous sex workers. However, in practice they notice that policy measures on behalf of the first group are often at the cost of the second group and vice versa.

4. *How is supervision and enforcement of the sex work sector organised?*

In the Netherlands, municipalities are in charge of the supervision and enforcement of the licenced sex work sector. Together with the police, they are the main players in the organisation of supervision and enforcement. The administrative checks in the licenced sector are performed by municipal enforcers, the police, or both. The municipal practice with regard to performing the checks varies strongly among municipalities. With regard to the frequency of checks, it turns out that in nearly half of the municipalities checks in the licenced sex work sector are performed between one and three times a year. In more than a third of the municipalities checks (also) take place based on complaints of neighbours. Approximately a fifth of the municipalities indicate that checks are carried out proactively (throughout the year).

In the non-licenced sector, the municipality and the police are also the main parties. The checks in the non-licenced sector are still often carried out by the *Aliens, Identification, and Human Trafficking Unit Police (AVIMs)*. In some cases, the municipalities themselves are in charge of the entire execution of supervision and enforcement, whereas in other municipalities the most suitable division of roles is still a matter of debate. More than one bottleneck is involved here. Sometimes municipalities argue that they lack capacity and expertise to deploy suitable officials for the tasks involved. Moreover, municipalities are not allowed to exchange data of sex workers. This hampers enforcement. For that matter, there are still municipalities that do mention data of sex workers in their administrative reports. In addition, large policy differences among municipalities are mentioned as an obstacle with regard to supervision of the

sector. It is difficult for enforcers to familiarise themselves with all the different policies and to enforce accordingly.

5. What are the results of supervision and enforcement of the sex industry?

By far most municipalities are of the opinion that proprietors of sex companies observe the rules fairly strictly or tolerably well. A little less than four in ten municipalities with licenced companies took measures in 2020. In the period between 2017 and 2020, both the number of administrative reports and the number of administrative measures increased in the municipalities that filled out the questionnaire. In most cases, the administrative measures concerned an order subject to an incremental penalty or a warning; in some cases, a building was closed.



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