

## MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

### Background to the study

With the imminent passing into law of the Regulation of Prostitution and Combating Abuses in the Sex Industry Act (*Wet regulerend prostitutie en bestrijding misstanden seksbranche*), the minister of Security and Justice has promised the House of Representatives a baseline measurement for a partial evaluation of this Act. Regioplan was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) to investigate the social position of sex workers in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

The prime focus of this study is the social position of sex workers as *perceived* by the workers themselves, with the experiences and opinions of the interviewed sex workers forming the basis. There is a possibility that the experiences of the study population may differ to a greater or lesser extent from those of the group of sex workers not included in the study. While we employed a number of methods to minimise the risk of the interviewees providing socially acceptable answers, this does however remain a risk that cannot be excluded completely.

Areas examined in the study included the profession's voluntary character, the employment relationship between sex workers and the employer or proprietor (if applicable), the treatment of sex workers by social institutions, and the health and well-being of sex workers. In addition, the study looked at a number of other aspects such as starting age, work history, workplaces, income, future plans and areas where the sex industry, in the eyes of the sex workers, could be improved.

Various findings of the survey were compared with the results of the survey that Regioplan carried out for the WODC in 2006 into the social position of sex workers in the Netherlands. However, this comparison is indicative in nature owing to the differences in the response groups of the two surveys (including age and the sector of industry in which they were active).

### Approach

The scope of the survey was large, involving more than 360 sex workers from various sectors of the sex industry. We held face-to-face interviews with sex workers working in licensed companies all over the Netherlands. In addition, we held telephone interviews with independent escorts and sex workers

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<sup>1</sup> This investigation is one of three subsidiary investigations that the WODC commissioned in 2013 and 2014, the other two relating to supervision and enforcement in the sex industry, and illegality and exploitation in the sex industry.

working from home who offer their services via the Internet. Respondents were offered a remuneration for participation. The interviews were held in Dutch, Thai, Spanish, Romanian, Hungarian, Bulgarian or English

and were conducted with sex workers living and/or working in any of around 60 Dutch municipalities. The municipalities where most of the interviewed sex workers live and/or work are Amsterdam (52 interviews), The Hague, (49 interviews) and Rotterdam (41 interviews).

## Response and distribution

Of the 267 proprietors/managers of window prostitution premises, clubs, private houses, escort companies and massage parlours providing sexual services that were approached, more than two-thirds (68%) were prepared to cooperate with the investigation. Ultimately, 364 of the (at least) 899 sex workers approached participated in the survey (40%). The response percentage varied depending on the sector of the industry.

Interviews were conducted with 101 window prostitutes, 85 sex workers in clubs or private houses, 71 escorts (employed or independent), 57 sex workers working from home, 36 sex workers affiliated with massage parlours and 14 other sex workers (working in a streetwalking zone, in an SM studio or via webcam).

The large majority of the sex workers interviewed was female (93%), 5% was male and 2% was transgender.<sup>2</sup> The male sex workers interviewed worked in the escort sector of the industry or from home. While most respondents were between 21 and 50 years of age, a few were between 18 and 21 and there were a number between 50 and 70. Nearly half of the respondents were born in the Netherlands (47%), approximately one in five originated from eastern Europe (21%), 15% came from Central and South America, and 11% from Asia.

## Findings

### *Sex work*

More than one-fifth of the respondents started sex work under the age of 21 (the lowest starting age is 14). The average starting age is 28. The average number of active years in the industry is 7.5. This average was much lower in the 2006 survey, correlating with the lower average age of the respondents in that survey. Approximately one in ten respondents had been working as a sex worker for less than a year; six in ten had been active for longer than five years.

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2006 study, a total of 11 male prostitutes and no transgenders were interviewed.

On average, respondents worked 27 hours each week; more than one-third indicated that they worked fewer than 12 hours a week. The average number of working hours per week was higher in 2006 (32 hours) than is currently the case, but this difference can be explained by the fact that the current survey also included home-based sex workers and independent escorts, who work fewer hours on a weekly basis. Window prostitutes further reported working the highest number of hours, while escorts reported working the lowest. This is in line with the findings of the 2006 survey.

*Reasons* Respondents reported that they started working in the sex industry because of the need to earn money to support themselves or their families, because it appealed to them or because they thought they would earn more money than if they took another type of job. A portion of the sex workers entered the industry owing to difficult financial circumstances (debts) or because they were unable to find alternative employment. In a number of cases, the sex worker interviewed was coerced into the profession by another person. These results are in line with the findings of the 2006 survey.

*Quitting* Many sex workers sometimes consider quitting the sex industry to seek alternative employment. More than half of the respondents have stopped working as a sex worker at least once; in 2006, this percentage was lower (44%). Sex workers working in clubs/private houses reported most often that they had stopped in the past. Around one in three sex workers who had quit in the past resumed work in the industry within six months of stopping. Money problems were the most common reasons for resuming sex work, as was also found in the 2006 survey. Nearly half of the respondents reported that they never think about quitting the sex industry.

*Work history* The large majority of respondents were employed in another industry before entering the sex industry. Window prostitutes have worked exclusively in the sex industry more often than other sex workers. A quarter of sex workers currently have other employment alongside their sex work. This percentage is higher for escorts and home-based sex workers. Fewer of the sex workers interviewed in the 2006 survey had another job outside the sex industry (7%). This difference can only partially be explained by the fact that the previous survey did not include home-based sex workers and independent escorts.

*Employment relationship* Four in five sex workers surveyed indicated that they were satisfied with their current employment relationship. Levels of satisfaction varied little between the various industry sectors. The type of employment relationship enjoyed by sex workers depends on the sector of the industry in which they work. According to window prostitutes, they work as self-employed persons; the same applies to home-based sex workers. Sex workers in clubs, private houses and massage parlours mostly work via an opt-in arrangement. Escorts either work via an opt-in arrangement (if employed by a company) or are self-employed. In the 2006 survey, sex workers in clubs, private houses and massage parlours more often

viewed themselves as self-employed, whereas now many sex workers in these sectors report that they work via an opt-in arrangement.

*Workplace* The large majority of the sex workers interviewed (88%) prefer a workplace for which the proprietor/manager has a licence, mostly for safety reasons. The choice of workplace is usually determined by its attractiveness ('seems like a good spot'), the potential to earn more than elsewhere and the favourable character of the manager or proprietor. On average, sex workers remain at one workplace for more than three years. This is longer than what was reported in the 2006 survey (average of 1.5 years), also if we disregard the group of home-based sex workers and self-employed escorts. However, the longer period spent at one workplace correlates positively with the higher age of respondents in the current survey (specifically sex workers in massage parlours).

Around one in five respondents has another workplace for work *within* the sex industry in addition to the workplace where the interview was conducted. Home-based sex workers and escorts in particular were found to have another workplace relatively often. On average, respondents have had three workplaces in the sex industry to date. The reasons sex workers gave for changing their workplace are low earnings at their former workplace, a desire to try a new workplace, or problems or arguments with the manager or proprietor of the former workplace. While these reasons were also reported in the 2006 survey, at that time problems or arguments with the manager or proprietor featured more often as a reason for a change workplace.

*Satisfaction with work* Three-quarters of the respondents said they are satisfied with the way things transpire in their work. This satisfaction is often related to the independence experienced in performing the work, the good relationship with colleagues or good working atmosphere, and the honest or good relationship enjoyed with the manager or proprietor. Reasons given for being dissatisfied are not related to the employment relationship with the manager or proprietor, but are mainly due to the low income earned in the sex industry. Half of those surveyed said they were satisfied with their income; window prostitutes were the least satisfied. In the 2006 survey, a larger share of sex workers were satisfied with their income; window prostitutes were likewise the least satisfied.

*Agreements* Sex workers consider it important to be able to decide for themselves which customers they work with and what they charge for specific sexual acts. They also make a variety of agreements with their manager or proprietor concerning, for example, working times, standards of hygiene in the workplace and the policy on alcohol and drug use. Though some sex workers consider themselves to be self-employed, in practice they are not always free to decide their own rates and their working times.

*Treatment* Nearly all sex workers believe that the treatment of sex workers by social institutions is a vital aspect that needs to be improved. Furthermore, three-

quarters of the sex workers surveyed think that the image of the profession at organisations/institutions, but also among the general public, should be improved. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents reported that they personally had often been well treated by organisations/institutions in the past year. Most sex workers had had dealings with the Municipal Health Service in the past year. Other institutions with which many sex workers had had contact were the vice squad, the GP, the Tax Administration, the Chamber of Commerce and the bank. Though sex workers are comparatively less enthusiastic about their experiences with social services, the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) and the Tax Administration, at least two-thirds reported that they felt well treated by these institutions. The way sex workers feel they are treated corresponds with the situation in 2006.

- Support* Regarding support in the area of healthcare, most sex workers say they can manage quite well. When it comes to problems with the manager or proprietor, sex workers are comparatively less aware of their options; the same applies to sex workers leaving the industry. Dutch sex workers are generally better informed of where they can find support and assistance than their foreign colleagues.
- Anonymity* The majority of the sex workers consider it important to be anonymous when dealing with institutions and care providers. Three-quarters also think it important that their sex work remains unknown to family, friends and acquaintances.
- Health* In general, sex workers lead a less healthy life style than the rest of the Dutch population. However, compared to the situation in 2006, lifestyle improvements seem to have been made with respect to (reduced) alcohol use, (reduced) smoking, taking the time to eat, and regular exercise. Health problems that most often affect sex workers are tension and wrought-up emotions, gloominess and loneliness. Health problems are reported less frequently by respondents working in massage parlours and more often by respondents working in clubs/private houses and the escort sector. More than one in three sex workers sometimes have to deal with intense situations due to their work, which result in distressing thoughts or memories and/or sleeping problems. Nearly half of the sex workers surveyed said they sometimes found the work to be emotionally taxing.
- Voluntary character of the work* Two in three sex workers think that the majority of sex workers perform their work fully voluntarily. Sex workers in clubs/private houses and massage parlours believe this is the case relatively often. The term 'voluntary' was not defined any further during the interviews and the respondents may have had varying interpretations.
- Areas for improvement* A secure and hygienic workplace and access to good healthcare were reported by (virtually) all respondents as aspects of the sex industry that could be further improved. The majority of respondents also attach great importance

to tackling the illegal sex industry (80%) and combating forced prostitution, trafficking in women and pimp boyfriends (95%). Both of these objectives are covered in the new legislation (Regulation of Prostitution and Combating Abuses in the Sex Industry Act). A somewhat smaller share (72%) considers it important for there to be a uniform policy and to apply uniform rules across the entire Dutch sex industry.

## Conclusion

Though there is room for improvement in a number of aspects of the sex industry, this survey shows that the majority of sex workers are satisfied with their employment situation, the way things transpire in their work and their working relationship with the proprietor or manager (where applicable). This is the conclusion we draw based on the answers of the interviewed respondents in the licensed sector (and those working as self-employed escorts or as home-based sex workers). It is possible that sex workers with positive experiences were overrepresented in the survey and that the results are correspondingly distorted. Indeed, sex workers in a *weaker* social position may have been less inclined to participate in a survey of this kind. While we applied a number of techniques to minimise the risk of the interviewees providing socially acceptable answers (see Chapter 1), this does however remain a risk that cannot be excluded completely.

The interviewed sex workers reported no or hardly any abuses or instances of coerced sex work. The survey leaves the impression that the interviewed sex workers perform their work on a fully or largely voluntary basis. It should be noted however that a portion of the sex workers chose to enter the sex industry because of financial difficulties such as debts. At the same time, a portion of the sex workers also simply work in the industry because they either enjoy it or find it exciting.

Despite the voluntary nature of the profession of sex worker, many respondents would rather move into another field of work as soon as a suitable opportunity presents itself. This is borne out by the finding that many sex workers have quit sex work in the past and/or are considering quitting. Respondents who quit sex work often did so with no professional help or help from their own social networks; they rarely turn to support agencies for assistance.

In general, most sex workers are satisfied with the treatment they receive from social institutions and care providers, though there is room for improvement. With respect to the health and well-being of sex workers – and in particular healthy and unhealthy behaviours – sex workers do not fare as well as the rest of the Dutch population and this is an area where further improvements could be made.