



**Global Network of Sex Work Projects**  
Promoting Health and Human Rights

**How Sex Work Laws are Implemented on the Ground  
and Their Impact on Sex Workers**

**Greece Case Study**

## Participant Demographics

This case study is based on interviews with 11 sex workers and two lawyers. The sex workers ranged in age from 21-54 years old. Five of them were migrants and two were Roma. The interviewees comprised four heterosexual transgender women, five heterosexual cisgender women, one gay cisgender man, and one heterosexual cisgender man. Four of the sex workers are parents and one was pregnant at the time of the interview. One of the participants was in Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST), two are living with HIV or Hepatitis B (HBV), and one is a regular user of cannabis. The participants reported working mostly in Athens except one participant who reported working every two months in another large city. Three participants had also been working in other European countries. Four of them were exclusively working indoors (brothels), four were exclusively street-based/working in hotels, one was a web-based sex worker and two were working both indoors and outdoors.

One of the lawyers interviewed has worked on several cases with transgender sex workers while the other works occasionally on advocacy and legal issues with sex workers in partnership with an NGO.

## Overview of the Sex Work Laws

The 2734/1999 law refers to sex work in Greece and was first introduced in 1834 due to public health concerns after a syphilis outbreak. According to this law, sex work is legal and highly regulated, but only in state-licensed brothels— not in hotels or on the streets. Municipalities determine the number of licensed brothels allowed in their local area. According to the 2734/1999 law “prostitutes” are not allowed to be married, but must be single, divorced or widowed. Sex workers are also required to obtain an individual professional license, which lasts for 3 years and requires certain legal and medical documents (e.g. identity or passport, residence permits, criminal record, HIV test results, chest X-ray). The license, however, only enables sex workers to work in licensed brothels. The law states that there can be no more than one licensed brothel in any one building. The use of an apartment as a brothel requires the consent of the owners and all other residents in the building.

One of the lawyers said:

*“the paradox is that actually there are no legal sex workers or legal brothels because of this law in Athens. The real number of the brothels is unknown, maybe 200, maybe more as well as the number of sex workers is unknown and hard to estimate. On the other hand, in the second largest city of Greece, called Thessaloniki, there are around 20 (maybe more) licensed brothels and in other smaller cities there are also few.”*

The few participants who had a license explained that it was easy to get a license in other cities, but difficult in Athens because of the strict geographical restrictions (e.g. a brothel must be more than 200 meters from churches, libraries, schools, hospitals, kindergartens, nursing homes, and other public buildings). Most of the sex workers were not well informed regarding this legislation (L. 2734/1999). Every licensed brothel is also required to have an owner with a special license.

According to the law in Greece, sex workers must have mandatory medical testing for STIs every 15 days, every 3 months for HIV and every month for syphilis. Sex workers are not allowed to work if any of these test results are positive. The participants we interviewed claim they get tested very often to protect their health, and to avoid issues with the police— mostly in private health clinics and at NGOs (such as the Red Umbrella Athens day centre). Several of the cis- and transgender women participants supported mandatory testing for HIV, describing it as a matter of professionalism and dignity. One of the male sex workers said that he feels protected enough

using condoms and therefore does not get tested every 3 months, while the other said he was tested very often for HIV/HBV/HCV.

One of the lawyers, referring to the medical examinations required for STIs and implemented by the local authorities, stated that their examination tools are only designed for cisgender women, and that transgender women are therefore often treated as men or as crossdressers. Transgender sex workers face serious barriers in accessing the national health system due to a lack of appropriate health services.

According to the sex work legislation, the assistant staff of brothels must also have a license. To get this license they must be over 50 years old, they must have legal residency documentation (documented migrant status is permitted) and they must receive mandatory medical testing (HIV, STIs, syphilis). In reality, brothel staff usually do not have licenses because they are afraid of the state and do not want to be recorded as working in a sex work business— or they do not have legal residency/migration documentation. Cisgender women working in brothels say they feel safer with an assistant, while it is less common for male sex workers and sex workers in other settings (hotels, etc.) to have an assistant.

The following quotes from sex workers illustrate the major problems with the licensing system in Greece:

*“I had a license when I was working in a couple of cities in Greece -not in Athens- where it is easier to obtain one and the brothels had also license. I have assistant of course. Back then I was more easily going to the police if they have any troubles with clients, but when I am working at my place I am on my own as I don't have license.” (Transgender woman, 45 years old, working in brothels and via the internet.)*

*“I don't care for license as I don't want to be recorded doing this work by the state. I am afraid to get in trouble in the future. If I ever wanted to do this job permanently, I might think of getting a license, but maybe not... I don't trust the police. I wish there was no prejudice or stigma against us. For me it's a work just for a short period. I feel safe at my place or at clients' houses, but I always stay at rural areas, never going to isolated houses or cottages. (Cisgender male sex worker, 27 years old, working via the internet.)*

*“I had a license for 3 years at the brothel, but I could not pay the taxes anymore after the economic crisis. It is useless as I don't have equal rights with other workers. Am I gonna get retired? I don't believe it. I have private health insurance and it was enough until recently that I needed a very expensive treatment for arthritis. I feel despair with the current health system, no offence for your country, mine is very bad too.” (Migrant cisgender woman, 41 years old, working in brothels/sex studios.)*

## **Sex Workers' Experiences**

Sex workers are afraid to go to the police or to the prosecutor and report crimes against them, as they believe they are going to be arrested because of their illegal sex work status. The majority of participants said that they do not trust the police and feel threatened rather than protected by the police. For example, one participant explained their negative perception and experience of the police:

*“I was not aware of any sex [work] law before coming here [to the Red Umbrella Athens day center]. In the past I was arrested and thus I understood I was illegal. I don't have a license since I am working at my own apartment and find my clients at the streets. Violence from clients is still painful to discuss about... of course I never went to report them, it is pointless I think... I had bad experiences when I was arrested for sex work... insults, verbal violence mostly because of my gender identity.” (Transgender woman, 34 years old, working outdoors.)*

Cis- and transgender women sex workers who work in brothels are the most heavily policed, while web-based workers are the least heavily policed. Sex workers in brothels say that police implement controls for documentation and HIV/STI test results every one to two weeks. During the controls, the police are reportedly polite and there are no reports of violence. As they frequently visit the brothels in central Athens they know most of the staff; therefore, they only ask for the health test results and documentation in cases for new or unknown staff/sex workers. Migrant sex workers with legal documentation do not face any problems with the police. One participant implied that a few police officers take bribes and will only come by the brothels for controls when the bosses have not given them the money.

People who work through the internet claimed not to face any problems with the police. One participant implied that in the late '90s policemen pretended to be clients aiming to control the new type of sex work that was being facilitated by internet advertising, but said this doesn't happen anymore:

*"I remember in 1999 when we were very few working through the internet that once a very handsome client was a hidden cop. I was shocked! I wasn't prepared...but ok, I spent the night at the police station and one more fine was added to my record. A few of my friends and colleagues in the sex industry had similar stories back then, but not anymore."* (Transgender woman, 45 years old, working in brothels and via the internet.)

The street-based sex worker participants— mainly women— described different issues. The street-based sex workers who are working and living in central Athens face daily or weekly arrests. The police ask them to come to the police station (without force) and then check their records and give them fines electronically (often €200 - 300 per fine). Most of the street-based sex workers in central Athens have over €2000 in fines, but it is never possible to pay them.

*"Today I got arrested again. I am used to it and I don't care as far as they did not deport me. I told them I am pregnant, and they checked the results from the gynecologist... I think they even called the clinic to verify it. I am not lying so I don't care. They offered me water and a chair to sit... They are good people, [I don't] complain. I spent 20 mins at the police station, and I returned to my corner to work for the rest of the day... I need the money for my baby!".* (Cisgender woman, 29 years old, undocumented migrant working outdoors.)

Two interview participants who were new to street-based sex work reported that they were given summons to appear in court on charges of soliciting without ever being arrested. Police officers came to their homes and gave them the court summons, which was not in an envelope and was not properly served, breaching their rights to confidentiality. The only proof of their involvement in sex work was the testimony of the police officers who had been following them. These women reported feeling very afraid of the police after this experience.

Street-based sex workers that get arrested on the streets of Athens go to trial, often without legal representation or without even being present at the trial. The criminal charge and hence the trial and verdict are based solely on the police testimonies. This allows arbitrary arrests to happen according to the perception of each policeman. It is noteworthy that male sex workers working outdoors do not face the same fines or arrests as women sex workers— but occasionally the police arrest them for drug-related crimes, violent crimes or illegal migration status. Street-based transgender sex workers who work on a particular avenue in Athens, report feeling safer in the last few years as the police protect them from violence and random attacks.

When migrants sex workers are arrested, they are not informed of their right to ask for a mediator/translator at their trial. Migrants who are informed about the possibility of obtaining a license to work legally (this is possible for documented migrants) are not motivated to do so due to

the lack of legal brothels, high taxes or the lack of social benefits. They are the most vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

According to the lawyers, limited access to legal aid is a big issue in Greece. There are some public programs for free legal aid, but sex workers must submit numerous supporting documents to access them. NGOs and Civil Society groups offer free legal advice, but it is limited due to high court fees and long court proceedings. Sex workers with low socio-economic status (e.g. migrants, homeless or living in poverty) often cannot collect the required certifications (e.g. criminal record from their home country translated in Greek) on time and must then face their legal problems without any support.

Greek sex work law causes fear, insecurity and vulnerability for the sex worker community. Reform is urgently needed to ensure equal human rights for all sex workers.



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