



Work changes among sex workers

Experiences and support from their perspective

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English summary

Introduction and methodology

In the Netherlands, sex work is legal, but it does not yet occupy a self-evident position in the labor market or in society. As a result, changing jobs—whether within or outside the erotic industry—can be challenging. The aim of this study is to gain insight into this process of occupational change from the perspective of sex workers. The study addresses the following main questions, which are further elaborated into a series of sub-questions:

1. How does the process of occupational change unfold?
2. What kinds of support are or are not offered and used in this process, and how are they experienced?
3. Which factors contribute positively or negatively to the process and outcomes of occupational change?
4. What improvements are possible and desirable in the support provided to sex workers seeking alternative employment?

The study combines quantitative and qualitative methods and is longitudinal in nature. The quantitative part consisted of questionnaires administered at four different points in time to map the process of occupational change and the accompanying guidance and support. The questionnaires were distributed among a diverse sample of 107 individuals (women, men, and transgender persons) currently engaged in sex work and considering or undergoing a transition, as well as among those who had done sex work in the past. In addition, 25 sex workers who are satisfied with their work completed a one-time questionnaire. The qualitative part consisted of one, two, or three in-depth interviews with 34 (former) sex workers, focusing on their individual experiences of occupational change. Furthermore, three focus groups were organized with 7 policymakers and 20 service providers to contextualize and interpret the results with them.

Experiences with sex work

To sketch the context within which sex workers weigh whether to continue or leave the profession, we first examined their experiences with sex work. Sex workers describe both attractive and challenging aspects of their work.

Appealing aspects of sex work

The appealing aspects can be grouped into four main themes. First, the flexibility and freedom associated with the work are often mentioned, such as flexible hours and locations, and little need for accountability. Second, sex work is often perceived as financially rewarding, enabling sex workers to maintain a stable standard of living, pay off debts, or provide financial support to others. It also allows for the rapid generation of extra income when needed, for example for unexpected expenses. A third theme is job satisfaction, including excitement, pleasure, or social interaction with clients and colleagues. Finally, interviews show that certain appealing aspects are specific to the form of sex work—such as window prostitution, working in a club, or via online platforms. For instance, those working in private houses or clubs highlight the contact with peers as positive. The organized nature of such venues is also valued, as it contributes to safety, control, and predictability.

Aspects experienced as negative

The challenging aspects can also be grouped into four main themes. First, recurring experiences of stigma and the resulting need to lead a double life are frequently mentioned. Sex workers often keep their work secret from those around them out of fear of rejection or negative reactions, which creates shame, insecurity, and psychological strain. Second, experiences of violence, intimidation, and disrespectful behavior are common, with sex workers recognizing these risks as part of their professional reality. A third theme is the mental and physical strain of the work. Mental strain arises from stigma, the perceived necessity of keeping sex work hidden, experiences of violence or disrespect, and interactions with clients perceived as unattractive or unhygienic. Physical strain results from long working hours, constant availability, night shifts, and serving multiple clients per day. Finally, some negative aspects are linked to specific forms of sex work, such as the complexity of laws and regulations in home-based or independent escort work, often accompanied by heavy administrative burdens.

Impact of the transition process

Job satisfaction among sex workers is related to the stage they are in within the process of occupational change. Those who have left sex work are more likely to report that they find nothing attractive about it than those still engaged in it. Respondents are satisfied with their work and not considering change more often report that they find nothing negative about their work compared to those currently transitioning or who have already gone through the process.

The process of occupational change

Next, the study focuses on the process of occupational change. We discuss the reasons for changing jobs, the factors that influence the process, and observable patterns in how it unfolds.

Reasons for change

Sex workers mention a wide range of reasons for changing jobs. Many align with the negative aspects noted above, such as stigma, living a double life, mental and physical strain, disrespectful clients, and experiences of violence or intimidation. Other reasons include the desire for more structure, regularity, and social contact with colleagues. Major life events—such as obtaining a residence permit, having time for reflection during the COVID-19 pandemic, or starting an education—also play a role. Age can also be a factor: younger sex workers sometimes view their work as temporary and pursue alternative career paths after completing their studies, while some older sex workers expect their income to decline as they age.

Barriers and supporting factors

Financial concerns are a major obstacle in transitioning to other work, particularly for sex workers with a migration background who remit money to their countries of origin, transgender persons facing high medical insurance costs, and those with debts. Guidance aimed at adjusting spending habits, building savings, or becoming debt-free can help lower this barrier. Uncertainty about alternative employment forms a second obstacle, often due to lack of education, work experience, or language skills, or the reluctance to mention sex work on a CV. Structural constraint, such as restrictions during asylum procedures or labor market discrimination, increase this uncertainty.

Housing plays a crucial role: losing accommodation or living in housing tied to sex work often presents an obstacle, whereas securing safe new housing can be a turning point. A supportive social network of family, friends, peers, or organizations facilitates the transition. For transgender sex workers and those with a migration background, peer support is often essential, as their networks in the Netherlands are more limited.

Patterns in the transition process

Transitions within or outside the erotic industry rarely follow a linear path. Many sex workers move step by step, with temporary returns to sex work or reconsiderations being common. Personal, financial, and practical factors are constantly weighed. Ultimately, most sex workers who change careers move into jobs outside the erotic industry, such as hospitality, cleaning, social work, education, or logistics. A smaller group prefers to remain in the industry but seeks safer, more stable, or more professional work, for example via online platforms or licensed escort services.

Guidance and support

For many sex workers, career change raises questions and uncertainties. Guidance and support can play an important role. This section describes whether sex workers receive guidance, how they experience it, and what forms of support they consider desirable.

The extent of guidance received

More than half of the sex workers actively engaged in career change and participating in this study receive support, mainly from professionals at sex work-specific organizations, but also from family or friends. Since part of the recruitment took place through such organizations, this proportion is likely upwardly biased and lower in reality. Barriers to support include stigma around sex work and the resulting reluctance to disclose involvement, lack of awareness of available services, or the perception that programs are not suitable. Specific groups—such as young male sex workers, transgender persons, and those with a migration background—face additional barriers and often require supplementary support.

Types of guidance

Guidance often spans multiple areas of life and is perceived as helpful when it is broad, personalized, and long-term. Sex workers receive support in exploring opportunities within and outside the industry, practical help with work or education, low-threshold assistance when starting a new job, budget coaching, help in coping with reduced income, housing support, and psychological counseling. Long-term support, continuing after the first steps toward alternative work, proves to be crucial.

Experiences with guidance

Sex workers appreciate sex work-specific organizations for their expertise in the sector, their non-judgmental approach, holistic methods, and the provision of a consistent contact person. Key factors in effective support include alignment with personal needs, preservation of autonomy, guidance in the individual's native language, cultural sensitivity, and (geographic) accessibility of the organization. Contact with other (former) sex workers is considered highly valuable, as it fosters recognition and reduces loneliness. Experiences with general support services and government agencies are mixed. These organizations often have less knowledge of sex workers' realities, resulting in mismatched support. The quality of assistance is strongly dependent on the attitude and commitment of individual professionals. Warm referrals are appreciated, as are good coordination and collaboration.

Desired improvements

Sex workers indicate that support is often focused on leaving the erotic industry altogether, while some wish to change jobs within the sector. The availability of services is not always clear; transparent and proactive communication is therefore essential. Referrals to general support services and government agencies do not always go smoothly. Sex workers stress the importance of continued involvement of their trusted contact person. Long-term engagement and aftercare are considered highly valuable.

Perspectives of policymakers and service providers

Professionals likewise emphasize that career change is not a linear process. Current support structures often operate with a binary approach: either someone is in sex work or they are not. As a result, programs do not always reflect reality. Tailored solutions and flexibility are essential. Temporary housing and work experience placements could play an important role, but are currently scarce. Transition pathways are further complicated by underlying issues such as trauma, addiction, or mental health problems, as well as by contact with peers who may disapprove of leaving sex work.

Support programs often end too early, while sustained involvement is crucial for lasting change. Organizations do not always align with the needs of sex workers and sometimes steer them toward leaving the profession. Accessibility remains limited, regional coverage is inconsistent, and collaboration between service providers and municipalities is fragmented. There is a need for neutral, inclusive programs tailored to different groups, offering specialized expertise—for example, for transgender sex workers and those with a migration background.

Each year, a national meeting is held for sex workers, service providers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, focused on exit programs from sex work. This day is commonly known among participants as the DUUP Day, which stands for Decentralisatie Uitkering Uitstapprogramma’s Prostituees (Decentralization Grant Exit Programs Prostitutes). Policymakers and service providers value this day as an important moment for knowledge sharing and exchanging experiences. At the same time, they emphasize that the current format of DUUP Day is in need of renewal to increase its effectiveness and accessibility.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, eight recommendations have been formulated for policy and practice to improve support for occupational change among sex workers, both within and outside the industry. These recommendations are:

- 1. Promote long-term, integrated guidance programs.
- 2. Strengthen the role of sex work-specific organizations.
- 3. Increase the visibility of available support services.
- 4. Provide support that is not exclusively focused on exit.
- 5. Develop inclusive and flexible guidance pathways.
- 6. Facilitate contact with peers and those with lived experience.
- 7. Create safe housing and work environments.
- 8. Revise the structure of DUUP Day.

The extent to which practice already aligns with these recommendations varies by region; some regions are more advanced than others.

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