# Belgium introduces legal reforms to grant sex workers labour rights and protections



In December 2023, Belgium introduced significant legal reforms allowing sex workers to access legal protections and labour rights, marking a notable step towards regularising the sex work industry in the country. The changes include rights such as paid leave and the ability to sign employment contracts with approved employers, positioning Belgium alongside countries like Germany and the Netherlands that have taken similar approaches, in contrast with nations such as France and Sweden, which maintain more restrictive stances.

The reforms also relaxed regulations on advertising sex work, permitting adults to promote their services legally in designated locations, such as behind windows. Importantly, the law decriminalises third parties involved in supporting sex workers, including bankers, website designers, and property owners, provided they comply with the legal framework. However, pimping and child prostitution remain illegal under the new legislation.

This legal shift is already impacting the lives of sex workers in Antwerp’s historic sailors’ quarter, where sex workers operate from neon-lit red-light windows surrounding a police station in the Villa Tinto complex. Kiana, a 32-year-old Romanian-born worker who rents one of the 51 display windows, expressed satisfaction with her profession, emphasising her choice and autonomy: “I’m not a victim, I chose to work here and I like what I’m doing,” she told AFP. Similarly, Mel, a sex worker and TikTok content creator known as Meliciousss, highlighted the social effects of the law: “I was just tired of lying about what I do for a living, and pretending to be a hairdresser or a masseuse. We, as sex workers, were seen by the state as a real job, and the views of people also changed.”

Marianne Chargois, a sex worker and activist at the association Utsopi, which champions sex workers’ rights, commented, “Even if the stigma still exists, in a way we have moved away from shame.” Utsopi estimates the number of sex workers in Belgium between 9,000 and 26,000, with women representing 90 percent of the workforce, although official statistics are unavailable.

Despite these advances, challenges remain. Organisations combating human trafficking and abuse warn that many involved in prostitution continue to face financial coercion, addiction, and exploitation by traffickers. A recent police operation in March dismantled a criminal network suspected of sexually exploiting around 30 Chinese women, with seven arrests made. Charles-Eric Clesse, a Belgian legal expert, noted that for prostitutes of African origin, over 90 percent of cases involve human trafficking and exploitation, often with victims working without residence permits.

The new law permits sex workers to sign employment contracts, offering enhanced labour rights like health insurance compared to the self-employed status, but uptake has been minimal. The Belgian Labour Ministry has received only three contract applications since the law’s introduction, all currently under judicial review to verify the credentials and criminal backgrounds of the employers.

Opposition exists as well. The Isala association, which advocates for abolishing prostitution, argues that the law inadvertently promotes pimping, potentially empowering brothel owners to coerce women into unsafe circumstances. The law has been subjected to a legal challenge and is set to be debated by Belgium’s Constitutional Court.

Meanwhile, some brothel owners, like Karin Vander Elst of Villa Tinto, reject the idea of formal employment contracts for sex workers, valuing the autonomy they believe such contracts would compromise. Vander Elst stated, “The sex workers who work here, they’re very free and independent. They work when they want. They choose their own clients. They take holiday when they want. If we’re going to give them a contract, it’s very difficult to maintain that or to keep everybody happy.”

The reform in Belgium represents a complex balance between recognising sex work as legitimate labour and addressing ongoing issues of exploitation and consent within the sector. The evolving legal landscape continues to be a focal point for debate among sex workers, activists, law enforcement, and policymakers.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/01/nx-s1-5212435/belgium-sex-workers-labor-protections-rights-first> - This article discusses Belgium's new law granting sex workers access to paid leave, health insurance, and the ability to sign employment contracts, marking a significant step towards regularizing the sex work industry in the country.
* <https://www.thehill.com/homenews/ap/ap-international/ap-a-new-belgium-law-gives-sex-workers-contracts-benefits-and-safety-protection/> - This piece highlights the comprehensive labor protections introduced in Belgium, including rights such as paid leave and the ability to sign employment contracts with approved employers, aligning Belgium with countries like Germany and the Netherlands.
* <https://www.ippf.org/featured-perspective/belgium-transformative-law-sex-workers-rights> - This article details the legal reforms in Belgium that allow sex workers to sign formal employment contracts, granting them access to benefits like paid public holidays and social security, and decriminalizing third parties involved in supporting sex workers.
* <https://www.nhpr.org/2024-12-01/belgium-becomes-first-country-to-give-sex-workers-robust-labor-rights-and-protections> - This report covers Belgium's new law that decriminalizes third parties supporting sex workers, such as bankers and website designers, provided they comply with the legal framework, while maintaining the illegality of pimping and child prostitution.
* <https://www.marketbeat.com/articles/a-new-belgium-law-gives-sex-workers-contracts-benefits-and-safety-protection-2024-12-01/> - This article discusses the impact of Belgium's legal reforms on sex workers in Antwerp's historic sailors’ quarter, where sex workers operate from neon-lit red-light windows, and includes personal accounts from workers like Kiana and Mel.
* <https://www.ippf.org/featured-perspective/belgium-transformative-law-sex-workers-rights> - This piece provides insights into the challenges that remain despite Belgium's legal reforms, including financial coercion, addiction, and exploitation by traffickers, and mentions a recent police operation dismantling a criminal network exploiting Chinese women.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMikAFBVV95cUxPbHZpRlVuMDY4VUllV3VIMlkzZkhBbFFkcjI0LU5lTFFMVmFXMXlRV2VobURBc2dONG92dGFKdUJTa1hpREtfVnNFQmdobU82QXhUS0o0Y0tMMDQxVk1CclFOV2RScEw1UVVCMFRTVThXai1ub1NXSjRpTDJNc1h6OEwyOTFCRlg1N19LQlo5a0M?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data