Sex workers bear a high burden of violence in Europe, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence. However, despite increasing recognition of violence against women and other marginalised groups as a human rights and gender equality priority by European Union (EU) and Council of Europe (CoE) entities, academia and European civil society, crimes against sex workers that occur within and outside the context of sex work are frequently overlooked.

Migrant sex workers are estimated to comprise the majority of the sex worker population in Western Europe, and a significant segment of the community in Central-Eastern Europe. The new community report by the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe explores this group’s experiences of violence and provides insights into their victimisation and ability to access justice based on evidence collected by 12 sex worker rights organisations. The report analyses in particular the barriers faced in the reporting phase and the impact of criminalisation and policing.
Methodology and demographics

In cooperation with 12 national partner organisations from 10 European countries\(^1\), ICRSE collected and analysed 49 cases of violence and crimes committed against sex workers. Sex workers were involved in the design of the research methodology, including defining its aims, creating a semi-structured interview template, and collecting evidence as recruiters of respondents and in the role of interviewers.

Key demographics of sex worker interviewees involved in the study:

- 26 of the interviewed sex workers were non-EU nationals, 5 were asylum-seekers, and 5 undocumented migrants. 2 persons had short-term business or tourist visas. 20 respondents were EU nationals working in different European countries. (1 respondent did not disclose their residence status).
- Research participants included 26 cis women, 19 trans women and 2 cis men.

Key findings

- Acts of (often recurring) physical violence were most commonly committed against sex workers in the research sample. Following physical violence, cases of psychological violence were recorded the most, illustrating the impact of societal stigma on sex workers which allows perpetrators to exploit their vulnerable positions and inability to rely on help.

- Robberies and thefts are often committed concurrently with other incidents. Although robberies are not usually listed as typical acts of gender-based violence, evidence indicates that sex workers are frequently targeted by offenders of this crime as they are seen as easy targets having a certain amount of cash in their possession.

- Various cases in the sample demonstrate that a crucial factor of victimisation is the criminalisation of sex work and consequently, the lack of safe working places. Criminalisation of sex workers, their clients or third parties result in fear of police and authorities and limit sex workers’ ability to report crimes, including exploitation and trafficking. The criminalisation of migration and related fear of arrest and deportation also negatively impact migrant sex workers’ access to justice.

---

1. Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, and the United Kingdom.
Based on the evidence, enabling and disabling factors of reporting to the police are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enabling factors of reporting to the police</th>
<th>Disabling factors of reporting to the police</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of sex worker collective or trusted NGO that encouraged or facilitated reporting</td>
<td>Fear of the consequences of reporting as an (undocumented) migrant: detention and deportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust and knowledge of and good experience with police officers; police committed to protecting sex working communities</td>
<td>Fear of the consequences of reporting as a sex worker: fines and prosecution for sex work-related offences (soliciting; brothel-keeping), being outed, losing custody of one’s child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge that revealing one’s sex worker status would not be used against them</td>
<td>Fear of being evicted from one’s home or apartment where sex workers work/live</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situations in which the fear of offenders became greater than the fear of negative consequences of calling the police</td>
<td>Fear of negative consequences of reporting for others: co-workers or apartment owners fined or prosecuted for third-party offenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous negative experiences with and general distrust towards police</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of sex worker interviewees interacted with police during identity checks (57%), followed by residency checks (30%), which indicates high levels of surveillance and profiling, negatively affecting the migrant sex working community’s trust in law enforcement.

36% of respondents reported only negative experiences with the police, which is determinant in decisions whether or not to report crimes.
Conclusion and Recommendations to European policy-makers

Crime and violence against migrant sex workers remain an under-explored issue. Evidence from sex workers organisations suggests that many migrant sex workers are unable to report crimes due to stigma and fear of arrest and deportation in the context of criminalisation of sex work and migration. The current ideological trend to “abolish prostitution” by criminalising clients of sex workers also negatively impacts sex workers’ trust in authorities as well as excludes sex workers and their organisations from policy-making.

In light of these findings, ICRSE calls on all relevant representatives of international and intergovernmental organisations, especially the European Union and the Council of Europe, to:

- Address the phenomenon of endemic violence against sex workers in their work by meaningfully including sex workers and their organisations, e.g. in the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and Victims’ Rights Strategy 2020-2025;

- Promote a rights-based approach to sex work by calling for the decriminalisation of sex work and the elimination of all discriminatory and repressive laws and regulations;

- Recognise and promote implementation of a firewall between public immigration enforcement and service provision in the area of social services and access to justice systems;

- Promote police accountability to protect marginalised communities and people facing intersectional discrimination against crime by closely monitoring the implementation of all provisions introduced by Victim’s Rights Directive in relation to marginalised communities.