Advancing trans and sex workers' rights through the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

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Ensuring Europe's fight against poverty leaves no one behind

Ahead of the **International Day for the Eradication of Poverty** (17 October), the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), Trans Europe and Central Asia – TGEU, representing more than 335 organisations, call on the European Commission to ensure that its first-ever Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS) addresses the realities of those most at risk of exclusion, including trans people and sex workers.

The EU has committed to reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, yet progress is alarmingly slow. In 2024, 93.3 million people—over one in five EU residents—remained at risk. Beyond this, in her 2025 State of the Union Address, President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen, committed to eradicate poverty by 2050. If the APS is to succeed, it must go beyond headline targets and confront the systemic barriers that lock people into cycles of deprivation.

Key barriers for trans people and sex workers

Trans people face structural discrimination across education, employment, housing, and healthcare, which makes them more vulnerable to poverty. In the EU, only **51% of trans people are in paid employment compared to nearly 70% of the general population**. According to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, 43% of trans women, 30% of trans men, and 20% of non-binary respondents reported discrimination when seeking work. Trans women are almost three times more likely to be unemployed. These disparities do not emerge in adulthood alone: many trans young people experience bullying and exclusion at school, which erodes their academic performance, increases dropout rates, and denies them access to qualifications that could secure future employment. For those who are also migrants, these challenges are compounded by the non-recognition of foreign diplomas, limited language support, and barriers to obtaining work permits.

Even when trans people do enter the job market, they are frequently shut out by discrimination. At the workplace, around one in three trans people experienced exclusion or harassment in the past year. Legal gender recognition is a critical factor here. Across much of the EU, fast, accessible, and affordable procedures to update identification documents are still absent. The mismatch between a person's lived gender and their official documents not only discourages many from applying for jobs but also creates obstacles in banking, welfare, and access to essential services. In Lithuania, for example, trans people must go through lengthy court proceedings and pay around €800 in legal fees simply to obtain legal recognition, a process that remains inaccessible for many.

Housing insecurity is another pressing concern. Up to 1 in 3 trans people in the EU report having experienced homelessness or severe housing difficulties. Discrimination is widespread: 25% have been directly refused a rental or home purchase because of their gender identity. For young trans people, family rejection often results in homelessness, leaving them trapped in cycles of insecurity. For trans sex workers, the situation is even more precarious. Under laws that criminalise "brothel-keeping", landlords across Europe are pressured to evict tenants suspected of engaging in sex work. This particularly affects trans people because underlying assumptions that all trans women are sex workers lead to this type of discriminatory treatment. The result is a system where **trans**

people are denied housing not only when they are sex workers, but also when they are merely profiled as such.

Austerity measures and welfare cuts across Europe disproportionately affect the most marginalised, pushing many into sex work as a means of survival. This includes single mothers without access to affordable childcare, disabled people who are excluded from labour markets shaped by narrow capitalist productivity norms, and migrants who are denied access to social benefits or legal employment. For migrants and racialised communities, these barriers are compounded by the lack of legal status and language barriers. Public narratives often erase this complexity, portraying (migrant) sex workers solely as victims of trafficking or victims of violence against women, ignoring their agency and the compounded discrimination they face. For trans people, discrimination in housing, employment, and education compounds these pressures, further limiting safe options in the formal economy**. Sex work itself is closely linked to structural inequality in the labour market.**

Criminalisation of sex work exacerbates these dynamics. Laws targeting sex workers, their clients, or third parties such as landlords and managers push sex work into unsafe and unregulated environments. The so-called “Nordic model”, which criminalises clients, has consistently failed to improve the lives of sex workers, instead making their work riskier and further restricting their access to justice. Structural inequalities, stigma and intersecting forms of discrimination that fuel poverty are the reasons why many people decide to sell sex. Even in countries where sex work is legal, burdensome requirements such as mandatory registration or compulsory health checks create unsafe parallel economies. **For trans sex workers—who already face transphobia, racism, and housing discrimination—these restrictions multiply the risks of exploitation and exclusion.**

The overlap between transphobia and whorephobia is clear. The 2025 ESWA report No Place to Call Home documents how **discrimination based on gender identity is not only a barrier to access housing, but also a pathway into sex work for many trans people**. One of the interviewees, a trans woman, explains: *“If I rent an Airbnb and they realise that I am transgender, they make the connection of me using the house to do sex work so they won’t allow it.*” This constant presumption criminalises trans people’s existence and fuels both housing and labour discrimination.

In this context, many trans sex workers are pushed into undeclared and unsafe work, without access to healthcare, pensions, or unemployment protections. Decriminalisation would change this reality. **Where sex work is fully decriminalised, sex workers can claim labour rights, negotiate safer working conditions, and access social protection schemes.** Full decriminalisation is therefore not only a matter of rights but also an effective poverty reduction measure.

Why intersectionality matters

Poverty is not a matter of individual misfortune or failure, but a systemic and self-perpetuating cycle rooted in injustice, unequal power relations, and the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. A truly transformative EU Anti-Poverty Strategy requires a **radical intersectional vision that moves the margin to the center**, by focusing on those who are among the most marginalised–trans people and sex workers. It needs to not only address their lived realities but also dismantle the deeper structures that sustain poverty and inequality. Failing to act upon the intersection between poverty and discrimination undermines the effectiveness of anti-poverty policies. Without such an approach, structural inequalities that affect marginalised groups will remain unchallenged, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and economic insecurity for all.

Call to action

EAPN, ESWA, and TGEU call on the European Commission to ensure that the forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy:

- Ensures the meaningful participation of trans-led and sex worker-led organisations in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the APS.
- Aligns with broader equality agendas, including the EU Gender Equality Strategy, LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, Anti-Racism Action Plan, Disability Strategy, and EU Affordable Housing Plan.
- Aligns the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2027 to reach the most marginalised people.
- Targets structural barriers by prioritising EU funds (ESF+, ERDF, AMIF) for actions addressing the compounded discrimination faced by trans people, sex workers, migrants, racialised groups, and disabled people. Provide EU funding for community-led organisations (those led by trans people and sex workers) through the sub-granting scheme, ensuring that those most affected by stigma and discrimination are at the forefront of the response.
- Targets structural barriers by prioritising EU funds (ESF+, ERDF, AMIF) for actions addressing the compounded discrimination faced by trans people, sex workers, migrants, racialised groups, and disabled people.
- Prioritises the collection and reporting of intersectional disaggregated data, including by all SOGIESC grounds through Eurostat and Member State statistical systems and in line with Commission's own Guidance note on the collection and use of data for LGBTIQ equality. This data should inform the implementation of the ePSR and the Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Facilitates regular exchanges among Member States to promote self-determination-based legal gender recognition models and GDPR-compliant systems for updating gendered personal data.
- Applies a human rights approach to sex work, advocating for legal recognition of labour rights for sex workers and the full decriminalisation of sex work in all Member States.
- Supports Member States in explicitly prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of gender identity and gender expression within national anti-discrimination legislation. It should cover conditions for access to employment, self-employment and occupation.
- Ensures trans-inclusive enforcement of the Equality Bodies Directive and the Pay Transparency Directive.
- Demands the repeal of all laws and administrative provisions that criminalize survival activities in public spaces including laws targeting begging, sleeping rough, informal economic activities, sex work, and other forms of subsistence work.

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