

STUDENT RESEARCH REPORT

Challenges & prospects for establishing **SEX WORK SPACES** in Belgium after decriminalisation



CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR ESTABLISHING SEX WORK SPACES IN BELGIUM AFTER DECRIMINALISATION

This research report, commissioned by UTSOPI (Belgian Union of Sex Workers), was conducted as part of the **Project Seminar in Applied Urban Research** in the MSc in Urban Studies program (VUB-ULB). It explores the challenges and opportunities of establishing sex work spaces in Belgium following the 2022 decriminalisation of sex work.

The research was carried out by three master's students over seven months, as part of a broader project led by PhD researchers Ana Dresler and Julie Sojcher in collaboration with Marianne Chargois from UTSOPI.

UTSOPI is a union led by sex workers and supported by allies. One of its core missions is to advocate for **sex workers' autonomy**—championing economic independence and improved working conditions, including **freedom of movement, choice of workspace, practices, working hours, and pricing**. UTSOPI also plays a key role in combating sexual exploitation and third-party control, both essential to sex worker empowerment.

MSc in Urban Studies (VUB-ULB) in collaboration with **UTSOPI**

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1. Introduction

Historically, sex work has often been associated—by the public and sometimes by sex workers themselves—with the idea of "easy money." However, the 2022 decriminalisation reform and the 2024 labour law revision have both legally affirmed sex work as work, deserving of dignity, protection, and recognition. With this report, we aim to restate and clarify this core principle: **Sex work is work.**

Our research seeks to contribute to this recognition by exploring how to create safer, more supportive, and better-integrated urban spaces for sex workers. Our goal is not only to help ensure sex workers' rights and autonomy, but also to identify pathways for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between sex workers and the cities they live and work in.

“ Sex Work is Work. ”



WHY STUDY SEX WORK SPACES IN BELGIUM ?

Before the 2022 reform of the sexual penal code, renting space or offering services to sex workers was classified as pimping. The new legislation narrows this definition to situations involving coercion, exploitation, or psychological abuse. This shift has created **new possibilities for how sex work can be legally organised.**

Despite these legal advances, sex workers still face major **obstacles** in accessing suitable workspaces. Legal operation now requires urban planning approval, landlord consent, and community acceptance. Furthermore, real estate speculation and gentrification have made it increasingly difficult for marginalised populations—including sex workers—to secure affordable, stable spaces for work and living.

This raises important questions: **How can sex workers operate safely in a decriminalised context if access to secure, legal workspaces remains so limited?** And how can the impact of decriminalisation be fairly assessed under such conditions?

To explore these questions, the report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** maps and categorizes existing sex work spaces in Belgium, distinguishing between formal and informal settings.

- **Section 3** investigates key challenges to opening sex work spaces, such as regulatory hurdles, financial barriers, safety concerns, spatial limitations, and cultural dynamics.
- **Section 4** presents a simulation outlining core considerations for designing, planning, and managing commercial sex work spaces.

Through this, the report aims to provide grounded insights into the real-world prospects and limitations of implementing sex work spaces under Belgium's new legal framework.

METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a combination of methods including document review, in-depth interviews, comparative analysis, data collection, and spatial mapping.

- **Comparative analysis** was conducted at both the national and international levels. Within Belgium, we compared different sex work spaces, policies, and operational realities across cities and regions.
- **Observations** included on-site visits and observations, participation in relevant events, and informal conversations with actors involved in or adjacent to the sex work sector.
- **Online research and mapping** allowed us to collect publically available information, including data from digital sex work platforms, which we visualized geographically to better understand spatial dynamics.
- The core of our methodology lies in a series of **in-depth interviews with key stakeholders** across multiple sectors. We spoke with municipal officials, professionals in banking and real estate, journalists with long-term engagement in sex work issues, and legal experts. These interviews offered valuable insights into the practical and structural challenges sex workers face today.
 - Most of UTSOPI's quotes were gathered in an interview with Daphné Davin.
- Finally, we developed a **simulation** based on interview findings, outlining key considerations for designing and implementing formal commercial sex work spaces under the current legal framework.



Disclaimer : While we have approached this topic with care and openness, as first-year Urban Studies students without personal ties to the sex work sector, we acknowledge the limitations of our outsider perspectives and the possibility of unconscious bias.

What's decriminalisation ?

Here is an overview of the **evolution of the Belgian legal framework** and the meaning of decriminalisation.

BEFORE DECRIMINALISATION

Let's begin by taking a look at the legislation prior to 2022 in order to better understand its evolution.

Previously, **all third parties** providing services to sex workers (landlords, owners of rooms, bankers, lawyers, drivers,...) could be accused of **pimping** and were liable to prosecution. This meant self-employed sex workers were often denied services such as a space to work freely, financial or legal advice,... making it extremely difficult to open a mandatory professional bank account for instance.

A **policy of tolerance** was in place, meaning sex workers and clients weren't criminalised. The general approach was to **turn a blind eye** on the existence of the sex work in well-known and highly visible window districts. Since sex work was part of the penal code (before 2022), it was **easy to intervene in cases of abuse** or exploitation without needing to gather much evidence. However, the former legal framework was also an open door for other kinds of abuse: it didn't allow sex workers to demand minimum working conditions, or be employed legally in order to benefit from social rights (sick leave, unemployment, retirement or maternity leave).

THE DECRIMINALISED CONTEXT

➡ So where does Belgian law currently stand on the matter ?

Here is a summary of the decriminalization of third parties in 2022 and the new labour law of 2024.

DECRIMINALISATION (2022)^[1]

On 18th March 2022, the reform of sexual criminal law was passed by the Belgian parliament and went into effect on 1st June of that same year. This represents the first step to ensure additional protection and equal rights for sex workers in Belgium.

Decriminalisation means that **“pimping” has been narrowed down** to situations where someone is obtaining **“abnormal (economic) benefit”** through the organisation or promotion of prostitution. This includes paying sex workers abnormally poorly, cutting costs by employing them in unhealthy workplaces, or charging abnormally for accounting or legal fees. It is also prohibited to prevent someone from leaving prostitution, or make it more difficult for them to do so.

Cases of coercion count as human trafficking and are prosecuted by another article in Belgian criminal law (Article 433 quinquies of the Penal Code).^[2]

LABOUR LAW (2024)^[3]

After two years of intense lobbying by UTSOPI, Violet^[4] and Espace P^[5], the Belgian Parliament approved a new labour law allowing sex workers to work under contract as employees on **3rd May 2024**.

➡ What does it imply for SEX WORKERS ?

The labour law provides access to a **bundle of rights** tied to **social security** (pension, health care, unemployment maternity leave, annual vacation,...) as well as additional **labour protections**.

These include the following freedoms :

1. Right to refuse a client
2. Right to refuse a sexual act
3. Right to interrupt a sexual act at any time
4. Right to perform a sexual act in the manner they wish
5. Right to refuse to be behind a window or advertise, if it can be a danger to their safety

Sex workers are also **entitled to end their contract** at any time while keeping their right to unemployment.

Moreover, the law allows for **anonymity** as employees are able to work under **hotel-restaurant-cafe (HORECA) contracts** that do not mention sex work. These contracts were already used prior to decriminalisation by managers as a way to avoid prosecution for pimping, and also allowed sex workers to benefit from some social welfare rights. However, this legal ambiguity also creates complications as the following quote illustrates:

“Some are already employed, but with contracts that do not correspond to the reality of their work. They do sex work, not waitresses, which discourages them from going to court if there is a problem.” - Julie, Espace P Liège^[6]

➡ What does it imply for EMPLOYERS ?

Next to these rights protecting sex workers, there are also **obligations for employers** and **limitations to who can employ sex workers** based on passed convictions for a series of crimes (fraud, kidnapping, voyeurism, sexual assault,...).

The law includes a list of measures to ensure safety during sexual practices : each room must be equipped with an **alarm button** (or a mobile one) which is connected to a **reference person** who must be available at all times. Additionally, sex worker support **organisations** must always be **allowed access** to the workplace.



More details on safety measures will be addressed in page 33.

➡ What are the LIMITATIONS of these laws ?

Despite being a huge step towards the elimination of exploitation, the new labour law has its **limitations** and risks. For instance, it **does not include self-employed people** in freelance, students, nor people working in the sectors of porn, webcam or stripteasing.

This means **many people fall out of its scope**, and the new law will not protect them unless they are working to provide physical sexual contact under a contract with an employer. It also raises important questions concerning sex workers **without a work status or legal residence** in Belgium, who are often more vulnerable due to their precarious administrative status.

“Decriminalisation technically applies to everyone, but undocumented workers can’t work under contract or register as self-employed. So while it removes one layer of criminalisation, it doesn’t solve the problems they face.” - UTSOPI

Moreover, though decriminalisation and the new labour law represent a huge step for sex workers’ rights in Belgium, they can also be **instrumentalised to reduce or eliminate sex work** in urban areas.

Despite these legal advancements, **many challenges remain** to open formal and safe sex work spaces remain due to complex administrative procedures and restrictive **local regulations**.



Such challenges will be covered in pages 25-38 (section 3).

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE ?

FEDERAL LAW

Since the 2022 reform, decriminalisation’s capacity to reduce exploitation and increase safety in the sex work sector has been questioned in the media and by some abolitionist^[7] organisations.

"It's honestly too soon to know the full impact of decriminalisation. It takes a long time for legal reforms like this to show clear, measurable effects." - UTSOPI

However, we can **assess decriminalisation's importance** with the following arguments :

1. Large organizations such as UNAIDS^[8] have supported decriminalisation as a way to reduce risks related to HIV transmission and improve general health and safety for sex workers.
2. Groups fighting human trafficking also argue that decriminalisation is an effective way to combat exploitation. However, many victims are still invisible due to a lack of trust in the system.
3. Even beyond health or security arguments, being legally recognized is a huge psychological and symbolic shift. It lets people feel part of society.

"Decriminalisation helps shift the focus from criminalizing sex workers to actually protecting them." - UTSOPI

In short, despite the difficulty to assess the direct impact of decriminalisation, Belgium can be considered a **pioneer and international example** in the recognition of sex workers' rights and freedoms.

LOCAL REGULATIONS

That being said, to work towards a better future for sex work and safer sex work spaces in particular, it is important to take a closer look at local regulations. In Belgium, most municipal regulations use **stigmatising language** and tend to set the **focus on fear and control** rather than protection. They need updating in substance and form in order to align with the current federal legislation.

These changes could participate towards preventing discrimination and the forced elimination of visible sex work or its **isolation in the outskirts of cities**. Such exclusion often leads to increasing **precarious conditions** for sex workers and increased difficulties for organisations and legal structures to provide support to those most at risk.

Just over three years after decriminalisation, organisations advocating for sex workers' rights agree on one thing : **The fight must go on.**

"Decriminalisation is a big deal, but it's only one part of the puzzle. We also need access to more opportunities for workplaces, safe reporting for undocumented sex workers, and an end to the stigma that follows sex workers everywhere." - UTSOPI

2. Sex work spaces in Belgium

Disclaimer : all spaces don't welcome all types of sex workers

Before diving into the topic of sex work spaces, it is important to acknowledge that **not all spaces are welcoming or suited to the full diversity of sex workers**. The vast **diversity** within the sex work community, in terms of legal status, socio-economic precarity, cultural and linguistic background, reasons for engaging in sex work, and access to technology, means that **no single model of space can meet all needs**. Choices must inevitably be made about whom a space is designed to serve, and in doing so, some groups may be excluded. And in the process, some groups may be left out. Recognising these **limitations** is not a dismissal of efforts to create inclusive spaces, but a necessary first step towards addressing their complexity with honesty and care.

The variety of formal & informal sex work spaces

The following section aims to illustrate the variety of sex work spaces which can be found in Belgium. This is a selection of the more common and well-known sex work spaces and does not aim to be exhaustive, as the nature of such spaces is **highly diverse and constantly evolving**.

Fundamentally, sex work spaces can be divided into two categories : **formal and informal spaces**. Formality can be a blurry concept and such typologies are never 100% exact. However, one can look at **whether a space has been officially created or designed for as a sex work space** or if it serves other functions. In this sense :

- **Formal** spaces are used for sex work as their main function and can range from highly visible erotic businesses to discrete locations.
- **Informal** spaces serve a different primary function and usually aren't officially intended for sex work practices.

FORMAL SPACES

Champagne Bars

Hospitality venues where clients buy expensive drinks (especially champagne) to spend time with hostesses, who may offer sexual services after negotiation.

Massage Parlours

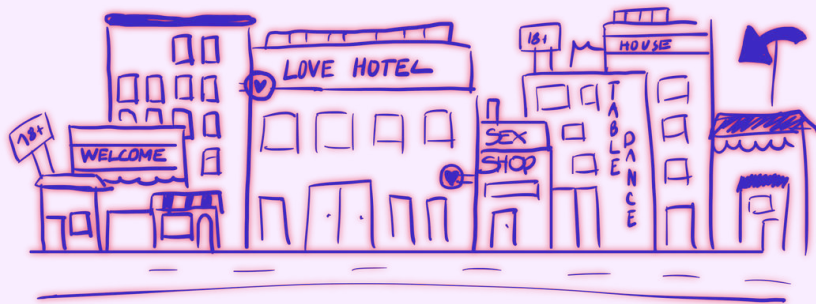
Offering massages with the (often expected) possibility of sexual services.

Peep Shows

Clients pay for visual sexual entertainment (live shows behind glass) – sometimes interactive, occasionally with sexual services available.

Love Hotels

Short-stay hotels where rooms are rented by the hour for discreet sexual encounters.



Windows

Sex workers display themselves behind windows which they rent from a manager in specific districts.

Carrées

Standardised, small window units located in (officially) residential streets/ alleys. Similar to window prostitution but sex workers rent directly from the property owners.

Erotic Clubs

Nightlife venues combining social interaction (bar, dance, sometimes striptease) with the possibility of sexual services in private rooms.

INFORMAL SPACES

Private homes

Sex work happens directly at the sex worker's or the client's residence (home-based prostitution). Often regular clients or pre-arranged appointments (online, phone).

Classic hotels & hostels

Temporary rented rooms used for sex work, either booked by the sex worker or client. Sometimes associated with escorting.



Short-term rentals

Temporary rentals (days or weeks) used for sex work – sometimes referred to as “escort apartments” but very informal. Popular for touring sex workers (travelling between cities).

Street & public space

Public space is used to make contact with clients and sometimes to perform sexual practices (parking spaces,...).

To all these, one could add **virtual spaces** which aren't linked to a physical space, but the home often equals the workplace (cam work, selling erotic content like photos or videos, OnlyFans-style platforms). The internet is also used as an **advertising tool** for planning encounters in (formal or informal) physical spaces depending on the client and sex worker's decision.



The topic of online advertising will be addressed on page 21.

To better grasp such diversity, a comparison of different sex work spaces and a classification in terms of visibility will follow.

COMPARING DIFFERENT SPACES

Here are two tables providing some extra information on each type of space such as the predominant **meeting mode** between clients and sex workers, some **common spatial** characteristics and an example of where they can be found in Belgium.

Informal Spaces

Type of space	Predominant meeting mode	Common spatial characteristics	Geographic example
Private homes	Pre-booked	Single-room/home-based	Everywhere
Classic hotels & hostels	Pre-booked or spontaneous	Standard hotel rooms	Everywhere – especially big cities
Short-term rentals	Pre-booked	Temporary apartments (1-3 rooms)	Everywhere – especially big cities
Online-based / virtual spaces	Online platforms	Home-based or studio-setups	Everywhere
Street & public space	On-site, in public space (street, parks, stations, parking lots)	No fixed location; can be in public space or relocated into more invisible spaces like private homes, a car or a hotel	Yser/Alhambra quarter in the City of Brussels

Formal Spaces

Type of space	Predominant meeting mode	Common spatial characteristics	Geographic example
Champagne Bars	On-site	Bar area + private rooms (2-5)	between Brussel and Leuven (Staatsbaan in Bekkevoort)
Massage Parlours	On-site (or pre-booked)	Massage cabins, private rooms (2-6)	Antwerpen's Chinatown or Ixelles in Brussels
Love hotels	Pre-booked or spontaneous	Standard hotel rooms	European Quarter (Brussels)
Windows	On-site (walk-in)	Single-room display windows, mostly concentrated in Red-light districts	Antwerpen (Schipperkwartie), Brussels (Rue d'Aerschot)
Carrées	On-site (walk-in)	Series of small rooms along a street (with a window), mostly concentrated in Red-light districts	Schaarbeek & Saint-Josse (Rue de Linné, Rue des Plantes), Liège (Rue Varin)
Erotic clubs	On-site	Bar, lounge, private rooms (3-10)	Charleroi area, Brussels periphery (Zaventem)
Peep shows / sex cinemas	Walk-in	Viewing cabins, stage, small rooms	Antwerpen Schipperkwartier

VISIBILITY IN PUBLIC SPACE

The following axis aims to show **how spaces can vary in terms of visibility** ranging from complete invisibility to being extremely visible in public space.



MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

When dealing with sex work spaces one can look not only at the degree of visibility but also at their management. Sex work spaces can vary widely in terms of how they are managed and organised. There is a huge **spectrum of management structures**, ranging from strong third-party control to full independence. It is important to treat this aspect critically and understand that **management models are not inherently good or bad** - they come with trade-offs that affect workers differently.

For example, while fully independent models may offer greater autonomy and control, they also place the full burden of administration, client acquisition, and safety on the individual. Conversely, spaces with stronger third-party management may reduce these logistical pressures but can come with reduced autonomy and a higher risk of exploitation or dependency.

The type of management structure is closely tied to workers' preferences, needs, and circumstances.

What might be empowering for one person can be a burden for another. As such, any policy or urban planning initiative should **account for this diversity** and avoid assuming a single "ideal" model of organising sex work spaces.



What can we learn from this ?

Sex work is extremely diverse !

There's a need for a wide variety of spaces to respond to these different practices !

As mentioned earlier, some of the spaces which have been illustrated are being increasingly **pushed out** to the outskirts of cities and industrial areas. Others are being **gradually shut down** which leads sex workers to seek alternative spaces to work, and often accompanied by an **increase in unsafety**.

It is also noticed that when places are shut down and pushed out, communities are torn apart and some sex workers become **harder to reach** for organisations aiming to provide them with health and legal services.

This section explored some geographical examples of where these various spaces may be located in Belgium. Now, the following section will look at the broader Belgian context and the trajectories of 4 major cities.

Sketching sex work in Belgian cities

For five decades leading up to the decriminalisation of prostitution in 2022, Belgium's approach to sex work was marked by contradiction: **tacit tolerance without legal recognition**, and fragmented local experimentation in the absence of a coherent national policy. This patchwork system produced stark **regional disparities**, as cities like Antwerpen and Oostende developed distinct governance models shaped by their own urban geographies, political priorities, and moral climates.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, approaches to sex work in Belgium have become increasingly divergent. Municipal governments have commonly pursued goals such as **relocating sex work away from city centers and banning street prostitution** altogether. These "clean-up" strategies, while often implemented at the local level, have triggered a series of knock-on effects: local policies frequently evolve in isolation, giving rise to unintended spillovers—such as the **displacement** of sex workers to neighboring municipalities.

The 2022 national decriminalisation of sex work marked a significant turning point in legal recognition. However, decades of policy fragmentation continue to shape the **uneven and locally contingent landscape** of sex work governance across Belgium.

Oostende

In Ostend, the city launched the *“Hangar d’Amour”* project in 2018 to transform a historic port warehouse into a **purpose-built center for sex work**, supporting the closure of the red-light district in Hazegras. Scheduled to open in 2025, the 36-room facility aims to offer a safe, legal, and regulated workspace for sex workers.

Notably, **sex workers were actively involved** in the design process—consulted on everything from room colors to mattress thickness—ensuring the space meets their needs while aligning with a broader plan for **urban renewal** in Hazegras.

Antwerpen’s 1998 Prostitution Policy Plan transformed its red-light district into a showcase of neo-regulation. The municipality tried to **reduce crime and boost property values** by strictly confining window prostitution to three streets (Verversrui, Vingerlingstraat, Schippersstraat) and investing in sanitation, security, and health services. The city’s approach was hailed as a model of **urban renewal**, but it came at a cost. Hundreds of sex workers were displaced, and some advocacy groups criticized the policy for prioritizing gentrification over labor rights.

Closely linked to the broader wave of urban “clean-up” initiatives at the turn of the 21st century, **Villa Tinto**, a purpose-built infrastructure developed in collaboration with city authorities, officially opened in 2005. It began with an idea of a real estate developer to construct a modern facility for sex work. Located in the Schipperskwartier red-light district, Villa Tinto comprises 51 high-security rooms, each equipped with biometric access and on-site police presence, and standardized health and safety protocols.

According to media reports from 2023, Villa Tinto sees an average of **80 sex workers and clients per day**. The rental of all rooms is managed by a couple who oversee the daily operations of the facility.

Antwerpen

Liège & Seraing

Liège, once home to one of Belgium’s most prominent red-light districts—particularly around Rue Varin and Rue du Champion—underwent a major shift in its approach to sex work in 2009. That year, the municipal government shut down all window-based prostitution venues, citing concerns over urban renewal and public order.

The closures forced an estimated 180 sex workers to relocate to the neighboring town of Seraing (Rue Marnix), placing significant pressure on its local infrastructure. In 2015, Liège proposed the establishment of a modern **Eros Center** in the city center as a safe and regulated alternative. However, the plan was ultimately **abandoned**, largely due to political resistance and public controversy. A similar initiative in **Seraing** also failed to materialize.

Brussels

In Brussels, the trajectory of sex work regulation and spatial organization has been marked by **fragmentation, neglect, and increasing marginalization**. Unlike cities such as Antwerpen, Brussels never implemented a comprehensive policy framework for sex work. Instead, individual municipalities make their own decisions, often without coordination.

This is especially evident in the three communes with visible sex work activity—**Saint-Josse, City of Brussels, and Schaerbeek**—each of which has adopted a **distinct strategy** in response to local pressures, political leadership, and public perception.

As a result, it is misleading to speak of “Brussels” as a single regulatory entity. In practice, **overlapping urban zones**—such as those surrounding the North Station—fall under different municipal authorities, creating contradictions in how space is managed and sex workers are treated. Scholars have described this patchwork as one of **“unregulated tolerance,”** where the absence of a coherent regional policy leads to both neglect and selective repression. There were also discussions about establishing an Eros Center in Brussels, modeled after other cities’ regulated facilities, but the plan was never realized.

The geography of sex work in Brussels has **shifted dramatically since the 1970s**. Once-visible areas such as Rue de Stassart, Rue Fontainas, and Avenue Louise have almost disappeared from the sex work map. This growing invisibility has pushed some sex workers into more **precarious and less protected environments**—both spatially and socially.



What can we learn from this ?

Local urban policy plays an important role !

Decriminalisation has created new legal possibilities, but without strong political support and coordinated urban policy, **access to safe and stable sex work spaces remains limited**. Projects like **Villa Tinto** demonstrate what is possible when municipalities invest in dedicated infrastructure. Still, as scholars and interviewees from frontlines pointed out, such models can also be strict and exclusionary, reflecting municipalities' more repressive approach that limits access for many sex workers.

Opening a legal workspace remains extremely challenging for individual workers due to regulatory, financial, and social barriers. However, there is **value in maintaining mixed-use neighborhoods** where sex work can coexist alongside other urban life. Rather than relying solely on isolated, tightly controlled zones, preserving diverse and inclusive districts may offer a more flexible and equitable path forward.

Digitalisation is also reshaping the sex work landscape in Belgian cities, bringing new forms of flexibility but also new exclusions, possibly further complicating efforts to ensure safety, access, and recognition for all sex workers.

Online advertising platforms

The **COVID-19 pandemic** dramatically accelerated the digitisation of Belgium's sex work industry. While street-based and window prostitution collapsed during lockdowns in 2020, many sex workers shifted to **online platforms**—such as escort websites, webcam services, and encrypted messaging apps—as both a **survival strategy and a new mode of autonomy**. This digital turn had already begun prior to the pandemic, but the crisis made it near-essential, especially for undocumented and freelance workers excluded from state aid.

The shift brought **benefits**, including greater control and client screening, but also introduced **new vulnerabilities**: online harassment, data leaks, algorithmic exploitation, and exclusion of less tech-savvy workers. As digital platforms expands, the sector may be growing increasingly fragmented and unequal.

MAPPING THE CONCENTRATION OF SEX WORK ADVERTISEMENTS IN BRUSSELS

Beyond enabling the digitalisation of certain sex work practices, the internet also serves as a key tool for advertising and **arranging meetings** ahead of in-person encounters. The shifts brought about by digitalisation are not confined to online spaces—they inevitably **take shape in the urban landscape** as well.

Therefore, in order to better understand the post-pandemic geography and configuration of sex work in Belgium—especially in Brussels—data was collected and analysed from one of the country's most prominent online platforms: **quartier-rouge.be**. While widely recognized as a site for sex work advertisements, the platform also caters to individuals seeking sexual partners or alternative relationship dynamics, making it a broader space of sexual commerce and connection. This website hosts thousands of active ads and provides a near-comprehensive overview of the online sex work landscape.

The collected data included location, name, age, and nationality (where available), as well as the **service category** under which each ad was listed. These categories are not user-generated but are selected from predefined options offered by the platform. There are four main categories :

1. **Privé** : *privé*, meaning "private" in French, refers to services provided in places organized and controlled by the worker.
2. **Escort** : Implies mobile services, where the worker travels to meet the client in external locations such as hotels or private residences.
3. **Massage**: Suggests service-oriented interactions, often in massage parlours or studios, though sometimes also offered in private residences.
4. **Libertines**: Indicates participation in a particular relationship style or sexual dynamic, rather than a specific work setting. Because this category centers on personal dynamics rather than a professional service context, it was **excluded from the spatial mapping analysis**.

The key distinction between Escort and Privé lies in commuting patterns and agency over location: Escort work involves mobility and client-chosen settings, whereas Privé allows the worker to define and control the workspace. In practice, it is noticeable that **distinction between categories remains unclear** to many of the platform's users.

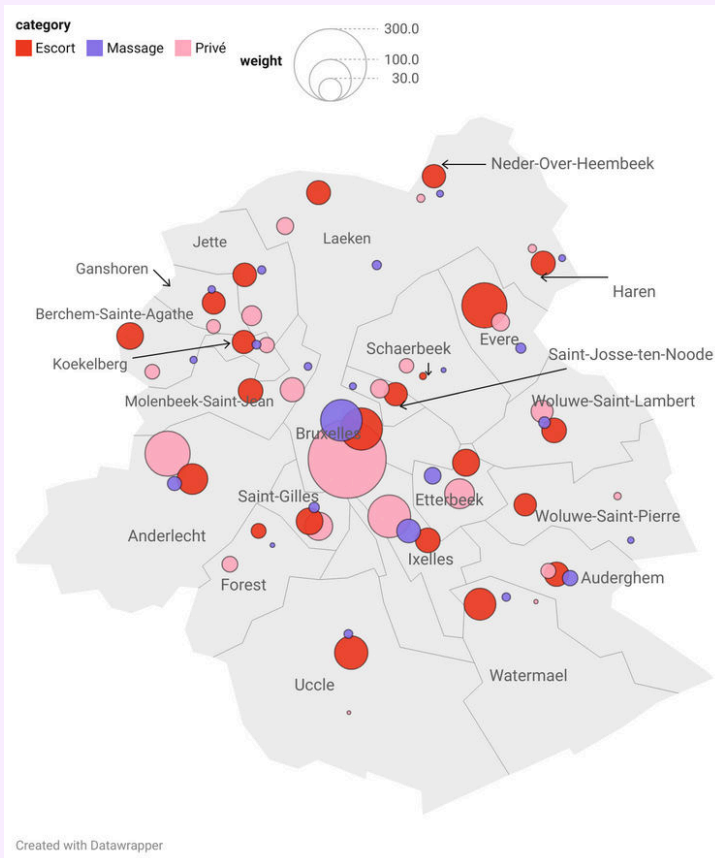
Unlike the sex work spaces we previously covered, the distinctions between *Privé*, *Escort* and *Massage* are mainly based on the **type of service**, but they demonstrate the **flexibility of spatial organisation** in contemporary web-driven sex work services.

Through a process of **data collection, cleaning (including deduplication), and weighting**, 1843 valid profiles were gathered and generated a distribution map reflecting the relative activity levels of each category across the **municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region**.



Interested in learning more about these methods and how data was collected ? Turn to the notes on page 66 for a more detailed overview. ^[9]

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF ONLINE SEX WORK ADVERTISEMENTS IN BRUSSELS (BCR)



This map shows the **distribution of online ads across Brussels**, with bubble size indicating the number of profiles per commune and color corresponding to service type. The spatial pattern highlights the **diversification and decentralisation** of sex work in the digital age, extending far beyond traditional red-light zones into residential and peripheral areas.

During data collection, a pricing difference was observed: for the same sex workers, **Escort services were typically 1.5 to 2 times more expensive than Privé**, likely due to travel requirements, time flexibility, and added privacy.

Among the 311 profiles analysed, ages ranged from 19 to over 60, with over half (approximately 52%) belonging to individuals aged 30 and above. The most represented nationalities were Belgian (129 profiles), Brazilian (37), other Latin American (21), and Romanian (20).^[10]



Bias and limitations : This analysis reflects only a snapshot of the online sex work landscape and comes with several limitations. First, due to the **mobility** of sex workers and the possibility of multiple profiles across locations, some duplication may persist despite data cleaning and weighting. Second, as precise addresses are not disclosed, the **geographic data is approximate** and best interpreted as indicative rather than exact—especially considering that some sex workers may lack detailed knowledge of Brussels' geography and may select locations based on visibility rather than accuracy. . Finally, given the high **turnover** of online ads, a one-month collection period cannot fully capture the constantly shifting nature of the sector.



What can we learn from this ?

Sex work is everywhere and won't disappear !

There is a need for adapted spaces which respond to this sector.

The digital footprint of sex work in Brussels reveals a **diffuse and flexible spatial reality**. Far from being limited to traditional red-light districts, sex work now spans private apartments, mobile escort services, and hybrid massage spaces across the entire city. **The digital turn has redefined both how and where sex work happens.**

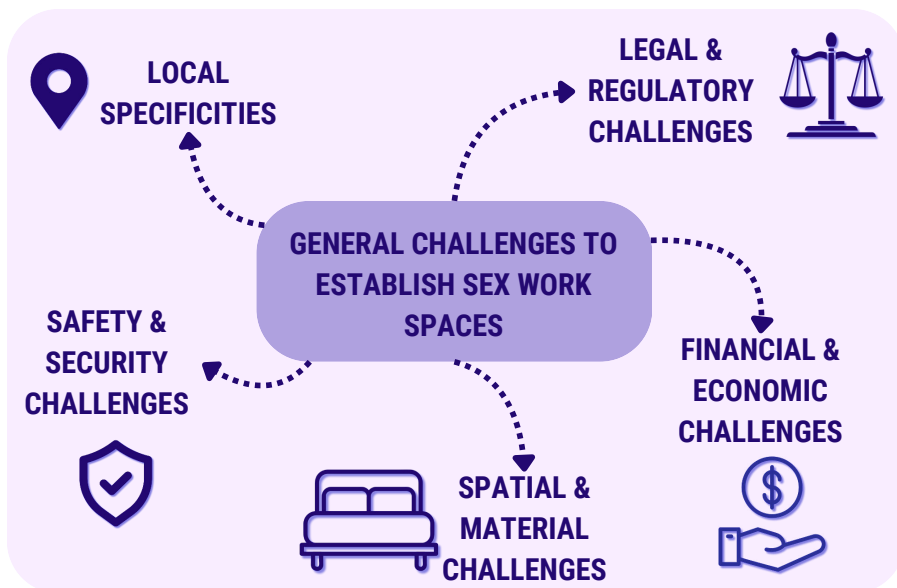
This suggests to another observation: sex work continues to be a part of everyday urban life in Brussels – and is not limited to the neighborhoods where sex work is visible. While the dense red-light districts of the past and the Carrées aggregating along highways have faded, the digital age has introduced new ways for sex workers to connect and organise. These shifts invite urban planners to **reconsider how cities can respond to the evolving realities of the sector.**

3. General challenges for sex work spaces

Naturally, one might think that since sex work has been decriminalised, access to formal sex work spaces would have become easier. Well... that's not exactly the current reality and there are **many remaining challenges**.

More generally, these challenges can often apply to a broader universal context where sex work is considered at the **margins of mainstream society**, stigmatised, and never fully recognised as work.

This section will go through **5 main challenges** which can arise when attempting to establish a sex work space. Keep in mind that they are all tightly tied to each other and represent a complex web of interacting barriers.



1) Legal & regulatory

This section aims to give a rough overview of the **complexity of varying regulations** one could encounter when attempting to open a space dedicated to sex work.

"That's part of the reason so many spaces remain informal—it's almost impossible to open new legal ones." - UTSOPI

ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS

Even in a decriminalised context, **laws and regulations can often be very complex and difficult to navigate** : commercial regulations, taxes, labour rights, work permits,...

These **procedures aren't accessible** for all sex workers due to financial constraints, language barriers, lack of legal documents,...

"Some sex workers actually want to pay taxes and access social protections, but the administrative burden is massive. You have to be self-employed, speak the language, fill out forms, understand tax codes—and a lot of people just don't have the tools or resources for that." - UTSOPI

Undocumented sex workers or those in precarious administrative situations are particularly vulnerable to accessing **safer work environments** or specific services. That being said, decriminalization is still a big step since undocumented sex workers cannot be charged with prostitution-related crimes.

LOCAL REGULATIONS

As mentioned earlier, even in this decriminalised context, **local regulations** tend to be the first emerging difficulty when attempting to open a formal sex work space. In most municipalities, having visible sex work spaces is simply not allowed and in others, it is strictly regulated.

"You have to have the agreement of the local authorities to open a sex work space" - Interview shared by UTSOPI

In municipalities where sex work is visible, local regulations tend to limit sex work spaces to **specific addresses** where it already exists. It is virtually impossible to create new visible spaces.

- Example : Schaarbeek's *Règlement de police relatif à la prostitution en vitrine* ^[11] limits visible sex work to these addresses :
 - Windows are limited to : "Rue d'Aerschot, numéros 12, 30, 36, 40, 42, 44, 46, 50, 52, 64, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 82, 98, 100, 102, 114, 116, 118, 122, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134, 136, 138, 140, 142, 144, 152, 154, 156, 158, 164, 168, 170, 172, 180, 184, 190, 192, 194, 196, 198, 200, 202, 204, 206, 210, 212, 214, 218."
 - Carrées are limited to : "Rue des Plantes, numéros 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 113, 114, 115, 117, 119, 121, 122, 139. Rue Linné, numéros 103, 105, 107, 109, 111, 113, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134, 136, 138."

In some municipalities, if a place closes down, it can't be reopened. This tends to cause the gradual elimination of sex work spaces in urban centres - especially windows and carrées which are highly visible.

In areas affected by street prostitution, sex work is often described as the leading cause for decreasing quality of life in the neighborhood and enters in conflict with residents.

It is important to note that **local regulations related to the sex work sector aren't implemented at random**. They are often linked to broader urban development plans, gentrification dynamics, and impacted by questions of morality and cultural stigma related to sex work in each territory. Above all, **politicians and local administrations** have a high degree of manoeuvre and their support or distrust is a key element in how sex work is regulated.

 Such local and cultural specificities will be further detailed in page 35.

WHAT ABOUT INFORMALITY ?

Finally, when addressing this topic, it is also important to note that even with decriminalisation, **most people in the sector are still working informally**. Sometimes it's out of necessity, but it could also be a choice.

"[In the sex work sector] you've got people who've been marginalized their whole lives—because they're queer, neurodivergent, migrants, or don't fit into the standard workforce—and they see sex work as a way to survive without being crushed by a system that doesn't include them." - UTSOPI

However, working in informal or illegal conditions (in a non-authorised space for instance) can become extremely heavy for the mental health of workers. Therefore, it is important to offer possibilities and **supporting structures** for those who wish to work in formal spaces and access social welfare to do so.

2) Financial & economic

Opening a sex work space comes with significant financial challenges. Income for sex workers is often **unpredictable** making budgeting and long-term financial planning extremely difficult. As the following quote illustrates:

***"Financially, it's tough too. Income in sex work is unpredictable. One month might be good, the next not. It makes planning and budgeting really hard."** - UTSOPI*

This financial instability creates major obstacles when trying to secure stable workspaces. On top of this, due to the **heavy stigmatisation** of the sex work industry and the need for financial institutions to manage reputational risk shaped by broader societal attitudes, many sex workers face significant struggles in accessing banking and financial services.

OCCUPATIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Even though with the amendment of **decriminalisation in 2022**, there is no legal objection anymore to provide financial services to sex workers, the reality often looks different. A lot of sex workers still experience **occupational discrimination** when getting into touch with Belgian Banks.

***"Banks often assume there's something shady going on—like money laundering — when it comes to sex work. Even getting a basic bank account can be a problem. Many sex workers are denied accounts, loans, or financial services just because of the nature of their work"** - UTSOPI*

An online survey conducted from December 2023 until February 2024 by Violet, UTSOPI and Espace P^[12] revealed that in many cases where sexworkers wanted to open a bank account, they were refused, or their already existing accounts were getting randomly blocked at one point. To give some numbers, around **10%** of the respondents were refused to open a bank account, pointing out that this is certainly an **underestimate** as in many cases sex workers do not even try to open a bank account because they are afraid of reactions they could face. This fear is certainly justified as respondents of the survey reported on negative feedback or **outright refusal when communicating their occupation with bank employees**. This results in the fact that **85%** of the respondents who have a Belgian Bank account do not communicate their activity in the sex work sector with the bank.

***"Denying a sex worker a bank account because of their profession is discrimination"** - UTSOPI Starter Guide 2025*

CASH & SEX WORK

However, as Banks are considered as private companies, they have the ability to refuse clients without providing adequate justification which makes it rather difficult to differentiate the real reasons for the denial. In the cases where a justification for a refusal or a blocking of a bank account was provided, it was mostly related to suspicious transactions like excessive cash deposits, lack of proof of income or employment contract or questions about the origin of the funds. This cautious approach is largely driven by the obligations placed on financial institutions under the European Union's Anti-Money Laundering (AML) Directives. One aspect that must be considered at this point, is the fact that **cash is the most frequent payment method used within the sex work sector**. Both the sex workers as well as the clients can benefit from this form of financial transaction as it secures a certain degree of anonymity by not having to disclose personal information.

Conversations with some Belgian Banks revealed that many no longer even provide cash handling services, creating significant barriers for sex workers in accessing adequate financial services. Without the ability to manage cash deposits or withdrawals through traditional banking channels, sex workers face higher financial insecurity. This **lack of access** not only complicates their ability to manage earnings but also reinforces their marginalization by limiting opportunities for financial stability and **formal economic participation**. For many sex workers, the desire to access financial services is tied to a broader longing for social inclusion and recognition as Daphné Davin poignantly put it:

"Like, suddenly you want to pay taxes—not because it's fun, but because being excluded your whole life makes you crave inclusion in things others take for granted" - UTSOPI

It should thus be considered by Bank institutions that cash deposits function as a necessary payment option in the sex work sector and **accusations of money laundering should be restrained**.

LOANS

Another challenge sex workers could encounter when trying to open their own workspaces is that some banks do not offer **loans** below a certain amount. In some cases, the **minimum loan size** can get so high (reaching into the millions) that it becomes inaccessible for small businesses operated by sex workers or individuals. As a result, it gets very difficult to secure smaller-scale financing which sex workers would need to establish or maintain a workspace. On top of that, the difficulty to be able to **prove a fixed and reliable income** remains one of the biggest constraints in accessing loans.

THE COST OF EXCLUSION

Not having the possibility to access banking services causes many problems and consequences for sex workers. It **limits their personal freedom** and holds great restrictions for work opportunities, especially when the aim is to establish sex working spaces. Subsequently, sex workers could become dependent on others, which can be followed by a **loss of agency and the risk of falling victim to abuse and exploitation**.

Access and own control to banking and financial services is **essential for sex worker's financial security, safety, and social inclusion**. It enables them to manage their earnings, save for the future, and reduce the risks of exploitation. Since the decriminalisation, by the Belgian Law, sex work is recognised as work and should thus be treated as such.

3) Spatial & material

The **physical environment** of sex work spaces plays a crucial role in ensuring safety, autonomy and well-being of sex workers. Beyond mere functionality, the **design and equipment of these spaces directly impact working conditions, privacy, health, and security aspects**. In the context of Belgium's recent decriminalization of sex work, the ability to create professional, safe, and comfortable work environments has become an opportunity but also a key challenge.

"What's crucial is the question of space and accessibility to the areas in which we work" - Interviews shared by UTSOPI

FINDING A SPACE

The first emerging challenge is finding an adapted space whether it's for rental or purchase. So many things have to be considered. **Landowners being legally allowed to rent their properties to sex workers doesn't make them immediately inclined or in capacity to do so**. There are other structural and moral elements to be taken into account as well as tax increases linked to the commercial use of a space.

"If you're renting, the landlord has to agree. And that's often where discrimination kicks in." - UTSOPI

“If you own the place, you’re better off, but you’ll still need to pay higher taxes and make sure the space meets health and safety regulations—like a certain number of square meters per room, soundproofing, etc.” - UTSOPI

DIVERSE SPATIAL NEEDS

Sex work spaces can serve a wide range of purposes, each with its own set of requirements. For instance, an independent sex worker operating from an informal space may prioritize **discretion, privacy, and ease of access for clients**. In contrast, more formal spaces like for example a cooperative brothel or a self-managed workspace might need **multiple rooms, common areas, and facilities that support collective decision-making, mutual support and exchange among workers**.

When discussing the spatial needs for sex work spaces, it becomes clear that **having access to adequate, safe, and functional infrastructure and equipment is crucial**. As one sex worker emphasized, it is not only about having a place to work, but especially about **ensuring that the environment meets basic standards of comfort and dignity**:

“Being able to have places that are also big enough to work in, places that aren’t chicken cages, and then having the basics on site. Like a washing machine, a tumble dryer, being able to store your things safely, having a place to rest when you’re not working, things like that ” - Interviews shared by UTSOPI

HEALTH & HYGIENE

Health and hygiene considerations can also vary but **should always be treated as a top priority**: sex work spaces need to be equipped with **sanitary facilities or showers**. There should be **easy-to-clean surfaces** and **proper ventilation**. Spaces may require dedicated areas for **sterilizing equipment, washing machines and dryers** or proper **waste disposal opportunities**.

SPECIFIC EQUIPMENT

Some sex workers may offer services that require **specific equipment** such as **massage tables, BDSM furniture, or accessible features for clients with disabilities**. Others might prioritize a very simple but welcoming and relaxing atmosphere, **using design elements to create a sense of comfort**.

Moreover, with the rise of online and digital sex work, the requirements for workspaces have also evolved, **shifting from traditional physical spaces to include dedicated areas equipped for content creation and live streaming**. This could include professional filming and lighting equipment and microphones, reliable internet connection but also secure storage solutions for sensitive files and personal data. Phone sex or sexting services might be less spatially demanding but would also benefit from a quiet, comfortable, and private workspace.

ADAPTABILITY & FLEXIBILITY

As can be seen, the diversity of sex work practices makes it impossible to apply a one-size-fits-all model when it comes to workspaces. Many sex workers offer a combination of services, which allows the switching between physical and virtual work. That is the reason why there is a **need for adaptable and flexible environments** that are specifically tailored to the services offered and the individual needs and preferences of sex workers, while consistently upholding **essential standards of safety, privacy, and hygiene**.

Another fundamental consideration in the spatial design and material setup of sex work spaces are **safety and security features** like panic buttons, surveillance cameras or lightning design.

 The topic of safety & security will be more closely elaborated on page 33.

While this section attempted to outline core spatial and material considerations necessary for the establishment, furnishing or selection of sex work spaces, it is important to recognize that **there is no universal template** for what a sex work space should look like. The diversity of sex work practices mentioned in previous sections and the services offered as well as individual or collective preferences requires **flexible and adaptable approaches** to both space selection and design and furnishing of spaces.

However, one thing can be said for sure: before starting to look for a suitable working place, it is essential to first **define the intended use of the space**, the working practices, and the needs and preferences of those who will use it.

4) Safety & security

When discussing sex work, “safety” is often narrowly defined through the lens of legal frameworks or law enforcement protocols. Yet for sex workers themselves, safety encompasses far more than just protection from physical violence. It is rooted in the realities of everyday life— **to work under predictable conditions, to be treated with social respect, and to exercise control in interactions with police, landlords, and clients.**^[13]

As recent studies and testimonies reveal, true safety is not merely the absence of harm but the presence of **stability, dignity, and autonomy**. It is the assurance that one can work without fear—not only of attack, but of eviction, exposure, or institutional betrayal.

While legal reforms in Belgium have made headlines in recent years, **everyday safety for sex workers remains far from guaranteed**. A deeper look reveals that formal recognition alone cannot undo years of marginalisation, nor can it fully address the intersecting threats that many sex workers continue to face.

STRUCTURAL & INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE

In 2018, Nigerian sex worker Eunice Osayande was murdered near Brussels North Station after enduring prolonged exploitation. The tragic event has had a lasting impact: protests were sparked, a street was named in her memory, and neighbourhoods gathered to commemorate.

Despite legal progress, violence against sex workers remains widespread. In Brussels' North Quarter, reports of **physical attacks, theft, and harassment** have increased, with UTSOPI warning on 17 December 2023 that some sex workers fear for their lives daily. Sex work has long been regarded as closely **linked to violence and drug use**. Municipalities like Schaerbeek, which host red-light districts, have considered night-time closures as a way to reduce such risks.

Whether online or offline, sex workers face persistent violations of **privacy and anonymity**. Online risks are well-documented, but similar threats exist in physical spaces as well. There have been cases of individuals filming sex workers without their consent and sharing footage on video platforms.

SPATIAL SAFETY & DESIGN

When designing formal spaces for sex work, safety is a key priority. In Antwerp's Villa Tinto, every detail—from **biometric entry** and ID scans to discreet room monitoring and emergency buttons—is aimed at reducing risk and ensuring quick response in case of danger. Shared corridors are under **CCTV surveillance**, not to monitor workers, but to signal to clients that they are never completely alone.

However, such systems also raise concerns. Academic and NGO voices caution that **surveillance tools**, while intended for safety, may undermine privacy and autonomy. Biometric data collection, for example, can reinforce control rather than empowerment if not handled with **transparency and consent**.

INFORMAL SAFETY STRATEGIES

The vast majority of sex workers operate in more fragmented, informal settings where the promise of protection is less assured.

An independent sex worker interviewed by UTSOPI shared the risks of working alone in a private, soundproofed apartment—while good for discretion, it poses safety concerns, as cries for help may go unheard. Though some **informal emergency support** exists, such as calling calling said “*strong guys*” for a fee, response times are slow and offer little immediate protection.

Despite legal reforms, **distrust of police** remains strong due to past criminalisation and harassment, making **panic buttons** and **institutional help** unappealing for some. Instead, sex workers rely on **informal networks**—like WhatsApp groups and private forums—to share warnings about dangerous clients. These peer-based safety systems, while essential, also operate in legal grey zones under Belgian privacy laws.

CARING, TRAINING, TRUST & LOCAL CHANGE

Beyond personal and peer-based strategies, many sex workers also rely on **NGOs and outreach workers** to fill critical safety gaps. These organisations provide not only emotional support and advocacy, but also practical tools for harm reduction—such as **clean syringes, safe sex supplies, STI testing, and basic healthcare services**. In this context, access to hygiene supplies, medical care, and **non-judgmental social support** is not just a health matter—it is a core component of safety and overall well-being.

True protection also requires **education, institutional reform, and trust-building**. UTSOPI is working to redefine safety—not just physically, but legally and socially—through targeted actions.

One key effort involves **training frontline professionals**, including **police and civil servants**, on the realities of sex work and the effects of decriminalisation. Some officers didn't even know sex work was legalised; others had to learn that acts like non-payment or stealthing (non-consensual removal of condoms) constitute sexual violence. These sessions aim to **turn law enforcement into allies rather than threats**.

In some municipalities, sex workers are still required to register and even have their tattoos photographed "in case they're found dead"—a practice some view as deeply dehumanising. Currently, UTSOPi is also developing a **"safe reporting" mechanism** that would allow undocumented sex workers to report abuse without fear of detention or deportation—crucial in areas like Brussels' North Quarter.

"Most sex workers don't trust the police. They think, 'Why report violence if I'll be the one locked up instead of my aggressor?'" - UTSOPi

Some **examples of trust-building** already exist on the ground. In Schaerbeek, for instance, police officers regularly visit red-light districts and have established a mutual relationship with sex workers. They are known to offer support when issues arise — even in cases involving undocumented status. However, such efforts also face challenges, particularly due to **linguistic barriers** which can prevent effective communication and deepen mistrust.

Still, there is a long way to go in building deeper understanding and ensuring sustained, open communication.

5) Local specificities

"There will always be someone who doesn't want to have whores around..."
- Interview shared by UTSOPi

The sentence above may sound harsh but it captures the essence of the issue quite well. As discussed in previous sections, the overall legal framework, along with regulations set by respective municipalities, plays a crucial role in determining whether and how commercial sex work spaces can be established in a specific **neighbourhood**.

In the case of Brussels, this becomes evident when looking at the two contrasting municipalities of **Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode**. Whilst Schaerbeek aims to proactively integrate sex work in the neighborhood and wish to ensure a positive coexistence between residents and sexworkers, Saint-Josse tends to favour more repressive and stricter approaches.

NEIGHBOURHOOD DYNAMICS & HISTORICAL EVOLUTIONS

In addition to that, on a local level, the characteristics of the **surrounding neighbourhood** in which sex work takes place can significantly influence both the implementation of such spaces and the daily experiences of sex workers. This can be often traced back to the ongoing **public stigmatisation** of this profession. Subsequently, establishing sex work spaces often encounters **resistance from local communities**, complicating efforts towards integration of sex workers.

"Even though the municipality might be open-minded, you still have to deal with neighborhood reactions. Neighbors might complain, and it becomes a constant source of stress for people trying to work legally" - UTSOPi

Overall, a **historical shift** can be observed in the way sex work is integrated into urban environments and how relationships between sex workers and other city residents have evolved, varying across different times and places. This shift, which was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall reflects broader transformations in the dynamics of sex work in Belgium but is particularly recognisable in Brussels. The **influx of foreign sex workers**, profoundly reshaped the city's social and spatial fabric.

According to journalist Danny Vileyn, who has been reporting on the sector since the 1990s, this demographic shift fundamentally altered the atmosphere surrounding sex work in the city. In earlier decades, many sex workers were Belgian-born and operated in well-defined areas such as Alhambra or the Carrées in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. These sites facilitated a degree of **informal coexistence and communication** with local residents. Over time, however, **increasing linguistic and cultural diversity** introduced new barriers, gradually eroding the mutual familiarity that had once characterized these neighborhoods. Racism and xenophobia also play a role.

"You could feel that prostitution wasn't anchored in the same way anymore" -
Danny Vileyn, journalist

In his view, the fall of the Wall, globalisation, and the COVID-19 crisis triggered far-reaching changes whose full implications are still unfolding.

(INSTITUTIONALISED) PUBLIC RESISTANCE

A lot of today's stigmatisation comes down to the **association made between sex work** and other safety issues which can be found in those areas such as **drug use and violence**. Nuisances, littering or the **visible display** of sex worker's bodies in windows or street-based sex work settings are also the subject of this debate.

"People complain about visibility, especially around Rue d'Aerschot, but they don't realize that hiding sex work makes it more dangerous. If you push sex workers into dark alleys or backstreets without lighting, you're creating the perfect conditions for violence." - UTSOPI

The *Comité Alhambra*^[14] in Brussels is a prominent example of a neighborhood committee aiming to restrict sex work activities due to its perception as a nuisance. Although the Comité does not oppose sex work per se, it firmly asserts that **street prostitution** (which is described as unregulated and mainly as a problem of human trafficking) **is incompatible with residential areas** due to the potential of aforementioned disturbances.

"Rather than legalising street prostitution, we ask, on the contrary, that local authorities be given the means to combat it in residential areas"
- Comité Alhambra

[own translation from French]

The Comité Alhambra can be seen as an institutionalised neighbourhood resistance and shows how they want to claim and transform public space through the displacement of street sex workers.

MUNICIPAL STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

In an **effort to bridge the gaps** between sex workers and neighborhood residents, community-building initiatives are sometimes introduced to **encourage collaboration** between the two groups, though they rarely achieve lasting success.

Nevertheless, some municipalities, such as **Schaerbeek**, are making notable efforts to strengthen community ties and communication through prevention programs like "Vie de Quartier" (part of the *Programme de Prévention Urbaine*). In the past, they organised workshops with neighborhood residents and sex workers to collaboratively explore what they wanted to see represented in their shared environment. The broader objective thereby was to **foster a sense of pride** within the neighbourhood through visual improvements like for example mural projects or waste management campaigns.

While resistance from parts of the public and local authorities unfortunately persists in many cases, a project manager of the Schaerbeek municipality who is dealing with sex work related topics in the neighbourhood emphasizes the following :

"I think that keeping the dialogue open is a good start. But as I said, it's not so easy" - Simon Letellier, Schaerbeek North Quarter

Keeping communication going requires a close collaboration between local NGO's which are advocating for sex workers' rights, the municipality, and the police — but also the provision of information in various languages.

In addition to that, the presence of more **specialised social workers** on the ground would be an essential step toward ensuring sustained support and safety for the neighbourhood.

Ultimately, the **improvement of public space** can help on a small scale level to foster a sense of shared identity and subsequently reduce tensions and contribute to the creation of more inclusive environment for both sex workers and residents.

Moving forward, **strengthening mutual understanding** and challenging long-standing stigmas will be essential to create cities where the establishment of sex work spaces is not merely tolerated but genuinely integrated into the social and spatial fabric of the neighborhood.

What do all these challenges reveal ?

There is still a huge amount of fear and stigma !

To briefly conclude, an overarching issue which links all the previously mentioned challenges is **stigmatisation** of sex work despite its official recognition as a profession under the 2024 labour law reform.



These challenges will reappear in practice in the following section which will focus on simulating the opening of a formal sex work space in Brussels. Despite remaining **structural barriers**, the simulation will point out how several administrative procedures can be tackled step by step.

4. Simulation

Opening a Sex Work Space

Building on the challenges outlined previously, this simulation aims to cover a list of tasks and issues which must be addressed in order to establish a **formal shared space** dedicated to sex work with **3 bedrooms**, shared by **3 sex workers or more**.

Before digging into the core of the roadmap, there are three distinctions to keep in mind :

FORMALITY vs. INFORMALITY

This simulation focuses on a **formal space** in order to examine the **full extent of legal and administrative requirements** sex workers must navigate in the current decriminalised framework. The aim is to better understand the complicated procedures that persist despite the legal reform and to highlight what it takes to create a stable workspace within the official system. **In practice**, however, the process of opening or accessing a sex work space is **rarely so linear**—some steps may be skipped, completed in a different order, or adapted to individual circumstances.

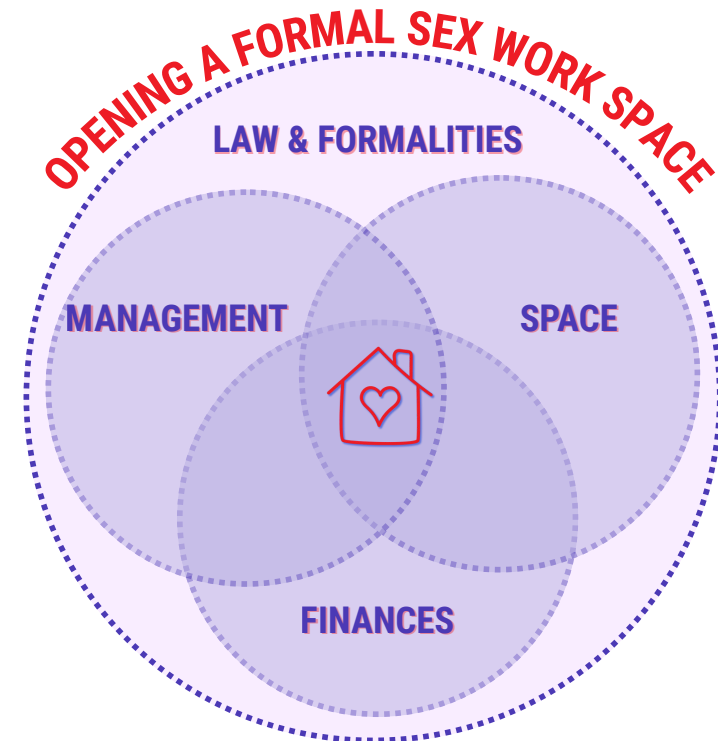
VISIBILITY vs. INVISIBILITY

The **degree of visibility** can vary significantly depending on the specific urban, social, and political context in which it is implemented. This simulation acknowledges that **formality does not always equate public visibility**, and that both dimensions must be carefully balanced in the planning and managing of sex work spaces. Visibility often comes with additional legal, spatial and locational requirements which will be partly covered in this simulation.

SELF-EMPLOYED vs. EMPLOYEE

Legal requirements, protections, taxes, financial procedures and responsibilities can also vary depending on the **status of the workers**. As mentioned previously, the **labour law regulations** related to working spaces apply **only to employees** with formal contracts. Each position has different advantages and disadvantages to consider. In practice however, some sex workers may choose neither employment status nor self-employment and instead work informally - due to legal, financial, or personal reasons.

Each scenario may vary significantly depending on the specific legal, social, and spatial context, the number of individuals involved, and the resources available. These steps should be adapted to fit the respective realities and needs and **only serve as an initial orientation** for the potential establishment of a commercial sex work space.

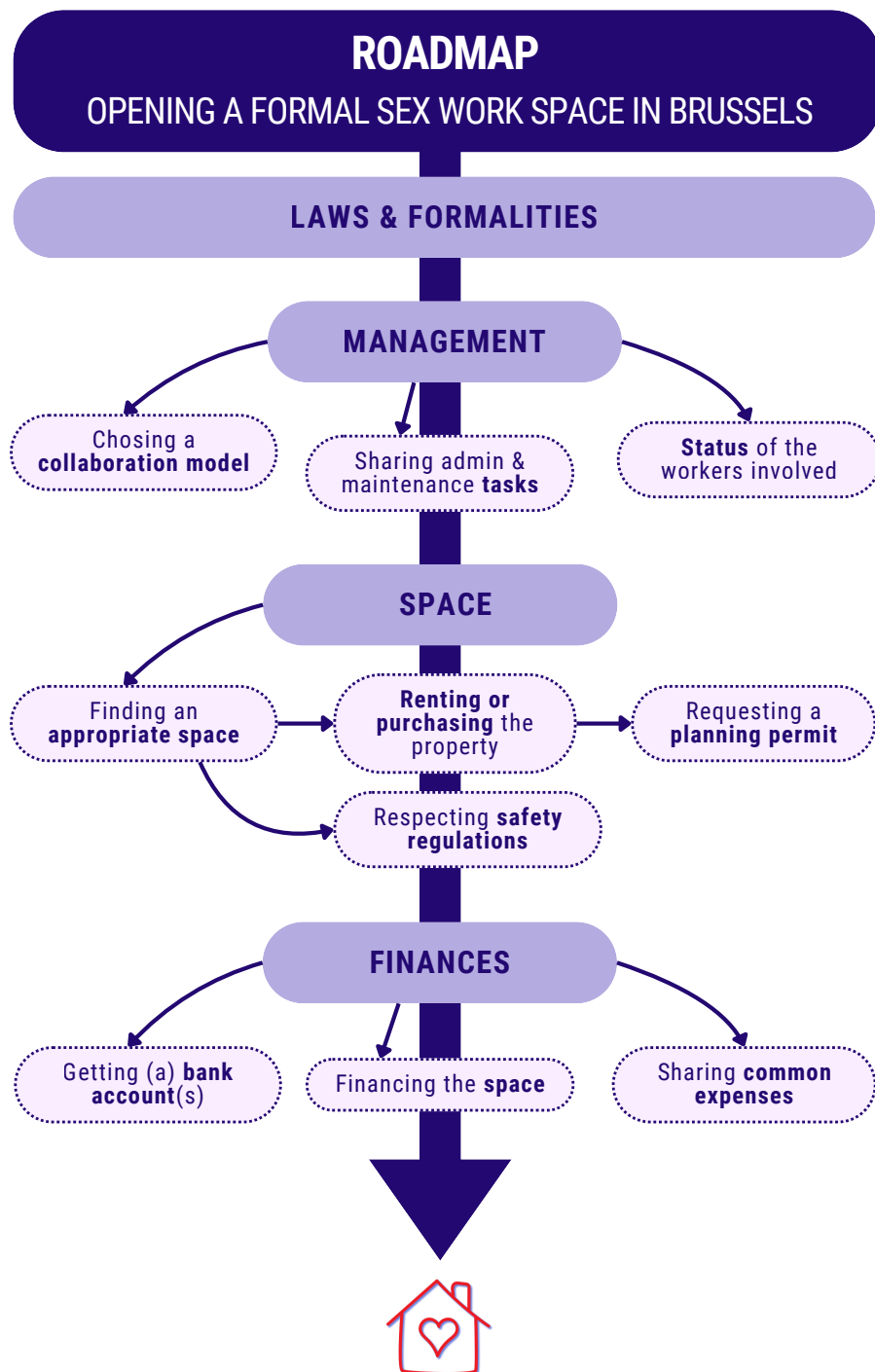


Throughout this simulation, **laws and formalities** were identified as an overarching theme which **affects all steps of the roadmap** towards the establishment of a formal sex work space. They range from federal law and municipal regulations to professional agreements, safety certificates, and lease contracts.

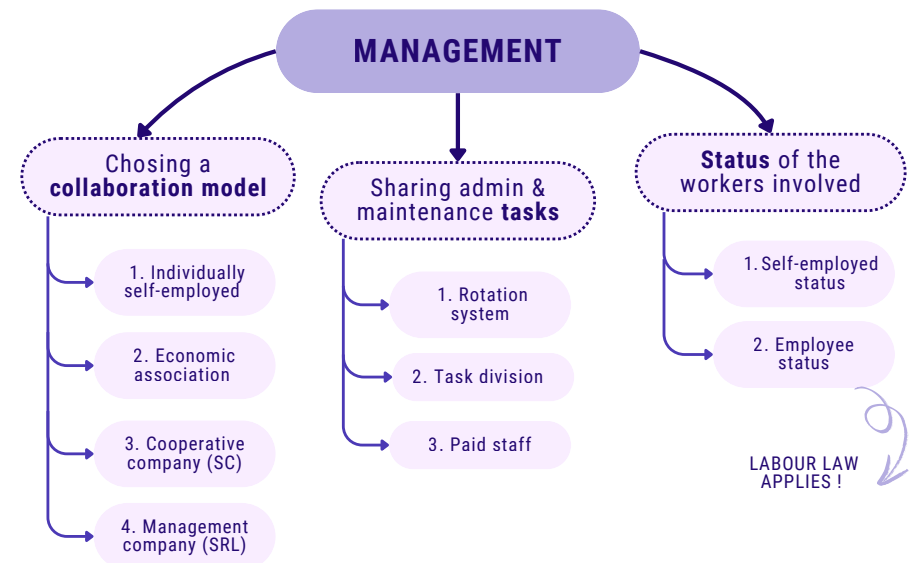
When diving deeper, three main themes can be identified :

- A. Management
- B. Space
- C. Finances

There are often intertwined and some need to be tackled simultaneously, rather than in a linear step-by-step model. The following roadmap shows the main steps.



A. MANAGEMENT



CHOOSING A COLLABORATION MODEL

➡ Which collaboration model fits the workers' needs ?

One important decision the workers involved in the project should decide is which collaboration model best suits their needs.

Even though some forms of collaboration and management between workers can be rather informal, **the space itself can be used formally as an official work space** (if it complies with certain regulations). Moreover, in this simulation, an informal collaboration between workers doesn't necessarily imply that the workers cannot have a formal work status (either as employee or as self-employed).

Like with any shared space or business, it is important to **discuss different needs, values and visions** for the space and the collaboration. Potential areas of tension or conflict should be identified in advance in order to adequately prepare for the entrepreneurial quest they will embark on. Not doing so could be a risk for the group's interpersonal bonds as well as each individual's finances and mental health.

There are 4 main **juridic forms of collaboration** which workers could choose to share a commercial space whilst still keeping their independence in working hours, rates,...

1. Remaining as **individually self-employed** workers
2. Creating an **economic association**
3. Creating a **cooperative company** (SC)
4. Creating a **management company** (SRL)

Here is a deeper analysis of each options with its main pros and cons :

OPTION 1 : Individually self-employed

Each person is a **self-employed worker** (individual company), with their own personal business number (BCE), social security affiliation and tax filing.

This implies there is **no collective liability** : each person is responsible for their own activity, declares their income, pays their social contributions and taxes separately.

- ✓ It's **simpler, faster, and cheaper** to set up. Each person keeps full independence and there is less accounting burden.
- ✗ Connections are based on **mutual trust**, which is essential to manage the shared space (bills, maintenance...). Each person is also **personally responsible** in case of a dispute with the authorities or a client.

OPTION 2 : Economic Association (*Association de fait*)

It's an **informal but recognised** group where workers remain fully **self-employed** (with their own business numbers).

It is **not a legal entity but a mutual agreement**. It is more common for very small, informal collaborations but having a **written contract** is recommended.

The association handles shared expenses: rent, utilities, cleaning and security.

- ✓ Maximum **independence**, very **cheap** to set up. A contract would add a layer of mutual liability.
- ✗ No legal shield, group has **no own legal status**, each member is **personally responsible** for collective issues.

➤ OPTIONS 1 & 2 only allow for workers to work under the self-employed status (formally).

OPTION 3 : Cooperative Company (*Société coopérative, SC*)

A cooperative is designed for members who want to collaborate as co-owners, often in an **egalitarian and democratic** way.

Each sex worker is both a **worker** (earning their own income) and a **member (or associate)** of the cooperative (who helps manage the shared space) by paying a fee (which can be fixed or % based). Decisions and profits are shared democratically.

- ✓ It's a **legal structure** which allows bank accounts, contracts, loans and also gives a more professional image with authorities. Transparency, **mutual protection, and equity** are encouraged.
- ✗ There are more complex administrations and **financial costs** (notary, accountant) to get started, and it requires clear rules to avoid confusion (Who manages the cooperative? How are decisions made?).

OPTION 4 Management Company (*Société de Gestion, SRL*)

An SRL is a **more traditional business structure** with one or more owners (shareholders), often used for managing shared commercial spaces.

In a classic SRL, there are 1 or several **managers** ("gérants") who are legally responsible for the company's duties (taxes, accounting, permits). Management power usually depends on company shares which can be divided equally or proportionally. Workers can decide internally who takes on management tasks and if they receive a fee or discount on the rent (to compensate).

- ✓ Strong formal structure. Because of the clear separation between management and workers, it is a more flexible model allowing for workers to join or leave easily.
- ✗ It is more costly, rigid and less egalitarian. Companies must pay attentions to stay within legal limits and requires for some workers to take on the heavy management tasks (or hire staff).

➤ OPTIONS 3 & 4 allow workers to work as self-employed or employees (the SRL is quite common in Brussels' window areas and massage parlors that operate "legally")

💡 It is important to think of the durability of the project and **what to do if one or more people were to leave the project** or be replaced. This variable influences the collaboration model.

SHARING ADMIN & MAINTENANCE TASKS

➡ How to fairly divide workload between the workers ?

Like with any professional collaboration, it is crucial to take the time to find a system to equitably distribute common tasks and managerial responsibilities. In practice it's rare that administrative and maintenance work is divided perfectly equally all the time, but there are ways to aim for a **fair balance**. For instance, managers can get a fee or a discount on their rent or service fees in exchange for doing more admin work.

Depending on the chosen collaboration model, the managerial workload tasks can be shared in several ways.

Here are 3 common solutions :

A. **Rotation system**: Every worker takes a turn managing a certain task (e.g., every 3 months).

B. **Task division**: Each person handles specific tasks consistently (one does accounting, one manages maintenance, one handles legal matters).

C. **Paid staff**: The workers hire a part-time administrator (accounting,...) or maintenance staff (cleaning,...) using part of the shared revenue (from room rental fees, for example).

➡ Although option C adds on financial costs, it also saves time and energy.

💡 To prevent conflict, it is recommended to **write roles, responsibilities and rules clearly** in company statutes and internal regulations.

STATUS FOR THE WORKERS INVOLVED

➡ Which status can the workers get to operate legally ?

As mentioned earlier, depending on the chosen collaboration model, the workers involved in the project can either become :

A. Self-employed (management options 1-4)

B. Employees (management options 3-4)

A. SELF-EMPLOYED STATUS

Once basic requirements are met, there are two tasks to fulfill :

- Registering as self-employed at a **BCE office** (*Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises*)^[15] in order to receive an individual **company number** which shall be used for all contacts with administrative and judicial authorities.
- Choosing a corresponding **NACE code**^[16] such as 96090 which represents the sector of "Other personal services". It's a code for classifying the business by the economic activity across the EU. In Belgium the code specific to sex work is voluntarily generalist.

PRE-REQUISITES

- ☐ Be over 18 years old
- ☐ Be in possession of political and civil rights
- ☐ Demonstrate basic management knowledge
- ☐ Not be subject to judicial review or declared legally incapable
- ☐ Not be prohibited from engaging in a trade-related activity
- ☐ Have Belgian nationality or be from the EU member country, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland or Liechtenstein.

For all other nationalities, recognition of professional qualifications must be granted in order to obtain a professional card giving them the right to practise as a self-employed person in Belgium. ^[17]

➡ basic prerequisites to obtain the self-employed status

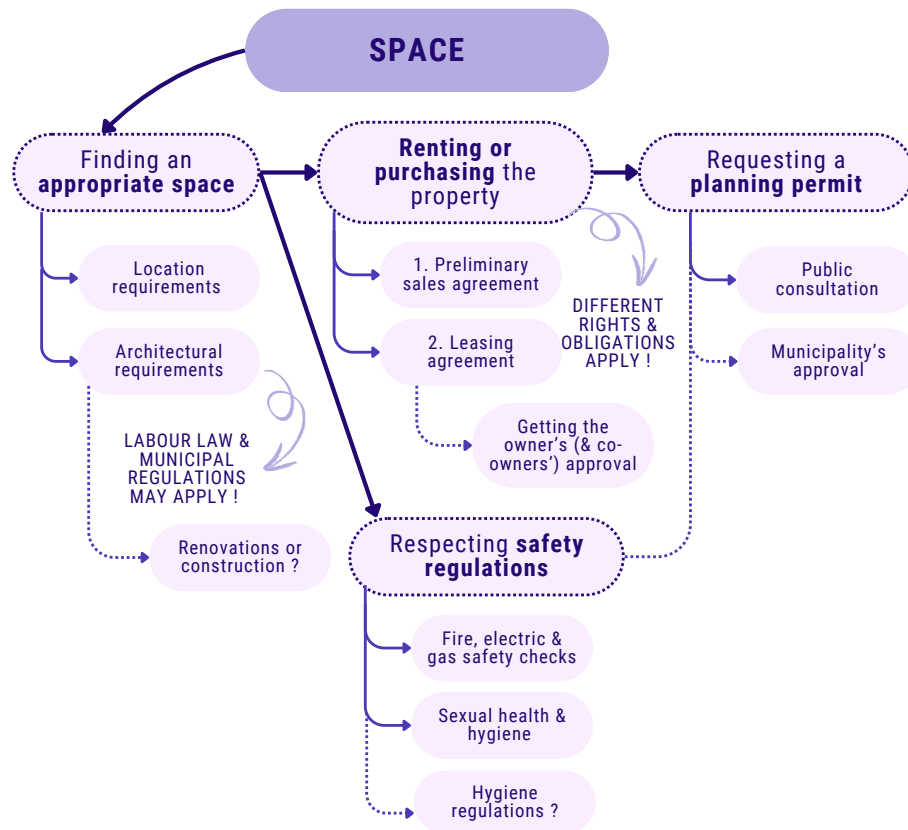
B. EMPLOYEE STATUS

For the shown management options 3 and 4 (SC and SRL) sex workers involved in the project may operate under an employee status which means that they are **formally hired by an employer** - such as an association, cooperative, or business entity legally recognised in Belgium.

In this case, the employer is responsible for **registering** the worker with the National Social Security Office (ONSS), **paying social contributions**, and **ensuring compliance with labour laws** (including insurance, workplace safety, and paid leave).

In this simulation, the decision to work under an employee status is up to the sex workers themselves, based on their preferences and needs. In practice, **in small-scale models, roles often overlap**: sex workers could be the part-time managers of the company which then formally employs them as employees under a labour contract.

B. SPACE



FINDING AN APPROPRIATE SPACE

➡ What are the main locational and architectural requirements for the space ?

LOCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Locational preferences can vary widely among sex workers, depending on working style, clientele, and personal priorities. Factors such as proximity to public transport, availability of parking, and neighborhood dynamics can all influence how suitable a location is for a given space.

The location of the space will also depend on whether the space is **visible or invisible** from the street. In the Brussels Capital-Region, visible sex work spaces such as windows, carrées and love hotels are mainly located in Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse and the City of Brussels. **Windows and carrées** are usually restricted to very **precise addresses**, which increases the difficulty to establish new ones - in combination with neighborhood resistance. It therefore may be more realistic to opt for an **invisible** sex work space where arrangements between clients and sex workers are made beforehand (through online advertising or other meeting spaces). However, some specific requirements for visible spaces will be mentioned in the following steps.

ZONING

Since the selected space's primary use would be for commercial purposes, it is crucial to check **town-planning regulations and zoning** in the *Plan Régional d'Affectation du Sol*^[18] to see if commercial activity is authorised in the building. Some zones are almost strictly residential (*zone d'habitat*) and don't allow new commercial activity. Others are more flexible and allow the establishment of small businesses (*zones de mixité*).

ARCHITECTURAL REQUIREMENTS

The 3-bedroom shared sex work space would have to meet the following **basic requirements** (some of which are based on the 2024 labour law spatial restrictions) :

- **Number of rooms** : ideally 4 (3 bedrooms and 1 storage / utilities room)
- **Bathrooms** : 2 or 3 ideally for comfort and flexibility (one in each bedroom)
- **Layout** : Design which can allow for privacy and avoids clients running in to each other
- **Insulation** : performant noise insulation (to avoid nuisances and increase privacy)

Beyond legal and technical requirements,, the **personal characteristics, working styles, and preferences of the sex workers using the space** should be reflected in the space. Aspects like lighting, equipment and the arrangement of furniture can greatly influence how comfortable workers feel in the space. These factors are essential for fostering a supportive and empowering working environment.

➡ Which architectural requirements are mandatory in the LABOUR LAW ?

- **Size of rooms**: at least 8 m² (for two people) or 9 m² (when three people are present at the same time)^[19]
- **Bathrooms** : each bedroom needs access to a shower with hot and cold water, either in each room or very close by.

➡ What about MUNICIPAL architectural regulations ?

In addition to the general requirements set by labor law, **some municipalities impose extra spatial and hygiene regulations** for workplaces. These may include **diverse room sizes**, mandatory access to **bidets**, and specific provisions for **warm water availability**. Such local regulations vary and influence the design and equipment of a space.

RENOVATIONS OR CONSTRUCTION WORK

➡ What if the space doesn't meet all architectural requirements ?

Indeed, it would be rather unlikely to find a space complying with all the necessary spatial and material characteristics. A solution to this is **to adapt the space to the specific needs** of sex workers.

However, if physical changes need to be made, a **planning permit including detailed architectural plans** has to be requested.



In the case of a rental, physical transformations should be discussed and fully **approved by the property owner**. Making significant architectural changes can also **affect taxation**. For example : property tax increases with each bathroom which is added to the property.

RENTING OR PURCHASING THE PROPERTY

➡ What's next once the ideal property has been found ?

Once the space has been found, workers could either :

- A. Become tenants by signing a **lease**
- B. Become owners by signing a preliminary **sales agreement** (*compromis de vente*) and **deed of sale** (*acte de vente*) in order to purchase the property



Though documented sex workers could technically become property owners, it is a difficult goal to achieve for most people due to financial restrictions and barriers in the banking sector.



In the case of a rental, nothing should be signed or decided before making sure the **property owner** is on board with the commercial project.

GETTING APPROVAL FOR THE PROJECT

➡ Who has to approve the project ?

To open a commercial space in a rented property, the **property owner's approval** is mandatory. Not having it may lead to legal consequences, including lease termination, fines, or forced closure of the activity.

They also have to approve and finance any big **works or renovations** of the property - which often makes them less tempted to do so unless it represents an economic advantage in the long run. This partly explains why the minimum **length for commercial leases is set at 9 years** in Brussels (with the exception of pop-up stores) - it wouldn't be financially viable to make big changes on the short term.

If the property is located in a building owned by different people, it is important to look at the **rules and agreements of the co-ownership**.

- 'Basic act' of their co-ownership (*acte de base de la copropriété*) regulates the usage of common areas (hallway, stairs,...).
- By-law of the co-ownership (*Règlement de la copropriété*)
- Internal rules of procedure (*Règlement d'ordre intérieur*)

Some of the documents could include restrictions on the establishment of a commercial space dedicated to sex work in their building. Other potential barriers could be restrictions on flow of people during the night, noise,...

After fully discussing intentions and commercial plans, it is time to sign a **commercial leasing agreement** (*bail commercial*).

SIGNING A LEASE

➡ Who signs the leasing agreement ?

Several options exist depending on which type of management structure the workers decide to use.

A. **Only one person signs the lease** then sub-rents to the others
→ the (legal) responsibility lies on one person (which can be a lot of pressure but also create a power imbalance)

B. All **three workers** sign a commercial **co-location** contract
→ workers are collectively responsible (under their individual names)



MANAGEMENT OPTION 1

3. The **association or company** signs the lease
→ the workers aren't directly tied to the lease and the association or company is responsible.



MANAGEMENT OPTIONS 2, 3 or 4



When discussing work spaces, it is important to **differentiate the property owner from the tenant** since they have **differing rights and obligations** regarding the space (which are stipulated in a contract).

REQUESTING A PLANNING PERMIT

→ How to formally change a property's function or architectural features ?

In most cases, **if the use, zoning, or architectural layout of the selected property needs changing**, a planning permit (*permis d'urbanisme*) has to be requested at the municipality.

- Example : changing an apartment into an office, a library into a bakery or adding a sign on a façade all need a planning permit.

Either the owner or the tenant can introduce the **application for a planning permit** to the municipality (or the region). However, it is no simple or straightforward task nor a mere formality : change a property's zoning or use involves a lengthy and costly procedure.

PLANNING PERMIT APPLICATION

- ☐ **Current use and proposed use** of the property
- ☐ **Written consent of the owner** allowing the change of use
- ☐ **Architectural plans** (existing and proposed) and situation plan in the neighbourhood by a licensed architect if the layout needs changing.
- ☐ **Fire safety** opinion (avis des pompiers) by the Brussels fire department (SIAMU)
- ☐ **Environmental Impact Statement** of Class 3 or 2 (*permis d'environnement*) issued by Bruxelles Environnement or the municipality.^[20]
- ☐ **PEB Energetic Performance Certificate** (*Performance énergétique bâtiment*) if doing works on heating, ventilation, or insulation.
- ☐ **Photos** of the interior space and façade of the building to check if the activity has a visual impact on public space.
- ☐ **Motivated Explanation** (*note explicative*) detailing the reasons for the request, the nature of the activity, assuring that the activity will cause no nuisances.



Before asking for a planning permit, one can ask for a **planning certificate** (*certificat d'urbanisme*) which indicates to what extent, and under what conditions, a project is likely to be approved. The documents required are less detailed and it allows to know the public authorities' position on the feasibility of the project.

→ Is zoning the property for commercial use essential ?

For many professional activities, working "from home" is allowed when a section of the home is officially dedicated to work related activities. If the working activity must remain secondary to residential use, it does not alter the primary function of the home.

In this case, most of the property's surface would be used for work-related purposes, so it must be declared as commercial space.^[21]

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

→ Do the neighbours have to approve the project ?

Planning requests can undergo a **public consultation** (*enquête publique*) procedure which allows other citizens to express their opinion on urban questions.

- Nearby residents are informed thanks to **red notices** in the street or on the Region's **openpermits website**.^[22] Specific time slots at the town hall can also be allocated for public consultations.

People's reasons to oppose themselves against a project can vary.

- Examples: fear of noise pollution, not wanting strangers to circulate in the building, moral or ethical values,...

This can have some weight on issuing of the permit, depending on the pertinence of the arguments expressed.

OTHER MUNICIPAL PERMITS

→ What about specific permits for sex work spaces ?

If attempting to open a **visible** sex work space such as a window brothel, some municipal regulations often apply and usually require a specific permit on top of the planning permit.

- Example : in order to apply for a *Certificat de Conformité* in the municipality of Schaarbeek, the following documents are requested :
 - Copy of the ID card of the operator of the window or square prostitution room. and a valid phone number.
 - The operator's type 2 criminal record extract.
 - If the operator is non-Belgian, their work permit.
 - A copy of the identity card of the owner(s) of the building destined to be (partially) used for window prostitution and, if it's a corporation, the identity of the person who validly represents that corporation.

- If the owner and/or operator is a corporation, proof of registration in the Commerce and Companies Register and an extract from the company's constitution in the Moniteur belge
- If applicable, the operator's VAT number.
- If the operator is a company, proof of registration, an extract from the company's constitution, the complete extract and list of active and non-active partners.
- If the operator is the tenant of the prostitution room, they must provide proof of that the owner was notified in advance of their application and provided a copy of the lease agreement.
- In the case of a takeover of an existing prostitution place, the new operator must provide proof that the former operator abandons the operation in question and specifies the effective date of the resumption of the operation.
- An extract from the cadastral matrix of the building in question.
- A copy of the planning permit.
- The fire safety attestation if the room or the carrée is more than 50m², otherwise, the attestation of normal fire insurance.
- Certificate of insurance.
- If the operator hires employees, workers' accident insurance.
- A copy of the sign showing the closing day.
- The electrical inspection certificate.
- The fire extinguisher inspection certificate.

Such municipal permits can be delivered once all documents have been provided and specific safety rules have been respected.

RECEIVING THE PERMIT(S)

➡ Who ultimately decides to accept or refuse the application ?

After considering all the provided documents, checking compliance with health and safety regulations and taking public opinion into account, **the municipality will finally decide** whether or not to grant the planning permit (and certificate of compliance). As seen in the local specificities, when it comes to sex work, a municipality's **political opinions and morals** can have a big decisional impact.

Before making their final decision, they may also ask for **additional case-specific documents** such as an acoustic study, a mobility impact note or the neighbor's consent.



If a space is used for commercial purposes **without a permit** it can lead to consequences with the municipal planning departments or taxation services. The former is allowed to make spontaneous visits.

RESPECTING SAFETY REGULATIONS

➡ Which safety regulations must the space comply with ?

FIRE, ELECTRICITY & GAS

For any business receiving clients, several **mandatory safety checks** must be conducted :

1. **Fire Safety Check** : by the Brussels Fire Department's Prevention Service (*Service de Prévention Incendie des Pompiers de Bruxelles*) to confirm that :
 - There are accessible emergency exits.
 - Fire extinguishers are present and inspected.
 - Smoke detectors are properly installed.
 - Materials meet safety standards (e.g., fire doors if needed).
2. **Electrical safety check** : by an accredited body (*organisme de contrôle agréé*) must be renewed every 5 years.
3. **Gas safety check** (if applicable): by an accredited body before opening and controlled every year or every 2 years depending on the installation.

SEXUAL HEALTH & HYGIENE MEASURES

➡ What else is needed to operate safely and comfortably ?

As mentioned in the challenges section, sex work comes with **specific material needs** for health and safety reasons.

Here are some basic things that workers would need to operate in a safe and hygienic environment :

- Clean bedding and bath linen
- Safe sex supplies (condoms, lubricant,...)
- Personal hygiene products, including for intimate care
- Washing machine (though going to a laundry mat is also an option)



There is no specific “hygiene permit” or sanitary authority for sex work in Belgium but **general hygiene compliance** is required and local authorities can conduct checks to verify hygiene standards.

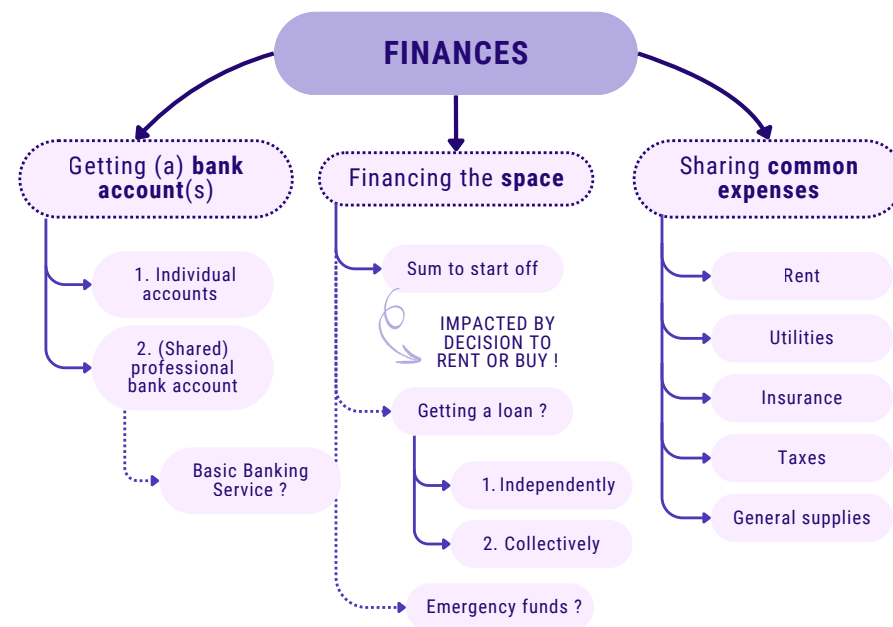
➡ Which safety regulations are included in the LABOUR LAW ?

In terms of obligations, some safety regulations only apply to employees working under an employment contract (which are stipulated in the labour law).

On top of some of the elements mentioned above (clean bed linens, safe sex supplies,...), the labour law requires :

- An **emergency button** in each room
- **Information** on emergency numbers, contact details of workers' representative organisations and support organisations, and recommendations on safe sex.

C. FINANCES



GETTING A BANK ACCOUNT

➡ How can the workers manage their finances ? (individually and for the space)

In order to manage the finances for a business, sex workers would need to **access a banking service**. This can be done once the company number and NACE code have been received.

In principle, everybody with a Belgian nationality or in some cases with a legal resident status of the EU can open a bank account. However, as we've seen in the challenges, it can happen that a bank will reject sex workers as clients.

Depending on the management model the workers decide to proceed with, there are two main options :

A. **INDIVIDUAL** professional accounts

→ Collective finances will be managed based on an **informal agreement**: each person opens their own **individual account**, and the expenses are split manually. This might be the simpler option but could also make it more difficult in terms of organizing and managing.

B. **COLLECTIVE** professional account

→ A professional bank account **especially tailored for corporations** can be opened. In the case of a collaborative work space, it is recommended to put the account on every individual's name (and not only on one) because then the responsibility is shared amongst everybody involved.

There are different **lists of documents** which are needed to open up the professional bank account. These are the basic requirements under the Anti-Money-Laundering (AML) law for every customer relationship.

INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNT	COLLECTIVE ACCOUNT
☐ full name	☐ registered name, address and number + operating address if different
☐ date and place of birth	☐ beneficial owner structure (your shareholders is where the money comes from and goes to in terms of dividends etc)
☐ profession	☐ board of directors (who makes the decisions)
☐ source of wealth	☐ type of business the corporation is doing
☐ reason for the relationship	☐ what will the products be used for
☐ what types of transactions to expect (to detect atypical transactions)	☐ authorised signatories (who can instruct on the products offered)

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS 1 & 2

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS 3 & 4

In practice the points mentioned above are **not that straightforward** and can be topped up based on the respective bank's internal framework. Sometimes for example, it could be required to provide a **preliminary business plan**. In general, the key requirements are guided by risk factors in the AML law.

There will also be a **screening on the corporation and individuals**, shareholders, signatories and directors. It will be checked upon the following points: sanctions, negative news or political exposure (as this is an increased bribery risk).^[23]

If and only if there are no contradictions found in the information provided, the bank account can be opened.

For more detailed information, UTSOPI's Starter Guide for self Employment^[24] explains how to keep track of professional expenses once the bank account has been set up or the procedure on how to pay social contributions.

TRANSPARENCY

➡ How honest do bank applications have to be ?

In application procedures, banks usually emphasize the **need for transparency** regarding the type of service provided.

In practice, out of **fear of discrimination**, some sex workers don't disclose the nature of their profession and use more general terms such as : "wellness services," "private personal services," - or regarding the space : "commercial space with private consultation rooms".

BASIC BANKING SERVICE

➡ What happens if workers are denied professional banking services ?

As discussed in the challenges, due to occupational discrimination, it could happen that the application for accessing banking services as a sex worker will get rejected.

However, if this occurs, there is still the right to apply for a **Basic Banking Service**.^[25] This measure was specifically introduced to support businesses that face difficulties in opening a professional account, with the aim of preventing exclusion from essential financial services. The basic banking service will then allow to carry out different transactions like depositing cash, withdrawing money, transferring money and some more. Please keep in mind that one cannot have a negative balance for this.

Sex workers facing discrimination when applying for banking services can always contact UTSOPI to report the issue or seek support.

FINANCING THE SPACE

➡ What are the financial costs for the space to operate ?

The budget required to set up a space will largely depend on the group's expectations in terms of comfort, geographical location and real estate values.

SUM TO START OFF

The sum needed to get started also depends on the decision to purchase or rent :

A. RENTING

- **Large security deposits** can also be a barrier for some people
- **Price of rent** and lack of transparency in contracts (especially for visible spaces)
 - Example : in Rue d'Aerschot, renting a window can cost 250€ a day

B. PURCHASING (which allows to avoid the need for the landowners approval)

- Very large initial sum which usually implies the need for a loan.

No matter the decision, due to specific spatial and design requirements, workers would need to start with a certain **sum** to invest before putting the space to use. Even without renovations, setting up a new workspace has many hidden costs such as material investments (sheets, hygiene products,...).

GETTING A LOAN

Like any new business, workers may seek support from banks in the form of a loan to get started. For that it is recommended to check out the **minimum loan size** of the respective bank in advance as they sometimes do not support smaller businesses.

It is also less likely for banks to trust freelancers who are just getting started without a fixed or reliable proof of income.

Here again, a distinction must be made if applying for a loan as individuals or as a company.

A. The workers can stay independent (self-employed) but they apply for a loan together as **co-borrowers**.

B. The loan is made in name of the **company** (SRL or SC).

INDIVIDUALS

- ☐ **ID card** (Belgian or EU passport)
- ☐ **Proof of income:** Last tax returns (for the past 2-3 years) if already self-employed and bank statements showing regular income
- ☐ **Debts and loans situation** (credit history)
- ☐ **Personal contribution proof:** typically banks require at least 20-30% own funds for a business loan. Example: For a loan of €100,000, they should provide €20,000-€30,000 themselves.

6
MANAGEMENT
OPTIONS 1 & 2

COMPANY

- ☐ **Business plan** (explaining the activity, income sources, client base – framed in discreet terms like "wellness services," "private rooms," etc.)
- ☐ **Projected financial plan** (showing expected income, expenses, profit)
- ☐ **Proof of registration:** Company statutes (if SRL/SC), BCE number and VAT number
- ☐ **Urban planning permits** (or application proof)
- ☐ **Rental contract or purchase compromise** (if planning to buy a building)

MANAGEMENT
OPTIONS 3 & 4

After looking at these requirements, it becomes clear that receiving a loan is a privilege and **not accessible to the wide majority of sex workers**.

EMERGENCY FUNDS

Due to the **high financial instability** that can come with sex work, it is recommended to plan for **Emergency Funds and Savings** in order to maintain a long-term resilience.

Here again, there are two main options :

A. Each worker could **individually set aside funds** for months with fewer clients or unexpected expenses.

B. All workers together can consider a **shared emergency fund** to which they can come back in cases of urgent renovations of the space or other unforeseen expenses. This option carries less risk, as it ensures that **financial responsibility is shared** rather than falling on a single individual.

MANAGING COMMON EXPENSES

➡ What are the collective expenses once the space is running ?

Managing a sex work space involves various shared expenses such as rent, utilities, hygiene and cleaning supplies, and taxes. They can vary depending on the type of workspace and location.

The main expenses to consider are the following :

- Rent
- Utilities : electricity, water, gas, internet,...
- General supplies: cleaning supplies, toilet paper,...
- Insurance
- Taxes

PAYING TAXES

Commercial venues, particularly visible ones such as carrées and windows, are subject to significantly higher tax burdens. In addition to the standard property tax (*précompte immobilier*), which is calculated based on cadastral income and varies depending on the municipality, local governments often impose specific taxes on sex work establishments.

Here are the tax rates for the 3 main municipalities with visible sex work in Brussels^[26] :

Schaerbeek (2023)	Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (2024)	Ville de Bruxelles (2025)
€1 960 per year per bedroom in a window €689 per year per carrée	3 655 € per year per carrée	3 269 € per year per room/ apartment dedicated to sex work (visible or invisible)

Beyond venue-level taxes, workspaces can also impact **individual income taxation**. In Belgium, workers have the option of deducting professional expenses—such as rent, maintenance, or insurance—either through a standard deduction or by declaring actual costs. For sex workers operating from private or shared spaces, declaring workspace-related expenses can reduce their taxable income, provided that receipts and documentation are available.

💡 It is important for workers to keep track of their individual and collective taxes since fiscal and administrative controls could occur at any time.

INSURANCE

Insurance brokers are the third party involved in the process of insuring a workplace and work practice. Some people decide to get insurance with their **bank** and others resort to other **insurance companies**.

In commercial spaces open to the public, businesses are also responsible for accidents which could occur in the workplace.

Here is a breakdown of the main types of insurance, whether they are mandatory, who should pay for them and a price estimation :

Insurance type	Covers	Mandatory?	Who pays?	Price
1. Civil Liability (Responsabilité Professionnelle)	Damage caused to clients inside the premises or damage caused to neighbors.	Yes	The business or freelancers	Usually €300-€600/year for small spaces
2. Fire & Explosion Liability (Responsabilité civile incendie et explosion)	If fire or explosion inside the premises causes damage to the building.	Yes	The business or freelancers	Around €200-€500/year depending on the size
3. Property Insurance	The building structure itself (walls, roof, plumbing...).	No	Owner, unless the lease says otherwise	Around € 300 - €600/ year (not the responsibility of tenants !)
4. Contents Insurance	Furniture (beds, sofas), equipment (e.g., massage tables), and electronics.	No* (but recommended)	The business or freelancers	From €200/year depending on the value insured

Alongside these insurances for the workspace, each self-employed worker must have their own **personal security and insurance**.

💡 Belgian insurers offer packages for small businesses which combine the most essential insurances ("Pack RC Professionnelle + Incendie + Contenu")

👉 What does this simulation reveal ?

Though this simulation may seem like "mission impossible", it is important to acknowledge that there is **support from non-profit organisations** regarding sex worker autonomy and providing information on self-employment, etc.

Though it may be intimidating, for tailored support and up-to-date information, start-up businesses can always **reach out to specified local advice centers**. Most aren't directly tied to sex work but offer individualised support with administrative procedures such as creating a financial plan, a building permit application,...

That being said, looking at the administrative burden it can be to find a space responding to all requirements and get the correct documentation, many **turn towards** (partially or fully) **informal arrangements**.



5. Conclusion

This report set out to explore the challenges and opportunities for establishing sex workspaces in Belgium in the wake of the 2022 decriminalisation of sex work and the labor law adaptation in 2024. First, it must be stated that for now it is **too early to fully identify the impacts and consequences** this legal reform brought along in this context. However, what has become clear is that while decriminalisation represents a **progressive legal step forward**, it **does not automatically guarantee access to safe, stable and inclusive sex work spaces** within a city. The complexity and length of this report reflects just how multifaceted the issue truly is. A straightforward answer to the question of **how sex workers can operate safely in a decriminalized context** and how the impact of decriminalization can be fairly assessed under such conditions thus remains elusive.

The findings show that the context of decriminalisation does not benefit all sex workers equally. Without strong **supporting structures** - such as accessible administrative guidance, multilingual support, and the recognition of diverse social backgrounds - **many sex workers remain excluded** from the protections the law intends to offer. And this applies also for the access and establishment of workspaces.

Furthermore, there is a need for a diverse range of spaces which are flexible and adaptable: no one-size-fits-all solution exists. While some sex workers may prefer small-scale, self-organized spaces others may need the backing of larger institutions or want more organised structures. The simulation highlights how exceptionally difficult it can get to open a formal visible space in an urban context. There are numerous **bureaucratic and administrative steps** to navigate. These are requirements that **often exceed the capacities of individual workers**, especially those lacking institutional support and guidance.

Taking this into account, the conversation must also expand to include **less visible and less formal sex workspaces**. In reality, many sex workers rely on these alternatives - sometimes by choice, but often out of necessity. These more informal spaces may be the only **viable option** for workers facing legal, financial, or social barriers but often **lack legal protection and stability**. A nuanced understanding of these differences is crucial for developing policies and urban strategies that genuinely reflect the everyday realities of sex workers.

Notably, the identified **challenges** are not just of regulatory nature, but they are **deeply interconnected** with persistent public stigma and the ongoing reluctance in parts of society to fully recognize that sex work is work.

The legal reform alone cannot undo decades of marginalisation. Societal and structural change is urgently needed alongside the reforms. In the context of cities, this calls for sustained efforts to raise public awareness, including local-level dialogues that **promote mutual understanding** between sex workers and neighborhood residents. Such initiatives can play a key role in building trust, addressing misconceptions, and fostering more inclusive urban communities.

At its core, the question of access and establishment of sex work spaces is **a question of who gets to belong in the city and on what terms**. If decriminalisation is intended to succeed in practice, we must keep the dialogue open and most importantly, we must **listen carefully and continuously to sex workers** who are best placed to know their needs.

LISTEN TO SEX WORKERS, THEY KNOW THEIR NEEDS.



The **red umbrella** symbolises the fight for sex workers' rights, representing protection, dignity, and the demand for safe working conditions free from violence and stigma. It has become a powerful emblem of global solidarity and visibility in the movement to decriminalise sex work and recognise it as legitimate labour.

6. NOTES

Section 1-Introduction & Background

1. The full text of the decriminalisation law can be found on the official Belgian legal database: ejustice.just.fgov.be.
2. The full text of Article 433 quinquies of the Belgian Penal Code is available at ETAAMB (Belgian Official Gazette): etaamb.openjustice.be.
3. The full version of the 2024 Labor Law can be accessed on the Belgian Justice Portal: ejustice.just.fgov.be.
4. [Violet](#) is the Flemish socio-medical support organisation for sex workers, active across the Flanders region.
5. [Espace P](#) is the French-speaking socio-medical aid association for sex workers, operating in Brussels and Wallonia.
6. Pommereau, É. (2023, December 11). Dépénalisation du travail sexuel: de la tolérance à la reconnaissance. Alter Echos. Retrieved from alterechos.be
7. Definition of abolitionism: Abolitionism refers to a political and ideological position that seeks to eliminate sex work entirely, viewing it inherently as a form of exploitation. Abolitionist organizations typically oppose legal recognition of sex work as labor and advocate for policies that criminalize the purchase of sexual services while framing sellers as victims in need of rescue or exit support.
8. UNAIDS. (2021). Sex work and human rights: UNAIDS factsheet. Retrieved from unaids.org

Section 2-Space & Typology

9. **Mapping Methodology: Weighting Online Advertisements Across Categories and Districts**
 - **Data collection:** Ads were scraped from all 22 sub-domains, covering various categories of sex work (e.g. privé, escort, massage, etc.). Many profiles appeared in multiple districts and categories to increase visibility.
 - **Deduplication:** Since the same sex worker often posts in several districts (within or beyond Brussels) and across different categories, profiles were deduplicated based on a combination of name, photos, and contact information, resulting in 1,843 unique sex workers.
 - **Weight assignment:** For each unique sex worker, all listed geographic tags were recorded. If a worker selected 10 districts under one category (e.g. privé), each district received a weight of 0.1. If multiple categories were selected (e.g. privé and escort), the weights were redistributed so that the total weight across all locations and categories remained 1 per worker.
 - **Category-district aggregation:** Finally, weights were summed across all workers to calculate the relative presence of each sex work category (privé, escort, massage, etc.) within each district. These weighted totals form the basis of the map presented.

10. The data used in this analysis was collected between February 9 and March 18, 2025.

Section 3-Challenges

11. The full text of Schaerbeek's local regulation on visible prostitution is available via the official municipal website: 1030.be

12. For the full end report on banking access, see: Banking Access Survey Report, jointly published by Violet, UTSOPi, and Espace P (2024). Retrieved from cloudfront.net

13. This definition is informed by: Cubides Kovacsics, M. I., Santos, W., & Siegmann, K. A. (2022). Sex workers' everyday security in the Netherlands and the impact of COVID-19. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20(2), 810–824. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00729-4>

14. More information on the perspective of the *Comité Alhambra* is available at: comitealhambra.be

Section 4-Stimulation

15. Find more about registering a business with BCE (Banque-Carrefour des Entreprises): economie-emploi.brussels

16. The NACE-BEL number is a statistical classification code assigned to every registered profession in Belgium to track economic activities.

17. Guidance for entrepreneurs in Brussels can be found on the regional portal: entreprenant.be

18. Learn more about the PRAS (Plan Régional d'Affectation du Sol) at: perspective.brussels

19. More details on labour regulations related to sex work under contract can be found on refli.be – Arrêté royal fixant les conditions d'agrément supplémentaires en exécution de l'article 17, alinéa 2, de la loi du 3 mai 2024 portant des dispositions en matière du travail du sexe sous contrat de travail

20. Any activity or installation that may affect the environment, public health, or safety must be assessed by Brussels Environment. Service-based businesses with no significant nuisance (e.g. no noise or pollution) typically fall under the lightest regulatory category—Class 3—which only requires a declaration rather than a full permit. However, the exact classification must be confirmed by Brussels Environment. The type of declaration or permit depends on factors such as the heating system, ventilation, waste management, soundproofing, and storage of cleaning products. More information is available at environnement.brussels.

21. Information on obtaining urban planning permits in Brussels is available at: urbanisme.irisnet.be

22. For information on public consultation procedures in urban projects, visit: openpermits.brussels

23. Belgian banks use various databases for client screening, such as World-Check, Dow Jones Fictive, Dow Jones Risk and Compliance, and Moody's.

24. The full practical guide for self-employed sex workers is available at: utsopi.be

25. Information on the Basic Banking Service and application procedures is available at the Federal Economy Service: economie.fgov.be

26. For municipal tax regulations on sex work spaces:

- Schaerbeek: Taxe sur les lieux de prostitution en vitrine – Exercices 2023 à 2025 (29 March 2023), available at: 1030.be
- Saint-Josse-ten-Noode: Taxe sur les immeubles ou parties d'immeubles appelées carrées (20 December 2020), available at: sjtn.brussels
- Ville de Bruxelles: Taxe sur les locaux abrités en maison de rendez-vous (3 October 2022), available at: bruxelles.be

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**“ Decriminalisation must go
hand in hand with access to adequate
work spaces, care, regularisation,
and ending stigmatisation. ”**

