



## Netherlands (the)

- Population: 16.8 million
  - GDP per capita (in US dollars): 52,172
  - Constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system
  - Human Development Index (HDI): 0.922 (5<sup>th</sup> rank among 187 countries)
  - Gender Inequality Index (GII): 0.062 (7<sup>th</sup> rank among 147 countries)
  - Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): Score of 87 on a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean)
  - Founding member of the European Member since 1952.
- No official national statistics on prostitution that gauge the prevalence of prostitution in the country. The Netherlands would count between 20,000 to 30,000 prostituted persons working full-time (*Fondation Scelles*, 2013). There are between 4,000 and 7,000 prostituted persons in Amsterdam. 674 licensed brothels as of 2014, including 15 of which in Amsterdam.
- National regulatory approach since 2000. According to Article 273F of the Criminal Code, persons who choose to prostitute themselves have the same rights as others workers, while those who coerce or exploit prostituted persons should be severely penalized (up to 18 years in prison). Municipalities are primarily responsible for regulating sex trafficking within their borders. In the vast majority of these communities, prostitution is regulated through brothel permits. The purchase of sexual services is not punished unless the prostituted person is a minor.
- Since 2009, a bill designed to address the shortcomings of the 2000 law has been continuously postponed. In October 2015, the government submitted a bill to the Lower House, which is awaiting approval by the Senate.
- Since reforms of the regulatory approach system have yet to be implemented, municipalities, particularly Amsterdam, have taken the initiative to put additional measures in place to combat exploitation.
- During the spring of 2015, the city of Amsterdam began the process of closing a number of licensed establishments windows in the red light district, resulting in the development of a prostitution window self-management model.

- In 2014, 294 police investigations on human trafficking resulted in 151 convictions (compared to 2013, with 253 investigations yet only 170 convictions (*U.S. Department of State*, July 2015).
- Country of origin, transit and destination for victims of sexual trafficking.
- The majority of victims are of Dutch nationality (30% in 2014) with most other identified victims being of Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish or Hungarian nationality.

In early 2015, in a television survey on prostitution (broadcasted NPO3), the representative of the Dutch public prosecutors acknowledged the failure of the legalization and claimed 70% of prostituted persons in the window were under duress. In 2012, the police estimated this figure to be 55% (*Bottenberg*, 2012). In the same television survey, the reporter claimed that 80% of prostituted persons were under duress. These figures immediately provoked controversy and debate. A petition signed by “sex workers” was even launched by the prostituted blogger Felicia Anna.

### **A Shortage of Data to Understand the Phenomenon**

While the Netherlands legalized prostitution in 2000 in order to better manage it, there are no precise figures that allow us to understand the extent of this phenomenon; as no figures exist on the number of victims in trafficking, illegal establishments, nor victims within the legal institutions. According to a survey of Dutch municipalities by Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek in Documentatiecentrum (WODC - Research and documentation center to access public policies of the Ministry of Security and Justice), in all sectors of prostitution<sup>1</sup> in 2014, only 15% of municipalities were able to present an accurate estimate of the phenomenon. Additionally, 23% of municipalities have no policy in this area and therefore, no quantitative understanding of the phenomenon.

#### ***Prostitution: less legal and less visible***

The same survey shows that the number of licensed establishments fell by nearly 50% in recent years: with 674 establishments in 2014 down from 1,127 in 2006. Within this category, prostitution windows are the most affected: 195 in 2014 down from 507 in 2006. However, there is an increase in less visible forms of prostitution -- escorting agencies, for example, rose from 81 in 2006 to 125 in 2014.

In an attempt to acquire a more precise understanding of this domain, more than 28,000 Internet advertisements for prostitution services were analyzed but have yet to produce a reliable estimate. They do show, however, that these 28,000 ads are connected to nearly 9,000 unique phone numbers, which could correspond to a smaller number of prostituted persons, about 20% engaged in both the legal and illegal sector of prostitution.

This insidious development is largely related to the development of the Internet, as well as the reinforcement of police supervision in licensed establishments and the emergence of new regulations introduced by municipalities (registration of prostituted persons, closing of

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<sup>1</sup> The prostitution sector includes licensed establishments, legal establishments without licenses located in communities that are governed by a licensing system, and illegal prostitution.

windows...). The emergence of unlicensed prostitution also reveals the law's inability to completely supervise and control prostitution.

### ***Innumerable Victims of Trafficking***

According to the report of Coördinatie Mensenhandel (CoMenshae - National Coordination of action against human trafficking), the number of identified potential victims has risen to 1561 in 2014 (including all forms of trafficking). This clear increase (9%) following the sharp decline in 2013, registers 1,437 victims compared to 1,711 victims in 2012. Is this a result of new developments in prostitution or of an improved identification policy? According to the National Rapporteur Corinne Dettmeijer-Vermeulen, "the increase in number of registered potential victims says nothing about the global scale of the human trafficking phenomenon in the Netherlands. For example, it is possible that the identification agencies have become more skilled in identifying victims and registering cases of trafficking" (*National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking and Sexual Violence against Children*, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

As in previous years, the large majority of victims are women, (out of 1,315, 85% are women), 77% of which have been exploited in the sex industry. Additionally, as in previous years, the majority of victims are Dutch nationals: 30% in 2014 (32% in 2013), making the Netherlands the leading country of the five origin countries, followed by Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary. The 2014 figures also show a decrease in number of African victims. Contrary to previous years, Nigeria is no longer one of the top five countries of origins of victims. It is hard to know, however, if this is a sign of a true decrease or rather an increased shift to illegal activity.

### ***Increasingly Young Victims***

In 2014, 216 victims of loverboys<sup>2</sup> were registered. This represents an increase from the previous year (196 identified victims in 2013), but all signs indicate that this figure continues to be largely under-estimated. The majority of victims are minors or young adults: 31 had been between the ages of 21 and 23, 59 between the ages of 18 and 21, 78 between the ages of 15 and 17, and 14 under 14 years old. Over the course of the past five years, 432 minors between 16 and 17 years of age were identified as victims of sex trafficking, and 169 children under the age of 16 (the youngest being 11).

## **The Exploitation of Minors: A Recurring Crisis**

Beyond these alarming assessments, many recent reports by the Dutch authorities have emphasized the young people's vulnerability to this violence and exploitation. A report by the Ombudsman<sup>3</sup> of Children states that 1 in 5 young people were victims of sexual violence in 2013 (*NL Times*, December 16, 2014). Every year, around 62,000 minors in the Netherlands

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<sup>2</sup> A term that refers to procurers that seduce young girls, take them away from their homes in order to then prostitute them.

<sup>3</sup> Agent with the responsibility to defend the rights of citizens from public authorities in Scandinavian countries (equivalent of mediators in France).

(underage 18) are victims of sexual violence, reports C. Dettmeijer-Vermeulen. However, only 1 in 10 cases were reported to the authorities. According to the National Rapporteur, 32% of minors will experience some form of sexual violence, with girls being at a higher risk: 4 in 10 girls are assaulted versus 2 in 10 boys.

### *Mobilizing Justice*

Since 2013, both investigations and processes related to cases of sexual exploitation of minors have been executed. Many loverboys trials revealed consistent patterns: young Dutch girls between the ages of 15 and 17 are seduced, frequently drugged and given alcohol and prostituted via the Internet and escorting websites in the suburbs of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Limburg,... Additionally, many clients of underage victims were taken to trial in 2015. While the criminal code penalizes clients of underage prostituted persons with up to 4 years in prison and a fine of 4<sup>th</sup> category crime for clients of minors between the ages of 16 and 17, only 87 individuals were prosecuted between 2000 and 2014 while 90 men were indicted in 2015.

This is in part due to the strong impact of the Valkenburg affair, judged by the Maastricht tribunal during June and July 2015. The story began in October 2014 with the police finding a 16-year-old girl (a run away) in a hotel bathroom in Limburg where she had been prostituted by her presumed *loverboy*. Locked in this room for 10 days, the young girl had been prostituted to eight men a day. Of all the clients, only one of those men was concerned by her age and requested to see her passport. After this request was refused, the client left the premises but failed to notify the authorities. By the analysing the loverboy's cellphones, the 80 men were identified. The parents of the victim said, "clients of minors would think twice, if they were aware that they can be prosecuted for having sex with a minor and that they could have to pay fines" (*NL Times*, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015). The prosecutor, determined to not let these acts go unpunished, announced to journalists during the investigation that the police would search for the suspects at their homes.

The suicide of two presumed clients (in February and March 2015) followed interrogations and brought attention back to the story. Consequently, the manner in which the interrogations were held their exposure was called into question. The clients had been assigned a psychologist to help them cope with the "pressure" of the investigations, however, of the 80 presumed clients, only 29 were examined. At the end of trial, the prosecutor apologized for remarks made to the clients, infuriating parents of the victim: "you have compassion for the perverts who deliberately go looking for young girls. Where is that compassion for us and our daughter?" (*NL Times*, August 7<sup>th</sup> 2015).

Moreover, the severities of the punishments are not always as strict as mandated by the law. In other words, the law is not always fully enforced. The loverboy was found guilty of trafficking humans and sentenced to only 2 years in prison. For the clients, the court considered that while the suspects had certainly had relations with the victim (most clients admitted to having had sex with the victim), they did not explicitly seek to have sexual relations with a minor. Three suspects were sentenced to 4 to 6 months in prison with three months of probation and others were sentenced to one day in prison and community service hours. These punishments were very moderate, especially considering the penalties stated in the law.

### ***Mobilizing Government***

The National Rapporteur was outraged by the leniency of these penalties and the sympathy shown to the clients. She stated in a November 2015 report that it is urgent to “implicate the client” (*National Rapporteur*, 2015). 432 minors between ages of 16 and 17 and 169 children under the age of 16 were identified as victims. Assuming that each of these children had at least one paid sexual relation with an adult, just under 600 individuals should have been arrested. However, since 2000, only 61 convictions have been made. That being said, the rapporteur explains that traffickers of minors are just as responsible as the clients of minors. She therefore demanded that the court be more strict in its judgments and apply sanctions to reflect the gravity of the crime (the penalties range up to 4 years in prison).

The National Rapporteur’s reaction is even more critical because, for several years, the fight against the sexual exploitation of children, especially that of young girls by loverboys, has been a concern of the Dutch government. C. Vermeulen-Dettmeijer called for improvements in the identification and protection of victims in September 2014: “Victims of loverboys are victims of human trafficking and should be treated as such” (*Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence Against Children*, September 2014). In 2015, the global action plan to combat sex trafficking for the period of 2011-2014 was renewed. It provides three lines of action: 1) educate girls about sexual exploitation and promote their independence; 2) improve the overall approach to the fight against loverboys; 3) improve the support and protection of victims. A committee, chaired by Deputy Naima Azough, was also established to develop assistance programs tailored to victims of loverboys and traffickers, particularly young vulnerable girls placed in institutions and homes. Additionally, the committee has prepared an action plan in conjunction with the National Orientation Mechanism and government plan: “*Hun verleden is niet hun toekomst*” (Their past is not their future).

### **The Unresolved Reform**

Since 2009, a bill addressing the regulation of prostitution and the fight against abuses in the sex industry (Wet regulerend prostitutie en bestrijding misstanden seksbranche - WRP) has been going back and forth between the two houses<sup>4</sup>. Adopted by the Lower House (Tweede Kamer) of Parliament in 2011, it has been repeatedly rejected by the Senate/Upper House (Eerste Kamer). The dispute concerns the registration of prostituted persons, which is considered an invasion of privacy and the client’s responsibility, which would violate Dutch law. This gridlock was finally broken in May 2013 when the Senate adopted a motion presented by Senator Strik, and sent part of the proposed law to the government for the amendment process (that being the demand to remove the clause enforcing the registration of prostituted persons and the obligation of clients to verify the registration of the prostituted

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<sup>4</sup> See chapters “Netherlands (The)”, in Fondation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (under the direction of), *Rapport mondial sur l’exploitation sexuelle - La prostitution au cœur du crime organisé*, Economica Ed., 2011; in Fondation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (under the direction of), *Sexual Exploitation - Prostitution and Organized Crime*, Economica Ed., 2012 ; in: Fondation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (under the direction of), *Sexual Exploitation – A growing menace*, Economica Ed., 2013.

person). The Minister of Security and Justice announced that the amended bill was almost ready and hoped that it would be put into effect on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014.

### ***Strength and Weaknesses: Supporters and Opponents***

Meanwhile, lobbying has not stopped. Repeated appeals for reform of the law have been sent to the parliament. In February 2013, the mayor of Amsterdam, Eberhard van der Laan, expressed his support for the bill in a letter to the Minister of Security, Justice Ivo Opstelten (*Dutch News*, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013). In his 2015 presentation before parliament on the WODC report, the Minister of Security and Justice, Ard van der Steur, reiterated the need to unify the regulations at the national level to improve supervision and control of illegal prostitution.

Some parliamentary members, however, have attempted to impose a program to penalize clients of prostituted persons, with or without coerced conditions. In February 2013, two deputies (Myrthe Hilkens of Partij van de Arbeid - PVDA and Gert-Jan Segers of Christen Unie) went to Sweden to study the effects of the prohibition of the purchase of sexual services and the Swedish model. In October 2014, deputies of PVDA, Socialistische Partij and Christen Unie, proposed a law that aimed to penalize clients of coerced prostituted persons (up to 4 years in prison or a 20,000 €/21,662 US\$ fine). The objective, explained G.-J. Segers, one of the deputies behind of this initiative, “is not to fill prisons with clients of prostituted persons, but to encourage them to be more cautious. A woman covered in bruises offering her services for 10 €... that shows that something isn’t right” (*Ecpm.info*, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2014).

### ***From One Proposed Law to Another***

In March 2014, the government proposed a new proposed law to parliament. It proposed:

- The establishment of a unique, national licensing system for all establishments and all forms of prostitution (independent prostituted persons, escorts, prostitution in the home...). The objective being to remove of the disparities that exist between regions and municipalities, as well as to improve the visibility and regulation of prostitution;
- The implementation of national standards for brothel operators;
- Obligation of clients to verify that the prostituted persons they encounter are more than 21 years of age; sanctions (up to one year of imprisonment or 20,000 €/ 21,662 US\$ fine) are expected for clients of prostituted persons under 21. This measure replaces the clause that sought to raise the minimum legal age for prostituted persons from 18 to 21 in the previous bill. Similarly, brothel operators will be subject to penalties if they employ prostituted persons less than 21 years of age.
- The bill was brought before the lower chamber in October 2015 and is currently waiting to be included in the agenda in the upper Chamber.

### ***A Little Help from the Court of Justice of the European Union***

The judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in October 2015 could potentially accelerate the course of the parliamentary process. The Dutch Council of State summoned the CJEU to resolve a dispute between the city of Amsterdam and a brothel operator. In short, the Amsterdam mayor denied a brothel operator permission to open two new brothels. This refusal was based on several police reports stating that the Hungarian and Bulgarian prostituted persons renting rooms near this brothel operator, “*could not*

*communicate in a language understood during the preliminary interview process” by the said operator. “The management of the existing prostitute windows could thus not be organized in such a way to prevent abuse. For this reason, it is hard to believe that M.H. could ensure that no criminal offences would be committed against prostituted persons in these new prostitute windows (...)” (Official Journal of the European Union, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2015).*

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, the CJEU decided on this matter: an owner who rents out windows to prostituted persons must be able to speak with its tenants in a common language (Dutch, English, Spanish, German) in order to prevent abuse. This judgment not only supports the municipal policy on prostitution in Amsterdam, but, in a way, puts pressure on the Dutch Parliament to strengthen its laws on prostitution.

### **Cities Anticipate Legal Changes**

As the Parliament was slow to endorse the reform, several cities took the initiative to implement some of the measure included in the first bill to better combat exploitation and strengthen the position of prostituted persons. Alkmaar, for instance, has already increased the legal minimum age for engaging in prostitution from 18 years of age to 19. Since 2011, Utrecht has registered window prostitutes maintenance and medical checks every 2 years and, as of December 2013, set the minimum age of entry into prostitution as 21 (*National Rapporteur*, 2013). Amsterdam has also strengthened the regulations for obtaining licenses. As of 2016, Groningen has implemented a new regulation: obligatory records on prostituted persons, minimum age set at 21 years of legal age, penalizing the patrons of illegal prostitution...

#### ***Utrecht Reconsiders its Red-Light District***

Some cities have taken more drastic measures: the municipality of Utrecht closed the last of the licensed establishments in the Zandpad district in July 2013. This included closing 162 floating windows (on barges), which were largely owned by the operating company Wegra (which was stripped of its licensing deals due to suspicions of human trafficking). Many criticized the brutality of this decision. The closing of windows brought people to the streets, as nearly 300 prostituted persons were now in danger of falling into the illegal sector. As a result, in 2013, the police tallied 14 illegal establishments after the closure of the Zandpad district as opposed to the three they tallied in 2012. Consequently, in December 2013, the city launched the possibility of a new prostitution district: 162 new settlements (to match the exact number of windows closed in 2013), equipped with surveillance cameras and proper lighting, in order to ensure the safest conditions for prostituted persons. After several delays due to conditions imposed by the municipality, the Council finally adopted the creation of the “Nieuwe Zandpad” in September 2015. The opening is projected for 2017, at the earliest. Additionally, in April 2015, a call for collaboration with prostituted persons, operators of prostitution establishments, residents and investors was introduced.

#### ***Amsterdam: Stepping Back***

In 2014, Amsterdam reported 15 official prostitute establishments (clubs and private spaces), 12 escorting agencies, and 402 windows (*Gemeente Amsterdam(b)*, 2015). For the

mayor Eberhard van der Laan, “according to precise estimates, 10% of prostituted persons came here through human trafficking. There are between 4,000 and 7,000 prostituted persons in Amsterdam. This signifies that we are responsible for the rape of 400 people each night” (*Reformatorisch Dagblad*, November 13<sup>th</sup> 2013). Since 2007, the municipality has been renovating windows in the famous Red Light District (within the framework of Project 1012). The goal is to transition from 482 to 290 windows. In 2014, 80 windows had been closed however with numerous objections. In 2013, the owners and operators of several brothels filed an appeal against the municipal policy and the new land use plan. In July 2013, however, the municipality obtained reason and the State Council rejected the appeals. In April 2015, hundreds of prostituted persons took to the streets to protest against the closures of their windows, shouting “Stop closing our windows!” “Don’t save us, save our windows!” “You are stealing our job!” A few weeks later, activists of the movement PROUD (Dutch Union for Sex Workers) occupied three windows of the Red Light District in protest. The purpose was to protest against the closure of three facilities that were closed due to maladministration (their licenses were also suspended and with the new controls, it takes 2 to 6 months to obtain a new one). Following the protest, the city of Amsterdam expanded the Project 102 and reduced the number of planned closures. In the end, the Red Light District should count 351 windows (instead of 290); 46 windows remain open, which will include 15 windows managed by the prostituted persons themselves (*Iamsterdam.com*, November 20<sup>th</sup> 2015).

### ***The Self-Management Model: A Valid Standard?***

The idea of self-directed brothels has indeed been central to the debate on prostitution in the Netherlands. The first cooperative of prostituted persons was established in Utrecht in August 2013, a few weeks after the closure of the floating windows in the Zandpad district. This organization, named Macha’s, after the word “macho,” consisted of a dozen prostituted persons, defending a model of independence with hopes of reopening self-managed brothels. This project ultimately failed.

In spring 2015, Amsterdam initiated a self-management project in prostitution windows. Within a few months, a study to test the project’s potential feasibility was conducted in collaboration with prostituted persons and the humanitarian organization HVO—Querido, giving rise to the Eigen Raam Project (Project Own Window). The project envisions the creation of 15 prostitution windows, and 4 buildings in the Red Light District, accommodating anywhere from 40 to 50 prostituted persons. Spaces will be owned by an independent foundation in which the managing board will consist mainly of prostituted persons. The city will have no involvement in the operation of the business or management areas.

The goal of the project is to allow prostituted persons to avoid intermediaries, to improve their security, to modernize the sex industry and to reduce the stigmatization that is associated with prostitution. Since the project was announced, it has been accepted by the Ministry of Security and of Justice. That being said, there are some who are opposed to the plan, many of whom participate in the industry itself. “Only 15 prostituted persons are interested in Project Own Window,” commented the prostituted blogger, Felicia Anna. However, the study conducted to evaluate the project’s feasibility claims that it has received support from a



number of prostituted persons. The opening of the first establishment is scheduled for mid-2016.

The Netherlands will be the leader in the fight against modern slavery; at least this is the assertion made in the 2014 report by the Walk Free Foundation (The Global Slavery Index), which ranked the country first, worldwide in this field. In fact, the Netherlands has taken real action to protect victims and prevent trafficking. The number of police investigations increases each year (294 in 2014 up from 253 in 2013). Protection programs for victims, especially child victims, have developed. Campaigns are conducted among the general public as well as to clients of prostituted persons to help them recognize the characteristics or signs of human trafficking. In 2014, nearly 13 million US\$ were to be allocated over 4 years to create a national network of assistance and rehabilitation programs for prostituted persons (*Dutch News*, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014). All actors involved have noted the ineffectiveness of the 2000 bill. After years of discussion and debate, however, this text continues to go unreformed and reforming bills continue to be passed back and forth between the Chambers and the government. It is thus left to the municipalities to find solutions to their problems concerning prostitution and criminal activity. That being said, the changes in Amsterdam's politics, a leading city in the debate on prostitution, and their experimentation with self-managed prostitution could mark an important step. However, are these measures enough to fight back against sexual exploitation?

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