

# Prostitution: a view from the other side of the window

Prostitution, migration, urban planning, social status and working conditions: the new book by Brussels-based historian and writer Hans Vandecandelaere covers a wide spectrum of themes. *Don't Ask Me Why* is a study of the prostitution business and the working conditions affecting female sex workers in Belgium, including foreign nationals.

## Interview with writer Hans Vandecandelaere

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Why such interest or special focus on prostitution?

**Hans Vandecandelaere** – My book's title is, funnily enough, *En vraag niet waarom* (*Don't Ask Me Why*). I think that's the big question that every sex worker keeps getting asked: "So, why do you do this job?" In the end, she'll just reply with "Stop asking me why, will you!" I get the same treatment because journalists constantly ask me the same question: "Why did you write this book?" (*Laughter*). Anyway, to be serious for a moment, when I wrote my first book on migration in Brussels, I was already doing my research in Rue d'Aerscot in Brussels (the red-light district). Although I had been intrigued at the time by this subject area, my approach to it was clearly no different from that of many other researchers, inasmuch as I wouldn't speak with the sex workers themselves. So, this means you opt for the main, traditional research methods, such as going to speak with the police and health-sector professionals, but you are less likely to dare to have a conversation with the sex workers themselves. As I said, this subject started to fascinate me as far back as eight years ago, and I just thought there should be a much more anthropological approach, interviewing the sex workers as a journalist right where they work, "on their beds" so to speak.

In fact, you describe a somewhat unusual method in this book. Can you tell us a little bit about how you managed to persuade them to talk to you?

The book provides an insight into all branches of the sex industry, from street prostitution

and the windows on one hand, to the digital phenomenon of prostitution by webcam on the other. You need to apply a separate methodology to some degree for each branch, but, when it came to the windows, I developed what I call in my book the "*twee-minuten-klant-strategie*", which means acting as a client for the two minutes needed to make it into the worker's bedroom before openly revealing the nature of my "visit": "I'm actually called Hans, and I haven't come here for that. I've come about my book."

But weren't the prostitutes afraid? You have to admit, seeing a client like that is a bit odd. Did you have to pay for these "visits"?

No, they weren't scared, just a little intrigued. For the girls in the windows, I'd say that, 80% of the time, I did have to pay for the interview, because let's not forget that they conduct their business in a really expensive rental sector. For a 12-hour shift in Rue d'Aerscot in Brussels, they'll pay 250 euros a day.

You mean that the prostitute pays the 250 euros for the 12 hours to the landlord?

Not to the landlord, no – to the window operator.

We also find out in the book that the nationality of the women behind the windows has changed a great deal over the years. In the past, there seemed to have been many Belgian and French prostitutes. But the arrival of foreign nationals in the 1990s brought a diversity to the face of window prostitution. There's a lovely turn



### En vraag niet waarom: Sekswork in België (Don't Ask Me Why: Sex Work In Belgium)

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of phrase in the book about the windows being mirrors that reflect the economic crises prevailing in the women's countries of origin. The shifting nationality of window prostitutes therefore seems to depend on which countries are most affected by economic turmoil.

Yes, I think that gross national product also plays a significant role in the prostitution industry: the higher it is in the host country, the greater the likelihood that this country will attract prostitution. And that's where you'll find a link between prostitution and economic crisis occurring elsewhere. The migration we saw in the 1990s was significant in terms of window prostitution in Belgium. Prostitutes in the early 1990s were still mainly Belgian, but by the end of the decade the whole situation had been turned on its head, with the majority of them now foreign nationals mainly coming from eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as Latin America and Africa. Then there was another shift in the noughties towards home-based prostitution and massage parlours.

We acknowledge this shift and the arrival of a new population on the prostitution scene, but where did the Belgian prostitutes go? Did they disappear off the face of the earth? Did they stop touting for business?

I just don't know. Good question.

Prostitution is generally considered to be illegal in Belgium, but you explain in this book that this isn't the case. The illegality lies in the exploitation or promotion of this occupation, and not in the prostitution itself.

It's actually the facilitation of prostitution that is unlawful. And so, in Belgium, we have an abolitionist law which says that you can lawfully be a sex worker. But while this isn't illegal, any third parties engaged in the business are breaking the law and are liable to prosecution. The rule is that money cannot be earned by one party on the back of the prostitution activity of another party. This situation has repercussions for the status of sex workers because while a prostitute may enter into a contract of employment, she has to play around with fictitious job titles, such as "masseuse" or "waitress", so as to avoid divulging

that she is a prostitute. Why is that? Because when you have a contract of employment that refers to prostitution, the prostitute's boss automatically becomes a "pimp" in the eyes of the law, and he then runs the risk of prosecution. The other viable option for prostitutes is to adopt self-employed status, but then the same problem will arise when they have recourse to the third-party services of, say, a web designer or an accountant – they all will be treated as benefiting from prostitution, and that's illegal.

Who are the winners and losers in this system?

The system definitely has its losers. Let's start with the sex workers themselves: without formal status, they cannot gain access to social or medical insurance cover. Then there are the bona fide operators who must live in constant fear of prosecution. I think that bona fide operators have a really important role to play in guaranteeing the workers' well-being. That said, you might well ask yourself how many of those women actually want a recognised social status. To my mind, a vast number of them would reply that they are happy with the system as it stands because it allows them to earn "black" money. And that'll do nicely, thank you!

Is it really black money (undeclared income)?

Often it is, yes, it's black money, but that's not always the case everywhere. In the world of the webcam, for example, the workers can download forms and sheets from the online platform for submitting their tax returns. Workers in the pornography industry also operate under artist status, but a major part of the business clearly remains undeclared. Personally, I'm all in favour of making this sector much more transparent through partial decriminalisation.

Would that mean legalisation and putting an end to this abolitionist policy?

No, not legalisation. Prostitution has been legalised in the Netherlands, and in Germany too. But legalisation implies a desire to create – or indeed invent – brand new laws just for the sake of formalising this single profession only. Decriminalising prostitution

entails maintaining those provisions of criminal law that are absolutely vital, such as measures to combat human trafficking and child prostitution, but the remaining features of the profession can be transposed into the existing legislation, that is to say, employment legislation. Therefore, nothing actually needs to be invented.

Isn't that already the case right now in Belgium? Aren't we already in a system where the public authorities, in particular in Antwerp, are in fact trying to codify the situation by compelling people to register?

What the City of Antwerp is doing in the Schipperskwartier (the red-light district) is simply organising the district and ensuring the quality of the bars. And so the operators are kept on a tight leash, and they can't afford to have a criminal record or deviate from the rules. However, in relation to undeclared work, the City of Antwerp reacts with: "that's none of our business. It's a federal matter, and it's up to social inspection services to enforce the law".

What can the local authorities do to improve working conditions? In your book, for example, you clearly explain the change that took place locally in 2011 in Schaerbeek, the Brussels municipality which decided to introduce the requirement that all bars must apply for a certificate of compliance – an idea that was originally developed 10 years earlier by the City of Antwerp.

First of all, there's no governance for the other sectors of prostitution. Anything to do with local governance is confined to managing street or window prostitution. The background to this is that, after the migration in the 1990s, the districts with windows had completely outgrown their original perimeters. There were many instances of nuisance but also, to some degree, problems associated with human trafficking. The red-light districts were expanding. The municipal authorities decided to take measures to reduce the public space and regulate it more effectively, and Antwerp was at the forefront of the change, delineating the zone of activity and inventing the compliance certificate. To be issued with a certificate, the workplace in question was required to cover a certain

surface area in square metres and to have sanitation facilities, hot and cold water, etc. If you compare, let's say, work premises in Schaerbeek from before to now, conditions have improved hugely.

You also refer to French tourists who regularly come to Belgium in search of prostitutes. It's interesting to read how France applied a firmer policy under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, which resulted in French "punters" regularly making the trip to Belgium.

Sarkozy himself launched the measures to criminalise the clients, with France witnessing the overhaul of the legislation in 2014. Sweden was the first country to introduce a "neo-abolitionist" law. The Swedish government is still spouting nonsense now, claiming that prostitution figures have fallen massively, when in fact there are no substantiated figures, and the prostitution scene there is considerably more dangerous than elsewhere.

What can be said about the prostitution laws worldwide?

Most countries apply prohibitionist laws which criminalise the three parties involved, namely the sex worker, the client and the third-party facilitators. The United States, Russia and the countries of the Middle East apply this system. Even Thailand – a country with a highly developed sex industry – follows this model. Europe, for the most part, operates a pro-abolition system, like in Belgium. The neo-abolitionist movement is gaining popular momentum due to the efforts made at European level by a large lobby campaigning for the European Commission to criminalise the clients. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, Iceland, France and Canada apply this system. By contrast, we then have the legalisation system operating in Germany, the Netherlands, Greece and Turkey.

Advocates of abolitionism will tell you that prostitution isn't an occupation, that it isn't work, it's exploitation.

The first argument that abolitionists use is that prostitution is a form of violence against women, because they see men as nothing

more than sexual predators who objectify women. That doesn't make sense, because sex workers offer a service and aren't a commodity to be sold. Then their second argument is that freedom of choice doesn't come into play, because it's always the woman's precarious situation that leads her into prostitution. I personally promote a more subtle theory. In terms of freedom of choice, yes, socio-economic development may be lagging behind, and certain pressures or cultural factors may imply the absence of absolute freedom, but it's a little too easy to say that prostitution isn't a free choice, when so many people in all kinds of sectors could be described as working against their will. These women do it because this job allows them to earn more money and to create other freedoms for themselves. Besides, talking with the prostitutes makes you realise that there are, in fact, quite a number of middle-class women among them, and therefore extreme precariousness is not the primary cause of their entry into prostitution.

But what drives this middle class to engage in prostitution?

Very often, you'll meet people who already had jobs in eastern Europe, but these jobs were in a traditional, poorly paid sector. These women will have come from the middle classes. What drives them is quite simply the desire to make more money and to have social mobility. So, we have to stop stereotyping prostitutes: the very existence of a middle-class prostitute shows, amongst other things, that prostitution does not come down to stereotyping. That's what I found so fascinating about prostitution, because you stand at a crossroads between various contemporary issues affecting our societies, such as issues of migration, ethics, feminism, urban planning and social issues, to name just a few.

One figure reported in the book, which I found very interesting, and which emerges from the work conducted by Assistant Professor Stef Adriaenssens at KU Leuven (Catholic University of Leuven), values the prostitution business in Belgium at 870 million euros, 42% of which is attributed to the escort and home-based prostitution market and only 17% to the prostitution windows. That's a huge figure, don't you agree?

Yes, and my theory is that the prostitution windows are currently in crisis. They now account for a mere 17% of business, although the professor did tell me that this finding doesn't as yet afford us the right to talk of crisis, because a second study is needed to facilitate a comparison. Nevertheless, the tremendous competition from prostitution on the internet or internet-dependent markets, such as the escort sector and massage parlours, are leading to the gradual absorption of the old markets for prostitution, including street and window prostitution.

Is it conceivable that, 20 years down the line, there will no longer be any visible prostitution in European towns and cities?

I really don't know, and this is precisely what people are wondering. Are we going to be part of an implosion in the wake of a crisis in the window prostitution business and internet competition, or are we going to become increasingly intolerant of visible prostitution, as is already the case in many Belgian towns, especially in Wallonia? Let's not forget that Wallonia has watched virtually all of its windows disappear: only six windows are left in Liège, and there's a small district in Seraing. As far as the windows are concerned, I am very pragmatic, and I feel that each neighbourhood should be looked at individually: for some of them, there may well be a legitimate interest in closing them – here, I'm thinking of Saint-Josse near the Gare du Nord in Brussels where conditions have become really harsh due to human trafficking, not to mention the fact that it is a very dense urban area. But there are also other neighbourhoods with these windows that should be left alone, such as in Antwerp or Ghent, areas that present absolute proof that several urban functions can coexist. Antwerp's Schipperskwartier has become a fantastically upmarket, ultra trendy neighbourhood to live in and yet, right on the doorstep, prostitution is happening without any bother or fuss. The future of the towns and cities will also be galvanised through the improved management of working conditions for all of their stakeholders and residents – which also involves having discussions with those at the lower end of the social scale. ●