



Exploratory survey about **MSM and trans* students active in prostitution**

/ sex work in **Brussels-Capital** and beyond.



Presentation of Alias

Since 2009, the non-profit organization Alias has been working with MSM (men who have sex with men) and trans* people active in prostitution/sex work in the Brussels-Capital Region. Alias develops strategies for health promotion, prevention/risk reduction and social inclusion through several participatory projects and the provision of psychosocial and medical services: street work (outreach) in the city and internet proactive contacts on escort websites, healthcare services (STI/HIV testing, vaccinations, PrEP), reception services, collective and community activities, individual follow-up. Alias' offer is completely anonymous and free of charge. Our objective is to meet the needs and accompany the requests of the public. We also offer an expertise on MSM and trans* prostitution to our partners.

More information : www.alias.brussels

Contact us : contact@alias.brussels

Presentation and objectives of the survey

The survey was conducted between July and December 2019 among MSM (men who have sex with men) and trans* students engaged in prostitution /sex work with three goals:

- To establish state of play concerning socio-demographic situation and conditions of activity.
- To identify the psycho-medico-social needs – particularly in terms of sexual health promotion and risk reduction – as well as their difficulties or ease of access to social rights.
- To make Alias and its offer known to this public.

¹ The illustrations are taken from the video clip « escort@student.bxl » made for Alias by Stéphane Leclercq (Mutation Production) ©.

Définitions

Sex work/prostitution: Alias uses the two terms together to reflect the diversity of social realities of the activity, however, sometimes only one term is used in the report and the summary for ease of reading. For the conduct of this survey, the term sex work was chosen to take into account all activities where a sexual and/or sensual service is offered in exchange for material or financial remuneration (escorting, camshow, sugar babies, prostitution, porn actors, etc.).

Methodology

- Review of available and relevant literature
- Questionnaire in 5 languages (French, Dutch, English, Portuguese and Spanish) distributed during 2 and a half months during online sessions on escort websites (N=23), via Facebook groups (N=57) and relays on Instagram accounts (N=4), through Alias activities and contacts of partner associations.
- Semi-directive individual interviews (with a defrayal).

Sample

39 respondents to the questionnaire who reported offering services of a sexual and/or sensual nature, with the exception of a person who is not yet a sex worker and is seeking to begin this activity.

8 semi-structured interviews. The profiles of the individuals are detailed in the research report.

Limits

- The public is difficult to reach because they are subject to stigma. Because the activity is often kept secret, this has been a major impediment to research. It was difficult to find respondents who fit the profile, to find the right places to disseminate the survey and to find social services that were aware of these profiles.
- The questionnaire did not collect information neither on the schoolyear of the respondents nor on how the questionnaire reached them.
- The topic of exit mechanisms and possible disincentives related to sex work was not addressed.
- During the interviews, the form of a face-to-face discussion was also an obstacle to be overcome.

Socio-demographic profile of responding students

- **76.3%** cisgender males and **23.7%** trans* and non-binary persons.
- **81.8%** said they were under 30 years of age.
- **52.6%** of students claim to be homosexual and **89.5%** to be LGBTQI+.
- **21 people** are Belgian, the others come from other European countries or Brazil.
- **43.2%** started the activity several years ago; **24.3%** 1 year ago; **21.6%** less than 6 months ago.

Conditions of sex work activity

- **81.6%** of students are into escorting. The others name their activity as «sex work», «prostitution», «cam girl/boy».
- **97.4%** meet their clients on escort sites; **52.6%** on applications; **26.3%** on social networks.
- **91.9%** of the activity take place at the customer's home, but also at the hotel (**64.9%**), at home or in a car (**37.8%**).
- Their activity is fairly regular: **44.4%** report once or several times a week, and **36.1%** once a month.

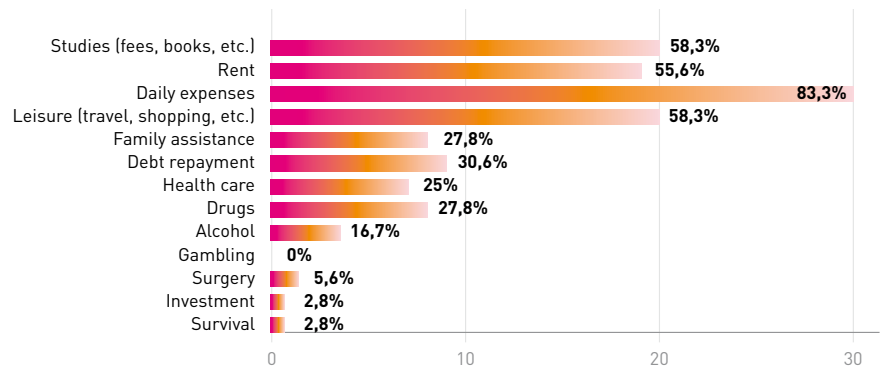


Revenues and Expenses

97.3% of respondents received the money for their services, 16.2% reported receiving materials ("gifts") and 8.1% received drugs. None of the respondents received any money.

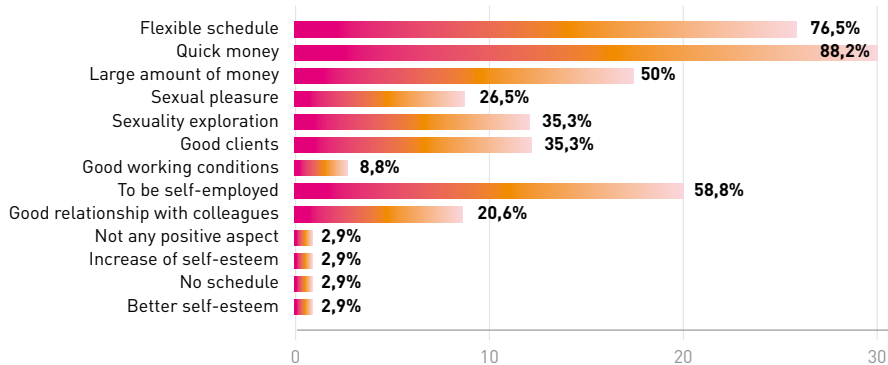
The students explained that they spend the money they receive from sex work first on daily expenses, then on their studies (school fees, books, etc.) and on leisure activities (travel, shopping). 56.6% of respondents receive financial assistance from their family and 48.6% have a student job.

The expenses allowed by the revenues from the activity



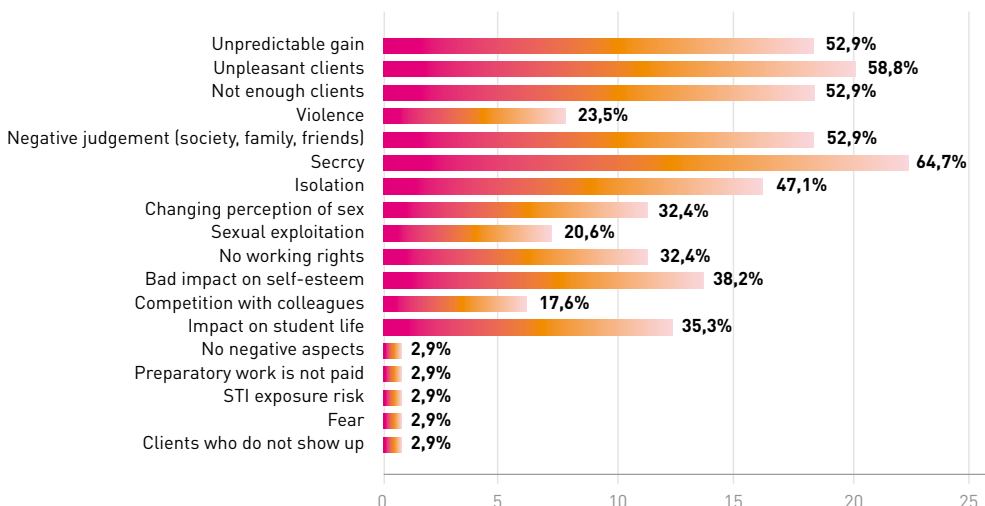
Perceived positive and negative aspects of the activity

Positive aspects



Among the positive aspects mentioned by students, quick money (88.2%), flexible hours (76.5%) and independence (58.8%) were the most common.

Negative aspects



The most frequently mentioned negative aspect is secrecy (64.7%). Even though 63.9% of respondents told someone about their activity in prostitution, it is often only one person in the student's entourage who knows mostly a friend or another sex worker. Only 9.7% told a family member. Other negative aspects related to the activity are unpleasant clients, unpredictable earnings, lack of clients and judgements by relatives and society.



Stigma & secrecy

The individual interviews deepened the different themes approached in the online survey. They specifically put forward the challenges linked to stigma and secrecy around the activity. The non-disclosure of the activity has impacts on multiple areas on the lives of the people who were questioned.

- Missed opportunities in medical care.
- The constraint of meeting clients outside of a share housing (family or flatsharing)
- The lack of support from close relatives (family, friends, other students, etc.).

This generalized secrecy, on multiple levels of their private lives, generates many mechanisms to maintain it, and thus an important mental load and an emotional fatigue.

Interview extract with Rodrigo: « Before, when I used to live alone and I had no money at all, I had 5€ for a whole week ... I used to see clients at home. But now I stopped (...) I share a flat and I can't. I just can't. So either I go at client's place or we go ... I propose to meet next to Luxembourg station (in a hotel) (...) At the time, I was on the website Quartier Rouge. Now, I am not anymore (...) because I am in a house that I share with housemates. And the communication on Quartier Rouge is always through calls. (...) The people who live with me can hear that I am talking about prices (...). »

Interview extract with Ric: « And also, it's difficult for me because I live part of the time at my parents' place in my hometown. And I can't tell them : I am going to Brussels. They will ask me : why now ? (...) When I am in Brussels, I can do whatever I want. I am here, I tell my boyfriend : I have a client now and I'll be back to see you. And he also tells me when he has clients because he's a masseur. So they come to his place, and I wait with him. And he says : I have a client at that time, that day. We tell each other everything.»

Interview extract with Vincent: « I have a good friend who's an escort. We met at uni, we get along really well. And she had confessed it to me... because I had asked her how she made money. And she told me and I said that I was also doing it ! And then we got along super well. It's nice to have a friend so that you can share together. In this environment, it's pretty close, we don't really want to go talk to others if they are not in the same situation. »

Interview extract with Alex: « Yes, it's exhausting. I was already emotionally and physically exhausted before I started, because you cannot exist in this world being a non-binary and queer person, with almost no money, and being full of energy all the time. So I was already exhausted and I am even more now. Because it asks me a lot of time and energy. Because it's a double life ! During the day, I am in an internship and in training and at night, I keep working until midnight or 1 am. The next day, I am up to be at 10 am at work. »

Findings and needs for psycho-medico-social services

- **48.6%** of the respondents reported not knowing of any psycho-medical-social association for sex workers.
- **94.3%** have access to medical services, which are reimbursed by a mutual insurance company, health insurance or medical card for **89.2%**.
- However, **83.8%** do not talk to their doctor about their activity in sex work.
- When asked what services they would like to access, anonymous and free screening, free condom distribution come first, followed by psychological consultations, legal information, social assistance and medical consultations.
- The barriers these students put forward to accessing these services were fear of judgment and fear for their anonymity.