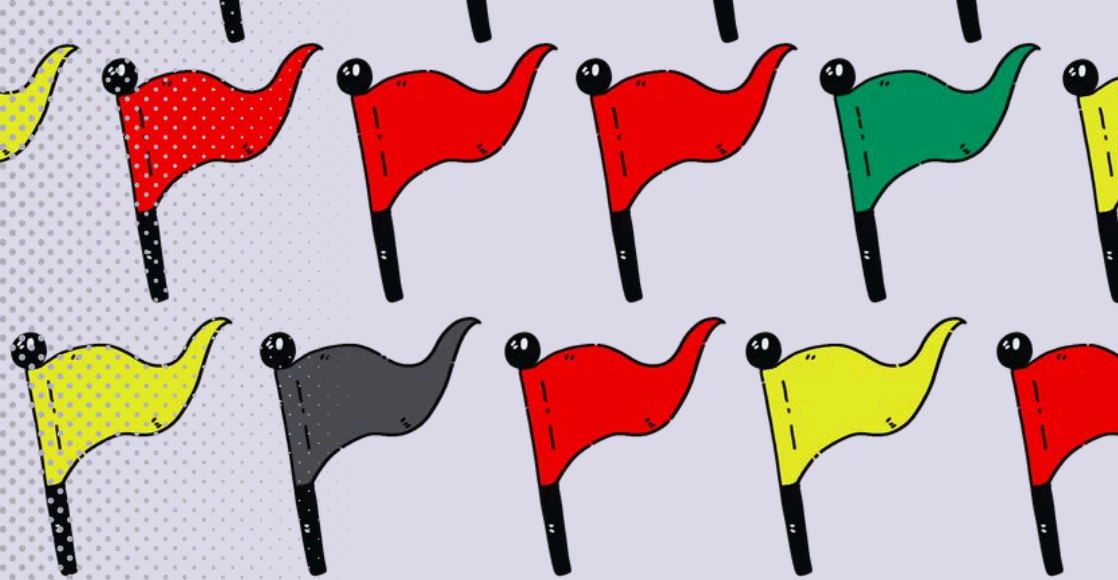
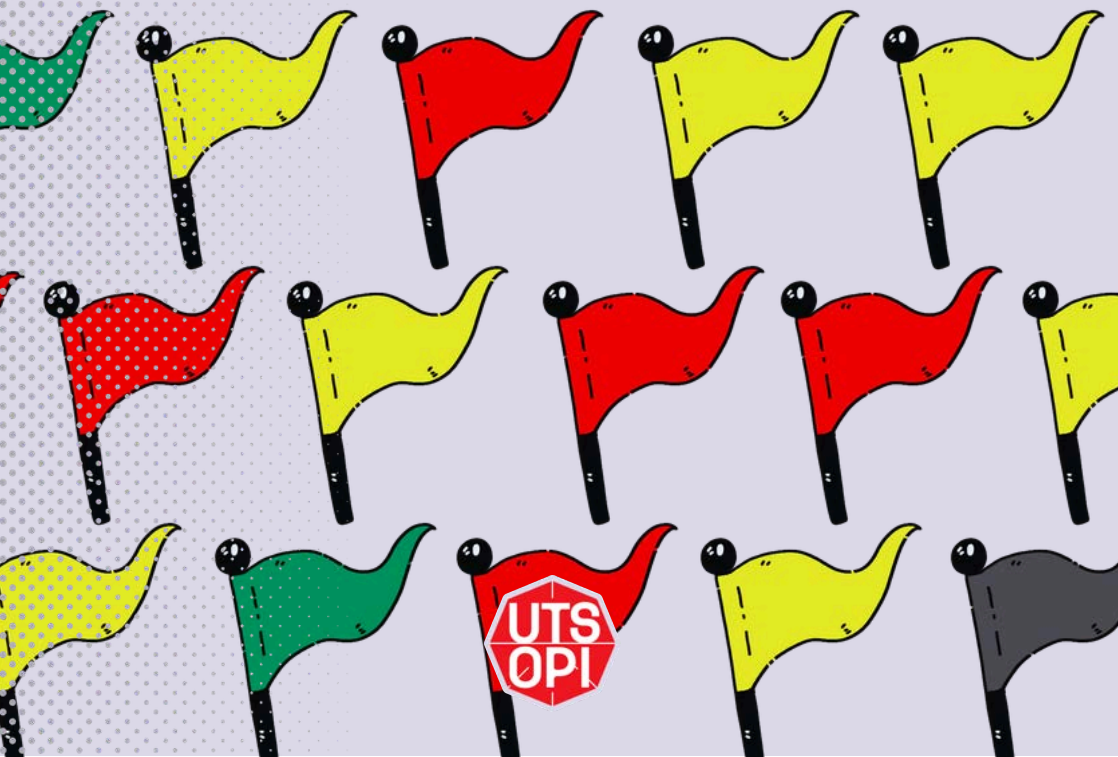




THE SEX WORK FLAG SYSTEM

BY UTSOPI, THE BELGIAN UNION OF SEX WORKERS —



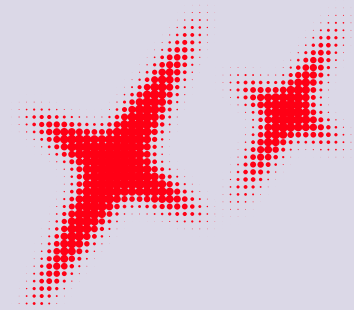


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Colophon

This guide was developed between 2022 and 2026 in response to sex workers' demand for a tool to navigate situations of harmful sexual behaviour.

UTSOPI drew on the Flag System developed by **Sensoa**, the Flemish expertise centre for sexual health. This system uses four colour flags to make sexually transgressive behaviour by adults easier to discuss. It supports tackling harmful sexual behaviour and strengthens prevention policies.

Several meetings with the organization Sensoa preceded the writing of this guide. The guide was further developed in collaboration with the medical-social assistance organizations **Violett** and **Boysproject**. Sensoa reviewed the final version of this guide for approval.

This guide was originally written in Dutch. The original version was made possible thanks to a grant from the Flemish government. Considering the need to raise awareness among beneficiaries and the multilingual and diverse nature of the target audience, it was decided to translate this guide into French and English.



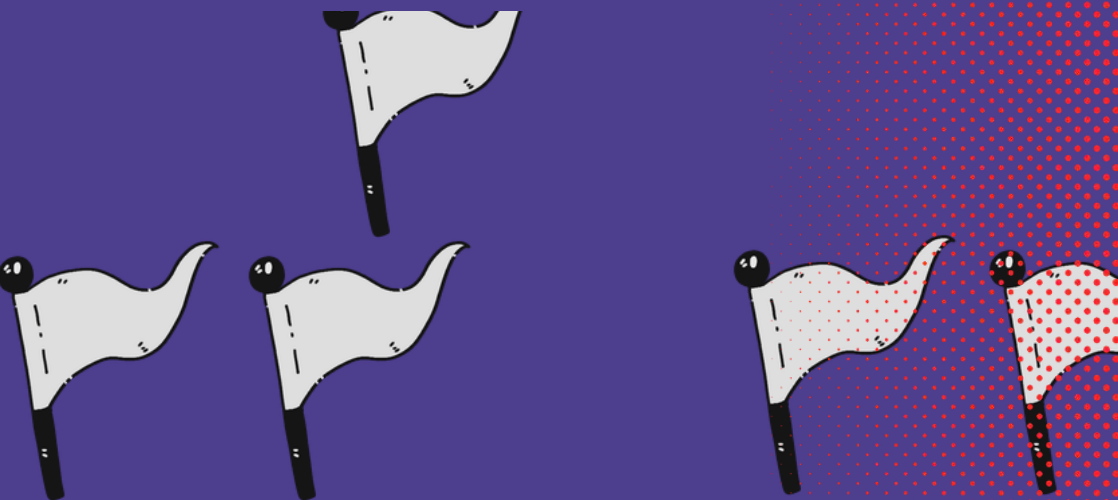
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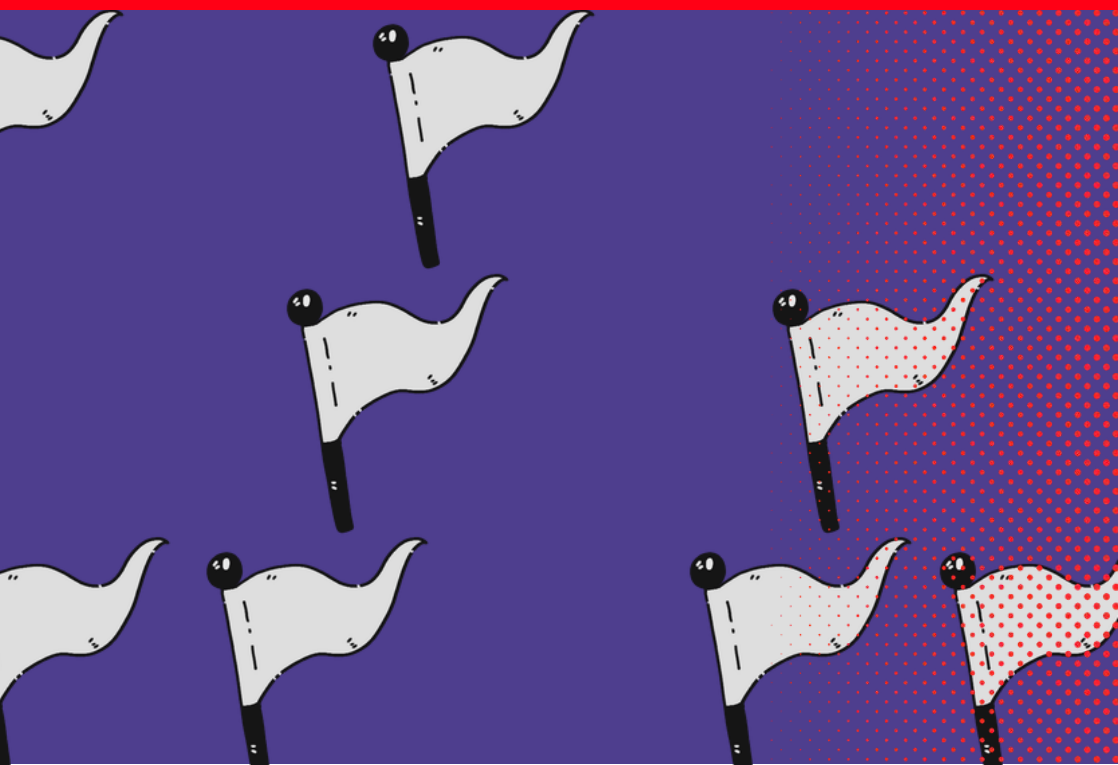
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INTRODUCTION



What is the Flag System?

The **Flag System** is a tool developed by Sensoa, the Flemish expertise centre for sexual health. It helps to assess and understand **harmful sexual behaviour**.

Why do we need it?

The law protects everyone, but it is black and white: something is either legal or illegal. If something happens without your consent, it is always against the law. However, proving the absence of consent is often very difficult, leaving victims without adequate protection or support.

Situations are not always straightforward. It can be unclear whether certain behaviour was harmful or not. In reality, such situations are often complex and exist in many shades of grey.

The Flag System provides a framework to reflect on what exactly happened. It helps assess and better understand situations. Rather than serving as a punitive tool, it offers guidelines for starting a conversation with the other person. It can also help you find the right words to express what you experienced as inappropriate.

It is also important to emphasize that the Flag System is not intended to make judgments about a person or their general behavior. It helps assess behavior within a specific situation or a particular incident. The focus is on what happened at that moment. The goal is to use the Flag System as a basis for discussing what happened.

How does it work?

The system uses colours to indicate whether certain behaviour is appropriate or not.

Green: The behaviour is appropriate and not harmful.

Yellow: The behaviour is somewhat inappropriate and mildly harmful.

Red: The behaviour is inappropriate and significantly harmful.

Black: The behaviour is completely inappropriate and severely harmful.



Please note that the Flag System does not indicate what is legal or illegal. For more information about your rights, please refer to our *Know Your Rights* guide series.

Who is it for?

The Flag System is useful for **anyone involved in sex and intimacy**.

The version of the Flag System you are currently reading is an adaptation of the original Flag System to the context of sex work. Both sex workers and their clients can benefit from approaching boundaries in a conscious and respectful way. Care providers can also use it to initiate conversations with their beneficiaries, as can business owners and others active in the sector.

The Flag System was developed to help you explore and respect your own boundaries, as well as those of others. This approach can help prevent harmful behaviour in the future.

The six criteria of the Flag System for sex workers

The **Flag System** evaluates behaviour based on **six criteria**. To receive a green flag, all criteria must be assessed positively. The more criteria that are violated, the more harmful the behaviour is.

In this guide, the criterion of “equality” from the original Sensoa guide has been replaced with “respectful agreement.” We did this for the following reason: “equality” in the original Sensoa guide refers to whether all parties involved are on equal footing in terms of power, experience, age, and physical, cognitive, or emotional development. Wherever there is an unequal power dynamic, it can be exploited. Sex work, however, involves a transaction between individuals who may or may not be equally experienced or privileged. Equality is less relevant when it comes to a transaction between a sex worker and a client. The emphasis here is therefore not on equality, but on the **explicit and mutual respect for the agreements made**.



1. Consent

Sexual behaviour is okay if all involved clearly agree and feel comfortable.

Consent means that everyone consciously and voluntarily agrees to what is happening. This can be expressed verbally, for example by saying “Yes, that’s what I want,” or non-verbally, for instance by responding positively to someone’s flirting.

To give consent, you first need to

understand what you are agreeing to. Without sufficient information, consent is impossible.

Agreeing to one action does not imply agreement to all others. Consent must always be clear, specific, and can be withdrawn at any time without giving a reason.

Example

You have arranged a meeting with a client online. When you meet them, something feels wrong and you’re uncomfortable. Even though you previously agreed to the date, you are not obliged to continue. You can withdraw your consent at any time, without explanation.

Want to know more?

Belgian criminal law is also based on the principle of consent. Read more in our guide series *Know Your Rights*.



2. Voluntary engagement

Sexual behaviour is okay when there is no pressure or coercion.

Giving consent means making a choice freely, without pressure, blackmail, deception, or coercion. If this is not the case, it is not a voluntary choice.

If you say “no,” this must always be immediately respected. If someone insists that you say “yes”, the choice is not voluntary.

Example

A client wants to French kiss you. You do not want to. The client keeps insisting until you say it's okay, just to put an end to the situation.

It is also possible that you agree because you want to avoid further negative consequences. We call this *secondary loss*: you

give your consent not out of your own free will, but because you're afraid of the consequences if you refuse.

Example

A client asks you for oral sex without a condom. You do not want to, but you agree because the client seems nervous and clearly has a short temper. You agree to avoid an angry reaction. In this situation, there is no voluntary consent.



3. Respectful agreement

Sexual behaviour in the context of sex work is okay when the agreed conditions are respected.

Sex work is work. Like in other jobs, clear agreements should be made between the people involved, and everyone's boundaries should be respected. This is part and parcel of a professional approach.

The sex worker decides what they offer and can change or limit the service if needed. The client knows in advance what the service includes. Both sides understand the rules and agree to follow them.

Example

In many types of sex work, payment is expected before the service. If a client ignores this request and insists on paying at the end, they are not respecting the sex worker's terms.

This principle doesn't only apply to the relationship between a sex worker and a client. It also applies to other professional interactions, for example, between a sex worker and an employer, a driver, or a doctor. These interactions also have a professional character where agreements are

made and respected. It is all the more important that these agreements are respected when there are clear power imbalances, for instance in interactions between a sex worker and the police or an employer.

About stigma

Earlier in this guide, we discussed how differences in age, migration background, gender, social class, and privilege matter less when assessing a situation between a sex worker and a client. After all, sex work is a transaction. It suffices that the agreement is respected.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the stigma surrounding sex work. This stigma can discourage sex workers from seeking help when something goes wrong, out of fear or shame. It can also lead to their complaints, whether to a doctor or the police, being dismissed or not taken seriously. In some cases, services even tell sex workers that they put themselves at risk and are therefore responsible for what

happened. In situations of harmful behaviour, sex workers are often left to face it alone.

As a result, the power dynamic can still be a factor. The moment a client shows abusive behavior or uses violence, there is a chance that the sex worker will not seek or find help due to stigma. That is special attention must be paid to stigma within this criterion.

4. Functioning level

Sexual behaviour is okay if it fits the level of functioning of everyone.

This refers to a person's ability to understand a situation mentally, physically and emotionally. If something aligns with your functioning level, this means that you understand what is safe or harmful for yourself and others, that you are able to act accordingly and, finally, that you choose to act accordingly.

Sometimes people cannot judge a situation properly at a certain

moment, for example because of alcohol, drugs, strong emotions, depression, a manic episode, burnout, trauma or intellectual disability. In these situations, their functioning level is not okay. Language barriers can also affect your functioning level, for instance by making it more difficult to understand where someone else's boundaries lie or express where yours lie.

To assess the functioning level, ask yourself two questions:



1. Is the person able to understand what is okay and what is harmful for themselves and the other?
2. If yes, do they act accordingly?

If the answer to either question is "no", then the functioning level is not okay.



Example

A client suggests using coke together. During sex, you do things you normally wouldn't, and afterwards you regret it. Because of the drugs, your level of functioning wasn't okay.

Alcohol or drugs are not an excuse for harmful behaviour. Just because someone is dealing with an addiction doesn't give them the right to use physical or psychological violence. The use of substances may explain this type of misconduct, but that does

not make it acceptable. The same applies when strong emotions such as sadness or anger lead to inappropriate reactions. We can be understanding about this, but these emotions never justify violent behavior.

5. Context

Sexual behaviour is okay if the behaviour is appropriate to the situation and circumstances.

Sex should take place in an appropriate context: in a situation and setting where sex is generally accepted, while respecting everyone's privacy.

It is not okay to show exposed

genitals or perform sexual acts in front of others without their consent. A client may want to have sex in public, but in that case it's important to make sure that no one can see you.

THE SEX WORK FLAG SYSTEM

In an intimate circle, or in places where everyone knows they might see sexual acts—like theme parties or certain clubs—

the context is appropriate. Everyone present is supposed to know what to expect when going to these places.

Example

Your client wants to have sex on the front balcony, facing the street. It's a highly visible spot where anyone passing by could see you. You refuse. The client then suggests the back balcony, but you notice neighbours with children in their yards. The context is still not okay.

6. Impact

Sexual behaviour is okay if it doesn't harm anyone.

Harmful sexual behaviour can result in physical harm (e.g., scratches or wounds), psychological harm (e.g., humiliation, shame, or fear), or social harm (e.g., isolation or exclusion).

Sometimes, the impact of harm only shows up much later. Sudden anxiety or intense sadness can be caused by events that happened months or even years earlier.

You can also cause harm to yourself if you don't respect someone's boundaries. You may feel overwhelming guilt, risk

damage to your reputation, and possibly face a complaint or legal consequences.

The impact or harm from harmful or abusive behaviour is often greater and more severe:

- the more intimate the behaviour;
- when the transgressive behaviour occurs repeatedly;
- if you experience fear;
- the more people are aware of or involved in it.

Example

A client sends photos from your ad to your parents and friends, who didn't know you were involved in sex work. The photos are intimate and the consequences are huge: your parents no longer want to see you, and you lose some friends. The impact is particularly severe.

Finally



Actions done with good intentions can also cause harm. For example, if you give someone a big kiss to show affection or enthusiasm, it might scare them or bring back unpleasant memories. This doesn't necessarily mean you did something wrong, but it's important to be aware of the other person's discomfort and talk about it with them. That way, you can learn about their boundaries.

Sex work, risk and impact

Be careful with this criterion:

Something that is risky can have a big impact. But just because you choose to take a risk doesn't mean it's automatically wrong. Taking risks can help you grow and can even be positive.

Sex work is a good example:

It comes with risks, but it can also teach you things and help you grow. Just because sex work involves risks doesn't make it negative. And perhaps even more importantly: just because you do sex work doesn't mean it's your fault if something abusive happens to you. If you experience abuse or violence, the responsibility always lies with the perpetrator, not with you.

Be aware of the risks involved in sex work and inform yourself thoroughly. Make sure that, in case of an emergency, you can always turn to people you trust: friends, family, colleagues or social workers who know that you do sex work. Isolation is a major risk factor; having a supportive social network is essential.

Key points

We have now learned about the six criteria of the Flag System. The purpose is now to assess different situations using these six criteria.

A situation is given a green flag if all criteria are met. A situation is given a yellow, red or black flag if one or more criteria are not met. We give a yellow flag for moderately harmful sexual behaviour, a red flag for seriously harmful sexual behaviour and a black flag for very severely harmful sexual behaviour.

Keep the following in mind when making your assessment:

- The flag is not the sum of all criteria. Look at the seriousness of the behaviour, not just the number of criteria that are or aren't okay;
- Always assess the behaviour of the person and not the person themselves. Just because someone does something that is not okay does not mean that that person is bad;
- Assess the person's behaviour in this situation only and not his behaviour in other situations;
- Even if your gut tells you it's a red or black flag: always go through all the criteria first. Only then can you assign a flag;
- If the situation is complex, or did a lot happen in quick succession? Have the roles been reversed (see box)? It may help to create a timeline of exactly what happened. That way, you can analyze each event step by step and assess the behavior gradually.

Changing roles

In complex situations, roles can shift: just because someone is a victim of inappropriate behavior does not mean that they cannot cross others' boundaries themselves later, for example out of anger or revenge. Victims can become perpetrators.

Nor does the fact that someone has crossed boundaries themselves mean that person can no longer be a victim. That is why it is important to examine each incident individually and assess it based on the criteria of the Flag System.

Example

A client of yours takes photos without your consent during your date. You are recognizable and naked in those photos. The client sends the photos to a friend. That friend also books a date with you. During that date, he shows you the nude photos he received. Out of revenge, you send the entire chat history and all email correspondence with the client to his wife and employer.

EXAMPLES

In this chapter you will find **some general situations**, as well as some **complex real-life cases**, presented to us by sex workers and social workers in the sector. They serve as an example to better understand and learn how to use the Sex Work Flag System.

Example 1

The standard example



A client meets up with a sex worker in a hotel. Agreements are made in advance about what will happen and at what price. Everything goes according to plan and both parties are satisfied.



We assess the client's behaviour.

Consent

The parties have clearly agreed in advance on the services and the price, and the client has respected these agreements. **There is consent.**

Voluntary engagement

There is no pressure, coercion, or manipulation on the part of the client.

Respectful agreement

The client is looking for sex activity and affection, while the sex worker wants to earn an income. The details of the services and the price are agreed upon in advance, so that everything is clear for both parties during the date. Both parties respect the agreement and **the client treats the sex worker with respect.**

Functioning level

In this case, the client clearly understands the situation and acts appropriately, so **their functioning level is okay.**

Context

Sex work takes place in an appropriate setting, where sexual services are provided for a fee. This fits with the professional context of sex work.

Impact

By being respectful, the client's behaviour is not harmful to the sex worker. **The impact is okay.**

GENERAL ASSESSMENT: GREEN FLAG

This situation meets all the criteria of the Flag System and is therefore given **a green flag.**



Consent

The managers tell clients they can receive oral sex without a condom at their venue, without consulting the sex workers. Some sex workers comply and perform oral sex without a condom, but it may not be entirely voluntary (see the following criteria). It is not certain whether the sex workers are sufficiently informed about the health risks of oral sex without a condom. If they agree without that knowledge, their consent is not informed, and therefore not valid.

Consent is problematic in several areas.

Voluntary engagement

The sex workers seem to have the option to refuse oral sex without a condom. However, their choice may not be fully voluntary, as they could feel pressured. They risk losing income if they get fewer clients, and their good relationship with the managers may also be at stake.

Respectful agreement

The managers are responsible for creating a safe and fair work environment for the sex workers. However, they decide that clients can have oral sex without a condom, without consulting the sex workers. The sex workers' boundaries are ignored and their income is affected. There is no respect for the sex workers' agreement or safety. **There is no respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The managers are able to understand what is safe or harmful, however they choose to prioritise clients and revenue over the well-being of sex workers. **The functioning level is not okay.**

Context

(Oral) sex without a condom occurs in sex work and can be appropriate in this context. However, it should not be taken for granted.

Impact

The owners take no measures to avoid harm for sex workers who refuse to perform oral sex without a condom. Their attitude puts sex workers at risk of losing income or even their job. There are health risks for both sex workers and clients, which could lead to long-term health problems. **There are several risks of harmful impact.**

GENERAL ASSESSMENT: YELLOW FLAG

Sex workers always have the right to decide which services they provide and which they refuse. This right must be guaranteed.

Managers are responsible for creating a work environment where sex workers can freely state what they are willing or unwilling to do. When oral sex without a condom is considered the norm, it creates pressure: a sex worker may agree because she is afraid of losing work or money. This compromises voluntary engagement.

It is therefore crucial that managers support their employees' choices and do not consider sex without a condom as automatically acceptable. Instead, they should create an atmosphere of open communication, where risks can be discussed and both sex workers and clients are properly informed.



Example 3

Cruising in the park



A man goes to a public park looking for sex and meets a male sex worker there. The park is the place where the sex worker usually works. They agree to have sex in a secluded spot behind some bushes in the middle of the park.

We assess the client's behaviour.

Consent

The client has sex with the sex worker with the sex worker's permission. **The consent is okay.**

Voluntary engagement

The client does not use coercion, lies or manipulation to obtain the sex worker's consent. **The voluntary engagement is okay.**

Respectful agreement

The client is looking for sex and affection, while the sex worker wants to earn an income. The client and the sex worker agree in advance on having sex in a secluded spot behind the bushes. Both understand what will happen, and the agreement is followed during the encounter. **There is a respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The client may be aware that passers-by could be unintentionally exposed to sexual acts in public and nevertheless take this risk. In this particular case, other factors need to be taken into account: male sex workers have less opportunities to work in safer places and homophobia creates the need for anonymous meeting places, both for the client and the sex worker. Considering the practical possibilities, the client has therefore tried to make the situation as good and safe as possible. In this case, **the level of functioning can be considered acceptable.**

Context

The sex takes place in a public location. Passers-by might see it without meaning to, so **the context is not appropriate.**

Impact

Sex in public is illegal in many places. The client therefore risks arrest and other legal problems. By choosing a visible location, the client also puts the sex worker at risk of arrest or legal issues. In addition, we also need to consider the possible impact on passers-by. Seeing sex unintentionally can have negative effects on some people. **There might be a negative impact.**

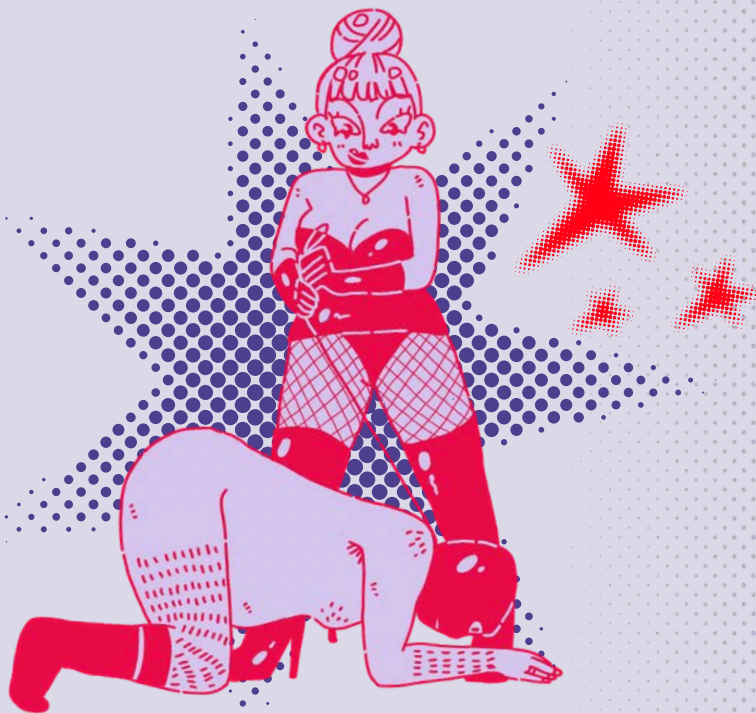
GENERAL ASSESSMENT: YELLOW FLAG

Regarding voluntariness and consent, the client's behaviour is completely acceptable. The sex is voluntary and consensual. However, choosing a public location carries risks. Passers-by who see it may be shocked or offended. Both the client and the sex worker have a responsibility to protect themselves and each other, as they both risk arrest or other legal consequences for public indecency.



Example 4

BDSM in the dungeon



A dominatrix and a client have a BDSM session in the dominatrix's dungeon. The dominatrix and client clearly agree beforehand on what is and isn't allowed and choose a safe word. The activities involve intense physical impact and emotional humiliation. Afterwards, they take time for aftercare and reflection.

We assess the behaviour of the dominatrix.

Consent

The dominatrix and the client make clear agreements in advance. Both know each other's boundaries and expectations. **There is consent.**

Voluntary engagement

The dominatrix never pressures or manipulates the client into doing things he hasn't agreed to beforehand. **Everything is voluntary.**

Respectful agreement

The dominatrix respects the boundaries set in the agreement and ensures the client's safety throughout the session. Afterwards, she participates in aftercare and reflection, showing care for the client's physical and emotional wellbeing. **There is a respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The dominatrix understands the situation, respects the client's boundaries, and acts according to the agreed-upon rules. She is aware of what is safe and acceptable for both herself and the client. **Her functioning level is okay.**

Context

The session takes place at the dominatrix's workplace. The activities are consistent with the context of a BDSM session, and **the setting is appropriate.**

Impact

Clear agreements and proper aftercare help the dominatrix and the client to minimize the risk of emotional or psychological harm.



GENERAL ASSESSMENT: GREEN FLAG

BDSM is a specific practice. Within this context, certain actions are permissible that would not be acceptable in other situations. For example, BDSM activities can sometimes leave physical marks, such as redness or bruising, but those involved do not consider this harmful, as it occurs within a controlled and mutually agreed-upon experience. In this example, all activities are clearly consented to, and aftercare, reflection, and discussion follow to minimize any impact. Therefore, this situation is fully acceptable and receives **a green flag**.



Example 5

Offering sex at the doctor's office



A sex worker schedules an appointment for an STI test and a gynaecological examination with a doctor they have never seen before. During the appointment, while in the examination chair, they suggest exchanging sexual services for the cost of the medical consultation—something they have done previously with other doctors. The doctor refuses and explains that this is inappropriate in a medical context. The sex worker is surprised but does not insist.

We assess the behaviour of the sex worker.

Consent

The sex worker makes the proposal and takes the initiative. Nothing in this example indicates that they act without consent. The doctor clearly says no, and the sex worker respects that decision. **Both people's choices are respected:** the sex worker chooses to propose and the doctor chooses to decline.

Voluntary engagement

Although the sex worker makes a suggestion that the doctor may find unusual, they do not insist. In this way, **the doctor's voluntary choice is fully respected.**

Respectful agreement

The sex worker did not respect the professional nature of the doctor-patient relationship. However, it is the doctor's responsibility to maintain professional boundaries. By refusing, **the doctor upholds the respectful agreement** expected in a medical appointment.

Functioning level

When the sex worker first proposes exchanging sexual services for the consultation, they seem to not fully understand the professional and ethical boundaries of the medical setting. This shows limited understanding of what is appropriate in the situation. Their functioning level at that moment is not fully okay, although it improves when the doctor explains this is not appropriate and they immediately adapt their behaviour.

Context

In a medical context, offering sexual services is not appropriate. The proposal is therefore **inappropriate in this setting.**

Impact

The doctor may feel uncomfortable or may react in a negative way to the proposal. This could lead the doctor to form negative views about sex work and treat sex workers differently from other patients. This represents a **potential negative impact.**

At the same time, the sex worker may learn about the accepted norms in medical practice. This could make them less likely, or unlikely, to make such proposals to doctors in the future. This is a **possible positive impact**.

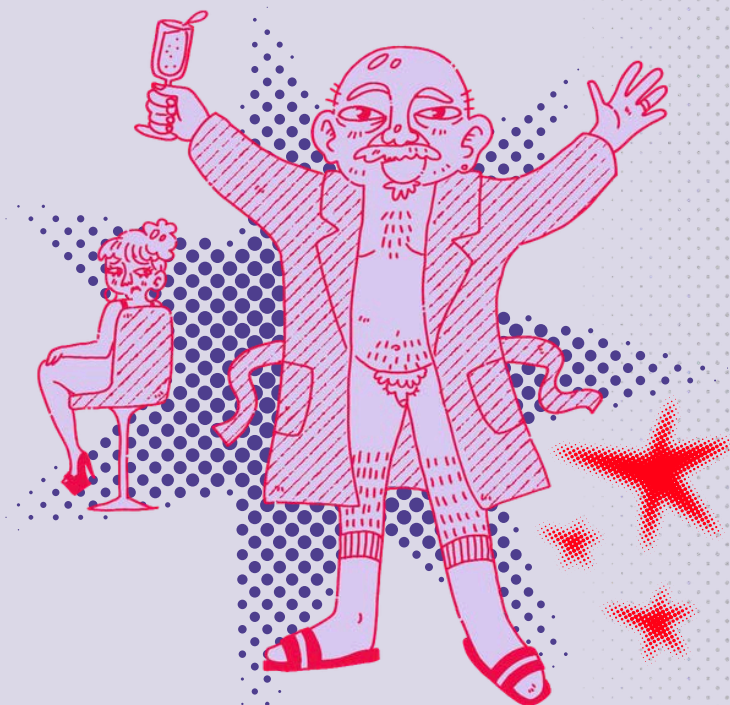
GENERAL ASSESSMENT: YELLOW FLAG

The sex worker suggests exchanging sex for a gynaecological examination. It's possible that this may not be unusual for them, but it is not appropriate in a medical setting. If the doctor had accepted, the power difference between the sex worker and the doctor would be a concern. Since this did not happen, the situation is given a **yellow flag**.



Example 6

Employer in inappropriate clothing



A male manager of a private brothel appears several times a day in lingerie or clothing that clearly exposes his genitals, while wandering among the sex workers. He is not a sex worker himself. The sex workers feel uncomfortable speaking up, fearing they might lose their jobs.



We assess the behaviour of the manager.

Consent

The employer does not ask his employees for their consent to appear in this way. **No permission is given so there is no consent.**

Voluntary engagement

There is indirect pressure. The sex workers are in a relationship of dependency with the employer, and he may also create an atmosphere of pressure. The sex workers do not dare to speak up for fear of losing their jobs. As a result, there is a real risk of negative consequences (secondary loss) if they set boundaries. **This undermines their voluntary engagement.**

Respectful agreement

The manager is responsible for maintaining a safe and professional work environment. By showing up in lingerie, he disregards the sex workers' boundaries and creates an unsafe workplace. Sex workers depend on the manager for both their workplace and their income. If they protest, they risk losing their job. The existing power imbalance has a great impact. **There is no respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

If the manager does not realize that showing up in lingerie in front of employees is inappropriate, this indicates a lack of understanding of social and professional rules, and individual boundaries. **His functioning level is not okay.** If the manager knows it is inappropriate but ignores it, this is a sign of deliberate misuse of his power to create discomfort and to maintain control over the sex workers. Also in this case, **his functioning level is not okay.**

Context

In certain contexts, dressing naked or provocatively can be acceptable. That is not the case here: his choice of clothing is **inappropriate in a professional context** where he is not a sex worker. Since he does not provide sexual services, this behaviour does not align with his role as an employer and manager.

Impact

The employees may feel uncomfortable, anxious, or unsafe because of the situation. If they cannot easily change workplaces—for example, because the location is convenient, they earn well, or they have regular clients—they may feel trapped. They may feel forced to accept a situation they do not agree with, which can negatively affect their well-being, cause stress, and trigger strong emotions. The employer can also face negative consequences, such as a damaged reputation, loss of staff, or demotivated employees. His behaviour can therefore have **adverse effects on himself as well**.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT: RED FLAG

The employer does not make use of explicit coercion or blackmail, but the situation is highly inappropriate. He does not ask for permission before interacting with his employees in this way. Because of his hierarchical position, he holds power, and the sex workers depend on him for their jobs, but he does not take into account the potential impact on the employees.



Example 7

Sex without protection



A sex worker with a latex allergy always brings her own latex-free condoms for clients. With the client she meets this evening, there is a problem: the latex-free condoms do not fit. The sex worker makes it clear that she cannot have sex without a condom. Together, they agree to have sex without penetration. Later, when both are naked in bed and kissing, the client attempts to penetrate her without asking or saying anything. The sex worker is surprised, does not physically resist, continues kissing, and allows it. In retrospect, she believes she allowed it because of the client's charm, but she deeply regrets what happened and fears potential consequences for her health.



We assess the client's behaviour.

Consent

The client agreed with the sex worker that there would be no penetration. Later, he penetrates her anyway, without discussing it or asking for permission. The sex worker does not get the opportunity to consent or refuse. The fact that the sex worker does not physically resist **does not mean she consents.**

Voluntary engagement

The sex worker goes along with it. Afterwards, she says she may have allowed this to happen because of the client's charm and that she regrets what happened. This suggests that there may have been indirect pressure, and that her decision was influenced by a desire to avoid negative consequences (secondary loss), such as not wanting to lose the connection or vibe with the client. **The voluntary engagement was not respected.**

Respectful agreement

The agreements made in advance between the sex worker and the client are not respected by the client. He disregards the professional conditions set by the sex worker. **There is no respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The client clearly understands the situation and the agreed-upon boundaries, but chooses to ignore them. His actions show poor judgment and a lack of respect for consent, putting the sex worker at risk physically and emotionally. **His functioning level is not okay.**

Context

The sex takes place in an appropriate context: in bed, with the client and the sex worker, or in a hotel room. **The context is acceptable.**

Impact

The sex worker feels upset and worried about health consequences. She does not understand why she did not defend herself, blames herself, and is emotionally distressed. **This represents a negative impact.**

The impact on the client can also be very negative: he may experience feelings of regret or shame, and there are health risks involved. Furthermore, the sex involved was without consent, which constitutes a criminal offense (see box) and could **lead to legal consequences**.

GENERAL DECISION: BLACK FLAG

The sex worker later reflects on the situation and feels that she should have resisted, thinking she had some responsibility. This is not correct. From the client's perspective, there was very severe harmful behaviour. There was no permission and, therefore, no voluntary engagement. The client knew the rules but chose not to respect them, and the impact on the sex worker is very negative. By taking advantage of the situation, the client clearly abused his power.

In sex work, agreements must be defined clearly in advance and strictly followed. There was no consent for penetration or for unprotected sex. A client must adhere to these agreements and not assume that something is acceptable without explicit confirmation. For all these reasons, the client's behaviour was very abusive.



Sex without consent

The Flag System is not meant as a means to punish. It is a tool to start conversations and reflect on situations that may have been transgressive. The goal is to learn and understand how to move from harmful behaviour to healthy behaviour. It does not replace laws or formal rules.

It is important to know that sexual acts without consent are always punishable. Penetrative sex without consent (as in the previous example) is considered rape. The law is clear: not resisting does not mean giving consent.

For sex work, consent only exists if payment is made. If the client refuses to pay or cancels payment afterward, there is no consent. Sex without consent is rape. This legal protection is fundamental, and some clients have already been convicted for this in Belgium.

Example 8

Drugs and unexpected strangulation sex



A client suggests using hard drugs during a hotel date, and the sex worker agrees. The date becomes more intense than expected, and the client surprises the sex worker with hard strangulation sex, completely restricting her freedom of movement. Both have an orgasm, leading the client to assume there was consent. However, afterwards, the sex worker experiences not only excitement, but also confusion, fear, and shame.



We assess the client's behaviour.

Consent

The client suggested to the sex worker to use drugs together, and she agreed. However, the client did not ask for permission to engage in strangulation sex, so the sex worker has no opportunity to refuse or consent to it. **There was no consent.**

Voluntary engagement

The sex worker is surprised and does not have the opportunity to consciously consent to the strangulation sex. She also cannot move, so she has no chance to resist once the client begins. There is clearly coercion involved in this situation. **There is no voluntary engagement.**

Respectful agreement

The sex worker agreed to use drugs and participate in sexual activity, but there was no agreement for rough sex practices. In rough sex, consent and clear communication about boundaries are crucial. The client proceeds without asking consent for these specific acts. **There is no respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The client fails to recognize the sex worker's boundaries and assumes consent based solely on physical responses (orgasm). This shows poor judgment and a lack of understanding of informed, ongoing consent, especially for hard sex practices. The client may have been temporarily unable to understand or respect the rules due to the influence of hard drugs. Drugs can impair judgment and reduce empathy, causing someone to ignore another person's boundaries. **The client's functioning level is not okay.**

Context

The sex takes place in an appropriate context: in bed, with the client and the sex worker, or in a hotel room. **The context is acceptable.**

Impact

Strangulation sex without prior consent or agreements can have serious physical and psychological consequences and may be traumatic. The client engages in strangulation sex with the sex worker, which may leave him feeling confused, anxious, or ashamed afterwards. The sex worker is also confused by her own physical reaction, an orgasm, despite the threatening nature of the situation, which can undermine her trust in her body's responses. **The potential impact is highly negative.**

GENERAL ASSESSMENT: BLACK FLAG

Strangulation sex is only safe when agreements are made in advance, boundaries are clearly set, and a safe word is established. In this situation, the sex worker was surprised and had her freedom of movement taken away. There was no consent and no voluntary engagement.

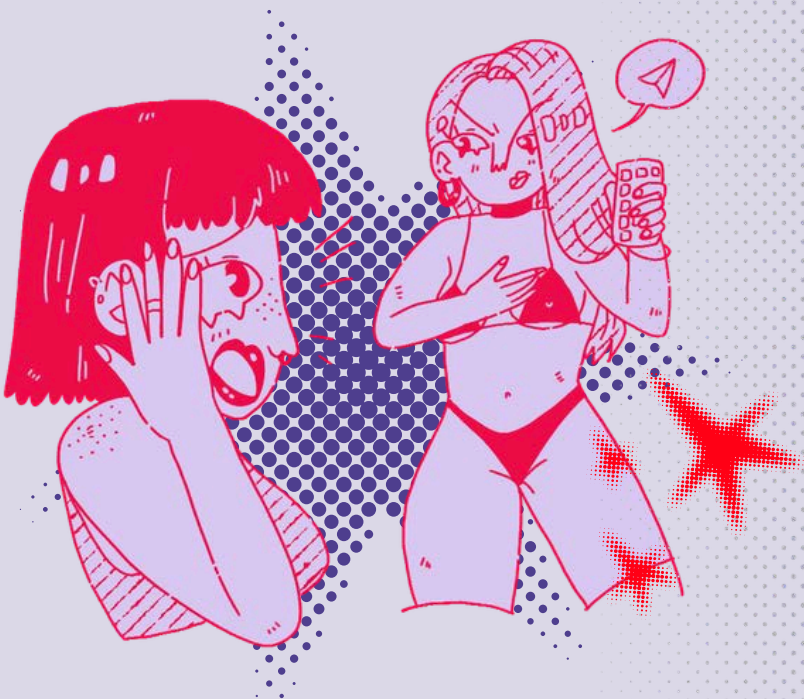
The example also highlights that drug use in sex work can be dangerous. Like alcohol, drugs can impair judgment. Some drugs reduce empathy, making it harder to recognize or respect another person's boundaries. Strangulation sex, if performed poorly or without experience, can also cause serious physical injuries, such as neck damage.

For all these reasons, the client's behaviour is very severely harmful.



Example 9

Threatening to distribute sexually explicit material



A sex worker gets into an argument with a colleague. The situation escalates, and the colleague threatens to send the sex worker's online advertisements, in which she appears half-naked and recognizable, to her parents and siblings, who are unaware that he does sex work.

 We assess the behaviour of the colleague.

Consent

The sex worker has not given permission for her photos to be used or shared.

There is no consent.

Voluntary engagement

The colleague is threatening to do something the sex worker does not want.

Therefore, **there is no voluntary engagement.**

Respectful agreement

This conflict doesn't take place within the context of a professional agreement.

This criterion is not relevant here.

Functioning level

"Outing" refers to disclosing someone's sex work activity to others without the sex workers' consent. It is harmful and a serious violation of privacy. Among sex workers, it is a golden rule that this never should happen. The colleague is aware of this rule but deliberately intends to break it to harm the other sex worker. **Their functioning level is not okay.**

Context

The argument and the threats are limited to the two sex workers. At this stage, **nothing inappropriate has occurred within the context.** However, this changes if the colleague were to send the nude photos to the sex worker's family, as that would constitute a serious violation of the sex worker's privacy.

Impact

Threatening to "out" someone can cause significant stress and anxiety. The potential impact of the colleague's actions is **very negative for the sex worker.** The colleague also risks harming herself: such behaviour can damage social relationships, and the sex worker could file a complaint. In that case, there would be legal consequences. **The possible impact for the colleague is therefore also serious and negative.**

GENERAL DECISION: RED FLAG

“Outing”, revealing someone’s involvement in sex work, can have particularly serious consequences when done without consent, including shame and exclusion by friends or family. Not only fellow sex workers, but also dissatisfied clients sometimes threaten to share nude photos with a person’s relatives or friends. In terms of consent, voluntariness, and especially impact, this situation is severely harmful. However, it remains merely a threat. If this were to actually happen, it would be considered **a black flag**.



Harassment and the distribution of images

The Flag System is designed to start a conversation about transgressive behaviour. In some cases, however, dialogue may not be effective, and further action may be required, for instance, to prevent someone from sharing images of you.

If someone threatens to share your images, this can be prosecuted. Such behaviour falls under the legal definition of stalking. A person commits harassment when they know that their actions seriously disturb your peace of mind.

If someone goes ahead and shares your photos, know that they can be prosecuted for it. Whenever someone distributes photos, videos, or audio recordings in which you are naked and/ or engaged in a sexual act without your consent, it is a crime. It does not matter whether you agreed to make the recordings. Collect evidence and report it to the police.

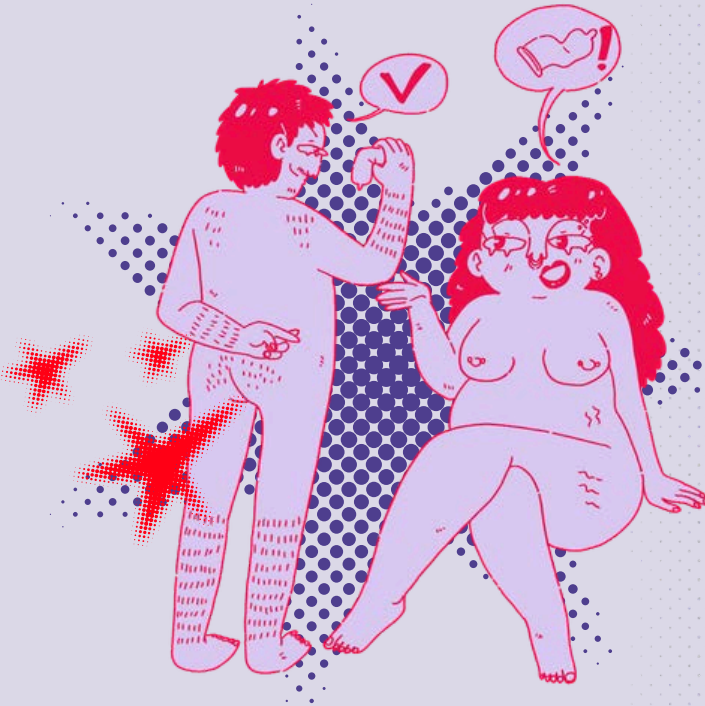


Check out our *Self-Defense zine on Doxxing* for more information.



Example 10

Stealthing (secretly taking off a condom)



A client meets a sex worker at the client's home. They agree to have safe sex. During the act, the client removes his condom without the sex worker's consent and without her noticing.



We assess the client's behaviour.

Consent

The condom is removed without the sex worker's knowledge and without her agreement. The sex worker is not informed of the client's intentions. Therefore, the sex worker is not given the opportunity to consent of their own free will. This constitutes deception. **There is no consent.**

Voluntary engagement

There is no pressure or coercion.

Respectful agreement

They had agreed to have protected sex. This agreement is not respected when the client disregards the sex worker's conditions. **There is no respectful agreement.**

Functioning level

The client is fully capable of understanding and discussing the general rules of the transaction (sex with a condom). Despite this, the client deliberately breaks the rule. His actions show a lack of respect for consent, putting the sex worker at serious physical and emotional risk. **This level of functioning is unacceptable.**

Context

The activity takes place at the client's home, in a place where it is appropriate to do sex work.

Impact

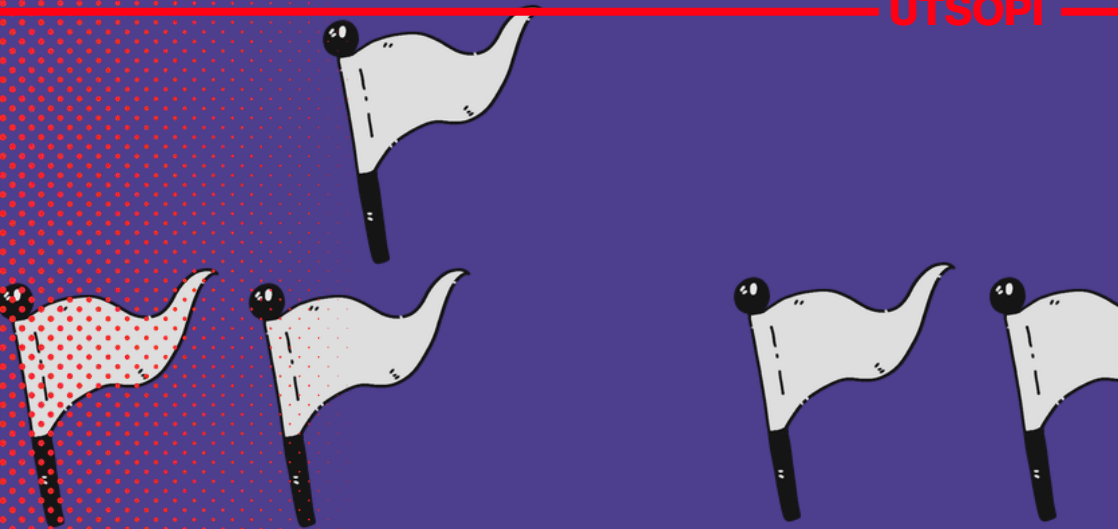
Having sex without a condom carries a risk of sexually transmitted infections (chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhoea), as well as the risk of HIV or an unwanted pregnancy. By removing the condom, the client exposes the sex worker to these risks, which can also be traumatic. The client also takes a health risk. Additionally, the sex worker can file a complaint, meaning there may be legal consequences. **The potential impact is very severe.**

GENERAL DECISION: BLACK FLAG

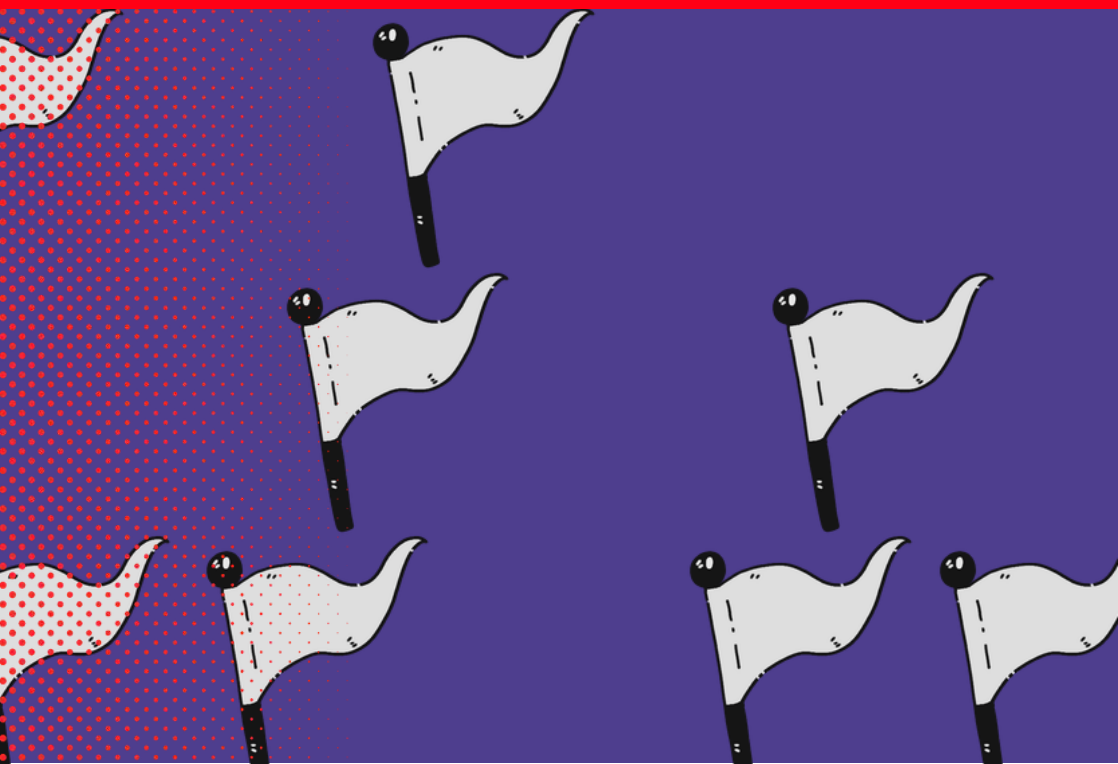
By removing the condom, the client violates nearly all the criteria of the Flag System. This behaviour can be traumatic for the sex worker and carries serious health risks. There is no consent, so the act is not voluntary.

What the client does is also punishable by law. However, for sex workers, the threshold to contact the police or a doctor can be high due to fear of having to disclose their work or losing anonymity. This creates a significant power imbalance between the sex worker and the client. The client's behaviour is unacceptable and receives **a black flag**.





EPILOGUE



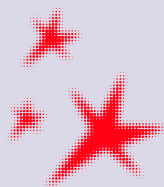
There is a good chance that you will be confronted with harmful behaviour at some point. Sometimes you are the victim of this behaviour, but you can also show harmful behaviour yourself.

Sexually harmful behaviour is widespread. Not every form of harmful behaviour is a crime. We are not always equally sensitive to the boundaries of others. Sometimes negative experiences arise from misunderstandings. Sometimes from a lack of communication. In such cases, there is not always a clear perpetrator and victim.

It is important that we can talk about it, that we learn to talk about it, and that we learn to understand it. This way, we can ensure that it happens less and less. The Sex Work Flag System helps to start that conversation. It is therefore not only intended for sex workers, but also for clients and support workers. It is meant to discuss and clarify situations separately.

Yet it is important to remember: your own experience of a situation is important and meaningful. There is no reason to doubt how you experience a situation. You can always ask for psychological and medical help.

What is seen as harmful behaviour differs from person to person. Everyone has their own boundaries, and they are not always easy to recognize. The Flag System provides an objective framework, but it is also important to listen to your own feelings. Use this guide to better understand and deal with your limits in your work practice.





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