

HOW BEST TO SUPPORT MALE AND TRANS* SEX WORKERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

A combination of stigmas over sex work, lack of official income or residence status, and experiences of homophobia and/or transphobia, often pushes LGBTQI+ sex workers into more precarious housing situations. Alias outlines how their combination approach of outreach and individualised support helps them provide safe and effective services for transgender and male sex workers. The insecure housing situation of many is exacerbated by structural elements, thus calling for the proper implementation of existing EU anti-discrimination and migration laws.



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Since 2009, Alias has been providing psycho-medico-social support in Brussels for trans persons and men having sexual relations with men in exchange for money or other services - including accommodation. The aim of Alias is to improve the well-being of these individuals, particularly through access to fundamental rights, social inclusion, the promotion of their health in the broad sense and, in particular, their sexual health. Among these fundamental rights, the issue of housing is central. The people supported by the association are confronted with the street, the absence of suitable accommodation solutions, and precarious, inadequate, or dangerous housing situations.

For 2022, we have data on the housing conditions of 134 trans persons and men having sexual relations with men in exchange for money or other services, here on out referred to as gasts.¹ Just over two thirds are in a situation of housing exclusion or homelessness. 49.2% are in insecure housing – i.e., staying with third parties (mainly friends or clients), in work flats, hotel rooms or Airbnbs, and including those who are threatened with eviction or are victims of domestic violence. A further 9.7% are homeless (mainly accommodated in shelters); 5.2% live on the street or in emergency accommodation; and 5.2% live in inadequate housing (in non-conventional temporary structures, squats, or in severely overcrowded conditions). 30.6% live in stable and adequate housing. Most of the beneficiaries of Alias are therefore in a situation of hidden homelessness, which is unfortunately lacking in-depth analysis and, therefore, not considered in the policy-development and the planning of services for homeless people.

¹ In Alias, a beneficiary is called "gast", which in Dutch means "guest".

The significant proportion of gasts in a poor housing situation is linked, among other things, to the lack of official income and to a precarious administrative status. 57.6% of our beneficiaries live without an income, apart from undeclared sex work income, which is small and precarious. Regarding the administrative status, 32.9% do not have a residence permit and 21.7% are either seeking asylum or have a temporary residence permit. When we isolate the proportion of beneficiaries without a declared income or a residence permit, it is interesting to observe an increase in the proportion of people in insecure housing, rather than on the street or in homeless services.

To fully understand the reasons behind this trend, a more in-depth analysis is needed. Nevertheless, we can put forward some possible interpretations based on what we have witnessed during the provision of social support. It is particularly complicated for the public we accompany to benefit from existing services for homeless people: beyond the lack of capacity, which particularly affects people without residence permits and without income, the public of Alias is often discouraged from using emergency accommodation centres and shelters because of the obligations linked to working hours, homophobia and transphobia (particularly present in certain community contexts), and the stigma surrounding people who do sex work. It is interesting to note that only about a third of the asylum seekers we accompanied in 2022 are housed in a federal reception centre. The lack of adequate services pushes our public to find precarious and temporary accommodation solutions: with friends, when possible, but more frequently in rooms rented by the week at a very high price - which implies that a very large part of the income linked to sex work is allocated to it - or in accommodation obtained in exchange for sexual services. We also meet people who live in work flats probably connected to trafficking networks and other criminal activities, and who have no control over the clients they receive or the money they earn.

Therefore, to meet the needs of our guests, Alias has developed a broad street work consisting of outreach and individual support. It is linked to a harm reduction approach, which is characterised by several values and principles of action. Firstly, the recognition of the people involved in sex work as people in their own right, with unique backgrounds and histories, who cannot be reduced to their practice of prostitution. Secondly, an unconditional attitude of non-judgment regarding the choices and practices of the people involved. Finally, an affirmation of the right to inclusion and participation in social life for all. Anonymity and confidentiality are also fundamental for the team. All people accompanied by Alias can choose to remain completely anonymous by using a pseudonym (an alias). The “low-threshold” methodology is essential within the association. This approach translates into constant attention to lowering the thresholds of access, by reaching out and adapting to the places, times, rhythms, and life choices of the people we accompany.

Our guests can contact us for any questions and needs for support. Whenever possible, the team redirects requests to other specific services and, if asked by the person concerned, accompanies them in a variety of procedures: registration with a Public Social Welfare Centre or other public institutions to access economic and social rights; filing a complaint following an assault, sexual violence, or an episode of discrimination; opening medical rights, including requesting urgent medical assistance for irregularly-residing migrants; accessing health care, sexual health, mental health, treatment for people with problematic substance use; finding accommodation or housing; finding employment or training; filing an application for international protection and being accompanied throughout the procedure, and so on. It is also important to consider that the beneficiary does not necessarily come with a specific request. Sometimes, the simple fact of being listened to is already extremely important.

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Despite all the efforts we put in accompanying Alias' guests, when it comes to helping people getting out of homelessness there are several structural challenges that are hard to overcome. The situation of the housing market in general has an important impact on the whole Brussels population. The lack of affordable housing excludes a significant part of the people who have the Social Integration Income (RIS) as their only source of income from the housing market. The people we support who have RIS have difficulties finding a studio - and often even a room in a shared apartment - because the prices are too high: minimum 600 Euros plus charges for studios of 25 to 40 square metres, 500 Euros for rooms. When they are willing to pay more than half of their income for housing, there are other barriers to overcome: the reluctance of house owners to rent to people who receive assistance from a Public Social Welfare Centre; the condition, sometimes imposed by owners, of proving an income equal to three times the price of the rent, which is particularly complicated for people whose income is partly undeclared; and on top of that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Moreover, in the current context marked by a strong increase in asylum applications - in 2022, in Belgium, 36,871 people applied for international protection against 25,971 people in 2021 (an increase of 42%) - Fedasil accommodation possibilities are scarce and people who do not have access to a Fedasil centre live with third parties - like many of the people we accompany - or on the street. In evident breach to the EU Reception Conditions Directive, asylum seekers are left homeless and without an address, which entails that they cannot obtain a municipal registration certificate (also called "orange card"), and that prevents them from being able to follow training or find a job. This means that their chances of getting out of a situation of destitution are greatly reduced, sometimes leaving sex work as the only way to make ends meet.

Besides, one third of the people we accompany are in an irregular situation. For them, the lack of housing solutions is an undeniable reality. In terms of existing services, we can only refer them to emergency accommodation, which is often an inappropriate solution for people who are particularly vulnerable because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Hidden homelessness - insecure accommodation without tenancy, often in poor conditions, or sleeping in someone else's home (including work flats or clients' homes) - is often the only way to survive.

Homelessness among male and trans sex worker is a reality to which we are increasingly confronted. With time, we have improved our ways of working and put in place solid partnerships within the homelessness sector. Nonetheless, long-term solutions cannot be found without concrete structural changes that combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, address stigmas around sex work, create affordable housing solutions, and develop a humane migration policy. To do that the regional and national levels are not sufficient, we also need effective implementation of existing EU anti-discrimination and migration law and a more concrete EU engagement on ending homelessness.