

# Putting an end to men's "right" to buy access to women's bodies

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Male dominance means that society creates a pool of prostitutes by any means necessary so that men have what men need to stay on top, to feel big, literally, metaphorically, in every way... (Andrea Dworkin, 1997).

How is it possible that hundreds of thousands of women can be illegally trafficked into Europe each year, and forced to work as prostitutes in brothels, hotels, massage parlours or on street corners without anybody really noticing ? Might it be because trafficked women are swiftly settled into the legal and semi-legal sex markets that exist in every major European city, and might it be because the thousands of European men that every day visit these markets and buy sexual services do not really care who the woman is that provides the service, or why she has 'chosen' to prostitute herself ?

Trafficking in women and girls for sexual purposes have been one of the turn of the century's hot topics upsetting us, our national politicians and our representatives in the European Union. The media has fed us with images of women and girls from Africa, Asia and the former Eastern block countries being held hostage in brothels in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom etc. However, while all of us are deeply touched and horrified by the sexual torments of trafficked women and girls, surprisingly few seem to be ready to make the evident connections between trafficking, the existence of growing European sex markets and its customers. Trafficking in women and children is connected to the existence of legal, semi-legal and illegal sex markets, and the existence of these sex markets is directly connected to the fact that there are men who are willing to pay for sex (in all its varied and exploitable forms).

Although many European countries are seemingly upset with the increasing trafficking in women, few are prepared to make these links, and take political action aimed at questioning the demand side, i.e. the behaviour of potential customers (men). Although it is evident that without men buying sex there would be no basis for trafficking and sexual exploitation of women.

However, there are efforts being made, which aim to change the behaviour of men, and thus to address the 'demand' side of an exploiting sex market. The Swedish law from 1999 forbids buying of sexual services, and thus provide an alternative to the current European pro-prostitution trend. According to the Swedish law a prostitution/sex contract between a woman selling sex and a man buying sex is not an equal contract. As long as society remains male dominated, women selling sex will be in a more vulnerable position than men buying sex, and society will remain male dominated if we do not act upon each form of male dominance – and men's right to buy women's bodies is a form of male dominance.

## The World's 'Oldest Trade' and the Swedish Law that Criminalizes Buying of Sexual Services

Prostitution is often described as the "oldest trade" and the contemporary prostitution/commercial sex scene is legitimised by stories about happy whores in ancient societies. Sexual activity is presumably amongst the more basic of human activities, but this does not make selling and buying sex to a very old trade. The contemporary prostitution/commercial sex scene is to a large extent a post-1960s phenomenon. The sexual liberalisation of the 1960s led to a decriminalisation of prostitution/commercial sex. However, while the motives for much of the decriminalisation was to end the state's and church's repression of sexual behaviour, one of the undesired consequences was the development of an ever-growing, commercial, and today close to global sex industry, where the main products are women and children and where men are the main consumers.

In the 1960s and 1970s Sweden was at the forefront promoting decriminalisation of prostitution and other forms of commercial sex. However, already in the mid- 1970s the women's movement and children's rights advocates started questioning who in fact were emancipated by free access to women through prostitution and other forms of commercial sex. The Swedish women's movement, while arguing for non-traditional gender roles and for women's sexual liberty, refused to confuse and mix up sexual liberty with prostitution, as they are virtually each others' contrasts. Hence, the preparatory work for the Swedish law started around 1975, and since then several government reports have been made proposing either status quo, or criminalizing both the sellers and buyers of sexual services, or criminalizing only the buyers of sexual services. It is however only in 1999 that the question was decided.

The Swedish law from 1999 on buying of sexual services forbids buying and attempts to buy sexual services. That is, selling and attempts to sell sexual services remains *legal* in Sweden, it is only the buyers side that is made criminal<sup>1</sup>. The legal construction chosen by the Swedish government to fight prostitution is unique and quite different from the liberal, pro-prostitution solutions chosen by for example the Danish, Dutch and the German governments.

The *travaux préparatoires* of the law states that the normative functions of the law are essential. That is, the law is a statement by the Swedish government that buying sexual services is not acceptable in an equal society. This, as the existence of prostitution, is a consequence of unequal gender relations and conservative ideas about male/female sexuality. The fact that this radical solution was chosen is probably partly due to the fact that all through the 1990s, women's and sex equality had been prioritised on the national political agenda (and that in 1999 there was almost 50% women in the Swedish parliament). According to the prostitution survey from 1995 there were then in Sweden about 2 500 women who sold sexual services (600 women in street prostitution). 125 000 men bought sexual services every year (10% of the Swedish men have bought sexual services).

The survey also disclosed interesting information about the average Swedish prostitute and the average Swedish sex buyer. According to the survey the majority of Swedish prostitutes have been sexually abused as children or in their youth, and more than half of the prostitute have severe social and mental problems. The efforts made to identify specific features in the client show the sex buyer is the man who buys sexual services because he can only relate to women as sex objects, the man who buys sexual services because he does not want a relationship, the man who buys sexual services because he does not have a relationship, the man who buys sexual services because he is not satisfied with his relationship, the man who buys sexual services because he wants a relationship and the man who buys sexual services because nobody wants to have a relationship with him. The conclusion being that the average buyer of sexual services is more or less the average man.

Conclusion I am here to tell you that prostitution is not meant to empower women. Prostitution is not the great equalizer. It was never the intention of pimps and tricks to liberate women socially, economically, sexually, or politically. Their intention is to use women's and children's bodies for sex and money. Pimps want to get paid and tricks want to get their dicks wet. That's prostitution. (Kelly Holsopple, 1998) It is difficult to approach the issue of prostitution analytically, politically or legally without always stepping on somebody's toes. The Swedish approach that views prostitution as a manifestation of the unequal power relationship between men and women in contemporary society has been criticised mainly by men, some prostitutes and pro-prostitution networks. The criticism sometimes argues that the law at its worse is oppressive as it circumscribes free 'choice', and at its best that the law is inadequate as it might be difficult to implement. And of course, it might be possible to address some of the negative affects of prostitution through making women's bodies into merchandise, and prostitution and brothels into a business like any other. And it will always be possible to find women who claim that they enjoy prostituting themselves, that they like the sex, the men and the money, women that legitimate the point of view of patriarchy and the average man. However, in case we accept the fact that most contemporary societies, still, are unequal, and that sexuality is one of the arenas where inequality is produced and reproduced, and in case we accept the fact that both illegally trafficked and other women and children are severely abused on the sex market, it becomes very difficult to launch feminist arguments against the motives and logic of the Swedish prostitution law : Prostitution does not liberate women ! It is only, as noted by Holsopple a way for pimps to get paid and tricks to get their dicks wet.

*I. Prop. 1997/98:55. The passing of the law was not an easy task. In fact, the first state survey about prostitution had already begun in 1977 and when the final proposal for the law was made in 1995 many voices were raised criticising the law for only criminalizing one of the parties making a contract about sexual services. Before 1999 only procuring was illegal.*