

Jan  
3  
2014

## The 'Nordic model' of prostitution law is a myth

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*The 'Nordic model' of prostitution policy has often been presented as a success in decreasing the number of women in visible prostitution and in promoting a feminist perspective. [May-Len Skilbrei](#) and [Charlotta Holmström](#) carefully examine the different policy approaches among Nordic countries and argue that, in reality, there is no such a thing as a 'Nordic model of prostitution policy'. Further they find that the evidence of policy impact is limited and unconvincing.*

The 'Nordic model' of prostitution is often heralded for being particularly progressive and woman-friendly, built on a feminist definition of prostitution as a form of male violence against women. [France](#) has moved to adopt a Nordic-inspired approach; policy makers are [urging](#) the UK to do the same. But the idea of such a model is misleading, and in no way tells the whole truth about what is going on in the region where it supposedly applies.

We recently gave a talk titled "The Nordic model of prostitution policy does not exist". The aim was to provoke reflection and a discussion, but also to tell the truth about prostitution policies in the Nordic countries.

We have researched Nordic prostitution policies since the mid-nineties, and in particular headed a large comparative [project](#) on Nordic prostitution policies and markets in 2007-2008. In our work, we examined how Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden approach prostitution through criminal justice and welfare policies, and reviewed the evidence for how these policies impact Nordic prostitution markets and the people who work in them.



Credit: Jeppestown (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

We found that the differences not only between, but also within, the Nordic countries are too great for there to be anything like a shared "Nordic" model – and that the case for their success is far more fraught than popular support would suggest. Only Sweden, Norway and Iceland have acts unilaterally criminalising the purchase of sex. Finland has a partial ban; Denmark has opted for decriminalisation. The "Nordic model", then, is in fact confined to only three countries.

These countries' laws prohibiting the purchase of sex are often [depicted](#) as ways to redistribute the guilt and shame of prostitution from the seller to the buyer of sex. However, this was by no means the only argument for their introduction. Contrary to many common [feminist appraisals](#), these laws do not in fact send a clear message as to what and who is the problem with prostitution; on the contrary, they are often

implemented in ways that produce negative outcomes for people in prostitution.

In truth, while these laws have attracted flattering attention [internationally](#), the politics and practices associated with them are very complex. In particular, they are sometimes applied in conjunction with other laws, by-laws and practices specifically aimed at pinning the blame for prostitution on people who sell sex, particularly if they are migrants. For these and other reasons, the Nordic countries' approaches must be judged with caution – and none more so than the most popular example, the case of Sweden.

### **Where Sweden leads**

Sweden often attracts particular attention in discussions of how to deal with prostitution, not least since reports from the Swedish government conclude that the law there has been a success.

It has often been [stated](#) that the number of women in visible prostitution in Sweden has decreased since the Sex Purchase Act (Sexköpslagen) was introduced in 1999; the Swedish police [describe](#) the act as an efficient tool for keeping trafficking away from Sweden. The law has broad support among the general public in Sweden, and this has been [interpreted](#) as a result of the law having its intended normative effect on opinions of prostitution. But given the available evidence, none of these points is fully convincing.

The claim that the number of people involved in prostitution has declined, for one, is largely based on the work of organisations that report on specific groups they work with, not the state of prostitution more generally: social workers, for example, count and get an impression based on their contact with women in street prostitution in the largest cities. There is no reason to believe that other forms of prostitution, hidden from view, are not still going on.

The oft-cited 2010 [Skarhed report](#) acknowledges this – but still concludes that the law is a success based on the number of women in contact with social workers and police. Men involved in prostitution, women in indoor venues, and those selling sex outside the larger cities are therefore excluded from the scope of the report.

This excessive focus on street prostitution handicaps many [accounts](#) of the law's implementation, which tend to simply repeat Swedish authorities' claims that the Sex Purchase Act has influenced the size of the prostitution markets. They ignore the fact that since 1999 or so, mobile phones and the internet have largely taken over the role face-to-face contact in street prostitution used to have – meaning a decline in contacts with women selling sex in the traditional way on the streets of Sweden cannot tell the whole story about the size and form of the country's prostitution markets.

Meanwhile, the Swedish Sex Purchase Act is often [said](#) to be an effective tool against human trafficking. The evidence for this claim is weak; Swedish authorities have backed it up with [something said](#) in a call intercepted by the police. The official data that does exist is vague; [some authors](#) have also pointed out that the act may have raised prices for sex, making trafficking for sexual purposes potentially more lucrative than ever.

There is also scant evidence for the claim that the law has had its advertised effect on the perception of prostitution and people in prostitution. Even though [surveys](#) among the general public indicate great support for the law, the same material also shows a rather strong support for a criminalisation of sex sellers. This contradicts the idea that the law promotes an ideal of gender equality: instead, the criminalisation of sex buyers seems to influence people to consider the possibility of criminalising sex sellers as well. This rather confounds the idea that the “Nordic model” successfully shifts the stigma of prostitution from sex sellers to clients.

### Values in practice

Ultimately, prostitution laws targeting buyers have complex effects on people far beyond those they are meant to target. In addition to this complicating factor, the Nordic countries also police prostitution using various other laws and by-laws. Some of these regulations do, in fact, assume that the women who sell sex are to be punished and blamed for prostitution. This goes to show that one should be careful in concluding that Nordic prostitution policies are guided by progressive feminist ideals, or that they necessarily seek to protect women involved in prostitution. The most telling example of this the way the Nordic countries treat migrants who sell sex.

In Sweden this is embodied by the [Aliens Act](#), which forbids foreign women from selling sex in Sweden and is used by the police to apprehend non-Swedish or migrant persons suspected of selling sex. This reveals the limits of the rhetoric of female victimisation, with clients framed as perpetrators: if the seller is foreign, she is to blame, and can be punished with deportation.

In Norway, we see similar gaps between stated ideology, written policies, and practice. Even though it is completely legal to sell sex, women involved in prostitution are victims of increased police, neighbour and border controls which stigmatise them and make them more vulnerable. The increased control the Norwegian police exert on prostitution markets so as to identify clients includes [document checks](#) on women involved in prostitution so as to find irregulars among them. Raids performed in the name of rescue often end with vulnerable women who lack residence permits being deported from Norway.

Taken together, the Nordic countries' ways of approaching prostitution have been presented nationally and understood internationally as expressions of a shared understanding of prostitution as a gender equality problem, an example of how women's rights can be enshrined in anti-prostitution law. But after looking closely at how the laws have been proposed and implemented, we beg to differ.

*Charlotta Holmström receives funding from the Research Council of Norway. This article was originally published at [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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