

# The Naked Anthropologist

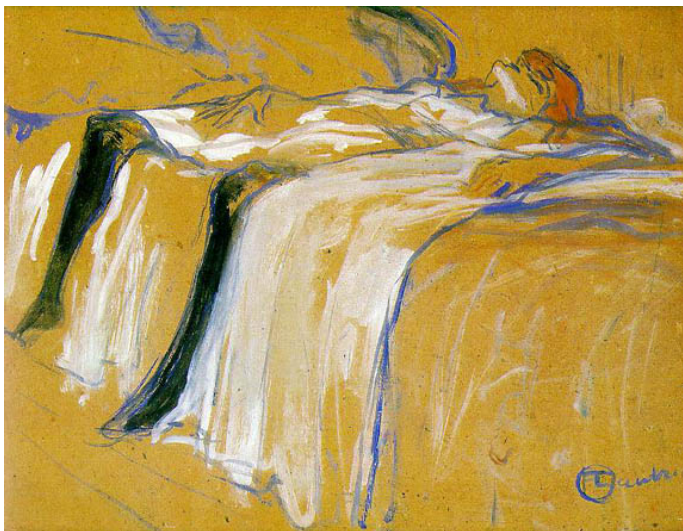
*Dr Laura Agustín on Migration, Trafficking and the Rescue Industry*

## Nordic/Swedish models: laws criminalising the purchase of sex

12 December 2012 in [migration](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [12 comments](#) |  [print](#)

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([http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/TLAalone\\_18961.jpg](http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/TLAalone_18961.jpg)) **Nordic model** is a [new tag](#) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/tag/nordic-model>) on this website, and it doesn't refer to leggy blondes. People contact me ever oftener asking for what I've written on prostitution laws in the Nordic countries, so I have now tagged everything I could find. This is a sub-set of the [Sweden tag](#) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/tag/sweden>), which includes other sorts of issues related to gender equality. Norway's law is even more stringent than Sweden's. Iceland is the third country that has passed the law, but many others are considering it.

What you will not find are quantitative, definitive, bottom-line debunkings of abolitionist and anti-prostitutionist claims. Those don't exist, *they cannot exist*, and anyone who says they can is spinning a line. There's widespread disagreement about how to define trafficking and who is a victim of it, so when you see numbers you should immediately be skeptical. Sometimes ideology is at the bottom of large figures for victims. Other times the issue is that different countries and organisations use non-comparable categories for counting people. Where sex businesses operate in the informal sector there are no formal lists of employees. Where sex workers are supposed to register with the state (as prostitutes) many do not. Undocumented migrants are not eligible to register anywhere as workers and are not counted at the border. Everyone estimates all these numbers; the words *research* and *evidence* are tossed about wantonly. The most egregious

example I know of ideologically based, subjective, sloppy counting is [Siddharth Kara's \(http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/02/27/sex-trafficking/\)](http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/02/27/sex-trafficking/). There are other grotesque examples I describe as [Garbage In, Garbage Out. \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/irresponsible-use-of-trafficking-data-or-garbage-in-garbage-out\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/irresponsible-use-of-trafficking-data-or-garbage-in-garbage-out)

When someone asks for 'the most reliable statistics on the effect of the Swedish Model of prostitution criminalisation', they are assuming those exist somewhere. To understand why they do not exist, look at critiques of the government evaluation of its law. They were unable to evaluate it, they didn't know how, I wouldn't know how either, so no conclusions can be drawn from the evaluation. There are only *claims*. Go to the [nordic-model tag \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/tag/nordic-model\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/tag/nordic-model) and find things like

- [Big claims, little evidence: Sweden's law against buying sex \(http://www.thelocal.se/27962/20100723/\)](http://www.thelocal.se/27962/20100723/)
- [Trafficking Convictions in Sweden: tortuous laws about sex \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/trafficking-convictions-in-sweden-tortuous-laws-about-sex\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/trafficking-convictions-in-sweden-tortuous-laws-about-sex)
- [What do sex-buying statistics mean? \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/what-do-sex-buying-statistics-mean-more-anti-trafficking-efforts-thats-what\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/what-do-sex-buying-statistics-mean-more-anti-trafficking-efforts-thats-what)
- [Doubtful report on sex-purchase law \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/in-english-evaluation-of-the-evaluation-swedens-sex-purchase-law\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/in-english-evaluation-of-the-evaluation-swedens-sex-purchase-law)
- [Smoke gets in your eyes: Evaluation of Swedish anti-prostitution law offers ideology, not methodology \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/smoke-gets-in-your-eyes-evaluation-of-swedish-anti-prostitution-law-offers-ideology-not-methodology\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/smoke-gets-in-your-eyes-evaluation-of-swedish-anti-prostitution-law-offers-ideology-not-methodology)

Moral entrepreneurs go on pretending large numbers prove their points. People say the Nordic model – laws that prohibit the purchase of sex and punish purchasers – is effective in reducing prostitution and trafficking. As for reducing prostitution, the only thing that *possibly* has been reduced is the number of people selling in the street, but those were tiny numbers to begin with and already shrinking. The Swedish evaluators anyway used famously [wrong Danish numbers for street prostitution \(http://www.lauraagustin.com/swedish-report-based-on-wrong-danish-numbers-for-street-prostitution\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/swedish-report-based-on-wrong-danish-numbers-for-street-prostitution) to make their claim and never issued a correction after being informed of their error. On any other kind of commercial sex, they had no numbers at all because they did not know how to do that research (and they admitted it).

As for claims about trafficking, you cannot know you have 'reduced' something for which you had *no baseline numbers* in the first place. All you have are police officials' impressions and claims. The 'effect' of the law is unmeasurable.

I've begun tweeting, by the way, and realise I am starting to reach people who don't know why anti-trafficking campaigns are so conflicted and unsuccessful. Do come [join me \(https://twitter.com/LauraAgustin\)](https://twitter.com/LauraAgustin) (@LauraAgustin) in the challenge to make incredibly complex subjects lucid in under 140 characters.

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*



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**Tags:** [clients](#), [laws](#), [nordic model](#), [research](#), [sweden](#), [trafficking](#)

## 12 comments

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**Zanne** on [12 December 2012 at 14:52](#)

there is no nordic model! If people actually insist on promoting this stupid term, then they should know that the least you can speak of is nordic models !

I would like to hear the arguments for using this term?

[Reply](#)

**Laura Agustín** on [12 December 2012 at 16:54](#)

I'm not promoting anything, just providing the information I have on concepts people write to me about. One might call it the Swedish-Norwegian law, but no one would pick up on it. Or get Iceland in there with its ban on stripping.

Agree that the term better describes leggy blondes but then all the nordic non-blondes would feel offended.

[Reply](#)

**Christian Groes** on [12 December 2012 at 15:51](#)

There is no nordic model, for example the difference between the Danish model of attempted decriminalization of sex work and Swedish criminalization of sex purchase is enormous in practice and ideology.

[Reply](#)

**Ole** on [12 December 2012 at 16:55](#)

The Nordic Countries are: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Of these 5 only 3 have criminalized sex-commerce (buying/selling): Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Neither Finland nor Denmark has. In both Denmark and Finland it is technically legal to exchange sex for money and vice versa (although they have other problems in that it can be illegal for prostitutes to organize).

So... "Nordic Model"? Hardly!

I know it's a phrase that's thrown around a lot, and of course you need a tag to categorize your articles so people can find them when looking for that stupid phrase, so I don't criticize that. But that doesn't mean it's not a stupid phrase which completely overrules the existence of 2 whole countries.

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**Laura Agustín** on [12 December 2012 at 17:07](#)

ok danish vänner i've added /Swedish to the title. the point is to get the article out, which means titles need keywords people search for. i am not the cause of this.

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**Nada** on [13 December 2012 at 02:48](#)

I think people are upset by the fact radical feminist ilk have changed the Swedish model to "Nordic" because people were becoming informed about how Swedish model does not really help sex workers. They think if they sell it with another name, people won't notice .

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**Joyce Arthur** on [13 December 2012 at 16:33](#)

Hi Laura! Thanks for this piece, but I agree with the commenters. "Nordic model" gives that disgraceful and discredited system too much credibility, and it's also an insult to Finland and Denmark. Since the origin and blame belongs to Sweden, I'm thinking we should just go back to calling it the "Swedish model". Chances are Sweden will be the last holdout anyway, once Norway and Iceland figure out it's not working.

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**Laura Agustín** on [13 December 2012 at 17:45](#)

Hi Joyce, I think you forget what I am doing here, which is neither condemning nor promoting anything. This is a post aimed at helping people find material on a phenomenon which is widely called the Nordic model by all sorts of people. It's about the Internet, and google searches, and tags people use to refer to things. You as an activist say that Iceland and Norway are going to abandon the law – first I've heard of it but even if you are right this post is not about how life should be but how it is now. And by the way I know plenty of advocates in Finland and Denmark who don't feel insulted or care about what the law is called.

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**Py** on [13 December 2012 at 22:00](#)

Hi all danish friends and others. Oh I so wish we could still just call it the swedish model, but since Norway took it the politicians actually started selling it around as "the nordic model", I know my geography so obviously

it's not true, but neither is the clame that it's working. But this is the way it's branded out there so rather than yell about an inaccurate name I 'suggest we continue our work to do something about it 😊

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**Sérgio Meira** on [22 December 2012 at 00:27](#)

Can someone explain why exactly Norway and Iceland took up the model? I mean, if the effect in Sweden has been, to put it mildly, underwhelming, why exactly should these two other countries go ahead and accept the same model? Was it all just a good, successful PR campaign?

[Reply](#)

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**laura agustin** on [22 December 2012 at 12:37](#)

The campaigning of a certain kind of feminism for laws like this is worldwide; some such feminists have tried or are trying to introduce bills and acts to prohibit the purchase of sex in many countries. The conditions of possibility, as Foucault called them, are most promising in the Nordic countries: because of their small populations, prosperity, better progress towards equality. Women have a bit more power in big governments in these countries, so highly-motivated feminist women have a better chance of being heard in mainstream politics.

And everyone doesn't agree with what you say – that the effect is underwhelming. The lack of data to prove anything either way is less important to many than the symbol. This legislation symbolises gender equality, from Fiji to France.

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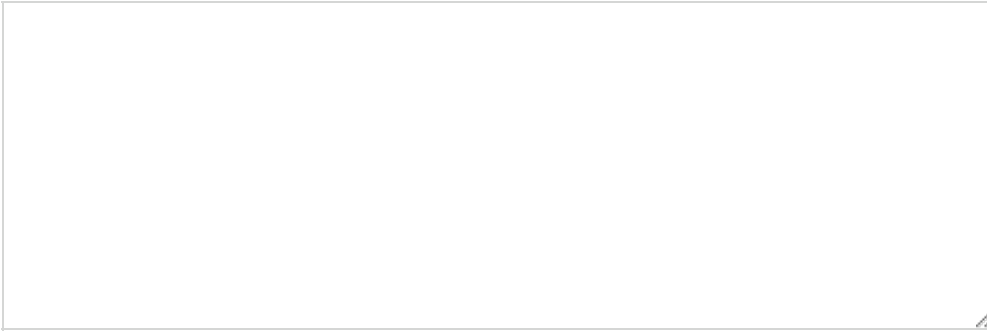
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