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On the Swedish Model

by [Hexy](#) on 7.23.2011 · [34 comments](#)

in [Europe](#), [Guest Blogging](#), [Sex Work](#)

Anyone who's read anything I've written on sex worker rights and legislation over the past however long I've been posting about it knows that I'm in favour of decriminalisation of the sex industry. This means that specific laws regulating the sex industry are removed and sex work is governed by the same laws that govern any other type of work. A study conducted in Australia has found that decriminalisation has the best health and safety outcomes for sex workers, with sex workers working under decriminalisation having lower STI rates than sex workers working under criminalisation or under licensing models, and also reporting better relationships with police and health services.

Amongst anti sex work feminists, the model of sex industry law reform preferred to decriminalisation is known as the Swedish Model. Based on legislation introduced in Sweden in 1999, the Swedish model criminalises the buying of sexual services. Selling of sexual services is technically not a crime, but buying them is punishable by a fine or gaol time. This legislation is based on a redefinition of sex work as ‘male violence against women’. Proponents of the Swedish model claim that it has reduced the amount of sex work occurring in Sweden, although this claim is disputed by Swedish sex workers and some researchers.

Recently, Swedish researchers Susanne Dodillet and Petra Östergren published a paper on the Swedish model, [The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Claimed Success and Documented Effects](#) (be warned about the language: it’s generally supportive, but it uses the p-word). The paper is a must read for anyone with an interest in this topic. Briefly put, it’s conclusions can be summarised as follows: contrary to claims otherwise, the Swedish legislation does not appear to have reduced the size of the Swedish sex industry, has not deterred clients, is unsupported by Swedish sex workers and may make sex work more dangerous and increase risk of STIs. As noted in a survey quoted in the report, support for criminalisation in Sweden is strong, however, the majority of people surveyed support the criminalisation of sex workers as well as clients.

I hear a lot of supporters of the Swedish model say that the legislation does not target sex workers because we are not the ones who are criminalised by the laws. To me, this buys into a long history of treating sex workers like we exist independently of community, clients, family and other human beings. When law reform occurs around sex work, politicians and law makers are always saying that they need to take into account the concerns of ‘citizens’ and ‘residents’ (usually in terms of ‘protecting’ them from sex work or keeping it out of their backyards). This is phrasing that ignores the fact that sex workers are *also* citizens and residents. We are members of communities, we vote, and when we are allowed to we pay taxes. We should not be treated as though we exist outside of society.

The main reason this is relevant to the Swedish model is that while the legislation does not specifically criminalise the sex worker, it criminalises everyone *around* the sex worker. It becomes illegal to rent a room, house, hotel room or apartment for anyone to do sex work out of, or the land lord risks being charged with pimping. The real world implication of this, of course, is that if a sex worker’s sex work status is revealed, they are most likely going to be evicted even if they are not working from that property, as the land lord will fear being charged under Sweden’s strict pimping laws. ‘Pimping’ is also a charge applied to anyone who assists in finding clients, provides security services, or allows advertising for sex workers. Sex workers cannot work together or they risk being charged with pimping each other, which dramatically decreases our opportunity to look out for each other’s safety, reduce overhead costs, and establish peer support networks, which are known to be our most effective method of reducing the STI rate. Services which provide support to sex workers risk running foul of legislators who oppose anything that looks like ‘promoting’ sex work, which may even include distribution of condoms to sex workers. Sex worker organisations do not receive condoms from the government and are not able to buy them in bulk, so have found themselves forced to obtain them from organisations that provide them to men who have sex with men.

Most disturbingly, the strict pimping laws apply to people who live with sex workers (the good old ‘living off the earnings’ schtick) which may include partners *and even sex workers’ children*. There have been cases in Sweden already where sex workers have had their underage children charged with pimping because they were living with them and not paying rent. Anti sex work feminists, *this* is your legislation that you claim does not harm us. This is the danger of treating sex workers like we are not part of our communities

and families. It is not feminist to support legislation that punishes women by targeting their children.

The issue of sex workers' children comes into play in other areas as well. Sex workers in Sweden have had their children removed from them when it was found that they engaged in sex work, even though doing sex work is not a criminal activity. I don't see how it can be said that these are not laws that harm sex workers when they are laws that make our work more dangerous, stop us from working in ways we may prefer that can make our work safer, stop us from accessing services, put us at risk of homelessness, and even take away our kids.

I've also heard reports from sex workers in Sweden that the Swedish government has denied access to the methadone treatment program to sex workers unless they leave sex work. Sweden has a "zero tolerance" drug policy, with no official needle exchange program, and clean injecting equipment being very hard to come by. The outcomes of this are unfortunately clear: over 80% of injecting drug users in Sweden have hepatitis. Depriving sex workers of access to methadone is essentially bullying them into continuing to inject drugs, and with the lack of access to clean needles, placing them at a very high risk of contracting a blood borne infection.

One of the most stupid, dangerous and anti sex worker things that Sweden does (and they're not alone in this one) in their attempt to stamp out sex work is use condoms as evidence that it's occurring. A woman stopped on suspicion of engaging in street-based sex work may be searched, and if she is carrying multiple condoms she will be considered to be a sex worker. If police interrupt what they suspect to be a sex work transaction, the presence of multiple condoms can be considered evidence that it was indeed such an interaction. Women entering the country carrying large numbers of condoms (a 'large number' being completely arbitrary) are deemed to be migrant sex workers and deported back to their country of origin. I'm sure I don't need to explain why this practice discourages the use of condoms and promotes the spread of STIs amongst sex workers, their clients, and the general population. Condoms should *never* be permitted to be used as evidence of sex work.

The Swedish model also opens the door to police corruption, as does any model with an element of criminalisation where power over the sex industry is handed to police. [Last year, a Swedish police chief, who advocated for the reforms, was actually charged with running a "prostitution ring"](#) (I hate that term) as well as investigated for a number of rapes. Tell me, if this model is so effective at preventing sex work from happening, why are the people responsible for enforcing it illegally profiting from the sex industry? A decriminalised model reduces opportunities for corruption (as police have no leverage with which to demand bribes or sexual favours from sex workers) and ensures that any police officer who wishes to engage in sex work as a worker, business owner or client does not have a conflict of interest.

I should note: the legislation, of course, is not inclusive of all women. When it is stated that sex work is 'male violence against women', what is meant is 'cis male violence against cis women'. Women working explicitly as trans women (and cis and trans male sex workers) are completely erased in both legislation and discussion. They don't fit neatly into the analysis, so they're just ignored. As I've stated before, if your analysis doesn't fit the affected community, it's not the community that needs to change.

It's a pretty simple decision to me: when the choice is between a legislative model that has been demonstrated to have some of the best health and safety outcomes for sex workers, and a legislative model that has the negative impacts on us listed above, I'm going to support the model that promotes our health, safety and well-being, and that sex workers actually want to work under. It's not only the humane choice, it's the feminist choice.

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This article was written by [hexy](#)

hexy has written 25 posts for Feministe.

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[1 Sina](#) 7.23.2011 at 11:45 pm

“There have been cases in Sweden already where sex workers have had their underage children charged with pimping because they were living with them and not paying rent.”

Do you have any links about these incidents?

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[2 nix](#) 7.23.2011 at 11:50 pm

To me, this buys into a long history of treating sex workers like we exist independently of community, clients, family and other human beings.

This bears highlighting, and your analysis demonstrates why this elision is so important to combat. Thanks.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[3 bpbetsy](#) 7.23.2011 at 11:56 pm

I was hoping for a post like this because while I have heard that some sex workers didn't support the Swedish model, I never knew exactly why.

From the information you provided, it is clear that the current policies as they relate to drugs, condoms, and children, are harmful to sex workers and must be changed. However, I don't think that a model which criminalizes the client instead of the worker necessarily *has* to operate this way. If the above problems were addressed (the ban on sex workers working together seems especially unfair and unsafe) I would endorse a model that criminalizes clients.

I don't live in Sweden so I can't and don't wish to speak for sex workers there, but I would personally feel the most safe and comfortable working under a system in which "selling" was legal and "buying" was illegal. (Put in quotes because I think those terms oversimplify sexual transactions). I would feel like I had more recourse against violent or aggressive clients and it would level the power imbalance between the client and myself, something I am always acutely aware of. (Of course, there is no guarantee that police will protect sex workers, but there never really is as far as I'm concerned.)

Anyway, to me, this model sounds like something that needs to be seriously reformed but not dismissed entirely. I should note that my experience in the industry (I'm in the U.S.) has indeed been characterized by male violence.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[4](#) Jeff 7.24.2011 at 12:19 am

It seems unlikely to me that sex workers would be in favor making it illegal to be their clients, but not being a sex worker I could be wrong.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[5](#) Hexy 7.24.2011 at 12:41 am

Sina:

Do you have any links about these incidents?

Pye Jacobson, a Swedish sex worker, discusses these cases in this video on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D7nOh57-I8>. I don't have any links to news articles, as the media usually doesn't report on things like "how a sex worker was screwed over by a piece of legislation."

bpbetsy:

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Swedish sex workers report having a worse relationship with police under this legislation, that harassment has increased, and that they are more reluctant to report crimes to police due to ill-treatment. Studies in Australia show that the best model for improving sex worker relationships with police is full decriminalisation.

It's also worth noting that, under the Swedish model of policing sex work, if the police interrupt a sex work transaction, the sex worker *is taken into custody*. They are often held for extended periods until they 'admit' to engaging in sex work.

Anyway, to me, this model sounds like something that needs to be seriously reformed but not dismissed entirely. I should note that my experience in the industry (I'm in the U.S.) has indeed been characterized by male violence.

I'm sorry you've had that experience. Violence should never be considered something sex workers have to deal with as part of our jobs.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[6](#) bpbetsy 7.24.2011 at 1:33 am

My immediate reaction is to support anything that gives the sex worker an advantage over the client (or pimp) in terms of controlling the interaction. From this discussion I gather that the Swedish model achieves this in theory but fails in practice?

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[7](#) [Hexy](#) 7.24.2011 at 1:40 am

[bpbetsy](#):

My immediate reaction is to support anything that gives the sex worker an advantage over the client (or pimp) in terms of controlling the interaction. From this discussion I gather that the Swedish model achieves this in theory but fails in practice?

Something like that. Sex workers in Sweden report that clients are just insisting on quicker negotiations and moving sex work to more isolated areas, both of which disempower the worker. Reducing the number of clients accessing sex workers also puts pressure on sex workers to offer unsafe services and offer services we may not want to offer, which doesn't exactly leave us in a position of power when it comes to negotiating our service.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[8](#) Sonia 7.24.2011 at 1:48 am

Reducing the number of clients accessing sex workers also puts pressure on sex workers to offer unsafe services and offer services we may not want to offer

Wasn't that entirely predictable when criminalizing clients was proposed? FTR, I support full decriminalization.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[9 Hexy](#) 7.24.2011 at 2:03 am

Sonia: Wasn't that entirely predictable when criminalizing clients was proposed? FTR, I support full decriminalization.

It's not considered a bug, it's considered a feature. This legislation is *supposed* to make life more difficult and dangerous for sex workers. That's how it's supposed to persuade us to leave the industry.

Supporter of the legislation Ann-Charlotte Altstadt is on record as saying:

So it is of minor importance that some women willingly prostitute themselves and are happy. This activity should not be made easier but rather more difficult with the help of the Act... there may be a few thousand prostitutes in Sweden who are thus sacrificed on the alter of gender equality.

She's willing to "sacrifice" the lives of a few thousand hookers to achieve her perceived greater good. She sees us as disposable.

I am not willing to give up sex worker lives for feminism.

Further suggesting that the point of the laws is to increase negative treatment of sex workers, the 2010 official evaluation stated that reports from sex workers that the laws had increased stigma and that they felt hunted by police "must be viewed as positive" because the point of the laws were to reduce sex work. So they were winning, because they were making sex workers' lives harder and more miserable.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[10 Eli](#) 7.24.2011 at 3:46 am

I don't have anything to add to the debate, but wanted to chip in a sincere "thank you" to Hexy for this post series (re: sex worker legislation). This is an issue that I just honestly wasn't very informed about previously, and your posts have been wonderfully illuminating.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[11 Hexy](#) 7.24.2011 at 6:25 am

Eva, if you want your comment to be approved, you can re-submit it without using the p-word. I've been very clear that I will not approve comments that use what I consider to be offensive terminology to refer to sex workers.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[12](#) Kathleen 7.24.2011 at 8:53 am

Like Sina, I'd like to see some documentation of this claim:

“There have been cases in Sweden already where sex workers have had their underage children charged with pimping because they were living with them and not paying rent.”

I started to watch the video you linked, but she kind of lost me with the sneering contempt for “radical feminism” in the opener.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[13](#) Wendy 7.24.2011 at 8:55 am

Good piece Hexy. I'm currently completing a master's thesis on the effects of prohibitory laws around sex work and one thing I've found is there is hardly any difference whatsoever between the effects of the Swedish law, and the effects of laws that criminalise the seller. Obviously, the sex worker can't actually go to jail in Sweden but in virtually *every other respect* the effects appear to be *exactly* the same. And almost all negative, from the sex worker's point of view.

The Swedish model fails because it is based on a fundamentally flawed premise: that making it illegal to buy sex stops men from buying sex and therefore stops women from selling it. As logical as that might sound on paper, and as nice as it sounds in some feminist ideologies, it just doesn't happen in the real world.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[14](#) Nyara 7.24.2011 at 8:58 am

[Hexy:](#)

She's willing to “sacrifice” the lives of a few thousand hookers to achieve her perceived greater good. She sees us as disposable.

I am not willing to give up sex worker lives for feminism.

Wow. Um...I'm not sure what to say. There's something very chilling about someone openly admitting that they consider certain people disposable.

And as far as I'm concerned, “sacrificing” a few thousand women on the altar of *anything* is incompatible with feminism. (Or basic human decency, for that matter.)

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[15 Kathleen](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:00 am

I also thought the part where she compared sex work to cleaning up shit all day was astonishing because it's an argument I've heard a zillion times from anti-feminist men: the link made between sex, disgust, and women and/or homosexual sex is pretty telling. Who is it that is sex-phobic again?

(also, btw, I did go back to the video — her reference is to “grown-up children”, not underage ones. If you want to make a credible critical analysis of the Swedish model, you might want to get your facts right)

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[16 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:08 am

Kathleen: I started to watch the video you linked, but she kind of lost me with the sneering contempt for “radical feminism” in the opener.

She starts discussing the specific cases at around the 5.30 mark if you wanted to skip ahead.

I have a sense that the sneering contempt was mutual.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[17 Kathleen](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:15 am

Jadey — no; that contempt is one-sided. Pye Jacobsson refers with contempt to ideas most closely associated with Andrea Dworkin's work. Guess what? Andrea Dworkin spent part of her life as a sex worker.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[18 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:22 am

She wasn't talking about Andrea Dworkin, but people who manipulate Dworkin's work and represent that interpretation of it as an anti-sex work argument.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[19 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:23 am

Also, having been a sex worker does not guarantee being pro-sex work or not holding anti-sex work beliefs, if that isn't obvious.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[20 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:25 am

Not to mention, if these attitudes exist among radical feminists in [Australia](#) and [Canada](#) (not to mention that last one was an explicitly international conference), why not Sweden?

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[21 Kathleen](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:34 am

Jadey — I am humbled by your skills as a mind-reader of you tube video commenters. However, it would be impossible to “misrepresent” Andrea Dworkin as an opponent of the “sex work is a groovy choice” position. Andrea Dworkin actually **was** an opponent of the “sex work is a groovy choice” position. This came from a place of having done sex work and having tremendous respect for sex workers. She reserved her contempt for people who hurt women; it’s telling to me that Pye Jacobsson **OPENS WITH** her contempt for Andrea Dworkin style “radical feminism”.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[22 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 9:51 am

I meant misrepresent the idea that Dworkin believed all penetration is rape, which is the specific thing she cited (I will admit that I am going off of [what other feminist analysts have said](#), in this case). She also did not cite Dworkin directly, but rather radical feminists in general who say things like that, which is not “mind-reading” but sticking to an interpretation of what she actually said. She may very well have meant Dworkin, but that’s some mind-reading on your part there.

As I said (and provided evidence for), there’s plenty of hostility from radical feminists (regardless of whether Dworkin was, and I’ll absolutely take your word that she wasn’t) toward sex workers, so some contempt in return is hardly unsurprising.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[23 matlun](#) 7.24.2011 at 10:14 am

I feel this is a somewhat unstructured post. The “Swedish Model” is normally used to describe the policy of

1. Decriminalizing the sex worker, AND
2. Criminalizing the client

But this article mostly discusses the (very real) problems with the pimping laws which are by no means unique to Sweden. The Dodillet/Östergren paper is very interesting, though (and does focus on the Sex Purchase Act).

As a side note: Both Dodillet and Österberg are well known in the Swedish debate and have been arguing for decriminalization. (They are also researcher and are actually using fact based

argumentation, which is rather refreshing).

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[24](#) matlun 7.24.2011 at 10:31 am

“Sweden has a “zero tolerance” drug policy, with no official needle exchange program”

By the way: This is not exactly true. There are needle exchange programs, but they are on county level. But there is much resistance to this, and the end result is still that few have access needle exchange. Stockholm (the capital) actually just approved the start of needle exchange (which is planned to start this year).

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[25](#) matlun 7.24.2011 at 10:58 am

Kathleen: I started to watch the video you linked, but she kind of lost me with the sneering contempt for “radical feminism” in the opener.

As a Swedish sex worker that is rather understandable. The Swedish legislation has very much been driven by anti sex radical feminism. It has been a very strong political force in Sweden, actually.

As to the “any penetration is like rape” quote, I do not see that as a huge misrepresentation of the Dworkin/MacKinnon position, but that is a somewhat off topic conversation.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[26](#) [Laura Agustín](#) 7.24.2011 at 11:08 am

I live in Sweden and have written in both Swedish and English media about the law and, more importantly, the evaluation of the law that was not able to evaluate anything. There is a Sweden tag on my website: <http://www.lauraagustin.com/tag/sweden>

Welcome

Laura Agustín

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[27](#) matlun 7.24.2011 at 11:10 am

Hexy: Sina:

Do you have any links about these incidents?

Pye Jacobson, a Swedish sex worker, discusses these cases in this video on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D7nOh57-I8>. I don't have any links to news articles, as the media usually doesn't report on things like "how a sex worker was screwed over by a piece of legislation."

Note that she discusses grown up children (still studying) who were living at home (without paying rent). That sounds as if it could happen according to Swedish law, but I have found no references.

I do not see that this could happen when it comes to "underage children", however.

I also do not know of any case where the number of condoms you carry has been used as evidence in Sweden, so I am wondering if this is also a false claim.

Not impossible that it could happen – compare with [this from the US](#).

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[28](#) Ruthi 7.24.2011 at 11:37 am

Thanks, Hexy! I found reading this quote and its comments enlightening and interesting.

I'd like to ask a question but I want to stress before I do that this is largely coming from a place of ignorance when it comes to sex work.

It makes sense to me that in a place where sex work is decriminalized, sex workers are able to better protect themselves from dangerous situations. (One case in my hometown in the Midwestern US comes to mind where a sex worker was beaten by a client and when she reported it to the police, they arrested her.) However, what are the effects of decriminalization on sex slavery? I am assuming that it exists on some level, although not at Ashton Kutcher induced panic levels. I do not know what the situation is in Australia at all.

(If some of my sentences are stunted, I apologize; I am writing this on a cell phone.)

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[29](#) Ruthi 7.24.2011 at 11:39 am

Ahh! I meant post of course, not comment.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[30](#) melponeme_k 7.24.2011 at 12:32 pm

Decriminalization of prostitution does nothing to stop the Mafia run slavery organizations. It has been found that the Mafia uses these places as safe havens.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[31](#) Kathleen 7.24.2011 at 1:48 pm

Jadey:

As I said (and provided evidence for), there's plenty of hostility from radical feminists (regardless of whether Dworkin was, and I'll absolutely take your word that she wasn't) toward sex workers, so some contempt in return is hardly unsurprising.

Provide cites. Provide ANY CITES AT ALL. Name and quote a single radical feminist who has said hostile things about sex workers. One. Just one.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[32](#) Kathleen 7.24.2011 at 1:50 pm

Matlun — I'd say the person who compares having sex to cleaning shit is the anti-sex one. But that's just me.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[33](#) Emilybites 7.24.2011 at 2:04 pm

Long-time lurker and rare commenter here – because I really don't get this post. hexy, your conflation between radical feminists, common or garden misogynists (cops, lawmakers) and anti-'sex work' people of all stripes is vague and misrepresents them. Conflating the police (state) arresting women for carrying too many condoms (which is misogynist, anti-feminist, stupid, cruel and punitive) with arresting johns – these are not both coming from a place of 'radical feminism'.

And this: “The Swedish model also opens the door to police corruption, as does any model with an element of criminalisation where power over the sex industry is handed to police...A decriminalised model reduces opportunities for corruption (as police have no leverage with which to demand bribes or sexual favours from sex workers)” is obviously not right. I mean, what? Since when did police not have power over sex workers? Tell me the police aren't assaulting, raping and pimping sex workers right now under a fully criminal system, because they can threaten them with plenty.

I'm a radical feminist and the contempt (violence, injustice) with which the police and non-feminist public in general treat sex workers disgusts me – but that has nothing to do with a desire to criminalise the kinds of people who want to buy other humans' bodies for sexual use. There's a lot to be said for criminalising 'buying' sexual services: the kind of people who buy them are the problem, not the people selling them. An industry where rape, assault and STIs are a feature, not a bug, is not something worth defending.

The point of the Swedish model is not to make sex work more 'difficult' and 'dangerous' for sex workers, but to make buying it more difficult and dangerous for the johns. GOOD. No one doing sex work should be penalised (just like no one selling an organ should be), but the people buying it? The

ones with all the money, the power, the desire to dominate and harm other human beings? Yeah, they should be penalised.

And ‘sex work’? Is not sex, matlun. ‘Anti-sex radical feminist’ is an ignorant thing to say (and I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt by not assuming you’re just deliberately dishonest).

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

[34 Jadey](#) 7.24.2011 at 2:38 pm

Kathleen: Provide cites. Provide ANY CITES AT ALL. Name and quote a single radical feminist who has said hostile things about sex workers. One. Just one.

Fortunately nowhere in my job description does it say cater to Kathleen’s every demand. I gave links above, although I doubt you’d take the word of sex workers and feminists who don’t agree with you. This is a derail and you are obnoxious. Someone else can take up the discussion but I have better uses of my time and energy than to debate with someone who can’t even accept that it’s possible for people to share her political beliefs and still be douchebags.

[\(Quote this comment?\)](#)

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