

Nordic Prostitution Policy Reform

A comparative study of prostitution policy reform in the Nordic countries

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Research on Norwegian prostitution policy

Posted by [Johan Karlsson Schaffer](#) on 8/17/10 • Categorized as [Field Notes](#), [Norway](#)

While a coherent, explanatory study on the politics of prostitution policy reform in Norway is yet to be written, existing research provides essential pieces to a puzzle that is yet to be laid out completely.

As the second country in the world to ban the purchase of sexual services, Norway stands out as a key case in NPPR's comparative analysis, not least because of the sudden shift in policy. In late 2004, for instance, a Justice Department [Working Group on Legal Regulation of Purchase of Sexual Services](#) advised against criminalising the purchase of sexual services.

Yet, only a few years later, proponents of the ban had achieved the necessary parliamentary majority for criminalisation, the tipping point being the Labour Party congress in April 2007. Two years earlier, the congress had turned down criminalisation. This year, too, party leadership argued against the proposal, suggesting instead to give government more time to consider the issue. Among those who entered the podium during the debate were party heavy-weights such as [Knut Storberget](#) (Minister of Justice), [Dag Terje Andersen](#) (Minister of Industry), [Helga Pedersen](#) (Minister of Fisheries and

vice party chairman) as well as **Anniken Huitfeldt**, leader of the women's network, who all endorsed postponing the decision.

Eventually, though, 184 out of 300 delegates voted in favour of criminalisation. Press reported it as a victory for the youth wing, influential regional branches of the party, including Oslo AP, and certain members of parliament, who managed to win the support of the congress. As the Labour Party's coalition partners, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party, already favoured criminalisation (as did the Christian Democratic party), a broad majority now supported criminalisation. A year later, in April **2008, Storberget presented the bill (Ot. prp. 48 [2007-2008])** which resulted in a sex purchase ban taking effect on 1 January, 2009.

Hence, recent prostitution policy in Norway represents an intriguing shift: How did proponents of criminalisation manage to turn the tide? While there are a number of studies which address, broadly, the shifts in Norwegian prostitution policy over the past decade, few studies of Norwegian prostitution policy have reached English-language academic publications. Most existing studies are written in Norwegian, aimed for a national public debate or commissioned by official or semi-official inquiries, and hence rarely seek a structured explanation of prostitution policy reform.

Casting the net widely, however, we can discern three types of resources to draw upon in the literature, focusing on discourse, agents and regulations, respectively.

- *Discourse*: One type of studies focus on how prostitution, prostitutes and clients are represented in media discourse and, as a sub-theme, how academic research feeds into those debates.
 - Prominent examples of such studies include Dag Stenvoll's **critical discourse analysis** of how Norwegian newspapers construed Russian women in prostitution in rural northern Norway in the 1990s, identifying recurring themes connecting prostitution to organised crime, contagious diseases, moral hazard, social stigma and an outside threat to an established social order.¹ Stenvoll has also written on the representation of clients in media, popular culture and politics.²
 - Similarly, Synnøve Økland Jahnsen analyses how Norwegian newspapers covered Nigerian women in prostitution in Norway in the mid '00s, arguing that media narratives revolve around three conflicts: the 'Norwegian prostitution market', emphasising competition between women of different ethnic origins offering sexual services; the

‘Norwegian lines of tolerance and decency’, describing a conflict between prostitutes and ‘regular citizens’ in the use of public space; and ‘a global sex market’, which emphasises unequal relations between women and men and between Norway and Nigeria. Nigerian women in prostitution are portrayed, paradoxically, as both illegal aliens exploiting Norwegian men and victims of cynical networks of transborder crime.³

- May-Len Skilbrei, too, **discusses how recent public debates, both nationally and locally, have dealt with the phenomenon of Nigerian prostitutes in the streets of Oslo**. Skilbrei notes that while traditional discourses victimise prostituted women, the terms of debate shifted in these years, casting “regular Norwegian men” as victims of aggressive marketing of sexual services, while the Nigerian women were singled out and blamed for pushing their trade in the wrong place (the Karl Johan Street) and in the wrong way (too aggressively). In effect, prostitution by Norwegian women was either construed as more orderly and less disturbing, or simply neglected.⁴
- *Agents*: A second type of studies addresses, instead, the agents engaged in prostitution policy making, such as women’s movements and sex workers’ organisations. Often, such studies are written with from the partisan perspective of a particular movement. This type includes Agnete Strøm’s recent historical account of the Women’s Front and **its struggle against prostitution** over 30 years⁵. From a different perspective, Astrid Renland and Arne Randers-Pehrson both discuss how sex workers’ groups and the women’s movement have struggled over the privilege to define sex work and sex workers.⁶
- *Regulations*: A third type of research seeks to describe public policies, legal regulations and their implementation and effects through institutions such as courts, the police and social agencies. May-Len Skilbrei has contributed immensely to documenting prostitution policies, laws and regulations in Norway.⁷ While these studies often provide useful, detailed accounts of the dependent variable (prostitution policy), they usually do not aim to provide theoretically founded explanations of policy change, but are descriptive, historical and atheoretical.

Naturally, a study on any one aspect of prostitution policy will necessarily also touch upon related aspects, and hence these types are not mutually exclusive categories. However, few studies claim to establish causal links between the different aspects, say, how media discourse influences policy, or the other way around, how policy implementation feeds back into public perceptions of prostitution. Additionally, there are a few studies which detail the subjective experience of prostitutes and their

clients.⁸ While such studies often give insights into very concrete effects of prostitution policy, they are less useful in explaining it, since, as many of these studies document, sex workers and sex buyers are rarely represented in public discourse and policy making.



While existing research provides knowledge about the input and output of prostitution policy reform, we know less about the mechanisms by which such input is translated into output.

("Albertine" by Alfred Seland at Oslo City Hall. Photo: Margaret

Maloney.)

However, few of the existing studies have focused on the political processes through which prostitution policy is made. For instance, although we know that prostitution policy has been debated within and across Norway's political parties for decades, there are no studies that we are aware of that seek to describe, let alone explain, how and why their positions have shifted, and how such changes, in turn affect the opportunities for prostitution policy reform.

As such, while individual studies shouldn't be faulted for having a particular, limited focus, collectively they leave the political arena as a blank spot on the map, or a black box.⁹ We know the *input* in form of media discourse, academic and activist knowledge production and various grassroots and elite organisations participating in such discourses, and we know the *output* in the form of policies and regulations which produce certain effects on prostitution as such and the various agencies in charge of regulating it. But we know little about the mechanisms by which such input is transformed into such output.

This seems especially puzzling if we're looking for causal explanations of prostitution policy reform, such as why Norway criminalised the purchase of sexual services as of 2009. While it seems likely that changes in media discourse, **corresponding to changes in prostitution markets**, did influence policy, that shift is only half the story: the nature of the influence as such must also be documented.

Hence, discourse studies need to be complemented with a careful assessment of, for instance, how various policy entrepreneurs, unlike their competitors, were able to use the discursive shift as an opportunity to achieve legislative success. Such processes are by no means a self-evident or mechanical, and while the outcome, in retrospect, might seem overdetermined, it is produced by active, purposive agents: Policy makers might seek to resist changes in the broader ideational framework or selectively draw on available information in order to maintain their preferred policy stance. Drawing on ideational and constructivist theories, the NPPR project hopes to contribute with such an account of prostitution policy change in the case of Norway.

Footnotes

1. Dag Stenvoll, 2002: "**From Russia with Love? Newspaper Coverage of Cross-Border Prostitution in Northern Norway, 1990—2001**", *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 9:2, 143–162. [[↔](#)]

2. Stenvoll, Dag, 2007: "Kundebilder: Representasjoner av menn som betaler for sex", 113–130, in Jessen, Liv (ed.), 2007: *Det ideelle offer – andre tekster om prostitusjon*. Oslo: Koloritt. [↔]
3. Synnøve Økland Jahnsen, 2007: *Women who cross borders – black magic? A critical discourse analysis of the Norwegian newspaper coverage of Nigerian women in prostitution in Norway*, Department of Sociology, University of Bergen; cf. Simonsen, Anne Hege, "Ubehaget i journalistikken : verden midt i blant oss" pp. 305–322 in *Grenser for kultur? Perspektiver fra norsk minoritetsforskning*, Øivind Fuglerud & Thomas Hylland Eriksen (eds.), Oslo: Pax, 2007. [↔]
4. May-Len Skilbrei, 2009: "Nigeriansk prostitusjon på norsk: Feil kvinner på feil sted", in *Norske seksualiteter*, edited by Wencke Mühleisen & Åse Røthing, Oslo: Cappelen. Cf. Skilbrei, May-Len (2001), "The Rise and Fall of the Norwegian Massage Parlours: Changes in the Norwegian Prostitution Setting in the 1990s" *Feminist Review* 67, 63–77. [↔]
5. Agnete Strøm, 2009: "A glimpse into 30 years of struggle against prostitution by the women's liberation movement in Norway", *Reproductive Health Matters* 17:34, 29–37. [↔]
6. Renland, Astrid, 2007: "Fra medsøstre til ofre, horer og streikbrytere", 29-56; Randers-Pehrson, Arne: "Sanne bilder av prostituerte? Hvilke bilder kan vi tåle?" in Jessen, Liv (ed.), 2007: *Det ideelle offer – andre tekster om prostitusjon*. Oslo: Koloritt. [↔]
7. e.g. Skilbrei, May-Len (1999), "Norsk prostitusjonskontroll på 1990-tallet", *Kritisk Juss* 26:1, 59–74; Skilbrei, May-Len (2006), "Prostitusjonslovgivning i Danmark, Norge og Sverige" in Trine Lynggard (ed.): *Sex säljer: Kön och makt inom prostitution och pornografi*, NIKK-rapport; Skilbrei, May-Len (2008), "Rettslig håndtering av prostitusjon og menneskehandel i Norge" i Charlotta Holmström og May-Len Skilbrei, red., *Prostitution i Norden*. Forskningsrapport, TemaNord-rapport; Stridbeck, Ulf (2005): "Prostitusjon i Norge: Realiteter, politikk og regulering", *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Kriminalvidenskab*, 92:1, 54–72. [↔]
8. e.g., Brunovskis, Anette: "Når ofre for menneskehandel sier nei til hjelp", in Jessen, Liv (ed.), 2007: *Det ideelle offer – andre tekster om prostitusjon*. Oslo: Koloritt; cf. Dotterud, Per Kristian: "Prostitusjonsdebatten – en historie om usynliggjøring og undertykking", in Jessen, Liv (ed.), 2007: *Det ideelle offer – andre tekster om prostitusjon*. Oslo: Koloritt; Skilbrei, May-Len og Irina Polyakova (2006), "*My life is too short; I want to live now*": *Kvinner fra Øst-Europa forteller om veien til og livet i prostitusjon i Norge*, rapport Institutt for kriminologi og retts sosiologi, UiO; Skilbrei, M-L, M. Tveit and A. Brunovskis (2006), *Afrikanske drømmer på europeiske gater. Nigerianske kvinner i prostitusjon i Norge*. Fafo-rapport 525. [↔]
9. For an exception to this rule, see Skilbrei (2009). [↔]

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