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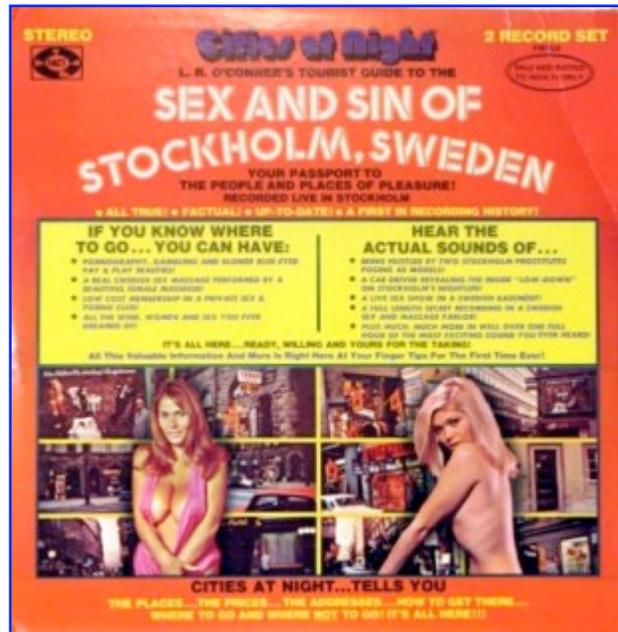
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Swedish Sex Law Report: ‘We’re Sorry We Haven’t a Clue’ (or, How to Make the Channel Tunnel Profitable)

by stephenpaterson on July 5, 2010

CONTRARY to popular belief, Sweden did not become the first European country to criminalise the clients of sex workers in 1999. As far as I can make out, England and Wales achieved that dubious privilege when Westminster imported US-style ‘kerb-crawling’ law 14 years earlier.

It is rare to have academic consensus on controversial areas of study, but currently in the UK it seems that the vast majority of academics studying prostitution and the sex industry are in agreement. It is almost impossible to find even a handful involved in this massively expanding area...that will deviate from the opinion that the sex industry should be legalised or decriminalised, and that penalising sex buyers has a negative effect on



those selling sexual services.

Thus begins [Julie Bindel's latest attack](#) on the sex industry (how would she make her money without it?) And indeed, she's right for once. The vast majority of intelligent people (let alone academics) who study the subject arrive at the opposite conclusion she does, her own passionate belief being, of course, in the criminalisation of all purchasers of sexual services, as the *Guardian* seemed to remind us almost daily at one stage.

The occasion of this latest Bindelian emission is the publication in Sweden of the official evaluation of its anti-sex purchase law, the basics of which can be read in English on Laura Agustin's excellent [Border Thinking blog](#) (mercifully devoid of Bindelian superlatives). At the same time as criminalising clients of sex workers, Sweden de-criminalised selling sex, a feature of the change which seems to have evaded its review.

However, this was a review with a difference. The Swedish Government made quite clear from the outset that, whatever the outcome, there would be no repeal of the law: if it was forcing street sex workers into back alleys to get trade and thus increasing violence, what the hell?

With a degree of effrontery that had to be heard to be believed, the chair of the inquiry, Anna Skarhed, told a press conference that they started with their conclusions and then worked out a rationale for them: "I think that these are quite obvious conclusions. But the important thing for the inquiry has been to try to, so to speak, get the basis for being able to draw them. And this is how we have worked," she announced.

Oh, for such refreshing transparency at Westminster!

The result is, [as Louise Persson, author of *Classical Feminism*, put it:](#)

an astounding absence of objective and unbiased guiding principles, a lack of solid evidence and a confusing methodical picture that could mean outright guesswork. All the report's conclusions are therefore questionable. I was prepared to focus on the fact that Skarhed wasn't allowed to freely criticise the law, but the report itself is a worse problem. Now-familiar self-congratulatory references to Sweden's higher moral ground compared with other countries are not missing: here the law is ascribed an almost magical power to eradicate patriarchy and sex trafficking.

Outcomes of New Law

The principal measurable effect of the law, claims the report, has been to halve Swedish street prostitution. Independent commentators might question this. To begin with, the Swede's knowledge of numbers of street sex workers before the law was very dubious, and [a Norwegian inquiry](#) in the meantime has found conflicting reports from the Swedish police and from their social services over the numbers of street sex workers active in the same areas at the same times.

In any event, English and Welsh kerb crawling law has been punishing punters on the streets for 25 years – more than twice as long as Sweden. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt might be the appropriate message from Blighty.

And where has it led us? Well, one thing our army of academics tell us is that it doesn't work. For a start, unlike the recent successful but isolated [health-based approach in Derby](#), it fails to address the underlying survival sex work problem of drug addiction. The addicts involved – today estimated at some 85 percent of that minority of sex workers who work the streets – thus do whatever is necessary to feed their craving, generally changing areas or times to avoid the vice squad, losing their street networks, and above all finding themselves often alone in areas where they don't know the dangerous punters, as was the case with the brutally murdered [Amanda Walker](#) and appears to have been the case in the Bradford slayings. Or they turn to other forms of crime.

The Swedish evaluation then turns to internet prostitution, saying:

In the last five years, Internet prostitution has increased in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. However, the scale of this form of prostitution is more extensive in our neighbouring countries, and there is *nothing to indicate that a greater increase in prostitution over the Internet has occurred in Sweden...*

“Nothing to indicate” is, of course, another way of saying they haven't a clue. The

report is peppered with such phrases: *we do not know very much* (about male prostitution); *there [is no] information that suggests that* (prostitutes formerly on the streets are now involved in indoor prostitution); and *there is nothing to indicate that* (prostitution in massage parlours, sex clubs, hotels, restaurants and nightclub



settings has increased in recent years)...etcetera...

Now let's try a quick and inexpensive (if unscientific) experiment with a Google search engine.

Iceland: Reykjavík + escort = 77,400 results in 0.21 seconds.

Finland: Helsinki + escort = 136,000 results in 0.35 seconds.

Norway: Oslo + escort = 246,000 results in 0.19 seconds.

Sweden: Stockholm + escort = 491,000 results in 0.16 seconds.

Back in 1999, the official estimate of sex workers in the whole of Sweden was a mere 2,500. Even rabbits, it would seem, could only aspire to multiply as fast.

Bearing in mind Stockholm's population is a mere 783,000, I may have to concede that some escorts could be advertising more than once. And a few escorts – though by the look of the links not many – might be Ford cars and even naval vessels. Yet many of these links seem to have multiple young women available, and one is still left wondering whether Stockholm's female population does anything else. Maybe the city's internet sex worker population has reached saturation point?

This mere 2,500 sex workers back in 1999 was a truly tiny number in a population of nine million Swedes. On the same basis, we in the UK would have had about 17,000 sex workers. Our actual official estimate was 80,000. A strong welfare state and a very advanced approach to flexible working hours have been identified as factors in the Swedish situation. But let's consider another one.

Stockholm is well towards the south of Sweden, and thus one of its warmer areas. In February, the temperatures in Stockholm plunge to between minus one and minus four Celsius. In other words, it's bleedin' freezin', and doesn't get much better than distinctly chilly even in the height of summer. Sexually transmitted diseases are arguably not as big a threat to male members as frost bite.

Little wonder, then, that Stockholm's red light area consists of but a single street – *Malmskillnadsgaden* - where, during winter, after picking up sex workers, presumably clients would have to leave them for several hours in a bath to thoroughly defrost. Which, at £40 or so an hour, may prove somewhat expensive.

Before they embarked on their new law, the Swedes carried out a small survey of some Swedish men. The men were assumed to be typical of the Swedish male population and from this survey, they concluded that one in eight Swedish men had purchased sex.

Somewhat less publicised was a survey showing that 78% of those who bought sex bought it abroad. And with temperatures like that, who could blame them?

[A survey by Durex](#) showed Swedes have sex less often than any other Nordic country – even the Icelanders do better. Even though 79% of Swedish men were prepared to go to the length of taking contraceptive pills themselves, some are driven to online gambling instead.

Nevertheless, large numbers of Swedish men pay some £50 a time to go back and forth using the tunnels and bridge connecting Malmo, at Sweden's southern tip, to Denmark, which is warmer and adopts a wholly more pragmatic approach to both sex work and drugs (on which the Swedes also have a zero-tolerance policy). That the tunnels were completed and the bridge opened just a year after the new anti-punter law came into effect is, we are assured, purely coincidental.

A little UK lateral thinking and a bit of cooperation with the French, and even the Channel Tunnel, it seems, might yet make a profit.

You can read the stories of these men in the *Times* and the *Telegraph*, which put on an interesting display of getting their facts wrong in different places.



No, **Roger Boyes in Copenhagen in the *Times***, Denmark has *not* decriminalised prostitution. It has **made it about as legal as it is in the UK, with brothels, for example, outlawed**. Do not mistake *de facto* with *de jure* just because it earns them a mint in kroner.

No, **Olga Craig in the *Telegraph***, in 1999 there were *not* “2,500 vice girls [who] prowled the streets of Stockholm or worked in brothels.” That was the estimated total sex worker population for the whole of Sweden. Nor are “almost all [UK sex workers] dependent on cocaine and heroin.” High percentages turn up only among survival sex workers – about a fifth of UK sex workers – who work the streets.

Sex trafficking

Among the claims for their law made by the Swedes is that it deters sex traffickers and thus organised crime. But according to **Radio Sweden**, the number trafficked annually into Stockholm alone is between 200 and 400 a year. This compares to the total number of sex trafficking victims (255) found by the UK’s 55 police forces in two unprecedented co-ordinated searches throughout the whole UK (*Pentameter* and *Pentameter 2*) which lasted between them well over a year in a country with nearly seven times the population.

Conclusion? The trafficking situation appears certainly no better in Sweden than in the UK and quite likely a good deal worse.

Yet, as the Swedish report points out, the law is *popular* in Sweden, with a series of polls each showing over 70% support. Less publicised by the Swedish Government is that they also reveal **“that the confidence of the Swedish public in the law having any impact on the extent of prostitution is rather weak. More than half of the interviewees say that they think that the sellers of sex should also be criminalised.”**

Which, of course, is a paradox, as the new law which they supposedly support has decriminalised them. This is bad news for Anna Skarhed and her report, as - instead of re-criminalising sex workers – she wants them compensated as victims of

violence against women, along with a doubling of the maximum penalty for those who buy sex to a year's imprisonment. She is also pursuing the setting up of a Swedish equivalent of the UK Human Trafficking Centre, but one which deals with sex work as well, to further conflate the two.

These, then, were the conclusions with which the inquiry began before that tedious business of actually inquiring. Which, in this case, seems to have taken as little time as possible.

Further reading: For a nuanced description of the debate within Scandinavia, try the [Nordic Prostitution Policy Reform](#) blog. For informative accounts of how the Swedish anti-client law came about, try Don Kulick's [400,000 Swedish Perverts](#) (pay for) or Arthur Gould's free download *The Criminalisation of Buying Sex: the Politics of Prostitution in Sweden*, which you can Google.

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11 Comments



1.

[Cath Elliott permalink](#)

England: London + escort = 11,400,000 results in 0.25 seconds.

What exactly were you trying to prove with that Google search Stephen?

[Reply](#)



2.

[stephenpaterson permalink](#)

Hi Cath + welcome. Actually, I get 2,280,000 (I don't put the country in). It's at least as scientific as anything to be found in Skarhed's effort. What's more it's free to the taxpayer.

There may be something in relating these results to population and discovering if, as I suspect, they expand geometrically in relationship to the population of the TTWA. See if we can get somebody to do a thesis on it.

Hope you + Julie are well.

[Reply](#)



3.

Xena [permalink](#)

I'm half considering tackling that thesis myself someday. I've been kind of intrigued with the work of economic anthropologists like Marvin Harris. There must be some kind of Neo-Malthusian (or maybe if we're discussing sex work over celibacy that would be post Malthusian?) formula to determine what kind of clientel base would support a given number of sex workers before they'd have to start beating each other down in the streets for 5 quid. Some of these estimates that these "protection" workers throw around just sound insane to me. 40 000 smuggled sex workers for the big World Cup game in—where was that? Germany? 2006ish? Do these women even know how much space 40 000 scantily clad women take up?

I suspect the numbers do go up slightly with population booms, for the same reasons other migrant populations go up when there's money to be made. I had a girlfriend who worked out on the east coast here in the 80's. I said, "For what? Codfish?!" She laughed and told me that there were boom times that smart escorts cashed in on, and other parts of the yearly EI cycle when everybody left for Calgary. It might be interesting to determine a formula for that too.

[Reply](#)



4.

Xena [permalink](#)

Oh, and you're correct about multiple ads. Research for my dungeon included listening in on my girlfriends' phone and on-line sales pitches. Some clients will respond to several ads and one girl 3-12 different times and not even know it. Some are looking for something specific & weird, like freckled shoulders, some are just cheap. Some are talk'n tugs. Watching my girlfriend fielding/haggling was pretty entertaining!

[Reply](#)



5.

Peter Mauley [permalink](#)

Great post Stephen, thanks

[Reply](#)



6.

kevin [permalink](#)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/7430122/The-dark-side-of-Swedish-society.html>

here one for you

[Reply](#)



7.

[Steve permalink](#)

Stephen,

I notice Laura has posted an article refuting the claims that the number of street workers in Denmark has increased.

<http://www.lauraagustin.com/swedish-report-based-on-wrong-danish-numbers-for-street-prostitution>

Swedish report based on wrong numbers for Denmark: Now Reden (Danish NGO) must tell the truth

It is on the basis of wrong numbers that the Swedish report concludes that there has been a high increase in the number of sexworkers in the streets in Denmark. The wrong numbers come from Reden in Copenhagen, who now must come forward and correct their misinformation, which they over a number of years have reported to the public.

[Reply](#)



8.

[stephenpaterson permalink](#)

Kevin – yes, I saw that. Did you know the Swedes sterilised women they considered unfit mothers until as late as 1975 through a eugenics programme passed through a law in 1934? And that when an investigative journalist uncovered it, the dominant Social Democrat Party opposed compensation as late as 1996?

Now those who were forcibly sterilised (and survive) can claim about \$20,000 compensation, but many who signed the consent forms apparently only did so because prison release or welfare benefits depended on it.

Over 60,000 were sterilised, apparently.

Steve – Yes, very interesting, I commented on Laura’s blog as I’m very dubious about referral stats quoted in Westminster concerning Poppy and used in trafficking debates.

[Reply](#)



9.

[Helena von Schantz permalink](#)

Thank you for your astute, enlightening and entertaining comments on the Swedish sex law report. I’m agitating as best I can against both the contraproductive sex law and the depressing Swedish habit of basing conclusions on ideology rather than on facts.

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