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## Banning the sex industry

# Naked ambition

Iceland is determined to outlaw the world's oldest business. Can it succeed?

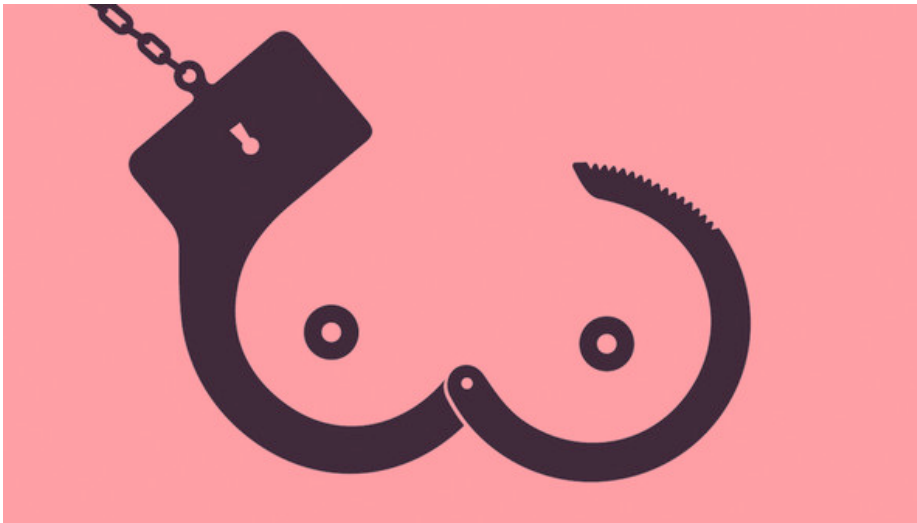
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ULTRA-LIBERAL Iceland wants to ban online pornography. It is just the latest step in its attempts to eliminate the sex industry entirely. In 2009 it introduced fines and jail terms for those who patronise prostitutes (whom it treats as victims). In 2010 it outlawed strip clubs. In February the government decided to take on the glut of smut online and floated the idea of banning violent or degrading pornography, which some Icelanders take to mean most of it. No country has yet wholly succeeded in controlling commercial sex, either through legalisation or criminalisation. But all over the world, particularly in rich democracies, policymakers are watching to see whether Iceland succeeds—and may follow in its footsteps if it does.

Iceland's proposal is in its early stages and may lose momentum after an election on April 27th, which the government is expected to lose. But its plan puts it in some odd company. Saudi Arabia similarly bans strip clubs, prostitution and pornography. But it also stops women from driving, forbids them from travelling without a man's permission and restricts their right to vote. In the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap report, which compares progress in 135 countries towards sex equality, Saudi Arabia ranked 131st.

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Iceland, however, is determinedly pro-women. Half the cabinet and 25 of the 63 members of Iceland’s parliament are female. The country is run by the world’s only openly lesbian prime minister. Iceland is also pro-sex. Its supermarkets sell condoms and mini-vibrators next to checkouts. A new sex-education film informs teenagers that sex should be something they want to do again and again, and then maybe again. Some 65% of Icelandic children are born outside marriage, more than any other country in the OECD. Same-sex marriage has been legal since 2010 and gays and lesbians can adopt children. Icelandair ran a campaign featuring the tagline, “Fancy a dirty weekend in Iceland?”

The country’s initiatives against the sex industry have been championed by a powerful feminist movement. "Tackling online porn, particularly the violent kind, is part of a broader set of policies to protect children and reduce sexual violence," says Halla Gunnarsdottir, a political adviser to the interior minister who has proposed the law. But the more ambitious Iceland has become in its war against the sex industry, the less success it seems to enjoy.

The most effective part of Iceland’s crackdown has been the ban on strip joints. In the late 1990s and early 2000s around 15 were operating, mostly in and around the capital, Reykjavik where two thirds of Iceland’s 322,000 citizens live. Stripping was a multi-million dollar business, says Helgi Gunlaugsson, a criminologist at the University of Iceland. Worried about links with drugs and prostitution and convinced that it violated women’s rights, Kolbrun Halldorsdottir, then a member of parliament, pushed for a ban.

Just two clubs remain today. And neither can be described as a strip joint. In the centre of Reykjavik, Strawberries is a champagne club offering gentlemen a fantasy world of go-go dancers and hot fun. On a Thursday night in March, however, the place was empty. A bored-looking girl in a neon-pink bikini-top, miniskirt and silver boots sat alone in a corner. Others gossiped or fiddled with their mobile phones. Private dances are still available, from 17,000 Icelandic krona (\$144) for 12 minutes with a Lambrini Bucks Fizz to 70,000 Icelandic krona for an hour’s gyrations washed down with Moët et Chandon. Despite the prices, the women stressed that only dancing is on offer. The clubs operate from buildings with fixed addresses and glowing signs which, unlike prostitutes, say, means that the police find it easier to keep an eye on them.


**Name and shame**  
Prostitution has proved harder to police and stamp out. Few prostitutes solicit on street corners. Many advertise through dating websites. The sites insist they remove suspicious profiles but one former Icelandic prostitute says you can still find them by searching for adverts that use dollar signs instead of the letter “s”, for example. Eva (not her real name) says that sex workers also trade clients by word of mouth. In a country as small as Iceland that can lead to its own problems: she once received an enquiry from a man whose voice she recognised as her uncle’s.


So far Iceland’s courts have seen just 20 cases relating to prostitution charges. Most resulted in convictions. But the names of some of those found guilty have been kept anonymous. The penalties are light, so the humiliation of exposure could have served as an additional deterrent, especially in tiny Iceland. The law will only make a difference, says Eva, when men realise that their names will be made public.


Even the police agree that the law could be better enforced. But they lack the cash and


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staff, says Sigridur Hjaltsted, assistant prosecutor for the sex-crimes unit of the Reykjavik police—and so they concentrate on investigating rape and child sex abuse. Gudron Jonsdottir, head of Stigamot, a centre offering support to the victims of sexual violence, is sceptical. She argues that the police decide where to direct their resources and thinks that the lack of enforcement is a choice.

### Define that

Regulating pornography is hardest of all. Distributing and selling it has been illegal in Iceland since 1869. Breaking the law is theoretically punishable with a fine or six months in jail. In reality, three minutes' walk from Reykjavik's main police station two sex shops sell a smorgasbord of films and magazines, from "Spanish Schoolgirls 2" to "Tranny-Condas". Neither shop has encountered any problems. As with prostitution, the lack of enforcement is in part down to money—because resources are scarce, they go mostly into investigating child pornography.

A ban on lubricious materials online, its supporters say, is a natural extension of today's legislation. Few people buy hard-core in hard copy any more. The government's main concern is violent pornography, says Ms Gunnarsdottir, and it wants the law to reflect this. For that, however, a clear definition of pornography is needed. It should include the depiction of violent or degrading sexual acts, says Robert Spano, dean of the faculty of law at the University of Iceland. He also chairs the standing committee on criminal law of Iceland's ministry of the interior, which is working on redefining the concept of pornography with a view to amending the general penal code. He cites Norway, which bans pornography that includes the depiction of sex involving violence, as a possible model.

Whatever the definition, a ban would be legally dubious, technically unfeasible and ineffective, argues Smari McCarthy, executive director of the International Modern Media Institute, a lobby group. In an open letter to Ogmundur Jonasson, the interior minister, he and other opponents compared banning online pornography to repression in China, Iran and North Korea. Iceland's constitution forbids censorship, argues Mr McCarthy.

Mr Spano counters that the constitution also allows the government to "safeguard public morals". Supporters point to existing limits on free speech regarding child porn and hate speech. Why not, they ask, also limit violent pornography?

A ban will be tricky both philosophically and practically. Does the violence refer only to what happens during filming or to what the audience later sees, asks Hildur Sverrisdottir, a member of Reykjavik's city council and the editor of a book about women's sexual fantasies. Which is worse, she asks: non-violent porn featuring a drugged, trafficked woman or sadistic hard-core porn voluntarily performed? The government would have to decide whether it is most concerned with the rights of porn actresses, or those of all other



women, ostensibly in need of protection from men who use pornography.

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A blacklist of online porn, as in Denmark and Australia, risks banning innocent websites. Denmark's list, released in 2008 by WikiLeaks, a whistle-blowing website, included non-pornographic sites that had been banned by mistake. A national whitelist that listed all permitted sites would also be unworkable. And preventing credit-card companies from allowing people to buy smut online would be pointless: plenty is available free.

Enforcing a ban would be tough, but is it even worthwhile? Anecdotes abound about the harm pornography can cause. Thorbjorg Sveinsdottir of the Children's House, an Icelandic centre for children who have been sexually abused, says that children who have viewed pornography exhibit similar symptoms to those who have been assaulted. Sigthrudur Gudmundsdottir, the manager of a refuge for abused women in Reykjavik, notes that women increasingly blame the violence they experience on their husbands' use of pornography. Ms Hjaltested, the assistant prosecutor, says that the police are seeing more rapes apparently inspired by pornography: "It's like copy-paste...like an imitation from hard-core porn."

Proof, though, is lacking—and not for want of looking. Research by Neil Malamuth, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, shows that watching pornography contributes to an increased risk of violent behaviour—but only in men already disposed towards sexual aggression who watch it a lot. In other words, it does not turn ordinary men into rapists. Studies in America, Denmark, Germany and Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s, and more recently in China, Finland and Japan, as well as other countries, show that as pornography became increasingly available, the number of rapes in those countries remained stable or even decreased.

Yet it is hard to draw broad conclusions about the effects of pornography in different countries, says Mr Malamuth, because there are so many variables. Simon Louis Lajeunesse of the University of Montreal studies the role of pornography in men's lives and how it affects their attitudes to sex. He says half the research he has come across on the effects of watching pornography says that men's views change, and half says they do not. When designing his research he wanted to find out how widespread the use of porn was, and asked at a university for male volunteers who had never seen any. He found none.

### Hard-core harm

No one can yet prove that violent pornography automatically leads to sexual violence, admits Ms Gunnarsdottir. "But we also can't prove the opposite," she adds. If the police and those who work with the victims of sexual violence are convinced of the link, she says, "that's enough for a government to move." Opponents say that the government would do better to focus on improving sex education.

Iceland is a tiny, homogenous and law-abiding island. It is hard to imagine a liberal democracy where banning the sex industry could be any easier. And yet successfully imposing a ban would come at a huge cost and for an uncertain benefit.

**Clarification:** We have amended this article to substitute our word "banning" for Ms Gunnarsdottir's word "tackling".

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