



October 9, 2011 Sunday 11 Tishri 5772 18:57 IST  Print  Back to original article

# THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: Courtesy

## Taking on the taboo

By RUTH EGLASH  
09/10/2011

Human rights groups, MK Orit Zuaretz set to raise the stakes in battle against prostitution in Israel.

Human rights groups and the Knesset Subcommittee on Trafficking in Women are taking on Israel's burgeoning sex service industry.

Committee chairwoman MK Orit Zuaretz is set to raise the stakes in the coming months battling prostitution with potential legislation that will make it illegal for a man to utilize the services of a prostitute.

### **RELATED:**

[Indictment: 3 imported Chilean women to work as prostitutes](#)

[Police: 19-year-old tourist forced into prostitution](#)

"I am connected to this issue through my work as the chairperson of the committee and I have come to understand that the petrol that maintains trafficking in women is the demand for sexual services," said Zuaretz, who recently returned from a two-week trip to the US to explore the white slave trade.

According to the MK, both women trafficked to Israel for work in the sex industry and local women who wind up working in one of the country's many discreet apartments or brothels come from very poor or problematic family backgrounds. In short, their careers as sex slaves are derived from a lack of other options.

"These women never come from wealthy families and taking advantage of them in this way is like buying blood diamonds," she points out. "If you buy a blood diamond it is criminal; if you buy the body of a woman it should be criminal too. I don't understand why this is tolerated by the public in a Jewish state."

Zuaretz said she plans, during the upcoming Knesset term, to forge ahead with legislation based on similar laws initially implemented in Sweden, and later in Norway and Iceland, to make it a criminal

offense to buy sexual services, but not to sell them. The proposed legislation, she said, is aimed at protecting women, either trafficked to Israel from abroad or local women, who have been forced into the country's sex industry.

Zuaretz's bill is being backed by a unique political lobbying campaign led by the Task Force for Human Trafficking, a project of NGO Atzum and the law firm Kabiri-Nevo-Keidar.

The project, "Ad 119" (Until 119), will see 119 volunteers trained as experts in the subject of human trafficking and the sex industry who will then be assigned to each of the remaining 119 Knesset members to educate on the phenomenon and encourage them to vote in favor of the bill.

"We have attacked the supply side of the sex trade industry and now we are turning to attack the demand side," says Rabbi Levi Lauer, director and founder of Atzum, which in recent years has seen measurable success in persuading the government to seal the Israel- Egypt border – the most common passage for women trafficked from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe into Israel – and by passing legislation to prosecute traffickers and pimps.

"I don't believe that this kind of lobbying model, similar to tactics used by AIPAC in the US Congress, has been used here in Israel," said Lauer, adding that key differences in the political system here mean that MKs are more accountable to party lines and not to actual constituents.

Despite this, he says: "Our goal is to make the purchase of sexual services illegal and even, if at first, there is little police enforcement of the law, by making it illegal raping these sex slaves will suddenly become daunting. There are many young people who rape sex slaves with impunity because they think there are no consequences, but if there is a chance they will get a criminal record then they might think twice about it."

While there is no exact figures on how many people in Israel utilize the services of sex workers in Israel, Atzum estimates that up to 10,000 men each month visit one of the hundreds of discreet apartments or brothels throughout the country. Of those, Lauer said that roughly 25-35 percent are from the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community; 25-35% are Arab; 8- 10% are foreign workers and the rest are from the rest of Israeli society.

"People tell me that this could be a lot of work for nothing," Lauer said. "But I always remind them that when the new law was passed to stop people from smoking and spitting on buses, people said there is no way in the world Israelis will stop smoking, but the law passed and the average citizen was empowered to go up to smokers and tell them to stop. Now no one, or almost no one, smokes or spits on buses."

He added that putting legislation in place could empower people who live in buildings where there are discreet brothels to call the police.

While Zauretz and Lauer are determined to push through this law, the government and certain social rights groups are more hesitant that criminalizing prostitution, without concurrent attempts at social education and rehabilitation services for the women, is not necessarily the answer.

The country's national coordinator for human trafficking, lawyer Rachel Gershuni, said that her department in the Justice Ministry has already held a series of meetings on the topic to solidify a governmental position on the issue. After hearing from a wide variety of academics, NGOs and even women working in the industry, Gershuni said the matter is not so "clear cut."

“Even for someone like myself who feels that prostitution can be seen as a gross violation of human rights by everyone who takes part in it, except of course the victims, I still have my doubts that criminal action is the way to go,” Gershuni said.

Her doubts, she said, stem from the fact that Israel does not have adequate rehabilitation services to help the women who would quickly be out of a job, leaving them with “little help and little recourse.”

Gershuni also said that some ground work needs to be done in order to “change public attitudes” toward the sex industry, including working on re-educating the public and only then creating legislation.

“When we look at the prohibition acts in the US, what happened was that there was only a small body of Christian women that pushed for it,” Gershuni said. “Not only was the majority of the public against it but the police were against it and therefore it was never enforced.

“We have to ask whether it is right to first do criminal legislation in order to educate the public or whether it is more effective to educate the public first. In Sweden, for example, education was carried out first.”

Zuaretz disagreed, saying that legislation can spark societal change. “Sometimes the law can be a catalyst for change and push the government, which has been comfortable doing nothing, into action,” she said, adding, “When the battle to stamp out sexual harassment in the army started, it was a phenomenon that no one liked to talk about and everyone acted as though it was normal.

“Then the law was implemented, mechanisms were put into place and women started complaining.”

Because prostitution brings in money, Zuaretz said, no one wants to challenge it. “I am determined to make people realize that prostitution is a human rights issue and we have to deal with it.”

[Print](#)[Back to original article](#)

---

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2011 The Jerusalem Post.