

NI outlaws paying for sex: could the rest of the UK follow?

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Paying for sex becomes illegal in Northern Ireland, but with calls for the law to be rolled out across the UK, a leading campaign group representing sex workers says lawmakers are missing the point. Those caught breaking the new law, which was overwhelmingly passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly last year, face up to a year in prison or a £1,000 fine.

Campaigners have claimed the passing of the law is a victory in the battle against human trafficking - saying that ending demand for prostitutes will tackle the "brutal exploitation" of women and girls.

But rather than protect sex workers, the new law could be putting them in more danger claims the [English Collective of Prostitutes](#) (ECP).

Laura Watson, spokeswoman for the ECP, told **Channel 4 News** the law will drive the industry "further underground", putting sex workers in more danger.

She said that criminalising clients makes it harder for sex workers to employ safety mechanisms they rely on, such as taking time to assess the mental state of a potential client, and taking number plates or contact information.

"If there is a police crackdown clients don't want to be hanging around," she said. "It pushes sex workers into more isolated areas, out of the public eye, and where they are more likely to be working alone."

Campaigners such as [End Demand](#), which is calling for the so-called "Sex Buyer Law" to be implemented across the UK, calls for the decriminalisation of the sale of sex acts but the criminalising of buying sex acts.

They argue: "The prostitution trade – and the trafficking of women in to it – is underpinned by the principles of supply and demand.

"Without the current demand from a minority of men to pay for sex, there would be no 'supply' of women and girls in to this exploitative trade."

What model?

Northern Ireland's ban adopts the Swedish model which sees paying for sex criminalised, but sale of sex acts decriminalised. Those in favour argue that the approach, which is endorsed by the Council for Europe, has reduced the number of sex workers in Sweden. Those opposed to the law say there is no correlation between a reduction in sex workers and the law.

The ECP advocates the New Zealand model, which decriminalised prostitution and allowed sex workers to work together (brothels are currently illegal in the UK) whilst reinforcing laws against those who coerced anyone into prostitution. The ECP says a five year review of the New Zealand approach found no increase in prostitution and that sex workers were more able to report violence and leave the industry if they chose to. However, Ms Watson says that such laws "will not end demand".

"Prostitution is about poverty," she said. "We estimate about 70 per cent of sex workers are mothers and child poverty is on the increase, especially in West Belfast where more than 20 per cent of children are living in poverty.

"The best they (government) can come up with is criminalising the way mothers have come up with as an answer to poverty."

She said this is the case in England as well as in Northern Ireland, citing cuts in welfare and increased university fees for an increase in the number of sex workers.

A Home Office report from 2004 estimated that there are around 80,000 prostitutes working in the UK, though Ms Watson says numbers have increased in recent years. She points to Hull as one example where last year there was a reported 60 per cent increase in women working on the street.

"It is because of cuts in welfare," she said. "That is what we want addressed."

Attempts to criminalise paying for sex in England and Wales, via an amendment to the Modern Slavery Act, were defeated following a campaign by the ECP last year.

Ms Watson also believes that the law in Northern Ireland is a result of a "moralist approach" by Christian groups. "Our approach is safety for sex workers," she adds.

The architect of Northern Ireland's change in law was DUP peer Lord Morrow (pictured, above) and one of the key campaigning groups advising him was the Christian charity Care, which also opposes abortion and same-sex marriage.

Care in Northern Ireland Policy Officer Mark Baillie said: "This is a significant day in the battle against human trafficking and exploitation here in Northern Ireland."

"We are firmly of the view that making paying for sexual services illegal is an important part of any legislation which seeks to deal with the causes of human trafficking and legislation rather than simply dealing with the symptoms."

<http://www.channel4.com/news/northern-ireland-paying-sex-illegal-crime-prostitution>