

Emma Thompson and Lena Dunham call on Amnesty International to withdraw support for decriminalisation of sex work

[EMILY DUGAN](#) | Wednesday 29 July 2015

## **The potential shift in Amnesty's position has starkly divided feminist campaigners and women's rights groups**

Amnesty International is more accustomed to being the toast of Hollywood luvvies than attracting their ire but proposals leaked this week to change the human rights group's position on prostitution have pitted them against Emma Thompson, Lena Dunham, Kate Winslet and Meryl Streep.

The actors are among thousands of people [calling on the charity to withdraw a proposal to advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work](#). The London-based human rights organisation will vote on changing its policy on prostitution on 12 August at its annual meeting in Dublin.

The potential shift in Amnesty's position has starkly divided feminist campaigners and women's rights groups. A Change.org petition calling for the proposal to be rejected, saying it "violates the basic human rights and dignities of prostituted individuals," already has more than 3,400 signatures.

The Draft Policy on Sex Work was sent out to members last week ahead of the Dublin conference and later leaked online. It outlines a policy "that seeks attainment of the highest possible protection of the human rights of sex workers, through measures that include the decriminalisation of sex work."

It specifies that it only refers to "consensual sexual conduct between adults — which excludes acts that involve coercion, deception, threats, or violence." At last year's annual meeting a similar proposal was voted on and declined by Amnesty members, after it was decided that further research should be done ahead of another vote this year.

Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, an American charity that has spearheaded the campaign against Amnesty, said: "It's just very disturbing that a human rights organisation would side with pimps and sex buyers, rather than the most disenfranchised women who are exploited in the sex trade."

Others have welcomed the move. Niki Adams, spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes, said: "I've looked in detail at the Amnesty policy and it's very good. It's really rooted in respecting the rights of sex workers and protecting against violations of those rights.

She added: "The solution is not to criminalise clients because there's no evidence that it would make it safer. Of course trafficking happens and none of us would deny that there's a high level of rape and violence in prostitution but I feel at the route of that is that [when it's criminalised] you can't report to the police, you can't get cases to court and fear of arrest is a massive disincentive to get help."

There is a subtle difference between decriminalisation - which Amnesty is advocating - and legalisation. Decriminalisation simply means taking away all laws that would result in buyers or sellers of sex facing punishment, which its advocates argue makes sex workers more able to seek help from police and others when in danger. Legalisation means sex workers have to be licensed and required to work in specific ways - as happens in Germany, the Netherlands and Nevada.

Legalisation is more controversial as it can allow a two-tier system to develop where licensed sex workers have their rights protected but those operating without licenses are pushed further underground. Research from the London School of Economics found that

“countries where prostitution is legal experience larger reported inflows of human trafficking.”

Some detractors of Amnesty’s policy announcement have been conflating decriminalisation and legalisation to argue that Amnesty is being irresponsible. Existing supporters of decriminalisation of the kind Amnesty is proposing include the World Health Organisation, UNAids and Human Rights Watch.

New Zealand decriminalised prostitution in 2003, removing it from criminal law, distinguishing between violence and consenting sex and reinforcing offences against compelling anyone into prostitution. A five-year government review found the change had resulted in no increase in prostitution; no increase in trafficking; better treatment for drug users and that sex workers were “more able to report violence.”

An Amnesty spokeswoman said: “The violations that sex workers are exposed to include physical and sexual violence, arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion and harassment, human trafficking, forced HIV testing and medical interventions. They can also be excluded from health care and housing services and other social and legal protection.

“Based on evidence that the criminalisation of consensual adult sex work exposes sex workers to increased human rights violations, Amnesty International’s draft policy advocates, amongst other things, that greater protection will be achieved if sex work is decriminalized.”

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/love-sex/sex-industry/emma-thompson-and-lena-dunham-call-on-amnesty-international-to-withdraw-support-for-decriminalisation-of-sex-work-10422507.html>