

Stop sex trafficking by criminalizing buyers

Amnesty International's decision to support the legalization of sex work fails the victims of sex trafficking

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On Aug. 11, Amnesty International [decided to support full decriminalization](#) of the sex trade, which includes all aspects of selling and buying sex, for “the [protection](#) of the human rights of sex workers.” In a [statement](#) Salil Shetty, Amnesty’s secretary general, said, “Sex workers are one of the most marginalized groups in the world.”

I do not deny that people who choose to enter the sex industry are marginalized and should never be arrested for selling sex. Nor do I reject the notion that their human rights are regularly violated and that we need to do much more to improve their safety and health conditions. But I find it odd that Amnesty, which has a history of standing up for the most vulnerable, does not pay more attention to another marginalized group of individuals: the victims of sex trafficking.

Specifically, I and other critics of Amnesty’s proposal reject decriminalizing the purchase of sexual services because it risks increasing the prevalence of human trafficking. Amnesty and decriminalization activists have responded to our concerns primarily by making two dubious claims: that [trafficking is not that common](#) and that making it easier to buy sex [does not make it easier to traffic human beings](#).

To make the first claim, they often refer to a [report](#) commissioned by New Zealand’s government, which concluded that only a “small number of sex workers reported being made to work by someone else.” But this is a poor interpretation of the data. The report was based on an [original study](#), “The Impact of the Prostitution Reform Act on the Health and Safety Practices of Sex Workers.” Any study that focuses on sex workers is likely to underestimate the prevalence of trafficking in the way that counting the number of households is likely to underestimate the prevalence of homelessness.

It has also been suggested that the link between buying sex and trafficking is weak. “There is no evidence to suggest that somehow trafficking goes up when sex trade is decriminalized,” Gauri van Gulick, Amnesty’s deputy Europe director, said in a [video statement](#). But this is patently false. In fact, [several studies](#) have found that countries where sex purchases are decriminalized tend to have higher rates of sex trafficking. [Decriminalization advocates](#) seem to think that making it easier to buy sex would not make it easier to exploit victims, as long as abuse and trafficking are still illegal. But this belief suffers from the same faulty logic as the argument that making it substantially easier to buy guns would not make it easier to shoot others, as long as homicide and aggravated assault are still illegal.

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What is clear is that if people did not pay for sexual services, nobody would be deceived or coerced into selling sex. Unfortunately, buying sex is widespread, and trafficking is highly profitable. In the U.S., for instance, an estimated [14 percent of men](#) have paid for sex at some point in their lives. An [Urban Institute report](#) found that pimps in Atlanta can earn more than [\\$32,000 a week](#), which is in the same range as what many [Fortune 500 CEOs](#) make in salary and bonuses. Is anybody surprised that monstrous criminals find sex trafficking an attractive industry?

In order to eradicate sex slavery, it is not sufficient to invest far more resources in busting the traffickers; we also have to make sexual exploitation a less lucrative business. One way to do this is to follow the approach that we took in Sweden in 1999 when we decriminalized selling sex but criminalized buying sex. Under this so-called Swedish model, nobody may be prosecuted for selling sex, since it is no longer illegal (in sharp contrast to the situation in the U.S., where even [trafficking victims are arrested](#)). The demand for purchased sex is targeted, which is key in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation.

The Swedish model has by since been implemented in multiple countries, including [Norway, Iceland and Canada](#). And data suggest that it has worked. In Norway, for instance, [several reports](#) have estimated that the prevalence of prostitution has fallen. In Sweden a [recent review](#) of the evidence indicates that the proportion of Swedish men who have ever paid for sex has dropped from about 13 percent in 1996 — before the model was introduced — to some 8 percent in 2008.

The Swedish model is by no means flawless. The details of exactly how selling sex is decriminalized, buying sex is criminalized and the laws are enforced should be more closely studied so that improvements can be made. For example, on the basis of [criminal justice research](#) in other fields, it appears that the certainty of punishment can be a much more effective deterrent than the severity of punishment. While traffickers should be sent to jail for life, sex buyers may be best discouraged by smaller and certain sanctions rather than long prison sentences. In addition, legislation is a blunt tool and can be only part of the solution. Neither of these points contradicts the notion that the overall approach, reducing the demand for paid sex, is sound, since it makes exploitation less financially rewarding. I hope that Amnesty and other advocates of full decriminalization over time will reconsider their position and rather than reject Swedish model, help us develop it to eradicate sex trafficking and protect the human rights of every single person in prostitution.

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