

Women in prostitution won't be protected by Amnesty's plan

4 August 2015 | Julie Bindel

For the majority of people, the controversy [surrounding Amnesty International and its proposed prostitution policy](#) is a non-story. This is for the simple reason that most will assume that decriminalisation means not arresting the women. When Amnesty promotes the notion that the decriminalisation of sex workers will protect their human rights, they fail to explain that this would apply to all those whose business is associated with the sex trade: pimps, brothel-owners, pornographers, and others who profit from the sale of women.

A number of survivors who have left the sex trade have spoken about how they survived while still involved, which includes insisting to themselves and to others that they were making a free and happy choice to sell sex.

When I [exposed](#) Amnesty's plan to campaign on decriminalising the entire sex trade in a national newspaper, I did so in the knowledge that feminists had been fighting this battle with senior policymakers for some years. Amnesty had been experiencing pressure both inside and outside of the organisation to put the human rights of women on the Amnesty agenda. This was partially achieved when it launched its [violence against women strategy](#), but prostitution was never a part of it. So long as Amnesty was condemning child sexual exploitation and the trafficking of women from across borders within the sex industry, they seemed fine to ignore the rest of the grotesque, state-sanctioned abuse of adult women.

The whistleblower who approached me with the [policy paper](#) told me that she and other women in the organisation could not convince many of the men that decriminalisation would harm rather than help women in prostitution. Following my exposure, and the outcry from survivors of prostitution and feminists, Amnesty responded by promising that it would properly consult interested parties before deciding on the appropriate policy. This consultation exercise was carried out by an academic who is a well-known adherent of the pro-decriminalisation argument. During the consultation, no survivor group or other abolitionist organisation that are critical of the sex trade was consulted. The result – the new draft policy – was a foregone conclusion.

Amnesty has only released a short summary of this research, emphasising the accounts of a few sex workers, especially in Oslo, who have complained about police brutality. All who oppose Amnesty's policy also oppose police brutality against any and all people. Amnesty was established to protect people against this.

In the draft policy document, New Zealand is cited as a paradise of egalitarian prostitution, but according to its own [government report](#), that is not quite the true story. Senior police officials have admitted that policing of organised crime in legal brothels is “patchy” and the regulation of brothels is “often woeful”. One investigator noted that because of decriminalisation police were not required by law to investigate the goings-on, and organised criminals infiltrated the off-street sex industry. The gross mistreatment of women in this vile industry is clear to see. Why is it that Amnesty, supposed champion of the oppressed, fails to see this?

It has been [argued](#), by those who support Amnesty's position, that criminalising the men who pay for sex will make it dangerous for those selling sex. But there is no credible evidence to suggest that criminalising sex buyers in Sweden and elsewhere has resulted in further danger to women working in prostitution.

The right of men to buy sex appears to be paramount, according to Amnesty. For example, in the

2014 leaked document it is stated that: “Sexual desire and activity are a fundamental human need. To criminalise those who are unable or unwilling to fulfil that need through more traditionally recognised means and thus purchase sex, may amount to a violation of the right to privacy and undermine the rights to free expression and health.” If Amnesty stays true to its founding principles, it should be concentrating on those whose human rights are violated – in this case the women in the sex trade – as opposed to those, such as the sex buyers and pimps who believe it is their human right to violate others.

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/04/sex-workers-amnesty-international-prostitution-decriminalisation>