

# France passes law making it illegal to pay for sex

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France is to make it illegal to pay for sex after MPs finally approved new legislation on prostitution following more than two years of rows and opposition by senators.

Under the new law, anyone caught purchasing an act from a sex worker will be fined and required to attend classes on the harms of prostitution.

There would be a €1,500 (£1,200) fine for a first offence, rising to €3,750 for a second, which would also be put on the person's criminal record. The offender would be forced to attend classes highlighting the harms of prostitution.

The law was passed by 64 votes to 12 with many MPs absent. The French parliament started debating the bill in 2013, but the final vote was delayed after several hearings owing to sharp divisions between the lower parliamentary chamber and the senate.

The move makes France one of only a handful of European countries to follow the Nordic model of criminalising consumers rather than sex workers. These include Norway and Iceland. Last year, Northern Ireland introduced legislation to make it the only part of the UK where people can be convicted of paying for sex.

The Socialist MP Maud Olivier, who championed the bill in France, said the aim was to “reduce [prostitution], protect prostitutes who want to leave it and to change mentalities”.

Bruno Le Roux, the head of the Socialist group in parliament, said: “You don't hire a woman like you hire a car. Our society should no longer tolerate it.”

Opponents of the law warned that cracking down on clients could push sex workers further underground and into vulnerable situations with less protection.

A crucial part of the legislation is that it will abolish a controversial 2003 law, introduced by Nicolas Sarkozy when he was interior minister, that banned passive soliciting on the street. This law had made it illegal to stand in a public place known for prostitution dressed in revealing clothes. It had been widely criticised by charities and support groups on the ground.

The legislation passed on Wednesday will treat the sex worker as a victim rather than a criminal. It will also make it easier for foreign sex workers, many of whom are illegally in France, to acquire a temporary residence permit if they embark on a programme to find other work.

In France, prostitution itself – receiving money for sex - is not a crime. But activities around it are. Laws prohibit pimping, human trafficking and buying sex from a minor. Brothels were outlawed in 1946.

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