

Prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes

Trafficking in human beings is a serious crime and has been called a modern form of slavery. It entails serious obstacles for the full enjoyment of human rights and has a very strong gender and child rights perspective. Almost 80 per cent of trafficking victims are women and girls.

Swedish ambassador to combat trafficking in human beings

The Swedish Government is stepping up its work against trafficking in human beings. An ambassador to combat trafficking in human beings has been installed, and will provide a strong support to the work against trafficking in the international arena. The ambassador will especially acknowledge the gender equality perspective and criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services as a way to decrease demand for sexual services.

Prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes

The Swedish Government has for a long time given priority to combatting prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes. This is one part of the government's work to combat men's violence against women.

The underlying reasons for people being involved in prostitution vary, but the primary factor that sustains both trafficking in human for sexual purposes and prostitution is demand. Efforts to undermine the market and to counteract the demand to buy sexual services are therefore fundamental in combatting prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes.

The Swedish model: Purchasing sexual services is illegal

On 1 January 1999, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce legislation criminalising the purchase, and not the selling, of sexual services. Since then, purchase of – and attempt to purchase – a sexual service has constituted a criminal offence in Sweden.

A person who obtains a casual sexual relation in return for payment, shall [if the act does not constitute another sexual crime] be sentenced for purchase of sexual service to a fine or imprisonment for at most one year. (Penal Code Chapter 6, Section 11)

The offence comprises all forms of sexual services, whether they are purchased on the street, the internet or in 'massage parlours', etc. The provision also applies to a person who takes advantage of a sexual service paid for by another person.

The legislation marks Sweden's attitude towards prostitution and ideas of a gender equal society. In the majority of cases, the seller is the weaker party, who is exploited by the buyer. Further, in most cases it is men who are acquiring casual sexual relations with women against remuneration. This is unacceptable. In Sweden, persons who sell sexual services are not punished. These persons should not risk punishment when seeking help because they have been selling sex.

By criminalising the purchase of sexual services, prostitution and its damaging effects can be counteracted more effectively. Active involvement of social services is key. Criminalisation can never be more than a supplementary element in the efforts to reduce prostitution, and cannot be a substitute for broader social interventions. The penalty is a fine or imprisonment for maximum one year. The most common penalty is a fine. In 2015, there were about 280 prosecutions.

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Gender equality policy in Sweden

Effects of criminalisation of sex purchase

The criminalisation has been evaluated and an Inquiry report was presented to the government in 2010. It concluded that the prohibition had had the intended effect, and is an important instrument in preventing and combatting prostitution and trafficking for sexual purposes.

According to the report, street prostitution in Sweden had halved since the prohibition was introduced in 1999. The Inquiry could find no confirmation that the criminalisation had had a negative effect on people exploited through prostitution.

Barrier for trafficking in human for sexual purposes

Trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes is considered to be substantially less prevalent in Sweden than in other comparable countries. The prohibition of the purchase of sexual services seems to act as a barrier for human traffickers and procurers. According to the Police, criminal groups that sell women for sexual purposes view Sweden as a poor market. They choose not to establish themselves here because of the prohibition.

Normative effect on attitudes toward purchasing sexual services

Furthermore, the Inquiry report concluded that the prohibition of the purchase of sexual services had also had a normative effect. There had been a change in attitude to the purchase of sexual services that coincided with making it a criminal offence to purchase sexual services. In Sweden, there is strong support for the prohibition (72 per cent are positive towards the legislation). The prohibition has proved to act as a deterrent to sex purchasers.

The Inquiry stated that those who have left prostitution have a consistently positive view of the ban. According to persons previously involved in prostitution, criminalisation of purchase of sexual services has made them stronger. They also point out that the buyers are the ones who entice young people into prostitution, and that there is no voluntary prostitution. The buyer always has the power and the people selling their bodies are always the ones being exploited.

In September 2014, an Inquiry was assigned with the task of evaluating the effect of the raised maximum penalty for purchase of a sexual service implemented in 2011. The purpose of the amendment was to make possible a more nuanced assessment of the penal value in serious cases of purchase of sexual services, such as when the person selling sex is a victim of trafficking in human beings.

Social initiatives to combat prostitution

Other initiatives aim at helping people to get out of prostitution or to stop purchasing sex. The social services in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö operate so called FAST (people with experience of prostitution) and KAST (purchasers of sexual services) groups that help with outreach activities, motivational interviews, different forms of therapy and psychosocial support.

Other preventive measures

The government also supports the development of guidance materials for professionals that have contact with people with experience from prostitution. The materials aim at developing their ability to see signals of for example children and young people at risk of falling into prostitution.