

OPINION

The Swedish sex-work model is a success

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On Aug. 11, the human-rights organization Amnesty International voted at its International Council Meeting to adopt a policy that supports the full decriminalization of all aspects of prostitution, including both selling and buying sex. This was very unfortunate. While decriminalizing individuals who sell sex is essential to increase the protection of prostituted people's human rights, making it easier to buy sex risks having the exact opposite effect.

There are important reasons why it is a gigantic misstep for Amnesty to advocate for the decriminalization of sex buyers. First, the empirical evidence of potential benefits from making it permissible to purchase sex is weak while the costs may be enormous. New Zealand decriminalized prostitution in 2003 and yet the country's Prostitution Law Review Committee found in its evaluation that a majority of prostituted persons felt that the decriminalization act "could do little about violence [in prostitution]." At the same time, several studies have found that countries where buying sex is decriminalized, sex trafficking is more prevalent.

Second, decriminalizing buying sex seems to be at odds with Amnesty's core objectives. One of the reasons that there are so many of us who have strongly supported Amnesty for years is the organization's steadfast commitment to the fundamental rights of individuals, whether they are refugees, prisoners of conscience, or victims of torture. But buying sex is not a human right.

Instead of adopting a harmful proposal, Amnesty should have learned from Sweden's prostitution policies. In 1999, Sweden made it illegal to buy sexual services, but not to sell them – an approach that is now often called "the Swedish model." The ingenuity of the

Swedish model is that it protects those who are most vulnerable from being arrested and prosecuted. Nobody is forced to buy sex. But many individuals are coerced, deceived or threatened into selling sex.

This approach to tackling the harms of commercial sex has since been implemented in several countries, including Canada. By contrast, in the United States, outrageously enough, victims of sex trafficking can easily be arrested for selling sex; in countries where selling sex has been decriminalized, they cannot. At the same time, the Swedish model – because it targets buyers rather than sellers – curbs the demand for purchased sex, which is the key driver behind sex trafficking.

There is much debate about how effective the Swedish model has been at tackling commercial sex, but the best available estimates still suggest that the end-demand approach has had a desirable impact both in Sweden and in Norway (which adopted the model in 2009). These results should be compared with those in Denmark, where prostitution was decriminalized in 1999. When the Danish government started measuring the number of individuals in prostitution in 2002, the head count stood at 3,886. By 2009, the number had jumped to 5,534, an increase of more than 40 per cent.

I am the first to admit that we Swedes have not done everything right when it comes to prostitution. While punishing only buyers and not sellers of sex is the right approach, it is apparent that we have not provided enough assistance to individuals in prostitution in terms of housing, education, health care and a way out of the sex industry. This is deeply regrettable. After all, the purpose of the model is to protect vulnerable individuals, and so legislation is just part of the solution – the government has to do much more to help mitigate the risks and harms in the sex industry.

During its international council meeting over the past few days, Amnesty had a rare opportunity to draw on lessons from Sweden and draft a new policy based on the Swedish model of punishing only the sex buyers, but that would have better addressed the stigma, harassment, health risks and overall lack of services that are so prevalent among people in prostitution across the world. But in the end, Amnesty blew it.