

Claims about the “Swedish Model” - and what’s really going on

The law has always had a huge support from society

If you ask a person in the street some will be in favour of the law, mostly because it’s politically incorrect to say something else. But many NGOs are critical against the law and have always been. These include RFSU (The National Organisation for Sexual education), RFSL (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights), HIV-Sweden (the patient organization for PLHIV), Rose Alliance (the sw org) and the Swedish Drug Users Union. All these organisations, apart from Rose Alliance, are state funded.

The law is protecting women who sell sex

Yes, we only talk about women in Sweden. No one cares about male and trans sex workers. The law identifies all female sex workers as victims. This has led to an increased stigma and prejudiced service deliveries to sex workers. Condoms are not distributed (except in one city in the south) as the goal is to rehabilitate all the "victims". If a sex worker refuses to identify as victim they can be denied services, be discriminated against and risk losing custody of their kids. If you say you’re not a victim, the state claims you are suffering from “a false consciousness”, “romanticizing prostitution” and is suffering from a form of self-harm. By saying you are such a victim you don’t even realize it yourself they are basically labeling sex workers mentally unstable. People will also say no sex worker has been murdered since the law. This is true but actually no sex worker has been murdered, what we know of, in the last 30 years or so.

The law is a tool to combat trafficking

This law was never about trafficking, that’s just something they started saying now. We do have a separate law against trafficking. Migrant sex workers are being stopped at the border simply for carrying “too many” condoms. They are deported for “earning a living in a dishonest way” even though selling sex is not illegal. When migrant sex workers object to being labeled trafficking victims they are simply deported, one Rumanian sex worker even filed a complaint against the state for being deported as soon as she refused to say she was forced to sell sex. There is no data on trafficking and no monitoring tool=no evidence at all.

The law has been evaluated

There was a, highly criticized “evaluation” done. But it’s sole focus was to make it more effective in catching clients. They asked some sex workers about the law and this is a quick translation:

”The persons who are still abused in prostitution says that criminalization has re-enforced the social stigma...even though if it’s not forbidden to sell sex they experience being chased by the police. They experience being treated as legally incompetent as their actions are tolerated but their will and choices are not respected”

Further down on the same page it said:

”When it comes to the persons who are still abused in prostitution must, the above mentioned negative effects of the prohibition that they describe, must rather be looked

upon as positive seen from the perspective that the purpose of the law is to fight against prostitution”

Basically “Now your life is shit so now you will have to quit. The Discrimination Ombudsman were really critical about the evaluation as they found it remarkable that added stigma could be considered positive and also because they thought that sex workers were not consulted enough. No one cared.

The law has resulted in fewer sex workers

The only data prior to the law was on street based sex work, and it’s the same today. The law came in 1999 when internet boomed and sex workers in Sweden have always worked indoors even before internet. It’s estimated that only about 10% work in the street. The number of street based sex workers went down just after 1999 but has since gone up again. Street based sex workers says the negotiation time is gone as clients are afraid to be arrested so now they have to make the deal when they are already inside the car. The client wants to chose where to stop the car as they think the police will know the regular spots sex workers use, so it actually gives the clients more power. The good clients are gone, some stopped buying sex but many moved to the indoor market. That means that street based sex workers now have to interact with dangerous clients in order to make money, even the police admits that. There are no indications that indoor sex work is lower. Not even the state claims that. Sometimes it’s written that all the brothels are gone, well we never had any for decades so that has nothing to do with this law but rather and older law regulating pimping.

The law results in fewer clients

Again, no numbers=no evidence. Street based sex workers might have fewer clients (see above) but all indoor workers I know says that there are as many clients as always. The law affects basically everything but the number of clients. The police is however targeting clients more and more aggressively. They will listen through the doors of sex workers work premises, very often their own home, and kick in the door to arrest the client. Often they bring with them a social worker to “rescue” the sex worker (you know the idea). Normally they claim they thought the sex worker was forced or a minor. The usual bullshit.

The law doesn't criminalize sex workers, Sweden has decriminalized them

First off, it was not illegal to sell sex before the law. So Sweden has not decriminalized sex workers, again just stuff they say to make it sound like they care. But important to know is that we also have many other laws criminalizing activities related to sex work. Our pimping law is as broad as possible and no exploitation or financial gain needed. Helping out for no cash is also illegal, so everybody work alone. There are three different laws regulating indoor sex work. If you rent a place for work, or work from your own home, the landlord is forced to evict you or can otherwise be charged with pimping. If you own the apartment you have lost your right to own it if you sell sex there. And outcall or incall to hotels can lead to the hotel being charged with pimping so now there are cameras and security guards everywhere. So there are actually only two ways to work without being affected by any law apart from the law criminalizing clients and that is in the street or going to the clients home, and doing it alone.

Sweden now have special services and exit programs

We had three specialized services, in the biggest cities, since many years. They are part of the social service system, not the health care. Their main focus is to get people to quit sex work, and to achieve that they offer long term therapy. Nothing else! And they constantly stigmatize sex workers whenever they talk with the press and politicians. And they say stuff like "we have met hundreds of prostitutes and have a mandate to speak for them". Yes you can claim money from the state if you have no income, but that is the same for all citizens. There are no exit programs, that's a big fat lie.

The law doesn't harm sex workers health

In a recent survey sex workers were asked what they worried about. 25% worried about violence (we always had very little violence in Sweden) but 58% worried about prejudice from authorities and of course that's not good for anyones health. The recent report from the Global Commission on HIV and the Law highlighted "the Swedish Model" as one specifically harmful legal models for HIV prevention.

Condoms are not distributed (apart from one city in the South) as they are seen to encourage prostitution and not a priority. In Rose Alliances' survey 68 % said that they never received a condom as part of HIV-prevention for sex workers. As sex work is considered violence it itself there is no mention of safety for sex workers. They even think having information about safety will prevent sex workers from quitting. So if it's dangerous we will quit which is what the state wants, another example of that they really don't care. But this law was never about sex workers health and safety anyway.

The law has been adopted by many other countries

Actually it's only Norway that has copied the law exactly. Finland has criminalized clients of trafficking victims. Island has banned everything including striptease which is not the same. Norwegian service providers (health and social) has reported a number of negative effects to their law.

- The prostitution market is the buyers market
- The "good" clients are gone
- Sex workers feel they are controlled by the government and feel they are more criminalized
- More sex workers work alone
- Many service providers expresses a concern for an increased vulnerability among sex workers.
- Few sex workers ask for help when they been victims of violence
- Harassment and discrimination from the rest of society has increased.
- Criminal individuals take advantage of the increased vulnerability of sex workers.

What you never hear is about countries that said no to the law. For example in Denmark the government clearly said no with the motivation that it would be harmful for sex workers.

The law has been successful

No evidence that it's effective at all. Just because politicians, police and social workers has the same idea and consensus doesn't make it evidence, that's called ideology. In Rose Alliance recent study only 7% of sex workers said the law has made them think about quitting sex work, 6% thought the law would make it easier to quit while 82% said it increased stigma.

(In the same study 14% of the sex workers said the law had been positive for them, most common reason? They could put their prices higher!)

Most important to remember, they know there are negative consequences but they don't care. This was never about what's good for sex workers, this is just Sweden trying to create the "perfect" society. The same thing that made them using forced sterilization towards many groups for decades (trans people up until 2 years ago if they wanted gender reassignment surgery) and the reason Sweden is one of the top countries in the world (per capita) in sending people to prison for HIV-related crimes, most of the time simply for not telling about living with HIV. It's about state control and a disregard for the individual citizen. And Sweden enjoys being the moral compass of the world, they spend millions doing it every year.

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