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## Sweden prostitution reduction model's success a myth, skeptics warn

Kvinnofrid law criminalizes paying for sex but legalizes sex work



*Photo by: Mary Altaffer*

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By Angela Waters - Special to The Washington Times - - Monday, December 22, 2014

BERLIN — For years Sweden has been celebrated for its innovative strategy to reduce prostitution — in particular its laws that target not the women but their johns and pimps.

Swedish officials say they have halved the number of streetwalkers, kept the number of prostitution cases level and reduced human trafficking to around 500 victims per year, a fraction of the rate in its Scandinavian neighbors in the years following the adoption of the so-called Kvinnofrid law in 1999.

The Kvinnofrid — “protection of women” — law criminalizes paying for sex but legalizes sex work, treating prostitution as violence against women — a long-held view among feminists in progressive Sweden similar to members of the New York-based Coalition Against the Trafficking in Women.

“It is critically important to look at the demand for core prostitution and the demand that fuels sex trafficking,” said Taina Bien-Aime, the coalition’s executive director. “Prostitution is inherently violence against women. The majority of the people exploited in the sex trade are women.”

But as more and more countries look to adopt the Nordic country’s model, some skeptics are warning that the country’s success at reducing prostitution is an illusion and is not doing nearly enough to stamp out the world’s oldest profession.

While Ms. Bien-Aime and others point to Sweden’s progress in protecting women, some academics and activists say the numbers don’t always hold up: Government statistics say Sweden, which counted 730 streetwalkers in 1999, saw the number fall to 300 by 2008. But the actual figure is far higher when those who work out of bars and solicit via the Internet are included.

“The Swedish model does not have the research supporting those claims,” said Petra Ostergren, a Swedish writer and social commentator specializing on gender

politics and prostitution issues. The government “talks about 2,000 to 3,000 sex workers in Sweden, but it is much more than that.”

Ms. Ostergren blames faulty methodology in a 2010 Swedish government study for inspiring myths about the Kvinnofrid law.

Swedish Chancellor of Justice Anna Skarhed, who helped compile the report, defended her findings.

“The results in my report are accurate,” said Ms. Skarhed. “We were very careful not to exaggerate. But anyone who has worked with questions concerning prostitution or trafficking knows that it will never be possible to give exact numbers.”

Pye Jakobsson, a former sex worker and the coordinator at the Rose Alliance, a Stockholm-based sex worker advocacy group, also doesn’t believe that prosecuting johns has curbed the demand for sex work in Sweden.

Another Swedish government report published in 2011 found that eight officers with the Stockholm police spoke to 42 sex workers in a year to provide counseling and help leaving the profession. Ms. Jakobsson thought that number was laughable. “I talk to more sex workers a month than the Stockholm prostitution unit does in a year,” she said. “I hear [sex workers] complain about a lot of things. But no one complains about lack of clients.”

Ms. Jakobsson also contends that the government isn’t paying sufficient attention to forms of prostitution other than streetwalking. Prostitution is flourishing elsewhere, she said.

“The only baseline [government officials] had was the known street zones,” said Ms. Jakobsson. “But there are many different settings. Some work in casinos, opportunistically in bars or online.”

Ms. Ostergren and Ms. Jakobsson say that instead, the law has increased pressure on sex workers who feel hunted by police in search of johns — the opposite of the law’s intended impact.

“How do you think [police] find the clients? By following random men around?” Ms. Jakobsson said. “No, they target us.”

## **More difficulties**

Although the Kvinnofrid law is the most well known Swedish prostitution law, it works in conjunction with a string of other laws that also present difficulties for prostitutes. For instance, the law against soliciting is supposed to outlaw pimps, but it also effectively outlaws workplaces for sex workers.

“If you rent an apartment, your landlord can be charged with pimping,” Ms. Jakobsson said. “If you perform sex work in an apartment that you own, you have forfeited your right to own it under renter laws and the pimping law.”

The anti-soliciting act makes it difficult for sex workers to find places to live, but it also discourages them from reporting abuse.

Sophie, 35, has worked as a prostitute since the age of 13. When she suffered domestic abuse from her partner, she didn’t dare to go to the authorities.

“I didn’t call the police then, because I know that my partner would say that I’m a sex worker,” Sophie said. “Then I would have to tell my story to the police. I would be in the papers, and my apartment would be staked out.”

Other sex workers said the anti-soliciting law forced them to remain in the shadows too.

The Rose Alliance conducted the biggest study on prostitutes in Sweden, interviewing 124 sex workers this year. Thirty-six reported violent attacks from clients. Nine — 25 percent — felt comfortable reporting the incident to the police. But even of those nine, only two said that they would report a future attack to authorities. Still, other countries have been drawn to the reported successes of the Swedish approach: Iceland and Norway have adopted Sweden's measures against sex work over the past five years, while Ireland and Canada are in the process of enacting similar laws now, and Stockholm's approach still has some strong supporters. Canada's parliament adopted a law last month criminalizing the purchase of sex, but even there some are questioning the Swedish model. A new position paper by the Canadian Public Health Association said the law did not address the "root causes and pathways" that lead to prostitution, while it could put sex workers in even greater danger.

"We looked at all the evidence that was available, and we didn't see a significant decrease in demand around the purchase of sex in countries where the Nordic model has been adopted," CPHA Executive Director Ian Culbert told CMAJ, the country's leading medical journal. "But we did see that it continues to place the sex workers' safety at risk."

Still, the Stockholm approach has its supporters.

"This Swedish experiment is the single, solitary example in a significant-sized population of a prostitution policy that works," Marie De Santis, a blogger for the website JusticeWomen.com, wrote earlier this month. "The failures and futility of the revolving door of arresting and rearresting prostitutes is all too familiar the world over."

Some human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, remain undecided when it comes to the Swedish sex work laws. At the moment, Amnesty International officials are conducting their own studies in six different countries to see how

different models of criminalization and decriminalization affect prostitution and sex trafficking.

“As of now, we do not have a position on the Nordic model,” said Elisabeth Lofgren, the press secretary for the Swedish branch of Amnesty International. “There will be no decision until, [at] earliest, next summer, after more studies are released on the topic.”

**<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/22/sweden-prostitution-reduction-models-success-a-myt/>**