

ISRAEL: Knesset approves penalties for prostitution clients

Israel joins small club of nations to criminalize procuring sex services; punishments include fines in the thousands that will grow for repeat offenses

The Times of Israel (31.12.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2sglA88>– The Knesset on Monday gave final approval to a bill that punishes johns caught hiring sex workers.

The new law, approved in its second and third readings by 34 MKs, with none voting against, will criminalize procuring the services of a prostitute, as well as presence in a location chiefly used for prostitution, such as a brothel.

First-time offenders will be fined NIS 2,000 (\$530), with the sum doubled for repeat offenses within three years. Prosecutors will also be empowered to indict prostitution clients in certain cases, with a maximum penalty fine of NIS 75,300 (\$20,400).

The law will come into effect in 18 months, during which time the state will form rehabilitation mechanisms for sex workers, to allow them to find alternative livelihoods.

However, those mechanisms have yet to be approved, and are

likely to cost tens of millions of shekels whose allocation is not currently guaranteed.

Among the bill's sponsors were MK Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked and MK Shuli Moalem-Refaeli (both formerly of Jewish Home, now of New Right).

Lavie said upon the law's approval she believed it would have a "dramatic impact" and "defines the state of Israel as a society, who we are and what our values are."

She warned, however, that there was still "a long and challenging road ahead" in tackling the phenomenon and vowed "to continue to ensure that the law will be applied in full to protect the rehabilitation, security and well-being of all those on the prostitution spectrum."

Moalem-Refaeli called the law's passage "one the most significant achievements" of the 20th Knesset.

Another major proponent of the law, MK Shelly Yachimovich (Zionist Union), compared the war on the prostitution industry to "the war on slavery... at first it was considered radical and revolutionary... but now we have this law, definitely an important and historic step."

Though pimping, sex trafficking, and running a brothel are punishable under existing Israeli law, prostitution itself remains legal.

Green-lighting the bill in August, ministers also approved the establishment of a team to implement the recommendations of the Committee to Reduce Prostitution, headed by Justice Ministry director-general Amy Palmer.

In 2016, the Welfare Ministry estimated there were 11,420-12,730 sex workers driving the country's NIS 1.2 billion (\$318 million) industry. According to that report, 71 percent of prostitutes said they began sex work out of financial desperation, and 76% said they would leave the industry if they could.

Punishing prostitution clients was first introduced by Sweden in its 1999 Sex Purchase Act – since adopted by Norway, Iceland, Canada, France, and Northern Ireland – which requires consumers to pay a fine or face up to six months in jail.

Defending the apparent contradiction in making buying sex illegal, but selling it legal, Sweden has contended that prostitution is essentially an act of exploitation and violence by the customers, who hold a position of power and should bear the brunt of the penalty.

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