

Europe: Criminalisation of clients in sexual exploitation cases (2018)



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According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) 2018 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, women and girls represent more than 70 percent of detected trafficking victims.

Sweden was the first country in the world to adopt a Sex Purchase Act. The Act Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services was passed in 1998 and came into force on 1 January 1999. This law made paying for sex a criminal offence in Sweden.

Initially, the maximum sentence was six-month imprisonment, but in 2011 this was increased to one year. In April 2008, the government appointed a Special Inquiry led by Chancellor of Justice, Anna Skarhed, to evaluate the implementation of this criminalisation of clients of sexual services and its effects.

While there was a significant increase in prostitution in the neighbouring countries throughout the first decade of this century, Sweden reported a decrease in sexual exploitation at home. This encouraging trend was linked to the Sex Purchase Act. Additionally, it was found that this law deterred the establishment of organised crime networks/groups in Sweden as it was no longer an attractive country.

During the first ten years of implementation, HRWF promoted this policy through a newsletter devoted solely to this issue that was sent to MPs of EU member states as well as releasing various publications.

For years, the Swedish approach was met with skepticism by other EU member states but, after 10 years of implementation and a convincing assessment report, the benefits were unmistakable.

HRWF's contribution to the visibility of this successful experience was in the hopes that other EU countries would follow in Sweden's footsteps. Other Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, Finland and Iceland, adopted this model fairly quickly.

In 2014, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution in favour of the Nordic model urging member states to criminalise the purchase of prostitution and offering support for trafficking victims to exit sex work.

Northern Ireland (2015), France (2016), and Ireland (2017) adopted the Nordic model approach as well as several non-EU countries such as Canada (2014) and Israel (2018).