Buying Sex Should Not Be Legal

**By RACHEL MORAN**AUG. 28, 2015

DUBLIN — HERE in my city, earlier this month, Amnesty International’s international council [endorsed](http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/global-movement-votes-to-adopt-policy-to-protect-human-rights-of-sex-workers) a new policy calling for the decriminalization of the global sex trade. Its proponents argue that decriminalizing prostitution is the best way of protecting “the human rights of sex workers,” though the policy would apply equally to pimps, brothel-keepers and johns.

Amnesty’s stated aim is to remove the stigma from prostituted women, so that they will be less vulnerable to abuse by criminals operating in the shadows. The group is also calling on governments “to ensure that sex workers enjoy full and equal legal protection from exploitation, trafficking and violence.”

The Amnesty vote comes in the context of a prolonged international debate about how to deal with prostitution and protect the interests of so-called sex workers. It is a debate in which I have a personal stake — and I believe Amnesty is making a historic mistake.

I entered the sex trade — as most do — before I was even a woman. At age 14, I was placed in the care of the state after my father committed suicide and because my mother suffered from mental illness.

Within a year, I was on the streets with no home, education or job skills. All I had was my body. At 15, I met a young man who thought it would be a good idea for me to prostitute myself. As “fresh meat,” I was a commodity in high demand.

For seven years, I was bought and sold. On the streets, that could be 10 times in a night. It’s hard to describe the full effect of the psychological coercion, and how deeply it eroded my confidence. By my late teens, I was using cocaine to dull the pain.

I cringe when I hear the words “sex work.” Selling my body wasn’t a livelihood. There was no resemblance to ordinary employment in the ritual degradation of strangers’ using my body to satiate their urges. I was doubly exploited — by those who pimped me and those who bought me.

I know there are some advocates who argue that women in prostitution sell sex as consenting adults. But those who do are a relatively privileged minority — primarily white, middle-class, Western women in escort agencies — not remotely representative of the global majority. Their right to sell doesn’t trump my right and others’ *not* to be sold in a trade that preys on women already marginalized by class and race.

The effort to decriminalize the sex trade worldwide is not a progressive movement. Implementing this policy will simply calcify into law men’s entitlement to buy sex, while decriminalizing pimping will protect no one but the pimps.

In the United States, prostitution is thought to be worth at least [$14 billion](http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21611063-internet-making-buying-and-selling-sex-easier-and-safer-governments-should-stop) a year. Most of that money doesn’t go to girls like my teenage self. Worldwide, [human](http://www.hhs.gov/news/factsheet/humantrafficking.html) trafficking is the second largest enterprise of organized crime, behind drug cartels but on a par with gunrunning.

In countries that have decriminalized the sex trade, legal has attracted illegal. With popular support, the authorities in Amsterdam [have closed down](http://globalnews.ca/news/540131/amsterdam-turns-out-the-red-lights-in-famed-district/) much of the city’s famous red light district — because it had become a magnet for criminal activity.

In Germany, where prostitution was legalized in 2002, the industry has exploded. It is [estimated](http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21589922-has-liberalisation-oldest-profession-gone-too-far-giant-teutonic-brothel) that one million men pay to use [450,000](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/money/brothel-berlin-germany-maison-envie-aka-house-desire-cuts-rates-green-customers-article-1.386666) girls and women every day. Sex tourists are pouring in, supporting “[mega-brothels](http://s.telegraph.co.uk/graphics/projects/welcome-to-paradise/)” up to 12 stories high.

In New Zealand, where prostitution was decriminalized in 2003, young women in brothels have told me that men now demand more than ever for less than ever. And because the trade is socially sanctioned, there is no incentive for the government to provide exit strategies for those who want to get out of it. These women are trapped.

There is an alternative: an approach, which originated in Sweden, that has now been adopted by other countries such as Norway, Iceland and Canada and is sometimes called the “Nordic model.”

The concept is simple: Make selling sex legal but buying it illegal — so that women can get help without being arrested, harassed or worse, and the criminal law is used to deter the buyers, because they fuel the market. There are numerous techniques, including hotel sting operations, placing fake ads to inhibit johns, and mailing court summonses to home addresses, where accused men’s spouses can see them.

Since Sweden passed its law, the number of men who say they have bought sex has [plummeted](http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm/SiteCollectionDocuments/Sv/publikationer/2015/prostitution-kartlaggning-2014.pdf). ([At 7.5 percent](http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/stockholm/SiteCollectionDocuments/Sv/manniska-och-samhalle/jamstalldhet/prostitution/SUMMARY-Prostitution-kartlaggning-2014.pdf), it’s roughly half the rate [reported](http://ijo.sagepub.com/content/58/7/802.abstract) by American men.) In contrast, after neighboring Denmark decriminalized prostitution outright, the trade increased by 40 percent within a seven-year period.

Contrary to stereotype, the average john is not a loner or a loser. In America, a significant proportion of buyers who purchase sex frequently [have](http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2013-03/sp-hci032513.php) an annual income above $120,000 and are married. Most have college degrees, and many have children. Why not let fines from these privileged men pay for young women’s counseling, education and housing? It is they who have credit cards and choices, not the prostituted women and girls.

Amnesty International proposes a sex trade free from “force, fraud or coercion,” but I know from what I’ve lived and witnessed that prostitution cannot be disentangled from coercion. I believe the majority of Amnesty delegates who voted in Dublin wished to help women and girls in prostitution and mistakenly allowed themselves to be sold the notion that decriminalizing pimps and johns would somehow achieve that aim. But in the name of human rights, what they voted for was to decriminalize *violations* of those rights, on a global scale.

The recommendation [goes before](https://www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/) the board for a final decision this autumn. Many of Amnesty’s leaders and members realize that their organization’s credibility and integrity are on the line. It’s not too late to stop this disastrous policy before it harms women and children worldwide.