

<http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/decriminalization-of-sex-work-would-only-expand-abuse/>

What do The World Health Organization, The Joint United Nations Program on HIV and AIDS, the United Nations Development Fund, The Global Commission on HIV and the Law, The International Labor Organization, the Open Society Foundation, The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, The UN Secretary General, and Human Rights Watch – and now, Amnesty International – all have in common? All of them, after careful consideration, have called for the full decriminalization of sex work. They are also staffed with leading public health, social science and human rights experts from all around the globe.

What do Pete Holmes, Dan Satterberg and Debora Boyer all have in common? They hold the belief that they know better than the majority of the top human rights organizations around the globe, a love for misleading empirically false claims, and the desire to ignore the voices of individuals who are actually working in the commercial sex trade. In a recent Seattle Times Opinion piece the trio chastised Amnesty International's move towards supporting the global decriminalization of sex work. The piece is riddled with inflated statistics and frankly, bad social science.

***The End Demand model is “the socially just path, and is the only way to end commercial sexual exploitation and the crimes associated with it.”***

In the past several years both King County and Washington State more generally have begun to implement the End Demand model. This model specifically targets the demand for sex work by criminalizing the purchase of sex. The logic behind this model is still that sex work is morally wrong, that sex work is not legitimate work and that it needs to be (or even can be) eradicated. Often proponents of the demand model believe that an individual cannot consent to selling sex and conflate sex work with sex trafficking. Yet, there is a reason the top global human rights organizations do not support the End Demand model—it is harmful to individuals working in the sex industry.

For example, criminalizing demand still forces sex workers to work in clandestine locations, which increases the risk of violence and limits the negotiation power of sex workers in transactions. Because the purchaser of sex is now incurring more costs than the seller, studies are showing that sex workers are having a more difficult time negotiating things like condom usage. In addition, clients are insisting on expediting the transaction, so sex workers have less time to assess their clients. Client screening is one of the most important tools sex workers have to protect themselves.

Furthermore, the Nordic model does nothing to lift the stigma against sex work as it insists that it is morally wrong. This stigma and fear of legal repercussions prevents sex workers from being able to come forward to receive health and legal assistance.

***“By chilling the demand for sex buying, we chill the economic incentives for sex trafficking.”***

Have we learned nothing from the failed war on drugs? Criminalization creates lucrative, unregulated markets that are breeding grounds for abuse. The idea that criminalizing the sex trade will eradicate the market for sex is ludicrous.

According to the National Council for Crime Prevention, Sweden's demand criminalization model may actually have the opposite effect of deterring traffickers. Indeed, criminalization increases the profit for traffickers, which makes Sweden an attractive country for experienced traffickers. A National Police Board press release from Sweden stated (more than a decade after they criminalized the demand for sex work) that: "Serious organized crime, including prostitution and trafficking, has increased in strength, power and complexity during the past decade. It constitutes a serious social problem in Sweden and organized crime makes large amounts of money from the exploitation and trafficking of people under slave-like conditions."

The End Demand model drives the sex work further underground and makes it less likely for abused individuals to seek the assistance they need. Criminalization does nothing to address the underlying social issues such as insecure housing, mental illness, dependencies, trauma, or societal barriers to exiting the sex trade such as stigma or criminal histories.

***"The average age of entry is 12 to 14."***

This is widely cited statistic that has been soundly debunked, yet continues to spread. Indeed, the Seattle Times is currently using it as a sidebar for the op-ed. Even the Polaris Project, one of the leading anti-trafficking organizations, has renounced this claim.

***"Decriminalization and legalization are failed experiments."***

There is much confusion about what decriminalization of sex work actually means. Decriminalization is the complete removal of laws governing sex work and sex work related offenses. The industry is therefore, subject to the same controls and regulations in which other businesses operate, including health and occupational safety regulations. Sex workers are entitled to the same employment rights and subject to the same responsibilities – such as paying taxes – as those who work in other industries. Even if sex work is fully decriminalized, the exploitation of minors and human trafficking still remain criminal acts. In fact improved relationship with police under decriminalization can create a flow of better information between workers and the police and may help to identify potential child or trafficked individuals.

*Decriminalization does not increase sex trafficking or consenting adult sex work.* New Zealand, a country with an incredible amount of gender equity, was the first nation to fully decriminalize sex work. Careful empirical data collected by the New Zealand government and corroborated by independent organizations shows that there has been no increase in the size of the sex industry since decriminalization. Furthermore, decriminalization has not increased sex trafficking in New Zealand. Indeed, according to

the 2014 U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report New Zealand is a Tier 1 country — meaning that it is amongst the most compliant in the fight against human trafficking.

Decriminalization has been associated with increased access to health services, reduction of risk of HIV, safer working conditions, reduction of stigma, and access to justice.

For more details on the junk science in this op-ed, as written by a Seattle sex worker rights advocate, [check out this article in the Stranger written by Mistress Matisse.](#)”

However, this response is redundant. SWOP-Seattle previously met with the City and Prosecuting Attorney’s office, which resulted in a lengthy meeting about our concerns. We compiled and submitted for their consideration our information packet [swopMarch15RevInfo](#) outlining the harms of criminalization and our recommended best practices, as well as the arguments stated above. Obviously, this pamphlet has been completely disregarded, as the recent Seattle Times op-ed flies in the face of the data we carefully compiled to educate these city officials. Our follow up email requesting further conversation has been unanswered...

With particular reference to the new [Amnesty International policy on state obligations](#) to respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of sex workers – we will again request a meeting to discuss these matters, and specifically, to further discuss our recommendation for an immunity or amnesty program for sex workers or clients who would like to report abuses.