

Amnesty International says prostitution is a human right – but it's wrong

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Tuesday 28 July 2015 16.41 EDT

<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jul/28/amnesty-international-prostitution-sex-work-human-trafficking>

Has [Amnesty International](#) been hijacked by proponents of the global sex trade? When the human rights nonprofit convenes its International Council Meeting next week in Dublin, delegates from around the world will be asked to vote on a proposal to recognize prostitution as a human right.

Amnesty is arguing that prostitution is a matter of free choice, a stance [heavily promoted](#) by the [multibillion-dollar commercial sex industry](#). The group is putting forth the view that sex work is compatible with the principle of gender equality and nondiscrimination, as if it were a job like any other.

“By definition,” [Amnesty’s proposal states](#), “sex work means that sex workers who are engaging in commercial sex have consented to do so.” This definition fails to take into account the [dire economic need](#), the [childhood sexual abuse](#), the [brutal coercion employed by pimps](#), and the [vast power differences of sex and race](#) that [drive the commercial sex industry](#).

Amnesty contends that “such conditions do not inevitably render individuals incapable of exercising personal agency”. This argument ignores the reality for the vast majority of individuals exploited by the commercial sex industry. When [United Nations personnel trade food for sex](#), these transactions – called “survival sex” – might technically be consensual, but can hardly be considered examples of free will. [Almost](#)

[all prostitution is some form of survival sex](#). There is no choice in the absence of the freedom to choose otherwise.

Amnesty's stance on prostitution shows it is missing a gender lens. This isn't the first time Amnesty has been slow to protect women's rights: the group failed even to recognize sex trafficking as a human rights violation until the late 1990s. But it now [recognizes rape as a weapon of war](#) and some other forms of violence against women – including trafficking – as violations of human rights.

It also previously shied away from recognizing [female genital mutilation](#) as a human rights violation, noting the practice was [deeply rooted in tradition](#), but then [took up the issue in 1995](#). The issue is harm, not choice.

Perhaps Amnesty should look to the [1949 UN Convention on trafficking](#), which characterizes prostitution and sex trafficking as “incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger[ing] the welfare of the individual, the family and the community”. If the organization endorses prostitution as a human right, it won't be supporting the women who might have no choice but to have sex for money, but rather the pimps and buyers of sex who have all the choice in the world.

Amnesty is urging its membership to separate prostitution and sex trafficking as entirely unrelated. Yet common sense and the economics of supply and demand dictate that [demand for prostitution fuels sex trafficking to supply it](#): not all prostituted women are sex trafficking victims, but all sex trafficking victims are sold into prostitution. Amnesty is urging its membership to legalize the industry, making no distinction between the women being prostituted and those who pay for and profit from their exploitation.

Sweden has made a legal distinction between those driven into the sex industry by poverty and discrimination and those who buy sex as an exercise of power and privilege. Its model law criminalizes only the buying of sex and offers support services to those who are bought. This progressive feminist method aims to decriminalize prostituted women without legitimizing the men who buy them.

In the book [Paid For](#), a compelling analysis of author Rachel Moran's experience in the sex trade, she describes three types of men who

patronize prostitution: those who assume the women they buy have no human feelings; those who are conscious of a woman's humanity but choose to ignore it; and those who derive sexual pleasure from reducing the humanity of women they buy. Is Amnesty really going to defend the rights of such men to buy women?

It's a heartbreaking moment for those of us who love Amnesty International. Former US president Jimmy Carter, who made human rights a centerpiece of US foreign policy, has started an [online petition](#) urging the group not to endorse commercial sexual exploitation as a right. The concept of human rights itself – not to mention sex equality – is at stake.

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- This article was amended on 29 July to replace the word “sex workers” with “prostitution” in the penultimate paragraph; this was due to an error that occurred in the editing process.