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10 myths about prostitution, trafficking and the Nordic model

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When the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) [announced](#) the release of our new [report on the Nordic Model](#), supporters of the sex industry began targeting our Facebook page.

When I followed up with an [opinion piece for *The Conversation*](#) on the success of the Nordic Model, a handful of men, and one prominent [Australian feminist](#), spent hours trading inaccuracies about the Nordic approach to prostitution policy and disparaging anyone stupid enough to think that a booming industry which trades in women's bodies is anything but inevitable.

These falsities and fabrications will be familiar to anyone who has written or said anything that publicly criticizes the sex industry. The same claims, usually without reference to relevant evidence, are repeated so frequently in certain spheres that they have practically become mantras. If you say it often enough, it becomes true, right?

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In the interests of being able to offer more than 140 character responses to these predictable criticisms, here's a list of responses to the most common myths I've had thrown at me.

1. I'm a sex worker, I choose sex work and I love it

This is one of the most popular retorts *de jour* and is treated by many who use it as a sort of checkmate argument, as though any one person stating that they enjoy sex work makes all of the [other evidence](#) about violence, post-traumatic stress disorder and trafficking in prostitution, magically disappear.

Maud Olivier, the Socialist MP who recently introduced the Bill to prohibit the purchase of sexual services in France, slammed the "hypocrisy" of such criticisms: "So is it enough for one prostitute to say she is free for the enslavement of others to be respectable and acceptable?" [she asked](#) her fellow parliamentarians.

But the "I love sex work" refrain is put forward as a powerful argument because it is seen to counter a supposedly all-encompassing claim by radical feminists and others that systems of prostitution are harmful to women.

This relies on misunderstandings of radical politics, the concept of structural oppression and tired old debates about false consciousness. Just because you like something doesn't mean that it can't be harmful (just as liking something [doesn't automatically make it feminist](#)). Radical feminists [criticize beauty practices](#) as harmful too, and saying you choose to wear high-heels doesn't make that critique wrong. Nor does it mean these feminists hate you for wearing high heels (I've heard that one wheeled out in many an undergraduate tutorial) or being in prostitution.

Similarly, when anyone practicing radical politics points out that free choice is a fairytale, and that all our actions are constrained within certain material conditions, this does not equate to saying we're all infantilized, little drones unable to make decisions for ourselves. It just means we're not all floating around in a cultural vacuum making

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decisions completely unaffected by structural issues like systemic economic inequality, racism and sexism.

2. Only sex workers are qualified to comment on prostitution

This myth is often used in tandem with the first. And [here's the best/worst example](#) I've had sent my way.

While such exchanges may be part of a wider problem of attempting to spuriously employ [personal experience to trump research](#) and disprove wider social trends (sexism doesn't exist because I've never seen it!), there is more to these interactions in the context of prostitution. Repeating that only current sex workers are qualified to talk about the sex industry is [an attempt to silence survivor's voices](#) and pretend that the consequences of prostitution apply only to those in prostitution.

It is true that much feminist opposition to prostitution has focused on the harms to women in prostitution, and rightly so, these [harms are serious and endemic](#). But, as advocates of the Nordic Model point out, the existence of systems of prostitution is also a barrier to gender equality.

As long as women (and yes there are men in prostitution, but please, let's be honest and admit that using "people" here would only obfuscate the fact that the vast majority of those in prostitution *are* women) can be bought and sold like commodities for sex is an issue for all women. [The Swedes](#) recognized this when they introduced the original ban on buying sex in 1999, and the [French women's rights minister is busy explaining it again](#) at the moment.

3. All sex workers oppose the Nordic Model

Firstly, it is important to point out that for every [sex worker rights organization](#) that opposes the Nordic Model, there's a [survivor organization](#) that advocates for it.

The idea that every woman with any experience in the sex industry detests the Nordic Model is tactical claim by a [number of sex worker rights' organizations](#) around the world and it relies heavily on myth

number two. This claim is, more often than not, followed by a link to [Petra Ostergren's blog](#) which *proves* (we're told) that all women in prostitution hate the Nordic Model and would prefer legalization.

It is clear that there are a number of very vocal opponents of the Nordic Model within the sex industry who have a significant platform. But it can hardly be said that these organizations represent *all* women in prostitution around the world, or that the odd blog post (light on references or other evidence) proves that the Nordic Model is a failure.

4. The Nordic Model denies sex workers' agency

One of the things that critics seem to find so difficult to comprehend about the Nordic Model is that it is actually about restricting *buyers*, not about restricting those in prostitution. That is why it *decriminalizes* prostituted persons. The Model doesn't discount the possibility of prostitution by "choice" but rather establishes that the buying of women in systems of prostitution is something that the state should actively discourage.

It's pretty simple really. The Nordic Model acknowledges that less demand for prostitution and less demand for trafficking = less prostitution and less trafficking ∴ reducing the number of women exposed to these particular types of abuse and creating a better chance of achieving gender equality.

If you think that the state should encourage the growth of the prostitution industry and treat it as a form of gainful employment for women, then you're bound to disagree, but that doesn't mean the Model denies anybody's agency.

5. The Nordic Model conflates prostitution and trafficking.

Many proponents of the Nordic Model adopt the understanding of trafficking advanced by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children

[<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>] (see Article 3a). This is a more nuanced

understanding of trafficking than the “people moved across international borders at gun point” version that is popular in much of the mainstream press. Perhaps this is where the confusion sets in.

But even in employing this more realistic, UN-supported understanding of the mechanics of coercion and trafficking, the Nordic Model does not assume that every woman in prostitution is necessarily trafficked.

What the Nordic Model *does* do is recognize that there is a *connection* between the market for prostitution and sex trafficking, specifically that the demand for sexual services fuels sex trafficking. So, if you want less sex trafficking, then you need to shrink the market for prostitution.

This logic was further supported by [a recent study of 150 countries](#), conducted by economists in the UK and Germany, showing that “the scale effect of legalized prostitution leads to an expansion of the prostitution market, increasing human trafficking.”

6. The Nordic Model doesn't work / pushes prostitution “underground”.

The contention that the Nordic Model has not reduced demand for prostitution is one often [repeated without evidence](#), but occasionally it is [claimed](#) that the Swedish government's own review of their legislation showed the failure of the Model. As legal scholar [Max Waltman has demonstrated](#), it did no such thing. Research commissioned by the Swedish government for its official review showed that [street prostitution had halved](#).

“Ha!” The critics say, “That study employed a flawed methodology and prostitution has just gone underground.” Perhaps, but that overlooks other sources, including research indicating the number of people in Sweden [buying sex has fallen](#) and that police report having intercepted communications from [traffickers declaring that Sweden is a “bad market.”](#)

It's also worth considering what “underground” is supposed to mean in this context, as in legalized and decriminalized systems, like some

in Australia, “underground” is taken to mean street prostitution. So if prostitution has moved off the streets, where has it gone? Online and indoors, is the assertion of critics, which is quite odd given that advocates of legalization [frequently tout the benefits of indoor prostitution](#).

7. The Nordic Model deprives women of a living.

This myth is the most intriguing because it is actually an admission that the Nordic Model works, directly contradicting myth six. The Model can only deprive women of a living if it does, in fact, reduce the demand for prostitution. What’s more, comprehensive exit programs are a critical part of the Model, involving access to a wide variety of services including retraining and employment support.

Hashtags like #nothingaboutuswithoutus (used by a number of groups, not just sex industry organizations) regularly appear alongside this claim as though the only satisfactory option available is for everyone to accept a flourishing prostitution market because some people want it that way.

Not just any people though, of course – workers – if you buy the “sex work is work” line. Leaving aside the problems with the concept that [prostitution is a job like any other](#), if we accept this premise, then the argument doesn’t follow, as workers in any given industry don’t get to determine whether or not that industry continues.

Take the brown coal or forestry industries in Australia, for example. These are sectors that have been deemed by governments to be harmful in a number of ways and that, as a result – while they are still potentially profitable – they no longer have a social license to continue operating uninhibited. Workers in these industries are often outraged at seeing their jobs threatened, which is why [unions advocate for “just transitions,”](#) providing retraining and facilitated access to social and employment services for those workers affected (sound familiar?). For the most part, these unions have given up arguing that the harmful industry in question should continue simply to avoid employment disruption for workers.

If sex work is work, and prostitution is just another industry, then it is open for wider public discussion and policy changes like other

industry, including the possibility that governments will no longer want it to function.

8. The Nordic Model has made prostitution unsafe.

First things first, prostitution *is* unsafe. To suggest that the Nordic Model is what makes it dangerous is disingenuous. Such declarations also ignore research showing that traditional forms of legalization and decriminalization do virtually nothing to protect women in prostitution from very high odds of physical and sexual violence as well as psychological trauma.

Systems of legalization foster greater demand and create an [expanding illegal industry surrounding them](#), so it is a fallacy to pretend that in localities where prostitution is legalized, all women are actually in legal forms of prostitution. In addition, [rates of trauma](#) are similar across legalized, decriminalized and criminalized systems of prostitution.

Sadly, even the Nordic Model is not capable of fully protecting women still in prostitution from many of these conditions – as long as there is prostitution there will be harm – but the idea that it makes conditions worse is spurious.

The “more violence” claims mostly relate to a widely cited [ProSentret study](#) which found that women in prostitution had reported an increase in certain forms of violent acts from johns, including hair pulling and biting, after the introduction of the Nordic Model in Norway. What is often left out from these accounts, however, is that the study also found women reported [a sharp decline in other forms of violence](#), including punching and rape.

As for women in prostitution not being able to access adequate social services, this may well be a problem on the ground. If so, it absolutely needs to be addressed. But this is an issue of implementation rather than a flaw in the Model itself.

The original version of the Nordic Model, introduced in Sweden, was part of the [Kvinnofrid reforms](#) to funnel more government money and support to a variety of services tackling violence against women,

including specifically in prostitution. We've seen this again [in France](#), with laws decriminalizing those in prostitution brought in alongside measures to curb other forms of violence against women.

9. The Nordic Model is really a moral crusade in disguise.

Despite the evidence-based policy of the Nordic Model being introduced by progressive and socialist governments, the notion persists that this is some kind of [underhanded religious](#) or conservative attempt to curtail sexual expression, rather than an effective way of tackling trafficking and violence against women.

But perhaps this all depends on how you define "[moral crusade](#)." If you view the movement for women's equality as a "moral crusade", then I suppose it is. If you are determined to dismiss all of the evidence in support of the Nordic Model and instead want to debate this on a "moral" level, then by all means do. Those who think violence against women is a bad thing are bound to win that argument.

10. Academics who research prostitution make money off the backs of women in prostitution.

This is a relatively new addition to the list of [silencing techniques](#) used against those feminists who challenge the sex industry. The first time I came across such an accusation was [via the comment section here](#) and then in the follow up emails helpfully advising me that I was just like men who rape women in prostitution because I was using the experiences of sex workers without paying.

So let me be very clear: academics conduct research. For many, like me, this often involves collating existing research and, using that evidence, creating an argument that can be defended. That is our job. And it is our job, regardless of the topic or area that we're researching.

Engaging in public debates about the Nordic Model, and citing relevant research, is in no way an attempt to speak for women in prostitution. It is an attempt to bring the findings of that research to a broader audience. If this is perceived as threatening by the sex

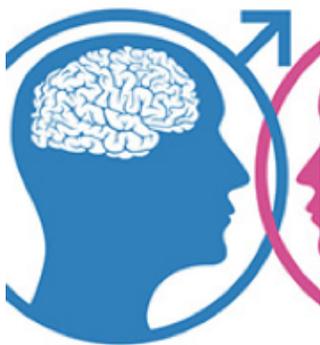
industry, then surely that suggests the Nordic Model is effective?

Meagan Tyler is a lecturer in Sociology at Victoria University, Australia. Her research interests are based mainly around the social construction of gender and sexuality. Her work in this area has been published in Women's Studies International Forum and Women and Therapy as well as several edited collections including 'Everyday Pornography' (Boyle ed., 2010) and 'Prostitution, Harm and Gender Inequality' (Coy ed., 2012). Meagan's first book, 'Selling Sex Short: The pornographic and sexological construction of women's sexuality in the West', was released in July, 2011.

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