

France's 'Non' to the Notion of 'Sex Work' Is a Blow Against the Exploitation of Women

Prostitution in France is now legally recognized as violence against women rather than as “sex work.” By an overwhelming majority (64-12), the country’s National Assembly voted Wednesday to criminalize sex buyers. Having faced down pressure from a muscular pro-prostitution lobby, hundreds of self-proclaimed “bastards” yelling “[Hands off my whore](#),” and three rejections by the French Senate, the Assembly passed a law that decriminalizes those who are prostituted and criminalizes prostitution users, whose exploitation of women and children has been historically ignored or whitewashed.

In line with France’s historical record of [human rights and abolitionist prostitution policy](#), the legislation also gives greater social protection and exit support to prostituted women. It offers them access to financial aid and grants temporary residence permits to foreign victims of trafficking.

The new legislation also strengthens France’s anti-pimping and procuring laws, unlike those of other countries, such as the Netherlands and New Zealand, where pimping and brothels are legal and where such legalization has abetted an increase in sex trafficking and organized crime. As one Dutch national report stated about the country’s legalizing of pimping and brothels, “The idea that a clean, normal business sector has emerged is an illusion.” In fact, it is the failure of Dutch and other foreign laws that treat prostitution as a sexual service industry that helped advance the French legislation.

In passing a law based on the [so-called Nordic model](#) of prostitution legislation, which makes the buyers legally accountable, France follows Sweden, Norway and Iceland, countries that lead the world on strategic indicators of gender equality. France recognizes that if a country wants to further women’s right to be free of all forms of sexual exploitation, it is unacceptable to normalize one very significant form of exploitation by promoting prostitution as just another job.

With a large and diverse population, France is the first country in mainland Europe to vote in favor of a law to criminalize demand (Northern Ireland [passed similar legislation in 2015](#)). Its legislation is a powerful rebuke to the policy proposals of more corporate-styled, well-financed and influential nongovernmental organizations such as Amnesty International. In 2015, Amnesty recommended that countries decriminalize the entire system of prostitution, including what it terms “facilitators”—better known as pimps and johns. Many human rights advocates who oppose Amnesty’s policy argue that an organization maintaining that its prostitution strategy protects women by decriminalizing sex buyers, pimps and brothels is akin to allowing foxes to safeguard a chicken coop.

The new French law is supported by NGOs representing survivors of prostitution, such as SPACE International, which understand that language is important and that institutionalizing prostitution as “sex work” dignifies the pimps and buyers—not the women. Amnesty claimed that its prostitution stance emerged from “the lived experiences of sex workers.” Yet Amnesty does not address the lived experience of *survivors*—women who have withstood the lived experience of

prostitution and refuse to call themselves “sex workers.”

In 2014, a Frenchwoman, Rosen Hicher, a 22-year survivor of prostitution, walked 500 miles across the country in support of the French law proposal and in protest of the Senate’s move to delay the vote by keeping the law locked in committee. Hicher had written a book in 2009 calling for the total decriminalization of the prostitution system, including pimping and brothels. “Today, I am ashamed of this book. ... I was hoping that the situation of prostituted women would improve with the legalization of prostitution. But we are seeing the reverse happening,” she said.

Hicher is among many activists who pushed for the new legislation. Legendary French feminist Denise Pouillon Falco; and Malka Marcovich, representing the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women; Sabine Salmon of Femmes Solidaires; and Marie-Victoire Louise helped spearhead the legal process. In 2009, cross-party parliamentarians Danielle Bousquet and Guy Geoffroy organized a committee that held hearings on changing the prostitution law. Those hearings took evidence from all parts of the political spectrum. In 2011, each political party in the National Assembly signed a resolution that “reaffirms the abolitionist position of France, the objective of which is a society without prostitution.” More recently, Abolition 2012—a collective of more than 60 French organizations and survivors—along with CAP International and its 14 member organizations, worked to push this law across the finish line.

The tide of prostitution policy flows increasingly toward the beachhead of decriminalizing women and criminalizing demand. The Irish Republic and the United Kingdom are considering similar “end demand” legislation. Underpinning France’s legislation is the European Parliament’s resolution of 2014, which stipulates that “the most effective way of combating the trafficking of women and under-age females for sexual exploitation and improving gender equality is ... (the so-called Nordic model), and currently under consideration in several European countries, where the purchase of sexual services constitutes the criminal act, not the services of the prostituted persons.”

Quoting a 19th-century slavery abolitionist, Martin Luther King Jr. remarked that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. The new French law has made that arc much shorter.

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