

European Parliament urges member states to adopt ‘Swedish model’ targeting clients, not prostitutes

The Strasbourg plenary session approved a non-binding report that promotes the ‘decriminalization of prostituted persons, especially women’

Silvia Ayuso, *El Pais*, Brussels, September 15, 2023

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The European Parliament on Thursday urged member states to promote the so-called “[Swedish model](#)” to combat prostitution — which punishes the client and not the person, usually a woman, who solicits — while asking the European Commission to develop common guidelines to ensure the fundamental rights of prostitutes, who are usually among the most vulnerable people in society.

The [non-binding report](#) calls on the EU-27 to implement measures to tackle the issue in view of the “asymmetry between national rules on prostitution within the EU,” which “given its cross-border nature, leads to more victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and makes for fertile operating ground for organised crime.”

It also calls on member states to act in the areas of “prevention and decriminalization of prostituted persons, especially women,” as well as seeking ways to “improve social protection, tackle school failure, promote education, and the establishment of inclusive policies that support women’s empowerment and economic independence, along with measures that condemn those who exploit.”

Countries should also implement “high-quality exit programs from prostitution” and guarantee sex workers “unconditional access” to social security and integration into society.

This is often one of the most difficult steps and one where countries that already have measures in place often show deficiencies. This is the case in France, where even [advocates of the abolition of prostitution](#) have acknowledged that the inadequacy of mechanisms for escaping sex work is hindering the social reintegration of prostitutes. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has just accepted the processing of a lawsuit by 261 French sex workers who have denounced the prostitution law adopted in France in 2016 that criminalizes the client, claiming that it has led to a dangerous degradation of their living and working conditions.

In a meeting prior to Thursday’s vote, the author of the report, German Social Democrat MEP Maria Noichi, acknowledged that there are still loopholes in these regulations. “States have to provide funding so that these people can enter society,” otherwise such legislation is reduced to being law “on paper, but not in reality,” she said. In fact, the report stresses that, when implementing the “Swedish model” or similar measures, national governments “should take advantage of the best practices used in other Member States” to avoid repeating mistakes. In

addition, the text proposes that the European Commission “compile comprehensive data that could serve as the basis for a study analyzing the different measures in the Member States” to combat prostitution and establish “common European guidelines guaranteeing the fundamental rights of persons engaged in prostitution.”

A divided vote

The vote was tighter than is usual — 234 in favor, 175 against and 122 abstentions — and was divided between political formations: social democrats and populists voting almost en bloc in favor, while liberals, greens and many of the conservatives and the far-right were positioned against or abstained, as noted by news agency EFE. Nevertheless, Noichi celebrated the fact that, with the approval of her report, the European Parliament “giving a voice to people, and especially women, who have traditionally been overlooked, marginalised and stigmatised in our societies.”

Prostitution is “a [form of violence](#) and both a cause and consequence of gender inequality,” she added. “This report outlines the reasons why the big majority of people end up in prostitution, and it highlights the way forward: create exit programmes and alternatives, eradicate poverty and social exclusion, dismantle stereotypes and inequalities, and reduce demand by tackling the buyers.”

During the debate preceding the vote, held on Wednesday, MEP María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop of the Spanish left-wing populist party Podemos backed the report and the measures it proposes, stating, “a sexual relationship cannot be the subject of a labor contract even when there is consent, because that contract always involves a violation of sexual freedom.”

“Prostitution is not only a radically capitalist institution, but it would not exist if patriarchy did not exist, because the only thing that gives it meaning is the male fantasy of domination. Normalizing it means institutionalizing the sexual privileges enjoyed by men and consolidating the structural subordination of women,” said the jurist, professor of philosophy of law.

Advocates of the criminalization of prostitution also supported the report, such as Romanian writer and abolitionist activist [Amelia Tiganus](#), who at a press conference in Strasbourg asked that it be made clear that “prostitution cannot be considered a job.”

Something the report specifically echoes, pointing out that prostitution “is not an individual act of a person renting his or her body for money, but rather it is a system organised for profit which is intrinsically violent, discriminatory and deeply inhuman and that operates as a business and creates a market where pimps plan and act to secure and increase their markets and where buyers of sex play a key role in boosting them.”