

# NORDIC MODEL NOW!

10 May 2021

To: Florence Schechter, Director,  
Jennifer Simmons, Trustee,  
Kristina Johansson, Trustee,  
Niharika Jain, Trustee,  
Sarah Creed, Curator,  
Sarah Harman, Trustee,  
Zoe Williams, Development and Marketing Manager

cc: Keir Starmer

Dear Vagina Museum director, staff and trustees,

## **Response to your letter to Keir Starmer MP**

Nordic Model Now! is a grassroots women's group that campaigns for the Nordic Model approach to prostitution that you argue so vehemently against in your letter to Keir Starmer. Many of our members have themselves experienced prostitution. One of them is on your mailing list and was very distressed to receive your recent newsletter and she suggested that we write to you explaining why we support the Nordic Model and asking you to rethink your position.

While we appreciate that you almost certainly had the best intentions in writing the letter, we fear that you have been misinformed.

Let's start with your claim that "decriminalisation was implemented in New Zealand with great success."

You go on to quote an "independent review" – which we believe was the [official review](#) that was undertaken 13 years ago in 2008. You don't mention that it states that the majority of the women interviewed felt that the new law could do little about the violence they experienced in prostitution.

The review also found evidence that brothel operators still require women to "provide commercial sexual services against their will" and that although the new law brought prostitution under Health and Safety regulations, there is no way of assessing compliance because there's no system of regular inspections of brothels. And anyway, how on earth can

you bring prostitution into line with Health and Safety norms, when PPE is required for any other job that risks contamination by other people's body fluids?

The review also found evidence of a significant black market and no evidence that women were more likely to report violence. It also notes the difficulty that many women have leaving the industry and that there was little dedicated support to help them do so.

New [academic research](#) [\*] by Helen Johnson and Tony Pitt found that the benefits of the New Zealand approach have been hugely exaggerated and its downsides have been ignored, denied, and hidden, and claims that the law has been a success simply cannot be justified.

They found there's been no serious attempt to track the numbers involved in the industry. The number reported in the 2008 study (2,332) is still frequently cited, but there is evidence that it has increased by at least 300% since then. Although the legislation requires regular inspections of brothels, they are practically non-existent and there is no public funding of services to help women exit prostitution.

We're in touch with a number of women who've been in prostitution in New Zealand (such as [Wahine Tao Rising](#)), who consider the policy an unmitigated disaster for women. One of them, [Chelsea Geddes](#), talks about how the law has made men expect more and be less willing to pay – making it harder for the women to maintain even the most basic boundaries.

We do not believe that it's a coincidence that the introduction of the new law coincided with a [sharp increase](#) in rape and domestic assault in the general population at a time that overall crime was decreasing.

Prostitution is one-sided sex – he pays precisely because she doesn't want to have sex with him. This reduces his empathy and increases his sense of superiority and entitlement – exactly the attitudes that are connected with male violence.

It is no surprise therefore that [studies of men](#) who buy sex show that they are significantly more likely than other men to rape and engage in all forms of violence against women and girls. Any increase in the amount of prostitution that happens will therefore inevitably lead to more male violence – against the greater number of women who are drawn into the industry and against women and girls in the general population.

New Zealand is a geopolitical outlier. It is a tiny country with a total population about the size of South London. It has no land borders and apart from some tiny Pacific islands, its nearest neighbour, Australia, is more than two thousand miles away. This means that there is a limit to how much we in the UK can extrapolate from the results there.

We need instead to pay close attention to Germany. Lobbyists for full decriminalisation argue that Germany's legalised system has no bearing on what would happen in the UK under full decriminalisation. However, the impact of both systems have major similarities – both lead to

an increase in the scale of the industry, with multi-story brothels in every city and small ones scattered in residential areas.

The huge scale and the fact that everything takes place under the cover of a legal system make it impossible for the police and other authorities to effectively deal with the criminal activities and abuse within the system.

[Helmut Sporer](#), a recently retired senior police officer, worked for approximately 30 years investigating and monitoring prostitution and human trafficking in Germany. During his career, he observed a progressive deterioration in both the conditions for the women involved in prostitution and the ability of the authorities to effectively deal with the proliferation of organized crime and abuses within the system.

Sporer spoke publicly in 2013 about the failures of the German system, but then he didn't go as far as arguing for the Nordic Model. Perhaps he hoped that further regulation of the German system would ameliorate the worst excesses. After seeing first-hand that the hoped-for improvements did not materialise after the introduction of new legislation in 2017 and after lengthy discussions with police officers and others in Sweden, he's come to the overwhelming conclusion that the Nordic Model is the only appropriate approach.

The UK has much more in common with Germany geopolitically than with New Zealand and we would be well to [listen to him](#) carefully.

In your letter you quote statistics from a study by Medecins du Monde conducted less than two years after the Nordic Model legislation was passed in France to suggest that “sex workers” are now exposed to more violence and are less likely to insist on condoms.

Only an 8-page summary of this 80-page report has been translated into English. This is unfortunate because the headline claims in the summary are misleading and are not backed up by the data in the full report. As a result, the headline claims are often unwittingly taken at face value in the English-speaking world. Another French NGO, Amicale du Nid, did a [detailed rebuttal of the claims](#), which we urge you to study in full.

We are in touch with women who have lived experience of the sex trade under the Nordic Model in France, Sweden and Ireland – and who are passionate supporters of the Nordic Model. For example, [#intedinhora](#) is a Swedish organisation of people who have experienced prostitution in Sweden, who support the Nordic Model. They got in touch with us because they were so sick of seeing the reality in Sweden being misrepresented in the English-speaking world and they wanted us to help amplify their voices. Do please listen to them.

Prostitution is [inherently violent](#) and no legislation can change that. Prostituted women have the [highest risk of murder of all](#) and they also have a much higher mortality rate than other women. A [Canadian study](#) estimated it at 40 times higher than other women.

We therefore believe that the only ethical approach is for measures to reduce the amount of prostitution that happens while providing genuine alternatives and routes out for those caught up in it. This is exactly what the Nordic Model aims to achieve – and can achieve when it is implemented properly and has widespread support – particularly from the feminist movement.

We believe that women should never be left with no option but prostitution for survival – but when the state sanctions prostitution (as it does implicitly under full decriminalisation) it implicitly sanctions prostitution as the last ditch option for destitute women.

When men’s right to buy sexual access to women and girls is enshrined in the law – as happens under the decriminalisation model – all women are reduced to commodities and sexual service points for men. This is anathema to women’s equality and liberation.

We have enclosed a [detailed critique](#) of many of the claims made in the debate on Dame Diana Johnson’s attempt to introduce Nordic Model style legislation and we urge you to study it. We would also be more than happy to meet with you to discuss this in more depth.

We give the final word to Harriet:

*“People think prostitution is about having consensual sex for money. It’s not. Those men don’t want to pay for that. They paid me and then used me however they wanted. I was beaten with objects until I bled; spat at; anally raped; gang raped; passed around at sex parties like a toy, men slipping off their condoms; I was shouted at, threatened, choked, told to look like I enjoyed it or he’d take the money back. I was scared every single second.”*

Yours sincerely

The Nordic Model Now! team

[\*] Johnson, H; Pitt, T. (2020). Review of the Decriminalisation Model in New Zealand. SASE. Available at <http://www.sase.org.uk/resources> (Accessed: 9 May 2021).