

Unison National Delegate Conference 2022: Say NO to Motion 55 'For Safety – End Support for the Nordic Model'



Motion 55 'For Safety – End Support for the Nordic Model', brought by the National LGBT+ Committee to the Unison National Delegate Conference 2022, seeks to overturn Unison's longstanding support for the Nordic Model approach to prostitution, with the ultimate aim of replacing it with support for full decriminalisation of the sex trade (full decrim), including pimps, brothel keepers, and sex buyers (punters), on the basis that this is safer for "sex workers."

*In this article, we go through the motion line by line, showing that it is misleading and relies on poor-quality research. We hope that this will help delegates and Unison members understand what is at stake and why we recommend you vote **against** the motion.*

For a simple discussion of the pros and cons of full decrim vs. the Nordic Model, please see our 'Decriminalisation of the sex trade vs. the Nordic Model: What you need to know' [booklet](#), which you can download for free.

How the voting works

The conference is a delegate conference, which means that only delegates are able to vote. Delegates represent branches and self-organising groups (LGBT+, Women's, Black Members, Members with Disabilities). These can optionally mandate how their delegates vote on particular motions – but this requires a properly constituted meeting where this is decided. If you are a member of Unison, you may want to get in touch with your representatives to explain your position and to ask that the branch or group should mandate its delegates to vote against the motion.

We suggest you share this article with them. There is a link at the end where you can download a PDF of the article.

Motion 55 unpicked

Motion 55 is published in the [final agenda](#) for the Unison National Delegate Conference 2022. The Conference is set to take place in Brighton 14-17 June.

Below we set out the motion text in bold and our response in normal type.

‘Conference notes that UNISON’s policy on sex work, adopted in 2010, is to support decriminalising the selling of sexual services while introducing a sex buyers law criminalising those who purchase those services.’

This is a misleading description of the current policy, the full text of which is available in the [Unison motions database](#).

The policy starts with the recognition that the UK’s current legislation enshrines men’s right to buy women for sex and is directly contradictory to a society based on equality between the sexes.

It continues with a recognition of the violence and abuse that is inherent to prostitution and the damage it causes to those in it, and how most women who become involved in prostitution do so as a result of childhood abuse, poverty, drug dependency, and homelessness, and commonly before their 18th birthday. It recognises that those selling sex should be decriminalised and provided with support services to help them exit prostitution safely and effectively; and that it is only through challenging men’s demand for prostitution and changing attitudes that we will end the sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse that is intrinsic to prostitution.

It is in recognition of all these facts that the policy calls for a Nordic Model approach to prostitution, which decriminalises the selling of sex and provides support for those in prostitution to build a new life outside, while criminalising profiteers and the purchase of sex, in order to reduce the demand that drives sex trafficking and to change social attitudes.

‘Conference recognises that the great majority of sex workers are women. Conference also recognises a significant number of women sex workers identify as LGBT+, and there are many gay, bisexual and trans sex workers who do not identify as women.’

Conference should also recognise that:

- The vast majority (99% or more) of punters are male. It is not possible to understand prostitution without recognising that it is something that men do mainly to women and children, but also to some men and transgendered people.
- The vast majority of those who are involved in prostitution are young, poor, recent migrants, victims of earlier sexual abuse, LGBT youth and/or those who are out of all other options.

- Prostitution is not a relationship between people who have similar levels of social, economic, and cultural power.

‘Conference notes that national LGBT+ conference policy:

1) Recognises that criminalisation of any kind, including of buyers, increases the risks for sex workers;’

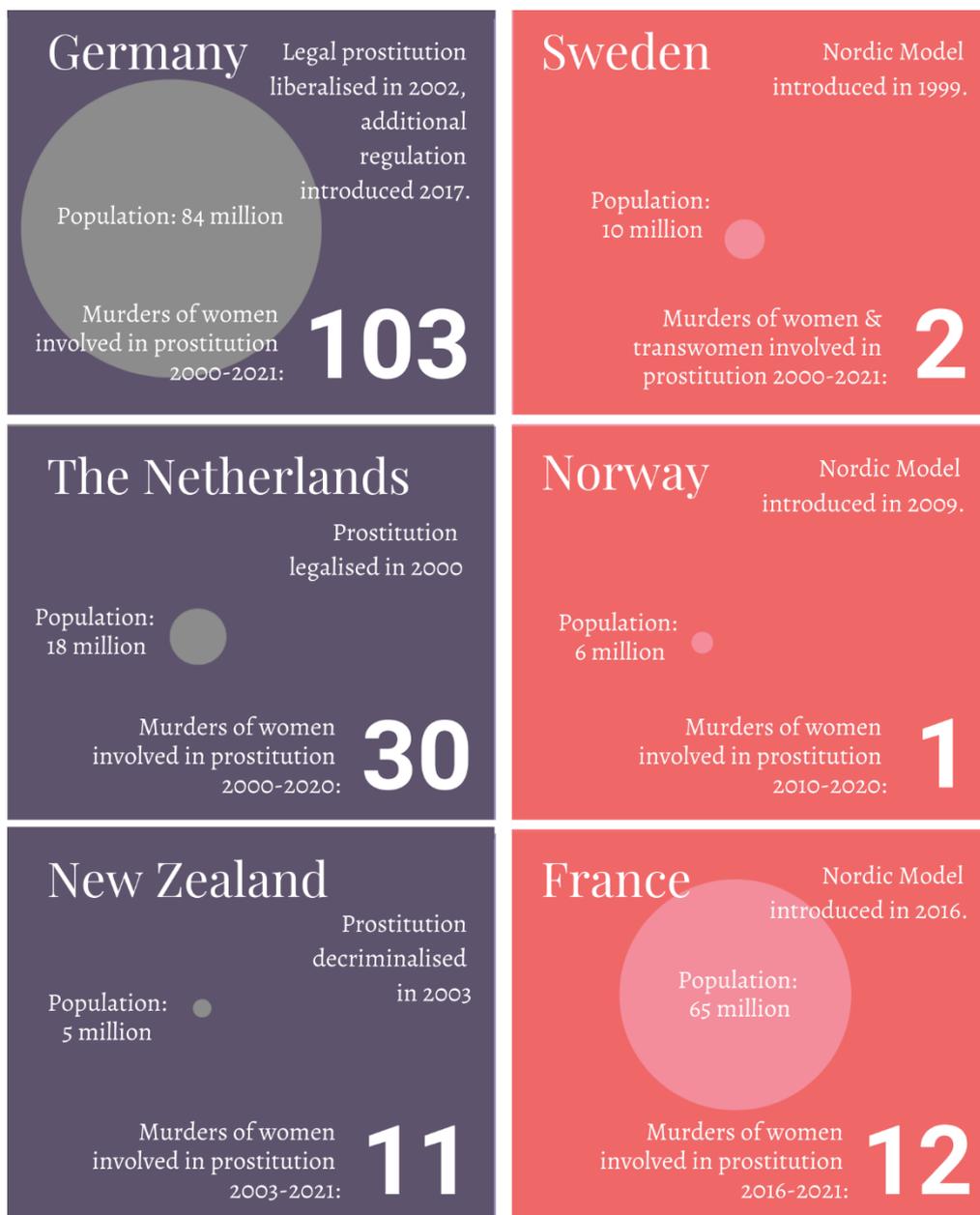
There is no credible evidence that criminalising the buyers makes prostitution more risky or dangerous for those involved in prostitution. There are a number of studies that make this claim, but when you read them in detail, you find that the data does not unequivocally support that claim. For more on this, see:

- [Critique of the Médecins du Monde study into the Nordic Model law in France](#)
- [Response to the Queen’s University Belfast review of the operation of Northern Ireland’s sex buyer law](#)
- [MYTH: Amnesty’s research in Norway has proved the Nordic Model is harmful to “sex workers”](#)

A [review of the key studies](#) that have been undertaken on the results of the Nordic Model in the countries in which it has been implemented found that, although all of the studies indicate a very high rate of violence towards the people in prostitution, there is no definitive evidence of any actual increase due to the sex purchase ban. Similarly claims that the sex purchase ban has driven prostitution underground and made it more dangerous are not supported by the research. Rather the evidence underlines the fact that **prostitution is always dangerous**.

What the homicide data tells us

It is widely [recognised](#) that women involved in prostitution have the highest murder rate of any social group. If criminalising buying sex makes it more risky, we’d expect to see more women murdered in the countries that have implemented the Nordic Model than in the countries that have implemented legalisation or full decrim. In fact, the data shows the opposite, as the following infographic shows. This is strong evidence that the much repeated claim that the Nordic Model makes prostitution riskier is simply not true.



Murder statistics from <http://www.sexindustry-kills.de>

For a discussion of this infographic and the data it is based on, see page 22 of our [booklet on decrim vs the Nordic Model](#).

See also, [FACT: Prostitution is inherently violent](#).

HIV transmission

We agree that the criminalisation of those involved in prostitution hinders the fight against HIV and AIDS. However, the Nordic Model does not target those in prostitution with criminal sanctions.

The assertion that criminalising buyers also hinders that fight is based on flawed modelling and studies in environments in which all of the actors were criminalised and **not** where the Nordic Model has been implemented.

The Nordic Model decriminalises individuals involved in prostitution and provides services to help them exit, along with access to sexual health care and condoms. The Nordic Model therefore has a very different impact than where selling sex is criminalised and the women are targeted by the police. In addition, the woman typically has more bargaining power under the Nordic Model, making the use of condoms more likely and violence less likely.

The World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendation that full decriminalisation of the sex trade is the best way to prevent the spread of HIV is based on flawed modelling, research that conflates the Nordic Model with prohibition regimes where all of the actors (prostituted persons, punters, and profiteers) are criminalised, and advice from an organisation under the leadership of Alejandra Gil, a pimp, who has since been jailed for 15 years for sex trafficking. Feminist author and activist Kat Banyard has rightly described this as a human rights scandal. This alone should cause us to have a healthy critical attitude to the WHO guidelines as they relate to the sex trade.

For more on this, see [MYTH: The Nordic Model hinders the global fight against HIV](#).

'2) Opposes the introduction of a sex buyers' law;'

We believe that this position is misguided and is based on a misunderstanding or denial of the facts.

'3) Recognises sex workers as workers who should have the same rights and protections as workers in other industries'

There are many reasons why recognising prostitution as work like any other is regressive and poses serious implications for all workers and the trade union movement.

Health & Safety (H&S)



In any other occupation with a risk of exposure to body fluids, you have to wear masks, gloves, goggles, and protective clothing, like the dentist in the picture.

Condoms slip and break, punters can refuse to wear them anyway, and they don't protect from saliva, sweat, and other body fluids. Or from injuries and inflammation caused by friction and mechanical trauma. Or from the psychological damage or deliberate physical violence.

Health & Safety standards require employers to rethink working practices to eliminate unreasonable risk. In prostitution, this would require participants to wear full protective clothing and the prohibition of any intimate contact – which would, of course, change the nature of prostitution itself.

Recognising prostitution as work would require us to accept that normal H&S standards do not apply to it. This would set a terrible precedent that the trade union movement should vehemently resist.

Decent work

The United Nations has a concept of [decent work](#), which is defined as:

“Productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work involves opportunities for productive work, delivers a fair income, guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all, provides security in the workplace and protection for workers and their families, offers better prospects for personal development and social inclusion, and gives people the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives.”

The concept of decent work has been included in major human rights declarations, including Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Before we consider whether prostitution can fit the UN definition of decent work, we need to remember exactly what it is. Andrea Dworkin, who was herself in prostitution in her youth, [describes](#) it like this:

“Prostitution is not an idea. It is the mouth, the vagina, the rectum, penetrated usually by a penis, sometimes hands, sometimes objects, by one man and then another and then another and then another and then another. That’s what it is.”

This is not work and it certainly is not productive. Its conditions do not include freedom and human dignity or any of the other requirements of decent work.

For the trade union movement to accept prostitution as work would be a terrible capitulation and would stand in opposition to all that it has traditionally fought for. And, again, it would set a terrible precedent.

For an in-depth discussion of these and other serious implications of recognising prostitution as work, see [Why Sex Work Isn’t Work](#).

‘Conference further notes:

a) Significant developments since 2010 include Amnesty International’s 2016 policy on sex workers, which includes advocating for the decriminalisation of all aspects of consensual adult sex work;’

Amnesty’s policy is riddled with logical inconsistencies, omission of key information, and flawed reasoning. Perhaps this is not surprising given that Amnesty was [advised by pimps](#).

The policy calls for the tackling of gender inequality and the objectification of women but ignores how prostitution is a key mechanism by which gender inequality is maintained and through which women are objectified.

Amnesty’s definition of “sex work” fails to reflect the material reality of the vast majority of women and girls in prostitution, nor the imbalance of power that **always** exists between the punter and the prostituted individual, and that consent in such circumstances is an oxymoron.

Amnesty’s policy insists that “sex work” and trafficking should not be conflated, but it redefines the UN definition of [trafficking](#) to omit its most relevant purpose: the exploitation of the prostitution of others. Exploiting the prostitution of another human being is the essence of pimping. And most pimping also satisfies the other elements of trafficking.

The [majority](#) of women and children in prostitution worldwide have a pimp and as Sigma Huda, UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking 2004–2008, rightly said: “Prostitution as actually practiced in the world usually does satisfy the elements of trafficking.”

What then is the meaning of Amnesty’s instruction to not conflate “sex work” and trafficking? And how does Amnesty expect them to be separated in practice? And how does Amnesty justify redefining pimps as “organisers” of prostitution and calling for their decriminalisation, when most fit the international legal definition of human traffickers and pimping is prohibited by [CEDAW](#) (another binding UN treaty)?

Perhaps the most bizarre fact is that Amnesty did not conduct research in **any** of the countries – such as New Zealand and Germany – that have implemented legislation consistent with its recommendations. If it had conducted such research, Amnesty would know that the approach it recommends invariably leads to an unmitigated [human rights disaster](#).

For more information, see [Response to Amnesty’s Prostitution Policy](#).

‘b) That the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women published a report in 2011 which explored the impacts of anti-trafficking initiatives that utilise an ‘end demand’ approach, including the criminalisation of clients, and states that such approaches cause serious harm to sex workers by putting their livelihoods at risk, increasing the stigma they face, and intensifying police power over them;’

Since the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women report was published in 2011, there have been a number of other reports that have come to the opposite conclusion. For example, in 2014, both the [EU Parliament](#) and the [Council of Europe](#) came to the conclusion that a Nordic Model approach (rather than full decriminalisation) is the best way of addressing prostitution.

‘c) Full decriminalisation is supported by many other organisations including the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Royal College of Nursing, Human Rights Watch, Freedom United, the Global Commission on HIV and the Law, ILGA World, ILGA Europe, Transgender Europe, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Survivors UK, The Gemini Project, Anti Slavery International, and sex workers organisations;’

All of the organisations that are named here promote the full decriminalisation of the entire sex trade, including of profiteers and punters.

Many high-profile lobbyists for “sex workers organisations” claim to be “sex workers” but are in fact [pimps and/or brothel keepers](#). These people have a powerful vested interest in a thriving sex industry. Their promotion of full decrim is like tobacco industry moguls advising on smoking policy. The vast sums of money that stand to be made from full decriminalisation means there are many powerful vested interests and, just like the tobacco industry lobbyists, they are masters of obfuscation, manipulation, and euphemism. We therefore need to exercise caution when assessing their contributions to the debate.

The truth is that many (perhaps most) women in prostitution do not want to see the sex trade, and certainly not pimps, decriminalised. They know they want to be decriminalised themselves and if they are presented with a choice between “decriminalisation” and “criminalisation,” of course they opt for the former. But often they don’t know there’s an alternative, or they’ve been frightened by scare stories about the Nordic Model. When they come to learn or understand that they would be decriminalised and get help to exit under the Nordic Model, while only the exploiters would be targeted, they often support it.

We are in touch with many women who have current or recent experience in prostitution who support the Nordic Model. Here is a message one of them sent us on social media:

“I have experience within the sex industry – both ‘choice’ and forced. There are many of us. I have friends I used to ‘work’ with on the streets and in brothels who are still stuck and none of them want full decriminalisation. It would mean the end of exit opportunities.”

There are many reasons why many of those in prostitution or who have recently exited it cannot easily speak freely in public. But even so, there are many survivors who openly campaign for the Nordic Model.

In addition, there are many highly respected organisations that vehemently oppose the full decriminalisation of the sex trade and instead advocate for the Nordic Model. For example, the [European Women's Lobby](#), the [Coalition Against Trafficking in Women](#), [Equality Now](#), the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe](#), the [European Network of Migrant Women](#), [Af3irm](#), and [CAP International](#).

There are also a number of organisations led by women who have lived experience of prostitution who campaign tirelessly for the Nordic Model, including [SPACE International](#), [#Intedinhora](#) in Sweden, [Network Ella](#) in Germany, [Wahine Toa Rising](#) in New Zealand, [AMADH](#) in Argentina, and [Kwanele](#) in South Africa.

‘d) It is also supported by trade unions including GMB, ASLEF (Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen), UCU (University and College Union), BFAWU (Bakers, Food, and Allied Workers Union), UVW (United Voices of the World) and the RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers);’

The TUC voted against the full decriminalisation of the sex trade in 2017. This shows that there is considerable difference of opinion on this issue within the trade union movement.

‘e) The adoption by 2022 UNISON women’s conference of the motion “For safety – End Support for the “Nordic Model” which called on women’s conference to stop supporting the Nordic Model, a legal model based on decriminalising the selling of sexual services while introducing a ‘sex buyers law’;’

Our understanding is that this motion was passed with only a small majority after a relatively short debate. We believe that when the full implications of the motion are understood, many women might come to a different conclusion.

f) Poverty, benefit cuts and sanctions have led to an increase in the number of women working in the sex industry, and long waits for Universal Credit payments have led to some turning to ‘survival’ sex work to pay rent and put food on the table;’

The Nordic Model is the only approach that implicitly recognises prostitution as a form of gender-based violence and that enshrines in law women’s right to viable alternatives.

It is critical that the trade union movement holds fast to these values at this time that government policies and world events are leading to devastating poverty, that is disproportionately impacting women and children.

The alternative – full decrim – is likely to lead to women being officially or unofficially expected to enter prostitution to make ends meet. In other words, full decrim would institutionalise prostitution as the *de facto* welfare system for marginalised women. Far from being a way of escaping poverty, [research](#) shows that involvement in prostitution generally entrenches poverty and deepens a woman’s social exclusion.

As a trade union movement, we should be fighting for a world where women and other marginalised people have better options than prostitution.

‘Conference further notes New Zealand decriminalised sex work in 2003. The legislation recognises sex work as work, and therefore covered by employment law. The law treats sex workers consent as crucial and gives them the legal right to refuse any client for any reason at any point.

The ‘New Zealand model’ has been praised by women’s rights organisations and international bodies including the WHO as the best legal approach to protect the safety, rights, and health, of people who sell sex.’

We have explained earlier about the dangers of recognizing prostitution as work. It sounds so good on paper that “sex workers” are covered by employment law, but in New Zealand it hasn’t worked out well in [practice](#).

New Zealand introduced its full decriminalisation law in the [Prostitution Reform Act](#) (PRA) 2003. Punter violence remains common and in 2008 the New Zealand Prostitution Law Review Committee [found](#) that a majority of prostituted persons felt that the PRA “could do little about violence that occurred.” The Committee further reported that abusive brothels did not improve conditions for prostituted individuals; the brothels that “had unfair management practices continued with them.”

People campaigning for the PRA wanted to improve things for the women – to give them more power. In fact, the PRA has had the opposite effect. More power has gone to the pimps and punters. Although police violence is now less common, women seldom report pimp and punter violence to the police.

Local authorities and residents have some control over where the larger brothels are sited, but none over the smaller ones, classified as “Small Owner Operated Brothels” (or [SOOBs](#)). There’s been rapid expansion in the number of SOOBs, and many are run by pimps. SOOBs are excluded from the official brothel data, which therefore gives a distorted view of the reality.

Sex trafficking is now [recognised](#) to be prevalent in New Zealand, and Māori and Pacific Islander women and children are disproportionately represented. Because brothels and SOOBs are legal, there is little or no oversight from the police.

The PRA has also failed to stop the prostitution of [children](#), which remains a major problem. [Mama Tere Strickland](#), a community worker, says: “At least the old law kept a lid on the numbers, but with no law on the streets, the pimps and gangs have moved in.” The children typically have family violence and sexual abuse in their backgrounds.

Since the change in the law there's been a [significant rise](#) in reported rape, sexual assault, and other male violence against women and girls in the general population. This is not surprising, given that there's been an increase in the amount of prostitution, and [evidence](#) shows that prostitution-buying makes men more prone to sexual violence.

Janice Raymond's [research](#) shows that the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC), which promotes the full decriminalisation of the sex trade, also plays a key role in gatekeeping the PRA legislation – which is a blatant conflict of interest and contrary to good governance. She also exposes some inconvenient truths – for example, that there were 914 applications for brothel operator certificates in the seven years from 2004 to 2011 but only 23 brothel inspections in the 12 years from 2003. Raymond says:

“When a country codifies prostitution as normal work, it is almost impossible for a governmental report to cast its evaluation and recommendations outside the labor paradigm. A labor framework tones down existing abuse of women because committee members frame such exploitation as a breakdown in labor relations rather than violence against women. Violence and coercion become “exploitative working conditions.” Lack of autonomy and low levels of women’s well-being are reported as occupational hazards to be remedied by better work conditions and minimized in scope. Even the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” reinforce this emphasis.”

For a succinct account of some of the problems with the New Zealand approach, we recommend [What lies beneath prostitution policy in New Zealand?](#)

See also, the coverage in our ‘Decriminalisation of the sex trade vs. the Nordic Model: What you need to know’ [booklet](#).

‘Conference recognises that decriminalisation is not about ‘encouraging’ sex work – it’s about the safety of people who sell sex.’

The aim of full decriminalisation may not be about encouraging sex work, but that is one of its consequences.

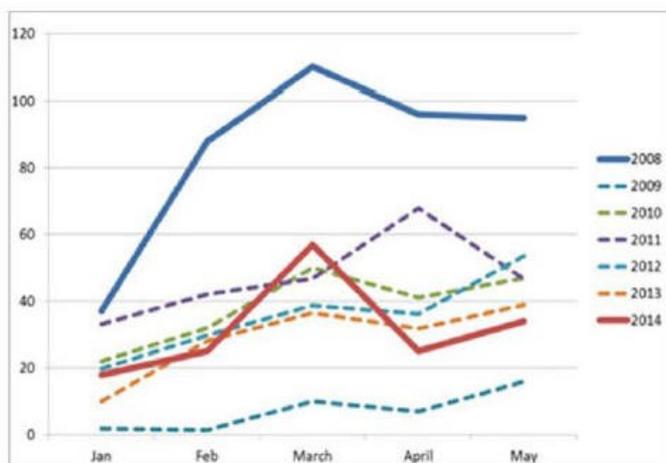
One of the primary purposes of the criminal law is to make it clear what society considers unacceptable and to discourage people from doing those things. So when something that was previously illegal is no longer a criminal offence, it sends out the message that society now considers that to be acceptable.

When a country decides to decriminalise the entire sex trade, it sends out the message that buying sexual access to other people is now considered a normal, legitimate, and acceptable thing to do, and so is profiting from other people’s prostitution. This inevitably leads to an increase in those activities.

‘No legal model anywhere in the world has been shown to increase, or decrease, the number of people who sell sex.’

This is simply not true. There has been extensive research that shows that legalisation/full decriminalisation of the sex trade causes more people to be drawn into prostitution in general and more sex trafficking in particular. For example, a [study](#) with data from 150 countries found that countries with “legalized prostitution experience a larger reported incidence of trafficking inflows.” An [economic analysis](#) concluded the same thing, as did an [extensive study](#) by the European Parliament.

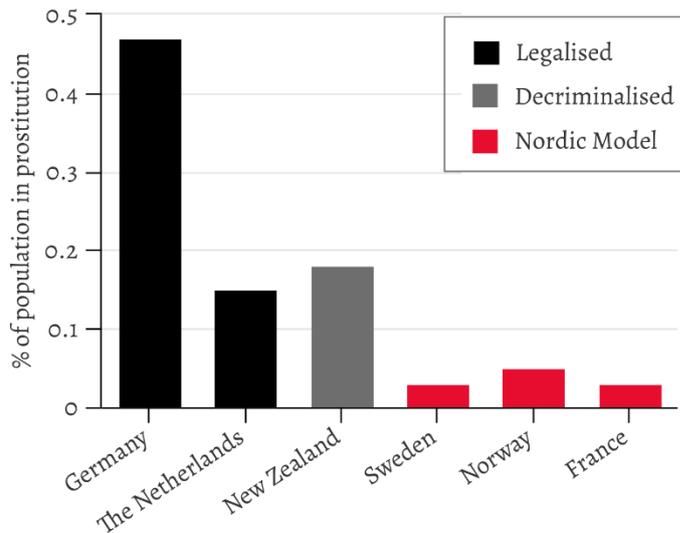
Research in [Norway](#) since the introduction of the Nordic Model in 2009 has shown a significant **decrease** in the numbers of individuals selling sex – as shown in the following chart:



The number of street prostitutes in Oslo 2008 – 2014

Similarly [research](#) in Sweden has shown a significant **decrease** in the size of the prostitution market – during a period in which the prostitution markets were rapidly expanding in most other European countries.

While the numbers of people in prostitution may be hard to measure with great accuracy, it is possible to arrive at approximate figures for those involved in prostitution in each country. By presenting these as a percentage of the population of the country, we can get a comparative figure, as shown in the following chart.



Approximate percentage of the population in prostitution in six countries

This shows very clearly that under the Nordic Model in Sweden, Norway and France, far fewer people are involved in prostitution (relative to the population) than in Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, which have legalised or decriminalised regimes.

The trend is clear: the more liberal the regime towards punters, pimps, and brothel owners, the more people end up in prostitution.

For information about the data this chart is based on, see the fully referenced version of our [booklet](#) on full decrim vs. the Nordic Model.

‘The evidence is that all that laws can change is whether people do sex work in dangerous conditions or in safer conditions.’

Prostitution is inherently [violent](#) and nothing can make it safe. It is damaging to the individuals who are caught up in it and it’s damaging to society as a whole. It increases the objectification of women and girls and men’s sense of entitlement. It therefore contributes to the [epidemic](#) of male violence against women and children that we are currently witnessing.

As we have shown earlier, no law can bring prostitution into line with Health & Safety norms or international standards of “decent work.”

Laws can and do make a difference in how people understand prostitution and whether it is sanctioned by society. Full decriminalisation doesn’t make it safe and is likely to lead to an increase in the numbers involved in prostitution – leading to more harm overall.

‘Conference believes that UNISON should not call for laws that put sex workers, including women and LGBT+ sex workers, at greater risk.’

Of course, conference shouldn't call for laws that put anyone at greater risk. But there is no unequivocal evidence that the Nordic Model increases the risks faced by those involved in prostitution – and there is considerable evidence that the alternatives do in fact increase the overall amount of harm.

‘Conference therefore resolves that UNISON should not call for the introduction of a sex buyers law, and instructs the National Executive Council to begin a dialogue with the National LGBT+ Committee, National Women’s Committee and other appropriate bodies within the union with a view to reviewing and advancing UNISON policy in this area.’

Prostitution affects everyone and so every single one of us has a stake in policy surrounding it. We do not base major decisions on the future of controversial industries (like fracking and nuclear weapons) solely on the views of the people working in them. That someone enjoys their job in fracking is irrelevant to the decision whether we as a society want it. Of course, those who lose their income because an industry is closed down must be given help to exit, retrain, etc. The Nordic Model specifically includes this provision.

For all of the reasons explained above, we believe this motion is misguided and that the Nordic Model/Sex Buyer Law is the best approach to prostitution policy that has yet been devised and so the policy to support it should be retained.

Any consideration of policy on prostitution must be rooted in a vision of social justice, human rights, and true equality for all.

Further reading

- [‘Decriminalisation of the sex trade vs. the Nordic Model: What you need to know’ booklet](#)
- [As a sex trade survivor, I believe the Nordic Model framework is the way forward, rather than the New Zealand model](#)
- [FFS Unison, join the dots between the endless ways men make women’s lives a misery and the industry that commercialises such behaviour.](#)