

Why you should vote AGAINST the motion for 'Decriminalisation of Sex Work' at the 2026 Unison NDC



Introduction

For 12 years from 2010, Unison had a policy of formal support for the [Nordic Model](#). Unfortunately in 2022 the National Delegates Conference (NDC) voted to [end this policy](#). Now South Derbyshire Healthcare and the University of Warwick branches are bringing motions to the 2026 NDC calling on Unison to adopt a formal policy of support for the full decriminalisation of 'sex work'. If [implemented](#), this would decriminalise **all aspects of the prostitution industry**, including brothels, pimping, advertising and sex buying.

This post goes through the motion line by line, showing that not everything it says can be taken at face value. The arguments for the motion focus on the safety of the women and other marginalised people who are involved in prostitution. We contest the claims that decriminalising pimping, brothel keeping, sex buying and advertising makes women safer. However, first we want to zoom out and frame the discussion in wider terms. While of course the safety of those directly involved is paramount, prostitution doesn't just affect those directly involved. It affects the whole of society. How men and women see and treat each other.

The bigger picture

A key purpose of legislation is to set clear boundaries for society about what isn't acceptable behaviour. For example, speed limits in residential areas make it clear that it is unacceptable to drive fast in places where children and old people are likely to be out and about. If speed limits were

removed, it would send out the message that driving fast in that area is now considered safe – even if it were not in fact safe.

Similarly, decriminalising prostitution would send out an official message that there is nothing wrong with prostitution. This would inevitably lead to more men paying for sex, more profiteers getting involved and setting up brothels, and more women and girls being drawn into the industry, leading to far more harm overall.

Consent

Those who promote full decriminalisation insist that it is sex between consenting adults and therefore it is not anyone else's business. But this fails to understand what really happens in prostitution.

Men pay precisely because she doesn't want to have sex with him. She is doing it because she needs the money. If she fails to please him or go along with what he wants, she risks loss of payment, violence, negative reviews on online sex buyer forums, and/or reprisals from a pimp or brothel keeper. Consent is therefore constrained and not freely given.

Insisting prostitution is normal consensual sex therefore changes and weakens the understanding of sexual consent.

This is a major concern at this time when male violence against women and girls is at epidemic levels. In fact, it is arguable that the change in the understanding of sexual consent caused by the normalisation of prostitution and the explosion of its filmed version, porn, is a significant factor in the epidemic of male violence against women and girls (VAWG) that we are currently witnessing.

Wild animals at the circus

Until recently, UK circuses featured wild animals – including lions, tigers and elephants – performing tricks. Even if you decided this was unethical and refused to go to the circus, you would sometimes see the animals in their cages beside the circus tent when you took your children to the playground near where the circus was parked up, for example.

It was heartbreaking to see the lions and tigers in their cages, with hardly room to turn around, and to hear an elephant moving about in the back of a large dark trailer. Their misery was palpable. It was shameful that human beings would incarcerate and demean these magnificent creatures for entertainment.

At first campaigners focused on improving the conditions for the animals, ensuring they had veterinary care and enough food, and on the banning of cruel training methods. But then it became clear that no regulations could change the fact that forcing these magnificent mammals to do demeaning tricks for people's 'entertainment' and keeping them in cages and transporting them from place to place was cruel and normalised the mistreatment of animals.

Gradually people began to understand that there was no way around the fact that it is unethical to treat wild animals as commodities for entertainment and a call for a total ban became louder and was eventually implemented in the Wild Animals in Circuses Act 2019.

While we do not want to suggest that prostituted women are wild animals, we believe there is much to be learned from this. Let's look at the parallels.

Lack of reciprocity

Just as there is no reciprocity when wild animals perform in circuses, so there is no reciprocity in prostitution. It's a one-way street. Women are available for the sexual use of men. Upwards of 99% of prostitution users are male and those used and abused are mostly female (in the region of 85%) along with other marginalised people who are treated *as if* they are female.

[Economists studying prostitution](#) articulated the truth that men are not simply paying for sex. What they are really paying for is the “control of sex”. They are paying for one-sided sex in which they do not have to think about the woman's needs or desires and the woman is obliged to do whatever he wants regardless of her feelings. Many, perhaps most, punters believe that having paid, they are **entitled** to do whatever they want.

The encounter happens outside of all the conventions of normal social interaction and this in turn erodes those social conventions in wider society, especially towards women and girls. The more prostitution that happens, the stronger this negative effect on wider society is likely to be.

Choice

Another common argument for full decriminalisation is that it's a women's right to [choose prostitution](#) and no one has a right to interfere in that.

But is this true? Multiple studies have found that upwards of 80% of women involved in prostitution don't want to be there but can't see a way out. Most of them entered prostitution as a result of abject poverty, homelessness or a threat of homelessness, a history of sexual abuse, coercion, and/or [grooming](#), whether by an individual or the very culture, often while still a minor.

This makes a mockery of the notion that the majority of women involved in prostitution are there out of free choice. The truth is that most of them would not be there if they had any other realistic option for survival.

But even if it were a free choice, would that make it OK? If a circus elephant was so attached to his keeper that she was willing to follow him into the circus ring and do whatever he asked, would that make it OK? That thousands of people should watch that elephant balancing on a ball and laugh at her antics, her size, her absurdity, her sacred body?

There is a concept in human rights law that human dignity is inalienable, which means that it can't be sold and you can't give it away. So someone choosing to undergo torture or cruel and degrading treatment does not absolve the perpetrator of responsibility or make it OK. Nor does it give the Government the right to make such treatment legal or to place it outside the law. The Government has an obligation under international law to prevent and prohibit such behaviour.

It seems that the law in England and Wales has recognised that this principle applies to elephants and has banned their use as commodities for entertainment in recognition of its cruel and degrading nature.

Isn't it about time that the law in England and Wales recognised that this principle applies to the women and other marginalised people involved in prostitution? That it is simply wrong for men to pay for their sexual use and abuse? That it is always cruel and degrading and often constitutes actual torture?

The profit motive

Before television, before the internet, before radio even, circuses were popular mass entertainment. Hence they were profitable. Circus owners were willing to push the boundaries of what was acceptable in order to attract more people, beat the competition, and increase their profits. It was this that drove the introduction of large wild mammals into circuses during the Victorian era, a period, like our own, of extreme wealth inequality.

Now forcing elephants and tigers to perform tricks is no longer an option and advanced deindustrialisation means that many people have very limited options for making money. It is not altogether surprising therefore that pimping is now common, especially as prostitution has been so valorised, technology has made it easier than ever, and the law against pimping is [very rarely enforced](#).

Prostitution [advertising websites](#) have lowered the bar to entry into pimping and profits can be eye-watering. Recent [research](#) found that pimps can make **around £20,000 per month per woman**, which works out at about a quarter of a million pounds a year. This is far more than can be made from almost any other criminal enterprise and because of the UK's *laissez faire* approach to the sex industry, it comes with much lower risks.

It's no surprise therefore that prostitution is a major contributor to the UK's GDP, with the ONS calculating that it contributes [more than £6 billion annually](#), with prostituted women receiving only [about 24% of that](#), the rest going to pimps and other third parties. To put this in perspective, in 2023, the annual turnover of the UK [fishing fleet](#) was £1.08 billion and the UK [steel industry](#) contributed £2.4 billion to GDP.

If full decriminalisation were implemented in the UK, it would implicitly declare that there is nothing wrong with prostitution and that paying for sex is no more significant than having a haircut. This would inevitably lead to a rapid increase in the numbers and frequency of men using prostitution and the number of pimps and other third-party profiteers wanting to cash in on the extra money.

There aren't enough women to fill this increased demand of their own volition, because women who have genuine choices don't generally choose to go into prostitution. So third parties use coercion, force, trickery, or taking advantage of vulnerabilities to recruit and retain women and girls in prostitution. This fits the United Nations [definition](#) of sex trafficking.

Ultimately, decriminalisation would result in more women getting involved in prostitution and more women effectively becoming trapped within it. Most, if not all, of these women would suffer profound negative consequences to their physical and mental health and life chances. Meaning that decriminalisation would lead to an **increase** in the numbers of women who are harmed within the prostitution system.

Lower prices and more dangerous activities

The increased numbers of women involved in prostitution under decriminalisation would reduce what they could charge and lead to lower prices. This would mean they would need to have more prostitution encounters to retain the same income. It would also increase the pressure to engage in more dangerous activities, including those popularised in online porn. This effect has been documented by [multiple research studies](#) whenever prostitution laws are liberalised.

This is also confirmed by anecdotal evidence from prostitution survivors. For example, Lea, a representative of [#intedinhora](#), a Swedish organisation of people with experience of prostitution, said that the price of prostitution under the Nordic Model in Sweden is much higher than in European countries where the sex trade is condoned. “This makes the johns furious,” she said. “You can often see them talking in online forums about how the ‘hookers’ here in Sweden are ‘spoiled’ and how they wish it were more like Germany where prices are less than half what they are in Sweden. This means that we don’t have to see as many johns to survive and can say no when we’re uncomfortable.”

This lowering of prices has already happened in the UK to some extent under our current system because of the combination of Government austerity policies since 2010 and the more recent ‘cost of living’ crisis, the proliferation of online pimping websites, and [police and government policy](#) decisions that have led to the widespread [non-enforcement](#) of laws against pimping, brothel keeping, and kerb crawling.

A comparison of current prices displayed on online pimping websites with those from 10 or 15 years ago, shows that prices have fallen considerably. Prices are now only about 50% of what they were in 2010 for example.

If full decriminalisation were formally implemented in the UK, we could expect an acceleration of this downward pressure on prices and increased pressure to engage in more dangerous acts and practices, meaning women involved in prostitution would be exposed to more, not less, harm.

It would also absolve the government of its responsibility to implement policies to address women’s poverty and to provide them with less harmful ways of making a living. Prostitution would become the safety net for women.

Health and safety

One of the arguments for decriminalisation is that it would mean that prostitution would come under health and safety regulations. Let’s think this through. Here are some [safety instructions](#) from the UK Health & Safety Executive (HSE) for workers who are exposed to bodily fluids:

- Avoid contact with blood or body fluids.
- Take all necessary precautions to prevent puncture wounds, cuts and abrasions in the presence of blood and body fluids.
- Protect all breaks in exposed skin by means of waterproof dressings and/or gloves.
- Protect the eyes and mouth by means of a visor or goggles/safety spectacles and a mask when splashing is a possibility.
- Avoid contamination of the person or clothing by use of waterproof/water resistant protective clothing, plastic apron, etc.
- Wear rubber boots or plastic disposable overshoes when the floor or ground is likely to be contaminated.

Before we consider whether it is possible for prostitution to be compatible with these working practices, let’s remember its actual nature. Andrea Dworkin, who was herself in prostitution, [describes](#) it like this:

“Prostitution 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.”

It should be no surprise therefore that women in prostitution suffer from frequent abrasions and tears in their vagina, mouth, anus and rectum caused by friction and mechanical trauma. Punters not only ejaculate in women’s orifices, but also on their faces and bodies, and some want to urinate (or even defaecate) on her. Some punters may want her to penetrate his anus and rectum with dildos and similar objects, which can lead to faecal matter being released.

How is it possible for this to conform to HSE safe practices? Condoms hardly provide even basic protection, and it’s well-known that punters often refuse to wear them or take them off midway.

Is it ethical to expect vulnerable young women to be exposed to serious health risks that all other workers have a legal right to be protected from? And what would the implications of normalising such unsafe practices be for other workers? Would it not inevitably lead to a watering down of standards for other workers too?

Health and safety guidelines also give employers a responsibility to take measures to minimise workplace psychological risks. Research has found that prostitution has a profoundly negative impact on women’s mental health. For example, [one study](#) of 193 women involved in prostitution found a high rate of psychological and mental ill-health and concluded that prostitution is itself a major public health problem. This applies to prostitution *per se* – regardless of the setting or legal framework in which it occurs.

Women who’ve had first-hand experience in the [legalised brothels](#) in Australia and the [decriminalised brothels](#) in New Zealand testify that the health and psychological risks remain intolerably high.

But the risks don’t end there. Punter violence is [commonplace](#) and women involved in prostitution [have been found](#) to have the highest risk of murder of any social group and a mortality rate 12 times higher than women in the general population.

We need to think long and hard about whether we want to support full decriminalisation, which legitimises and normalises an industry that is incompatible with standard health and safety norms and that causes serious, long-term physical and mental health problems – or whether it is better to support the [Nordic Model](#), which implicitly recognises the harms involved and focuses on prevention and reducing the size of the industry and the numbers involved in it, while providing those caught up in it with a viable transition out.

Violence against women and girls

There are three motions in the draft agenda for the 2026 NDC calling for action against misogyny, sexual harassment and men’s violence against women. One of these motions mentions that the police describe the current level of VAWG as an “epidemic” that makes up 20% of all recorded crime.

However, there is no discussion of **why** this has got so much worse over recent years. And no mention of the now unequivocal evidence that both [porn consumption](#) and [buying sex](#) are associated with attitudes that underlie men’s verbal and physical aggression towards women, including rape and sexual harassment.

It would therefore make absolutely no sense to campaign for decriminalisation of the prostitution system at this time, given that this would increase the size of the industry, the numbers and frequency of men paying for sex and that this is likely to lead to more sexual harassment, misconduct, and violence in the general community.

For more on this, see the article we wrote on this prior to Unison's 2022 vote to end support for the Nordic Model: [FFS Unison, join the dots between the endless ways men make women's lives a misery and the industry that commercialises such behaviour.](#)

What kind of world are we fighting for?

As trade unionists, we need to ask what kind of world are we fighting for?

Do we want the UK to become like Germany, a major sex tourist destination with thousands of young women having little choice but to offer their mind, body and soul to one man after another to sexually use and abuse while she metaphorically holds her nose and flatters him? Men she might not want to sit next to on the bus? Men who will go back to their families and workplaces bringing the contempt he had for her and ultimately all women with him?

A country where the sexploitation industry contributes more to the economy than many other industries combined? Where women are used as commodities for others to get rich on. Women as sexual entertainment. Women as subhuman. Men as fully human, as masters.

Is this the world we want to fight for? If not, then please vote **against** this motion.

The motion

At the time of writing, the final agenda for the 2026 Unison NDC has not been published. The [draft agenda](#) has two motions for full decriminalisation – Motion 33 from South Derbyshire Healthcare and Motion 34 from the University of Warwick branches. These motions are almost identical and it is likely that they will be combined into one in the final agenda. We have therefore taken them as one.

We understand that the motion(s) will go forward to the final agenda but there is no guarantee that it will be debated and the Unison NEC has not made a recommendation about how delegates should vote.

How the voting works

As a delegate conference, 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. You can download a PDF of the article.

“Conference notes...”

This section of the motion has five numbered points. We reproduce each one below and follow it with a critique.

“1) In 2022 this conference carried a motion withdrawing UNISON’s support for the Nordic Model. This legal model criminalises sex buyers and, in countries where introduced, increases violence and stigma against sex workers. In the carried 2022 motion, improvements to safety, dignity and rights of sex workers in countries and territories where sex work has been decriminalised were also noted;”

Claim that the Nordic Model increases violence and stigma

We contest the claim that in countries where it’s been introduced, the [Nordic Model](#) “increases violence and stigma against sex workers”. This claim has been repeated so many times that it has taken on a quality of unassailable truth. But it is misleading.

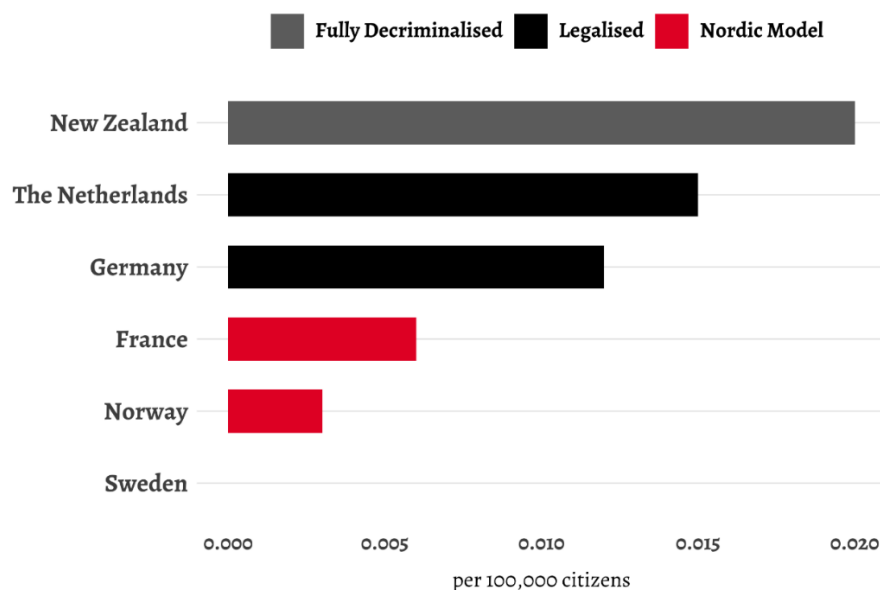
The Nordic Model is based on the understanding that **nothing** can make prostitution safe and so it aims to reduce the size of the industry. It has several planks: It decriminalises selling sex and provides support, routes out and genuine alternatives to those caught up in the industry; it makes buying sex a criminal offence – with the aim of changing men’s behaviour; and it has strong laws against pimping, brothel keeping, sex trafficking, and advertising prostitution.

It is well known that VAWG is generally under-reported to the police, and that this is particularly true for the endemic violence that men perpetrate against women and girls in prostitution. Levels of reporting of these crimes are affected by changes in education and awareness, how well victims expect their complaints to be dealt with, and how prostitution is understood by the authorities. These and other issues make it difficult to compare rates of VAWG, including VAWG in prostitution, between countries with any accuracy.

This is why the homicide data is of particular interest – a dead body that has met a violent end is an unarguable fact.

Therefore, to test the claim that the Nordic Model is more dangerous for “sex workers” than full decriminalisation, we looked in detail at the homicide data for women involved in prostitution whose murders were related to their prostitution. If the claim is true that the Nordic Model is more dangerous than decriminalisation, we would expect to see higher rates in countries that have implemented the Nordic Model and lower rates in countries that have implemented full decriminalisation – or legalisation, [which is similar](#). **In fact, the data shows the exact opposite** as the following chart shows.

For full information about the data and statistical analysis, see [MYTH: The Nordic Model is more dangerous for sex workers than decriminalisation](#).



Data source: <http://www.sexindustry-kills.de>; Female citizens

Average annual rate of homicide of women involved in prostitution per 100,000 female population

For links to a number of articles that critique popular studies that purport to show that the Nordic Model increases violence against ‘sex workers’, see [MYTH: The Nordic Model pushes prostitution underground](#).

Stigma

We also contest the claim that there is an increase in stigma under the Nordic Model and the idea that stigma is the **cause** of many of the problems that women involved in it experience, and the implication that decriminalisation would reduce it.

On the surface, this can sound compelling – until you look at the practical results of decriminalising and legalising the industry. [Jacqueline Gwynne](#), who was a receptionist in legal brothels in Melbourne, where prostitution was legalised in 1994, says:

“The women are still ostracised and marginalised, and most of them live a double life where they keep their life within the sex trade secret – to the extent that many cut themselves off from family and friends outside of the industry. The stigma exists because prostitution is degrading and no regulation can change that.”

Women who have experience [of New Zealand’s decriminalised system](#) and [Germany’s legalised system](#) say much the same. This suggests that legitimising the sex industry does not reduce the stigma associated with women’s involvement in it. Instead it suggests that the stigma is intrinsic to the sexism and double-standards that permeate the sex industry. It suggests that a more hopeful approach would be to work to reduce the size of the industry and to discourage young women’s entry into it and young men’s use of it – as the Nordic Model aims to.

The European Court of Human Rights judgement

France introduced the Nordic Model in April 2016. A group of self-identified ‘sex workers’ subsequently took the French Government to court on the basis that it forced them to work in more dangerous situations, putting their physical and mental health in danger and that it infringed their

human rights to respect for their private life, personal autonomy and sexual freedom. They worked their way through the French courts, who each ruled against them, and eventually took their case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

In June 2023, after a lengthy and thorough examination of all the relevant facts, the ECHR unanimously ruled that there had been no violation of the applicants' rights and the court subsequently declined leave to appeal.

In the [final judgement](#), the ECHR recognised the undeniable risks to which prostituted people are exposed but observed that the negative effects that the applicants claimed to have been caused by the Nordic Model had in fact existed **before** the law was introduced and were therefore likely to have other causes, including that these risks are inherent to prostitution itself.

The judgement also explained that the Nordic Model law “contributed to reversing the power balance between prostitutes and their clients, by positioning the former as victims and enabling them to report clients in the event of violence, since henceforth it was the client who would face prosecution”.

The court recognised that as well as measures to support persons moving away from prostitution, the Nordic Model law strengthened public policies to reduce health risks for the benefit of all prostituted people, through the introduction of special measures to improve access to support and general healthcare for persons who continued to engage in this activity, and by ensuring that they were not left to fend for themselves.

Claim that full decriminalisation improves safety, dignity and rights

We contest the claim that countries and territories where full decriminalisation has been implemented have seen “improvements to safety, dignity and rights of sex workers”.

New Zealand

In 2003 New Zealand (NZ) became the first country in the world to introduce a fully decriminalised prostitution system. The NZ government subsequently sponsored five reports into how its operation was working in practice. These **claim**: the industry has not expanded; health and safety have improved; it has aided the prosecution and conviction of crimes against women in prostitution; it has not harmed vulnerable children who are victims of sexual exploitation; and that there is no human trafficking in the industry.

A data scientist went through the five reports line by line and found that not only does the data **not** uphold any of these claims, it actually proves the opposite. For example:

- There was a significant expansion in both the size of the industry and the amount of advertising for it following the introduction of the legislation.
- 41% of the people involved in prostitution who were surveyed said that they had entered prostitution **because it was now legal**.
- The majority of people involved in prostitution who responded to a survey felt that the legislation had done little about the violence endemic in the industry, with a significant number of them reporting they had experienced threats and actual assaults, rape and injury in the previous 12 months.
- More than 90% of the women would **not** consider reporting violations of their rights.

- “Key informants” said there was no substantial change in the use of condoms because men “always or almost always” ask for unprotected sex.
- The promised health inspections of brothels did not materialise. There were only 11 such inspections in the 12 years to 2015 even though more than **900 brothel licences** were granted during that time (compared to 189 licensed brothels prior to the legislation).
- Although women have the legal right to refuse clients or particular services, in practice this is usually not possible because of pressure from market forces, competition between the women, and coercion by brothel managers and pimps.
- Under the legislation, sex crimes against children are considered minor offences, comparable to liquor and tobacco offences, meaning that there is little protection for children or even recognition that their sexual exploitation is an issue.
- The NZ Government did not recognise any cases of sex trafficking in the industry in the 20 years to 2023 but there were at least 133 cases that met the international definition of sex trafficking in the nine years to 2011.

You can read the data scientist’s report here: [What REALLY happened in New Zealand after prostitution was decriminalised?](#)

Testimony from women who have experienced prostitution in New Zealand under its decriminalisation model back this up. For example:

- [The reality of New Zealand’s decriminalised sex trade](#)
- [On #DECRIM: Chelsea Geddes on New Zealand’s decriminalised prostitution system](#)
- [‘I remember I would often dream of something better, but deep down I always knew it was a dream’ By Tiarna](#)
- [Sara Smiles: My Story in the World of Paid Rape.](#)
- [Michelle Mara: Michelle Mara started in prostitution in New Zealand when the sex trade was illegal and she continued after it was fully decriminalised there in 2003.](#)

Belgium

More recently, it is claimed that Belgium has implemented a fully decriminalised system and that they have done it in such a way that it has avoided some of the pitfalls found in New Zealand. However, a closer look at the details show that this is not the case – largely because of the logic of the sex industry itself.

Belgium decriminalised prostitution in 2022 to much fanfare. [Just over a year later](#), it passed additional “sex work” [legislation](#), which makes provisions for legal employment contracts. These grant access to regular employee social security benefits, plus some special protections. This implies that the Belgian government now recognises prostitution as a normal job, albeit one that requires some additional safeguards.

Key among the safeguards is the stipulation that “employers” cannot force “sex workers” to “have relations” with any specific “client” or to perform any specific practice, and such refusal cannot be considered a “breach of the employment contract” and must not lead to any negative employment-related consequences for the “sex worker”. However, if she does exercise this right of refusal more

than ten times in six months, the law provides for mediation services to aid resolution. This suggests that her “right of refusal” is in fact considerably constrained.

Esther, prostitution survivor and NMN policy expert, was sceptical. She explained that it ignores market forces and coercion caused by demands from buyers, and how that will trickle down to what brothel owners consider normal services. Women who refuse certain practices (such as anal or fisting) are likely to find they don’t get many buyers once these have come to be seen as normal services. How will brothel owners respond to that? Will they even be able to keep afloat if women turn down dangerous sex acts popularised by online porn?

Traffickers will undercut brothels by coercing the women they control, who won’t have employment contracts. This will either lead to a two-tier system (one of the key things supporters of full decriminalisation complain happens under “legalisation”) or brothel owners will use their powers of “persuasion” to ensure the women they employ never refuse a practice, like they do in New Zealand, as [Chelsea Geddes has testified](#).

Esther summed it up:

“Will any woman who is alone with a buyer be able to refuse a sex act on these grounds? The people who draft these laws have no understanding of how coercion or this industry actually work.”

Another worry is that under Belgium’s social security system, you are not entitled to unemployment benefits if you quit a job voluntarily or refuse to take one that is offered. What are the implications of this now that prostitution is officially accepted as a normal job? Will unemployed women be coerced into taking a job in a brothel? And will women who walk out of one be refused unemployment benefits and so be coerced to stay in prostitution against their will? What would the “right” to refuse specific sex acts mean in those circumstances?

These are just a few of the contradictions inherent in any regularised prostitution system, which the pimps and their cheerleaders would prefer we didn’t articulate. Esther has written extensively about many others and how prostitution [can never conform](#) to employment regulations and equality law. Pretending that it can, is likely to have negative consequences for other workers and lead to a general watering down of employment standards, especially for women.

If a “sex worker” gives blow jobs as part of her employment contract, what’s to stop the boss of any other business tacking on giving blow jobs to important clients and managers as part of your job description?

For further information about the law in Belgium, see:

- [Belgium’s New Prostitution Legislation: Separating Fact from Fiction](#)
- [8 MYTHS ABOUT BELGIUM’S “SEX WORK EMPLOYMENT” LAW](#)
- [Belgium. The major sidewalk reform ends in the gutter](#)

2) Sex workers are often marginalised people living in or escaping poverty: disabled people, mothers, migrants, working class students, women and LGBTQIA+ people. Recent research conducted by Decrim Now, surveying 172 sex workers, demonstrated that 53 percent respondents were working multiple jobs. Many low paid workers, particularly women, will turn

to sex work for additional income. There is no reason to think this will not include UNISON members;

We agree with this. However, we do not believe that decriminalisation is the solution.

Many men who experience economic hardship turn to dealing Class A drugs or other illegal activities to supplement their income. This is not an argument for decriminalising dealing Class A drugs. Rather it is an argument for a whole raft of social interventions that would reduce the market in Class A drugs and make it clear that profiting from other people's misery is beyond the pale.

This is exactly the approach that the Nordic Model takes to the issue of prostitution (which is obviously not a direct parallel, because what is being traded is the use of human beings rather than substances).

3) Decrim Now's research showed 76 percent of respondents started or remained in sex work due to poverty or financial need. 77 percent were disabled or had a long term health condition, including mental illness and neurodivergence. 32 percent of respondents started or continued in sex work because of being too unwell to continue 'regular' work and could not survive on benefits. Nearly all respondents cited decriminalisation as the intervention needed to make them more safe;

Decrim Now's research supports what we said earlier that prostitution is rarely a real free choice between multiple viable options for most of those involved in it. Again we do not believe that full decriminalisation is the solution. Rather we advocate a holistic approach that decriminalises those selling sex and provides them with support, viable alternatives and genuine routes out of the industry, along with legislative measures that would lead to a reduction in the size of the industry (criminalising paying for sex, and rigorous laws against pimping, brothel keeping and advertising) and a raft of additional measures, including tackling poverty and the gender pay gap and support for families, etc.

As for "nearly all respondents" saying decriminalisation would make them more safe, this is hardly surprising since the Decrim Now report explains that research survey participants "were recruited with the help of sex worker collectives including the English Collective of Prostitutes, SWARM, the Sex Workers' Union and THORN". All of these organisations campaign vociferously for full decriminalisation and our research shows that generally they do not welcome anyone who disagrees with this position. It is therefore hardly surprising that most respondents favoured full decriminalisation.

But there is another strand to this and that is that when people are told repeatedly that the Nordic Model makes prostitution more dangerous for "sex workers", people are likely to believe that – even though as we have shown above, the so-called evidence for this is not robust and is highly contested.

4) The current law of partial criminalisation is dangerous. To avoid soliciting charges, street based workers must work apart from each other, out of sight and away from safety. If two or more workers work at the same premises for safety, they can be charged with brothel keeping. Criminal charges are a barrier to employment for those who wish to leave the industry, while risking deportation or being prevented from travelling to other countries. Charges can also result in workers losing custody of children. Sex workers routinely face financial discrimination, while those criminally most vulnerable being less likely to access healthcare services or disclose their job. Sex workers experience barriers to unionisation due to criminalisation;

We assume that this point is referring to the situation in England and Wales that means that persistently soliciting to sell sex in a public place is a criminal offence and so is brothel keeping.

While we vehemently campaign for soliciting to sell sex in a public place to be decriminalised and for the police to focus on enforcing the kerb crawling legislation, in practice the police do not routinely enforce this legislation. However, there is no doubt that street prostitution causes serious problems for local communities, as documented in [Holbeck, Leeds](#). If kerb crawling were also decriminalised, as it would be under full decriminalisation, the police would have no way of preventing street prostitution without resorting to civil injunctions and criminal behaviour orders and similar, which are likely to be targeted at the women and that can have [draconian consequences](#).

Furthermore we dispute that [street-based prostitution](#) can be safe when not “out of sight”. Even if the soliciting takes place in a well-lit busy public space, the prostitution encounter itself invariably takes place elsewhere, typically in an otherwise deserted carpark, a hotel room, or a quiet dark street or lane or similar.

It is not a criminal offence to sell sex in a brothel in England and Wales, although managing or helping to manage a brothel is a criminal offence. However, [prosecutions are generally very low](#). On average there were only 10 prosecutions a year in England and Wales between 2018 and 2022. Furthermore, [CPS Guidance](#) is clear that women involved in prostitution who have a minor role in helping to manage a brothel they work in should generally **not** be prosecuted.

Therefore the claim that if two or more women work at the same premises for safety, they risk being charged with brothel keeping is an exaggeration of the practical reality.

We totally agree that a criminal record is a barrier to regular employment and exiting prostitution and this is why we campaign vigorously for the decriminalisation of selling sex and for the expunging of historical criminal records for the same.

However, we do not believe this should extend to third parties who profit from others’ prostitution, including brothel keepers. In fact the Government has a legal obligation under [CEDAW Article 6](#) to crackdown on all and any third parties profiting from women’s prostitution.

We are also clear that women should not lose custody of their children simply because they are involved in prostitution. However, the welfare of the child is paramount and the prostitution milieu is not a suitable environment for children and sometimes it is necessary for children to be taken into care. This typically happens when women involved in prostitution do not have suitable accommodation and/or access to drug rehabilitation, support and alternative employment. There is no guarantee that any of these things would improve under full decriminalisation whereas providing holistic services to address these issues is a fundamental part of the Nordic Model.

5) Decriminalisation is supported by human rights organisations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNAIDS, the WHO, National Aids Trust, Terrance Higgins Trust, Sisters Uncut, The UN Working Group On Discrimination Against Women and Girls, and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. Unions including the RCN, GMB, UCU, CWU, ASLEF, Equity, IWW, UNISON Northern Ireland and UNISON LGBT+ all support the full decriminalisation of sex work in the UK.

There are also many bodies and organisations that oppose full decriminalisation and support the Nordic Model, including the [EU Parliament](#), the [Council of Europe](#), the [European Women's Lobby](#), [Equality Now](#), [CATW](#), the [Scottish Women's Convention](#), and the [UN Special Rapporteur on VAWG](#).

There are also a growing number of survivor-led grassroots organisations that support the Nordic Model, including [SPACE International](#), [Inte din Hora](#) in Sweden, [Network Ella](#) in Germany, [Wahine Toa Rising](#) in New Zealand, [AMADH](#) in Argentina, and Kwanele in South Africa.

“Conference believes...”

a) Sex workers are workers and members of our communities;

Of course those involved in prostitution are members of our communities. However, we do not believe it is helpful to dignify prostitution as work, when all the evidence suggests that it is a harmful traditional practice that causes untold harm to those directly caught up in it whilst also contributing to the second-class status of all women and girls and the upholding of the patriarchal system on which capitalism itself depends.

b) The current laws around sex work perpetuate a cycle of poverty and harm;

While we may agree with this, we do not agree with the proposed solution.

c) Full decriminalisation is essential for sex workers' safety, public health, women's rights, LGBTQIA+ rights and workers' rights.

We vehemently disagree with this and believe that full decriminalisation would be catastrophic for all these groups.

“Conference calls on the National Executive Council to...”

i. Support the full decriminalisation of sex work as national policy;

ii. Contact the Sex Workers Union - a branch of unionised sex workers within BFAWU to express solidarity and support for the unionisation of sex workers and their demands for labour rights, safety and fair working conditions;

iii. Contact Decrim Now to support the campaign for decriminalisation and against any further attempts to criminalise sex work.

We vehemently disagree with this.

Resources

- [Flyers about the Nordic Model](#)
- [Booklet: Decriminalisation of the sex trade vs. the Nordic Model: What you need to know](#)
- [Booklet: What are we talking about when we talk of the sex industry?](#)
- [Power and Control in Prostitution](#)
- [FACT: Grooming has never been easier](#)
- [Myths and misinformation about the Nordic Model](#)