

Survivors' Statement Opposing Amnesty International's resolution to decriminalise Pimps and Johns

Sunday 7 August 2016, by [SPACE International](#) (Date first published: January 2014).

We are a group of Sex-Trade Survivors from the US, UK, Germany, Denmark, Canada, Ireland and France, and this letter directly addresses you, Amnesty International, regarding your proposed policy of endorsing the worldwide decriminalisation of pimps and johns responsible for human rights abuses in the global Sex-Trade.

We know, through the experiences of our own lives, that the Sex-Trade is a damaging, dehumanising and demeaning system of exploitation which should **never** be decriminalised. We support and endorse the Swedish Model, which decriminalises only the exploited person in a prostitution exchange. This is very different in approach to the model currently being floated by Amnesty International, which is the complete and total decriminalisation of all parties in the sex trade, including those who exploit for sexual gain (punters/johns) and those who exploit for financial gain (pimps/traffickers.)

It is scarcely believable to us that you, Amnesty International, would be prepared to endorse a legal model that gives free reign to pimps and johns. In doing so, you would be prepared to actively work against your own human rights principles and compromise your integrity as an organisation with a stated human rights mission, yet this is exactly the mystifying and incredible situation you have presented us with.

It must be pointed out that this proposed policy is in direct contravention to at least three UN conventions that address women's rights. The UN convention of 1949 articulates specifically that prostitution and trafficking and such slavery like practices "... are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person...." Article 6 of CEDAW states that "State Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women." Article 9.5 in the Palermo Protocol calls on State Parties to take measures to discourage the demand that fosters the exploitation of persons that lead to trafficking. Decriminalizing the johns and traffickers is in direct contravention of the Palermo Protocol the UNs most recent instrument that addresses human trafficking.

You claim that you are considering endorsing full decriminalisation of all parties in the Sex-Trade out of a sense of concern for prostituted persons; if this is the case you will need to examine why you would consider endorsing a model that has been proven, time and again all over the globe, to massively swell the size of the Sex-Trade and thereby increase the numbers of prostituted and trafficked women and children abused within it.

It is also of serious concern to us that Amnesty International seems to be ignoring the highly gendered nature of the global Sex-Trade. The vast majority of prostituted persons everywhere are female, either women or girls and in the cases of women, most have been prostituted since they

were girls themselves. Prostitution is a straight-forward and blatantly obvious system of unequal power relations, which operates to subjugate females in relation to males and to compound and conserve that subjugation by the intersection of further oppressions such as class and race.

Many of our members currently work delivering front-line services to women and girls in prostitution right now, and what we find in the lives of young women today are the very same things we found yesterday in our own: poverty, desperation, addiction and an absolute absence of viable choice. It is these women and girls that you, Amnesty International, are proposing be abandoned to a legal framework that allows them to be bought, sold and used with impunity by adult men who are financially, socially and racially privileged in relation to them.

It is shocking and disturbing to us to find the following footnote in your Draft Policy Document:

'Claims that suggest the majority of sex workers enter the sex industry as children, that most were physically or sexually abused as children, are forced against their will to undertake sex work and/or are addicted to drugs have been shown to be misrepresentative of a large proportion of sex workers.'

We would like to know where exactly these findings have been 'shown to be misrepresentative', because they were certainly shown to be representative to us in the escort agencies, the brothels and the red-light zones. In this footnote, you have attempted to erase the reality of our lives and to conceal and deny the damage we have lived and bear witness to.

Perhaps if you had broadened your research to include both sides of this argument you would have discovered what we already know - that most prostituted women *did* enter the sex trade from situations of desperation and/or destitution, most *were* physically and sexually abused as children, and most *are* forced by life circumstances into prostitution; and if they were not abusing addictive substances prior to prostitution, they were soon after.

For all your talk of the necessity of "research", you have compiled a suspiciously one-sided body of it which utterly ignores us Sex-Trade Survivors and our Survivor-led groups. You also ignore front-line service providers and women's rights groups who, through the course of their activism and service provision, have come recognise prostitution as a violation of human rights and to endorse an abolitionist solution. These voices, and ours, are entirely absent from your supposed "research."

The recently leaked 'Draft Policy Document' also ignores the absolutely enormous pre-existing body of research, conducted globally over several decades, that documents and charts the devastating physical, mental and emotional damage wrought on people in prostitution worldwide - a devastation that all of our members still live with.

While not doubting the good work you have done in other areas, nor impugning the many social justice activists currently active in Amnesty, your reputation in relation to women's rights is far from flawless. It is not so long ago that you passed Female Genital Mutilation off as a cultural practice. That was a mistake, and you are on the edge of your next big mistake in relation to your global reputation on women's rights, this time debating whether or not to tell the world that we females exist to be used and that males have a right to use us. We are here to declare before you and the world that men have no right to use us; they never had, regardless how many years they've spent abusing the social vulnerabilities of women and girls in order to do so.

Your entire document is founded on the premise that the abuse of pimping and sex-buying should be decriminalised and the Sex-Trade regulated in order to somehow make prostitution safer for the prostituted. It is not the first time the world has heard this argument. The notion that the system of

prostitution should be regulated with a view to making its conditions safer is no different than the senseless stance that slavery should have been regulated towards the same end. It is an argument that completely ignores the structural oppression that shamefully upheld one system for centuries and shamefully continues to uphold the other to this day.

In fact, far from being a neutral group concerning itself only with the human rights of those affected, you have nailed your pro-prostitution colours very firmly to the mast by your continual use of the terms 'sex worker' and 'sex work', although you know this to be considered unacceptable phraseology by those of us who've lived prostitution and actively campaign against it. Our exact problem with the term 'sex work' (which emerged from the San Francisco Sex-Trade of the 1980's) is in the intention of its origins: it was, initially, deliberately constructed to conceal the harm and damage of prostitution. We would expect better from any human rights organisation than to buy into terminology that was created in order to conceal harm.

In your document you refer to people who "are choosing voluntarily to do so", while stating, within the same document, "...the status and experience of being discriminated against are themselves often key factors in what leads people into sex work."

You, Amnesty International, therefore recognise that the extreme limitation of choices experienced on the basis of pre-existing discrimination are key factors that coerce people into prostitution, yet you refuse to recognise the sex of prostitution as coerced sex which constitutes a human rights violation. As Sex-Trade Surviving women, we would like to publicly ask Amnesty International: If you recognise that people are coerced into prostitution, why do you not recognise the sex of prostitution as coercive sex? If you recognise that people are led into prostitution by pre-existing discrimination, why do you not recognise the sex of prostitution as a human rights violation in and of itself?

We put it to you, Amnesty International, directly and publicly, that you are on the brink of an enormous public failure, and if you vote to decriminalise human rights violations, that failure will fall heavily on all those abused in the Sex-Trade, on your own human rights principles, and on yourselves.

SPACE International

(Survivors of Prostitution-Abuse Calling for Enlightenment)

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