

Strict laws protect women

Sweden simultaneously helps women out of the industry, with shelter, counselling and job training

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For the one smiling face of dominatrix Terri-Jean Bedford there are thousands upon thousands more who are weeping, waiting for the despair to end, living lives filled with drugs, sedatives, physical and sexual abuse and suicidal thoughts.

Their stories were ignored in Justice Susan Himel's decision to overturn Canada's prostitution laws on Tuesday.

Reasonable evidence was likewise ignored, evidence that shows lax prostitution laws increase the exploitation of women, help organized crime and increase human trafficking.

Parliament has 30 days to decide how to act on this decision. It must be overturned, and failing that, something more stringent put in its place. Following the path of Sweden by criminalizing Johns is one possible solution, with considerable support among women's groups and anti-human trafficking activists across the globe.

The Swedish model prosecutes the buyer.

"A person who obtains casual sexual relations in exchange for payment shall be sentenced," reads the law, "...to a fine or imprisonment for at most six months."

The government there simultaneously helps women out of the industry, with shelter, counselling and job training — and a hand out is what prostitutes need. After all, 90% of prostitutes say that's what they want.

A Swedish independent inquiry published in July 2010 says the results have been a success. Prostitution, organized crime and human trafficking have decreased.

This is in stark contrast to other countries, like neighbouring Finland, where purchasing sex is allowed. In Sweden, about 400 to 600 women are trafficked into the country annually. In Finland, 10,000 to 15,000 are.

Countries with legalized prostitution should consider the number of young girls transported in dirty containers from places like Ukraine, Russia, Nigeria and elsewhere, to service western buyers. Will Canada join their ranks?

Some in the Netherlands are now hoping to undo the damage of legalized prostitution. Amsterdam's Mayor Job Cohen told the press in 2007 human trafficking was on the rise and crime was running rampant: "Since the legalization in 2000, things have changed. The law was created for voluntary prostitution but these days we see trafficking of women, exploitation and all kinds of criminal activity."

Prostitution is dangerous whether legal or illegal. Furthermore, it's not a choice. The vast majority of women come to it through drug and sexual abuse, mental health problems and extreme poverty.

Maintaining strict laws is about protecting women who are abused by the very way in which they survive. This is also about the kind of country we want to live in.

"You will never have equality between men and women if you allow men who have money in their pockets the right to buy a body," says Victor Malarek, author of *The Johns*, a book which puts a face, and not a pretty one, on men who use prostitutes.

"...Put this thing to a vote for the Canadian people and they will overwhelmingly reject legalization. Because who wants this in their backyard? That's exactly where it's going to be."

We can assume Justice Susan Himel's backyard will remain well kept.

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