



Demand Abolition

A Program of Hunt Alternatives

In early August, delegates from national sections of Amnesty International will vote on an organization-wide resolution calling for the decriminalization of commercial sex. Amnesty's proposal is based on several principles that fail to acknowledge the harm commercial sexual exploitation inflicts on vulnerable people all over the world.

Demand Abolition supports decriminalization for victims of the sex trade, but not for sex buyers or third-party exploiters—such as pimps or brothel owners—who could be protected under Amnesty's proposed policy.

We offer the following critique of key points in Amnesty's proposal:

1. “The International Board [must] adopt a policy that seeks attainment of the highest possible protection of the human rights of sex workers, through measures that include the decriminalization of sex work, taking into account ‘the harm reduction principle.’”

Critique: The harm reduction principle implies that some behaviors are inevitable, so we should focus on mitigating the harm rather than stopping the practice. **Drastically reducing the human exploitation inherent in sex buying is not an impossible dream—as demonstrated in countries that have adopted the Nordic Model.** To alleviate the harms implicit in commercial sex, Amnesty should support decriminalization for prostituted people and call for more services to be made available to them. Also, Amnesty should advocate for policies that hold sex buyers and exploiters legally accountable for the sex trade's harms.

2. “States can impose restrictions on sex work, provided they comply with international human rights law, are for a legitimate purpose, and not discriminatory.”

Critique: The vagueness of the term “sex work,” which is used throughout Amnesty's policy, demonstrates that the organization does not fully recognize the exploitative nature of the practice. Does “sex work” mean prostituted people exclusively, or does it include sex buyers, pimps, and brothel owners—all players within the “sex work” industry? **It is not a human right to buy sex or profit from the sale of another person.** Living in a society free from sexual exploitation should be every human being's right.

Framing this issue as “sex work” suggests that prostitution is merely a labor issue that can be fixed by giving “workers” better rights. This is untrue. In places where this has been tried the lives of prostituted people have not improved. It's more accurate to consider prostitution and its related industries as gender-based violence. The notion that someone in power (usually a male) has the right to buy access to another person's body (usually a female) exemplifies perverse entitlement.

3. “Amnesty International [must upholds its] longstanding position that trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation should be criminalized as a matter of international law.”

Critique: Sex trafficking is just one of many ways that those with power lure vulnerable people into commercial sex. **Psychological, emotional, and financial manipulation also keep women, children, and some men, in prostitution.** To protect only those who are trafficked ignores the rights and needs of the vast majority of prostituted people.

4. “Any child involved in a commercial sex act is a victim of sexual exploitation, entitled to support, reparations, and remedies. States must take all appropriate measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse of children.”

Critique: Prostitution isn't less harmful on your 18th birthday. Every person suffering within the sex trade deserves support and protection, regardless of age. Girls are often first sold into prostitution when they're only 14 or 15 years old. Someone who has been statutorily raped thousands of times as a child and teenager cannot suddenly offer her “consent” once she turns 18. Amnesty should recommend that states take all appropriate measures to prevent sexual exploitation of all persons.

5. “Evidence shows many individuals engaged in sex work do so due to socio-economic marginalization and limited choices, and therefore Amnesty International should urge states to take appropriate measures to realize the social, economic, and cultural rights of all people so that no person enters sex work against their will, and those who decide to undertake sex work are able to leave if and when they choose.”

Critique: This “principle” puts the blame on victims. It implies that the sex trade exists not because of those who choose to buy someone for sex, but because marginalized members of society “choose” to sell it. The statement recognizes the limited choices of many people in prostitution, yet Amnesty still advocates for its broader acceptance in society. **Sexual exploitation should be challenged at every level—not decriminalized, which only enables more abuse.**

6. “The available evidence indicates that the criminalization of sex work is more likely than not to reinforce discrimination against those who sell sex, placing them at greater risk of harassment and violence, including ill-treatment at the hands of police.”

Critique: Independent research demonstrates that decriminalizing commercial sex leads to widespread harm, including an explosion in sex trafficking and related crime. But, the biased and limited research that Amnesty has provided to its delegates ignores this reality. For example, Amnesty's research fails to point out that decriminalization in Germany and the Netherlands has led to a surge in trafficking and exploitation. Amnesty should present its delegates with more thorough and balanced research before considering any policy on commercial sex.

Lack of choice forces some people to make decisions they might not otherwise make, including being coerced into commercial sex. Human rights activists agree that those who are victimized by the sex trade shouldn't be criminalized. **But sex buyers do have a choice. As demonstrated in countries that have adopted the Nordic Model, the most efficient and pragmatic way to reduce sexual exploitation is to hold the buyers accountable. Amnesty should not support any policy that protects sex buyers or third-party exploiters.**

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Demand Abolition is dedicated to eradicating illegal commercial sex in the United States by focusing on those who fuel the sex trade—the buyers.